

*Art and Book: A Commentary on Artists' Books*

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the subject of

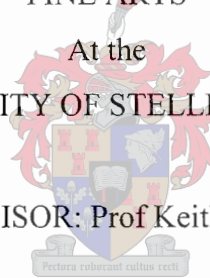
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SUPERVISOR: Prof Keith Dietrich

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## *Declaration*

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date:

## *Abstract*

The thesis investigates the contemporary practice of book art, examining in particular the manner in which it fits both into the tradition of the book and the tradition of art making. The thesis spans two volumes. Volume One discusses the phenomenon of the artist's book from three vantage points: the attempts to define it, the attempts to catalogue it and the attempts to interpret it. Volume Two is an artist's book and although it is part of the project I have set myself, it is not being submitted with the theoretical component of the MA dissertation, but as part of the practical component. (Briefly, one of the tasks it embarks upon is an examination of the phenomenon of thesis writing, as understood and endeavoured by myself in the production of the first volume – in this sense it is self-reflective. Another is an examination of some aspects of my attempts to make examples of artist's books, which includes an investigation of some of the recurrent themes and preoccupations of my work)

Volume One is set out in three chapters. The first chapter pursues a definition of book art and the artist's book in order to draw some perimeters around the subject, and to build a picture of its nature. In the course of doing this, the ideas of some book artists and book art commentators are considered in an attempt to create a richer tapestry of understanding.

In the next chapter some of the ways in which book art has been categorised are discussed. This is in order to more finely delineate the nature and scope of book art. It is also to bring some clarity to bear upon the different components and manifestations of a vast and sometimes confusing oeuvre. I then suggest a system of classification of my own which offers an adjacent model for investigating artists' books and the endeavour of book art.

With the above model in place, I undertake a foray into the arena of interpretation. Here I suggest the suitability of adopting certain methodologies of interpretation that come from the field of contemporary literary studies in general, and the interpretation of poetry in particular. I draw comparisons between the book artist and the poet, and suggest that they occupy a similar territory of meaning making.

In the course of laying out my arguments in the three chapters, I refer extensively to examples of artists' books in order to make particular points. Where I consider it apt, I draw upon my book art as a source of example. In this way, I am able to weave into the text some information and reflection about my own practice and concerns as a book artist.

## *Opsomming*

Daar word in die tesis ondersoek ingestel na die hedendaagse praktyk van die boekkuns en in die besonder die wyse waarop dit aansluit by die tradisie van die boek en die tradisie van die kuns. Die tesis beslaan twee volumes. Volume Een bespreek die fenomeen van die kunstenaarsboek vanuit drie invalshoeke: pogings om dit te definieer, pogings om dit te katalogiseer en pogings om dit te interpreteer. Volume Twee is 'n kunstenaarsboek en, hoewel dit deel uitmaak van die projek wat ek onderneem het, word dit nie voorgelê saam met die teoretiese komponent van die MA- dissertasie nie maar as deel van die praktiese komponent. (Een van die take wat dit onderneem is, kortliks, 'n ondersoek van die fenomeen tesis-skryf soos ek dit met die produksie van die eerste volume self verstaan en benader het – in dié sin is dit selfreflektief. 'n Ander taak is 'n ondersoek van sekere aspekte van my pogings om kunstenaarsboeke te maak, insluitende 'n ondersoek na van die deurlopende temas en preokupasies van my werk.)

Volume Een bestaan uit drie hoofstukke. Die eerste hoofstuk streef na 'n definisie van die boekkuns en die kunstenaarsboek met die doel om die onderwerp nader te omlin en 'n beeld daarvan op te bou. In die proses word die idees van 'n aantal boekkunstenaars en boekkuns-kommentatore oorweeg in die poging om n ryker begripstapissierie te weef.

In die daaropvolgende hoofstuk word van die wyses waarop die boekkuns gekategoriseer is, bespreek, om die aard en rykwydte van die boekkuns nog nader te omlin. Dit werk ook gedoen om lig te werp op die verskillende onderdele en manifestasies van 'n omvangryke en soms verwarrende oeuvre. Ek stel vervolgens my eie klassifiseringsstelsel voor, wat 'n verdere model bied vir die ondersoek van kunstenaarsboeke en die boekkunsbedryf.

Aan die hand van hierdie model betree ek dan die arena van interpretasie. Ek stel voor dat sekere interpretasie-metodes ontleen aan die tydgenootlike literatuurwetenskap, en spesifiek die interpreteer van poësie, oorweeg word. Ek vergelyk die boekkunstenaar

met die digter en stel voor dat hulle op soortgelyke wyses met die skep van betekenis omgaan.

In die loop van die uiteensetting van my argument in drie hoofstukke, verwys ek ekstensief na voorbeelde van kunstenaarsboeke om spesifieke punte te maak. Waar ek dit as gepas beskou, verwys ek, by wyse van illustrasie, na my eie boekkuns. Op hierdie manier is dit vir my moontlik om inligting en besinning oor my eie praktyk en pre-okkupasies as boekkunstenaar met die teks te verweef.

## *Acknowledgements*

I wish to thank the following people for their invaluable support: Prof Keith Dietrich, my wonderful thesis supervisor, at the University of Stellenbosch; Jack Ginsberg for so generously allowing me access to study his collection of artists' books; Dr Wilhelm Liebenberg for invaluable discussions around the subject of literary theory and for lending me numerous books, also for reading this text and giving enormously helpful suggestions; the staff at the V&A library, London, who time and again went out of their way to help me in this research; Romaine Hill for being the thesis editor one dreams of. And then, this list would not be complete without adding a great deal of thanks to Christopher, who fed me and kept me 'glued' to the computer while I worked to a deadline to complete this thesis.

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Not books  
but reading

Not the bronze  
but the flower

the arrow  
let fly

Every now  
and then  
a book

feint  
rules

the spiral intaglio of the ear

(Finlay, 2003: frontis piece)

## *Foreword*

This research and thinking around the subject of the artist's book have provided me with the opportunity to understand more about the genre, and how my particular way of working fits into the tradition. It has also prompted a consideration of the nature of my artwork. As could be expected, for an artist taking the time out to do some 'navel gazing' on her personal artistic production, this has proved to be a fruitful exercise. Much that was partially conscious in the working process has become more conscious, and much that was obscure has become clarified. Thoughts and insights have arisen that I am hopeful will germinate into new art pieces. In the reading and investigations for this thesis, my purpose has been to do research relevant to the practical component of this study, thus sustaining a personal momentum of curiosity and interest.

I came to the arena of the artist's book by chance, accidentally falling into it when I was creating a notebook of ideas for paintings. I have Prof Keith Dietrich to thank for alerting me to the fact that I was *de facto* a maker of artist's books and then directing my attention to this field of artistic activity.

Here, in South Africa, the artist's book community is still in its infancy. There are a number of artists working in the medium and a growing interest in the possibilities afforded by this manner of working. For some, artists like William Kentridge, it is an occasional departure from their usual work. These are the itinerant makers of book art. For others, like Elizabeth Vels, it is a mainline activity. Patronage is also in an early phase. Much book art challenges the usual viewing customs of galleries. Some ways of making book art accessible to a public are being introduced by a few galleries. The Bell Roberts Gallery in Cape Town, for example, stocks a collection of book art by local book artists in a small bookshop within the gallery.

As yet there are no bookshops here singularly devoted to book art, like the wonderful Bookartbookshop run by Tanya Peixoto in London. We have no journals exclusively

devoted to artist's books to connect us, carry the impetus of our work forward and continue the 'jabber' and debate around our chosen field of activity. In America there are the journals, *JAB (Journal of Artist's Books)* and *Umbrella*, as well as many other publications wholly or partially devoted to the subjects. In the UK there is, as one example, the *Artist's Book Yearbook*. In both of these countries there are universities and training institutions with book arts courses specialising in the subject of book art (as well as related book arts skills). There are also book art fairs, such as the annual London Artists' Book Fair and National Small Press Fair.

In my research I have attempted to find a context for my work within a larger framework of the world of book art. The Masters in Fine Arts course has provided me with the opportunity to experiment with different forms of the artist's book and different modalities of working. I have used it as a time for experimentation and investigation. Consequently, there is a wide range of approaches and intentions in the books that I have made. Within this variety, as I write about my work, I attempt to uncover my unique concerns and interests.

Because in many respects the books that I have made are very different from each other, it was not easy, at first, to see the commonalities, and to discern the direction that my work was taking. Part of the journey of my books was the cultivation of confidence and direction in a new field; and arriving at a point where I felt I had enough of a grasp of the subject to claim a personal approach.

In relation to my artists' books, I came to realise that one of the bridging themes is an attempt to codify and make form out of personal experience and of my own circumscribed world. In some way or another all my work can be described as a form of journaling, a way of commentating (either directly or obliquely) on my world and experiences. The genres of the diary, the journal and the personal record fall within my ambit. I am concerned to find new forms for recording the personal, and notating the small radius of an individual life. It is for this reason that I have chosen to title my accompanying Masters in Fine Art exhibition of practical work, 'Black Boxes'. While each book object on the exhibition is literally presented in its own custom made black box, the black box also metaphorically refers to the recording boxes

carried by aeroplane flights. The black box, then, is a device for storing the accumulated data of a journey.

I am interested in storytelling and meaning making, in which the outward material structure of the book object and the meanings it is presenting, merge and support each other. The artist's book provides wonderful opportunities for this. It is a necessary central intent for the maker of artist's books. For myself, I find that the dialogue between different texts (provided by the constitutive elements, such as materials, physical form, words, images, art processes and so forth) is an endlessly creative field of exploration.

There is much else that interests me to this medium. I can enumerating some of the features of the book that are potential features of book art that I find appealing: the relationship of intimacy that can be established between a book and a reader; the fact that books can take time to absorb and that their form can be devised to make it possible for a reader to live with a book for days on end and take in its imaginative complexities; that books are portable and it is possible to take them wherever one goes; that books are easily stored within a domestic context; that books have a very long history and that this history is tied into the transcription of knowledge and ideas and the keeping of records; that books are a location where the imaginative life of people can be shared; that books are about community and communication; that books are potential storage houses for memory; that books are theoretically able to have a long life, longer than one single lifetime; that books are capable of bridging time; that books also bridge cultures and geographic location, and the constricted circle of people and acquaintances that a lifetime constrained by circumstances allows one. Now and again, finding a book is akin to finding a precious friend. Occasionally, finding a book puts one in touch with an astonishing mind that changes the way one perceives the world forever. Books are such complex entities that I could continue the list of attractive features that draw me to the world of the book. But what has been expressed above will suffice to point out that much of what I have said about the book also holds true for art. As cultural artefacts the book and the art object have always been related as carrier bags for culture and for meaning making. It is therefore a most natural development for them to come together in the form of the artist's book. This thesis attempts to explore this form of the book and this form of art, revealing some of

its complexity, some of its quirkiness and some of its singular strength arising out of the fact that it has adopted practices and concepts from two historically distinct disciplines – namely the discipline of art and the discipline of the book.

The impetus to attempt to define book art; and then to attempt to form a useful system for categorisation arises from the perception that the contemporary phenomenon of book art is a relative newcomer to the cultural scene. Because of its relative newness, commentators on the subject are still grappling to pin it down and define its limits and potentials. There has been widespread recognition amongst writers on the subject that there is merit in attempted definitions as this focuses attention on the varied facets of the subject and is useful in the distillation of salient features.

Because of the many manifestations of book art, it has proved difficult to pin down, but, as I hope to show in this thesis, the many attempts at defining it are contributing towards building a richer, and increasingly subtle understanding of what is happening. From an overview of current literature it appears that not much work has yet been done in devising adequate and useful systems of categorisation for book art. Categorisation in this context is taken to mean that which can assist in clarifying similarities and differences between different manifestations of book art, and thus will be an aid to interpretation. This thesis sets out to assess some of the current models and structures of classification and then suggests a new model. And it attempts to suggest that producing a new system of categorisation is useful, as not much work has been done in this area.

Along the way I refer to examples of book art made by numerous book artists, as well as to artists' books made by myself. When I write about my work I attempt to delineate some of my central concerns and ways of working. An important conceptual working method within my book art is that of utilising synchronicities and coincidences. An important working technique is that of collage, the conjoining of materials from different sources, the bringing together of bits and pieces from clearly different worlds in order to create a new and different text. This is one of the devices that I employ to help to keep meanings open ended and to unfix certainties.

The devices and results of synchronicity and collage are therefore investigated in some of the sections where I write about my work. Both are posited as methodologies that fit comfortably within a theory of post-modernism, and with the production of post-modern cultural artefacts. An important concern in my work is that of the development and charting of personal images and metaphors. A few of these will be isolated and discussed. And the significance of individual symbol making in relation to notions pertaining to magic and the power of language and archetype will be introduced. Most of this happens in Volume Two.

An important theme within a number of my artists' books, as I have described above, is that of the journey. In my work it is never a linear journey, along a known route from departure to destination. It is more the sort of journeying that might be imaged as a spiral or a circle-like movement. In their respective ways, the books fold back on themselves. An analogy for the sort of journeying that is undertaken is that of the traditional alchemical task to chart a journey towards the attainment of an inner knowledge of self and an outer knowledge of the world. Much transformation happens along the way. In the ancient alchemical texts this is often described and pictured through the adept's attempts to transform chemical substances in the physical realm, the ultimate task being the transformation of base metal into gold. Of course, this immense and difficult task is on one level the expression, in the material realm, of another sort of metaphysical chemistry that has been attempted. Through the realm of art making, I like to think that I am working as a contemporary alchemist. I therefore devote some time, in Volume Two, to discussing the ideas and symbols of alchemy and how my book art resonates with these.



## *List of Illustrations*

Where possible, I have adopted a system approximating the British NAL (National Art Library) method for describing the artists' books in their collection. And even at the NAL a standardised system is not yet consistently utilised for this tricky category of book that is both book and art. Where I have obtained illustrative material outside of the NAL collection, I have not always been able to provide all the necessary descriptive details, and where I have used the NAL catalogue, I have not always been able to provide the same sort of information about each book. As mentioned above, the cataloguing is inconsistent in this regard, reflecting the 'untamed' nature of the subject. I also have not been able to provide catalogue page numbers. The NAL catalogue of book art (housed at the V&A Library in London) is unnumbered. It is arranged in an alphabetical order, under countries of origin. In the list below, all measurements are given in centimetres. The list is presented in order of where the illustrations first appear, in the text of this thesis.

Fig. 1 Buzz Spector, *A Passage* (1994). (Drucker, 1995:119.)

Fig. 2 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 3 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

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Fig. 6 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 7 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 8 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 9 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 10 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 11 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 12 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 13 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 14 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 15 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 16 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 17 Anne Emslie, *A Pattern Book* (2004). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 18 Anne Emslie, *A Flotilla of Fortune Cookies* (2006). High-fired porcelain. Unique work: the author. Artist's collection.

Fig. 19 Anne Emslie, *Notes from the Edge of Infinity* (2006). Unique work: the artist.

Fig. 20 Anne Emslie, *A Small Web of Grief* (2003). Unique work: the artist. Artist's collection.

Fig. 21 Julie Chen, *You are Here* (1992). Berkley: Flying Fish Press. NAL collection.

Fig. 22 Larry Thomas. *Pocket Book* (1990). USA: the artist. Presumed unique. NAL collection.

Fig. 23 Five Books: James Castle, page from [*Airway Coffee Book*] (n.d.). Unique work: the artist. Private collection; courtesy A.C. Wade Estate, Castle Collection. (Artists' Book Yearbook, 1996-1997:51.)

Fig. 24 Anne Emslie, *Grumeti* (2003). Cape Town: the artist. Unique work. Artist's collection.

Fig 25 Ed Ruscha, *Various Small Fires and Milk* (1964). (Drucker, 1995:76.)

Fig. 26 Martha Rosler, *Service, a Trilogy on Colonization* (1978). (Drucker, 1995:86.)

Fig. 27 Anne Emslie, *Book of the Gates* (2005). Edition of 50 copies. Cape Town: Stonewall. Artist's collection.

Fig. 28 Anne Emslie, *Book of the Gates* (2005). Edition of 50 copies. Cape Town: Stonewall. Artist's collection.

Fig. 29 Anne Emslie, *Book of the Gates* (2005). Edition of 50 copies. Cape Town: Stonewall. Artist's collection.

Fig. 30 Anne Emslie, *Book of the Gates* (2005). Edition of 50 copies. Cape Town: Stonewall. Artist's collection.

Fig. 31 Anne Emslie, *Book of the Gates* (2005). Edition of 50 copies. Cape Town: Stonewall. Artist's collection.

Fig. 32 Sophie Artemis, *Primer* (English and Hindi) (1992). London: unique work. Two volumes, 25cm. NAL collection.

Fig 33 Ken Campbell, *Father's Garden* (1989). [Oxford?]: the artist. 33cm. Edition of 50 copies. NAL collection.

Fig. 34 Victoria Edwards, *Fragments of an Interior* (1991). London: the artist. 27cm, in a box. Edition of 10 copies. NAL collection.

Fig 35 Mark Hudson, *Carmen Dalekorum: Being Songs of Stephen Micalet, Bearded Bishop of Leisure* (1989). London: the artist. Edition of thirty copies. NAL collection.

Fig. 36 John Eric Broaddus, *Above the Trees: a short novel* (1985). Unique work. Two volumes (93,93p.) 23cm. NAL collection.

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Fig. 43 Flockophobic Press, *The Bee* (c. 1992). New York: Flockophobic Press. 9x16cm. NAL collection.

Fig. 44 Yohei Nishimuri, *Time, The Weekly Magazine* (1992). 20x16x3cm. Unique object. NAL collection.

Fig. 45 Nishimuri, Yohei, *The Open and Closed Book: Contemporary Book Art* (1992). Tokyo: the artist. Unique object.

Fig. 46 Anne Emslie, *The Scrolls of Betrayal* (2006). Cape Town: the artist. Unique work.

Fig. 47 Gregory Green, *The Book Bomb* (c.1976). Springfield. NAL collection.

Fig. 48 Anne Emslie, *The Dress Diaries* (2006). Cape Town: the artist. Unique work.

Fig. 49 Greg Daville, *Double Glazing the Large Glass* (1993). Hove: Jesus, Me and Satan. NAL collection.

Fig. 50 Mira Schor, *The Book of Pages* (1976). (Drucker, 1995:103.)

Fig. 51 Anne Emslie, *Through A Glass Darkly* (2003). Unique work: the artist.

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Fig. 53 Tennessee Rice Dixon and Jim Gasperini (with music and sound by Morrow, Charlie) *Scrutiny in the Great Round*,(1995). Macmillan Interactive Publishing, England. NAL collection.

Fig. 54 Ron King, *Turn Over Darling*, (1990). (Drucker, 1995: 176.)

## *Introduction*

Books radiate imagination. Marked and creased, buckled by the heat of the sun, fluted by damp, they gather associations and furnish our intimate lives. Bookshelves: an array of ordered spines, muted colours, sheer and stratified, fusty with neglect, darkening a room; they bear down, greedy for attention.

The corpus of culture and its corpse, books, carry our dreams and bear the deadweight of convention. Rational thought, ordered communication and liminal imagination are entangled in the book's paradoxical properties as the formality of the library threatens to smother the flames and generousities of the imagination

(Finlay, 2001:13).

## **I.1 Scope and nature of the area of study**

The thesis, titled *Art and Book: A Commentary on Artists' Books*, is in two distinct parts. The two parts are intended to stand independently, although the second volume contains a form of commentary on the first volume. Volume One is a conventional thesis that is designed to meet the academic requirements of the Masters in Fine Art degree. So why is there a Volume Two? The topic of this research is book art and part of the nature of book art is that it investigates the form of the book in its many guises; and it comments upon the language and nature of the book, frequently in a manner that reflects some degree of subversion. Book art stretches the envelope of the concept of the book. Here, in Volume One, the book is a thesis. In Volume Two it is also a thesis, but with a difference, this being that it is also an artist's book. As a piece of book art it stretches the concept of the thesis. It is partly intended as a commentary on the commentary. So working within the perimeters of the thesis I have attempted an integration of content and form. I have attempted to demonstrate, within the cover and cloak of thesis, what an actual artist's book becomes, in this one manifestation of infinite possible manifestations, when it adopts the form of the thesis. Or, to put it another way, what a thesis becomes when it adopts the form of the artist's book.

The subject of this thesis draws attention to the twin themes of art and book. In Volume One an attempt is made to investigate the links between the domain of art and the domain of the book as they manifest in the phenomenon of book art. Volume One constitutes an investigation of book art within certain perimeters. There are three sections, each forming a chapter and each chapter dealing with a specific challenge. These are set out below, under the section that outlines an exposition of contents.

Volume Two represents a hundred-and-eighty degree turn in thinking and approach. It departs from the conventional form of the thesis presented in Volume One. It is an attempt to examine the task of thesis writing and to do so in such a way that an artist's book is created. It is also an attempt to examine my own work in a different manner and from a different vantage point. Volume Two attempts to illustrate the point that different forms intrinsically carry different sorts of meaning; and that the conventional



form of the thesis, while academically respectable, is an inappropriate, unwieldy and inadequate vehicle for the expression of other sorts of meaning. It has a particular place and value and it is useful that this place be recognised both for what it can and cannot do.

One of the premises upon which my artists' books are based (including Volume Two of this thesis, which is an artist's book) is that if one works attentively and intuitively with the personal material of one's everyday life, one begins to observe larger patterns emerging. It is the belief that while working at the level of the microcosm, the macrocosm begins to reveal itself. The starting point may be described as an act of faith, a sort of blind entry into an increasingly tangled web of connections and networks of meaning that slowly evolve their own larger structures.

## **I.2 Review of relevant literature**

### **I.2.1 Volume One**

Klima, in *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature* (1998), provides a useful overview of the field. Most specifically, he identifies and discusses the current need, amongst critics and practitioners in the field, to define the scope and nature of book art. His research is also extremely useful in identifying other authors to be read in specific areas of interest relating to book art. Another useful author, who has made a detailed study of how libraries accommodate and catalogue artists' books, is Simon Ford. His line of research has provided him with an interesting aerial perspective of the subject. His study, *Artists' Books in UK and Ireland Libraries* (1995), was of great assistance.

There were a few books that created a background influence to my writing and thinking. In attempting to clarify my thoughts and my personal approach to the subject, I found much of use in a wonderful small book on philosophy, *Think* (1999), by the erudite and articulate philosopher, Simon Blackburn. It was a guide to thinking. I also found the clever and iconoclastic pen of Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (1987) to be both entertaining and helpful, especially as a guide to a more refined

understanding of the difficulties attendant upon attempting to pin down definitions and concretise knowledge. I was also particularly drawn to the fine intellect of Harold Bloom in *How to Read and Why* (2000), which helped to refine my thoughts about the purposes of the book and suitable approaches to its consumption. Then I also read a great deal around the subject of contemporary literary theory at a time when the thesis might have taken another turn. In the end I did not make as much use of this reading as I initially thought I would, but amongst my favourite authors here were Raman Seldon (*A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (1985)) and Terry Eagleton (*Literary Theory, an Introduction* (1983)).

Also, in my investigation of book art with the aim of an attempted definition, I found the many articles appearing in the various editions of the *Artist's Book Yearbook*, brought out by the *Magpie Press*, to be very informative and thought provoking. Some of the contributing writers, whose perceptions I found particularly useful, are Stephen Bury, Cathy Courtney, John Nicholson, Tom Trusky, Telfer Stokes, John Bentley, Andrew Lanyon, Paul Johnson, Clive Phillpot, Emma Hill, Les Bicknell and Stefan Szczelkun. In attempting to distinguish book art from other sorts of books and other sorts of art, I found the writings of Johan Degenaar in *Art and the Meaning of Life* (1986) to be most helpful. The theory that he lays out to distinguish the language of poetry from the language of prose seems pertinent and insightful in relation to making distinctions between book art and the ordinary book.

I found much of interest in the writings of book art historian and practitioner, Johanna Drucker. Her book, *The Century of Artists' Books* (1995), positions book art within the history of the book and looks at early, as well as current, examples of the genre. She has also undertaken a grouping of various sorts of books according to themes. I consider her thematic categorisation of books as one of my examples of attempts at book art categorisation. In my section on categorisation I also look at the writings of Keith Smith, and in particular, *Text in Book Format* (1997) and his attempts to codify and explain the physical structure of books. Then with reference to general theory pertinent to categorisation, I have turned to Wikipedia, the Internet encyclopedia, and found the articles on the work of Jurgen Habermas and Gerard Genette and Hans George Gadamer to be useful. I also consulted Gadamer's book, *Truth and Method*. And I found a useful site on Genette to be [www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen](http://www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen).

In addition I turned to the writings of Simon Ford who, as a writer and librarian, has specifically focused his attention on the cataloguing of book art. Then of great assistance to me in working out an approach to categorisation in general, and to cataloguing book art in particular, was a series of private conversations I had with Dr Wilhem Liebenberg (former senior lecturer in the Department of Afrikaans and Nederlands at Wits), who has an informed interest in contemporary philosophy and contemporary literary criticism.

In a review of literature on the topic of book art it seems pertinent to make some remarks about the book art that was relevant to this thesis. Where possible, I chose to use first hand sources for my illustrative material. I was able to turn over pages, explore the nooks and crannies and unusual structures of some of the books, and in many other ways experience first hand how the book was made and its meanings articulated. My sources for books were two collections. Through the generosity of Jack Ginsberg I was able to view his collection in his home in Johannesburg on more than one occasion. Then I spent much time at the National Art Library (NAL), housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). An examination of these books, some of which are listed under *List of Illustrations*, formed a significant part of my book research. The Internet was a wonderful additional source for viewing the works of book artists, and I have listed the book art Internet sites that I found the most useful in an appendix towards the end of Volume One.

In articulating thoughts about the interpretation of artists' books I have found useful the thinking around language and philosophy that led up to and emerged in the movement we know as postmodernism. I turn to postmodernism in order to draw attention to the vast number of sign systems that constitute our worlds and by means of which we mediate meaning and understanding through the interplay and interaction between signs. I use some of the theory around language to assist in unpacking meanings of some of the book art I discuss.

In my attempts to understand the relevance of postmodern thinking and the legacy of literary criticism to book art, I found my conversations (see above) with Dr Wilhelm Liebenberg to be helpful and insightful. In my reading around the subject, I found the

writings of Terry Eagleton to be especially clear. I also found Raman Selden and Jonathan Culler helpful. An article from the Internet written by Prof Mary Klages (<http://www.colorado.edu/English/courses/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html>) provided a useful overview of some of the more salient characteristics of post-modernism from a literary perspective as well as a contrasting analysis of modernism and the thinking of the period of Enlightenment. Also her final remarks about the post-modernist questioning of the organisation of knowledge seem especially apt and speak both to my book art (*A Pattern Book* likewise questions the organisation and constructs of knowledge) and my attempts to form some sort of structure and organisation for interpreting book art against a backdrop of post-modern provisionality and its manifested wariness of fixed structures. I also found the *Wikipedia* encyclopedia on the Internet useful (<http://en.wikipedia.org/Postmodernism>) as an overview of various salient characteristics of postmodernism and a lead to other sources.

Also of interest was a site on post-modernism, titled *Postmodernism and its Critics* by Shannon Weiss and Karla Wesley. I liked the clearly articulated chart of contrasts that they presented, showing the differences between Modernism and post-modernism (<http://www.as.ua.edu/ant/Faculty/murphy/436/pomo.htm>)

Researching collage, I found the Masters in Fine Art thesis, *Framing the Text: An Investigation of Collage in Postmodern Narrative Illustration*, by Joanne Halse (University of Stellenbosch), to be a very useful source of theory and ideas.

## **I.2.2 Volume Two**

As I write, this volume is still in the process of being completed. It may, therefore, take unexpected turns. In this volume, where my research and writing are partly to spotlight certain features of my own work, I turn to a number of different fields for theory, ideas and inspiration.

Turning to synchronicity, the writings of Jung on the subject are classic texts. Also useful to my research on this subject is the website from the *Siderus Foundation*: <http://www.siderus.org/main/article.php?sid=52>. This has an article titled *The Mystery of Chance* by Peter A Jordan that I find to be full of fascinating ideas.

On the subject of alchemy, my reading turns to many sources. Chief amongst the works and writings that I am using are those by Samten from his *Luxlapis Project* and the internet site, <http://www.levity.com>. The second volume, being a thesis of a different sort to the first volume, relies less on research and more on my own writings.

### **I.3 Exposition of contents**

The first section, contained within Chapter One of Volume One, sets out the challenge to define book art. In the process, it considers problems attendant upon attempting to fix definitions. It also argues the advantages of attempting to delineate definitions. It attempts to suggest that the search for a definition hones understanding of a subject. It promotes the adoption of loose boundaries and flexible definitions that leads to further debate and thinking and does not limit the boundary edges of the subject. The opinions of book art practitioners and commentators are quoted so as to bring many voices into the debates and discussions around defining the nature of this multi-faceted, multi-layered entity.

Chapter Two, of Volume One, deals with another challenge pertaining to book art. This is the challenge to classify and categorise different forms of book art in a manner that can assist interpretation and understanding. The chapter considers purposes of categorisation and what sorts of categorisation suit the attempt to assist understanding and interpretation. It draws attention to previous attempts to categorise book art and the purposes for which the categorisations are intended. The chapter then presents a new proposal of mine for the categorisation of artists' books that takes into account the origins of the genre in the world of the book, as well as in the world of art. A number of subdivisions along a hypothetical scale line between art and book are identified. These are suggested as particular types of book art, according to how they manifest features from the world of art and features from the world of book. An attempt is then made to identify the strengths and weaknesses of this system and assess its usefulness.

Chapter Three, of Volume One, deals with the challenge of interpreting book art. Contemporary theory relating to the study of literature is discussed in relation to book art. Examples of artists' books, including my own, are discussed. This is in order to illustrate how literary theory manifests in the realm of the artist's book, and is useful for its interpretation. And in particular, theory relating to the interpretation of poetry is demonstrated to be pertinent to the study of the artists' book.

Chapter Four, of Volume One, is a short chapter. It attempts to take an overview of the findings of the first three chapters and draw some deductions. It serves the function of knitting some of the yarns together and concluding the first volume of the thesis.

Then there are three appendices attached to Volume One. The first of these contains a list of useful terms and terminology associated with book art. The second contains a list of useful emails and websites associated with book art. The third contains the notes I made to accompany a book object, and is titled *Notes from the Edge of Infinity*.

Volume Two is divided into two distinct parts. These are respectively titled *The Swan's Feather* and *The Oak Leaf*. The feather of the swan becomes my metaphor for London in particular, and Europe in general. The leaf of the oak becomes my metaphor for Stellenbosch in particular, and South Africa in general. These are the terrains from which the thesis emerged. As an artist's book, Volume Two is intent on combining form and meaning. Its meaning emerges from an infinite number of subtle clues built into its construction. Simply, it is to be approached by the reader in a different manner and mind frame than that required for volume one.

#### **I.4 Indication of deductions**

The research establishes that book art is a relatively new field and, as with many fields still in their infancy, the question of what it is and the task of attempting to define it, has occupied many book art commentators. Much confusion has arisen between fine art editions and books that explore concepts and material structures of

the book as their underpinning preoccupations. It is the latter sort of books that are now commonly regarded as being the domain of book art. Many of the artists who have chosen to adopt the format of book art for their work have explained their practice in terms that have been helpful in elucidating the subject. Their words and explanations make it clearer what is actually going on in the minds and work of artists in the field and consequently, how the field is busy defining itself. The problems attendant on attempting to fix definitions are aired and the advisability of keeping definitions loose and open-ended is proposed. The usefulness of attempting definitions is indicated in that they help to clarify the broad outlines and character of the subject.

Volume One, Chapter One provides a picture of the multi-faceted and chameleon-like artist's book and the realm of book art in its many guises and manifestations. Having netted the butterfly, I allow it to escape. I conclude that the task of setting up the frontiers of a definition is a facilitating means for contemplation, a way of casting a beam of light on the subject. Also that the worth of a definition is that it can serve as a form of measuring stick in terms of which one might usefully measure the changes in the reality.

I also draw deductions about the artist's book as a contemporary art form. I conclude that book art is becoming an increasingly popular mode of expression among contemporary artists for a number of specific social and cultural reasons. I support this conclusion by quoting a number of artists who express their personal fascination and connection to the artist's book. I deduce that the present-day information and communications scene, which is increasingly threatening to bypass the traditional paper book, is one of the causes for the popularity of the medium of the artist's book among artists and collectors. I conclude that, as computers and the Internet gain footing, this impacts on attitudes to the traditional book. I also conclude that in some quarters there has been a resurgence of nostalgia for the book (and that some book art is an expression of this nostalgia). I conclude, for a number of reasons, that the book is not a dying form but will continue to have a life. In addition I conclude that the artist's book provides some particularly attractive features, freedoms and possibilities for the contemporary artist, and as such, is likely to grow in popularity as a medium of artistic expression.

Chapter Two of Volume One deals with problems and issues attendant upon categorisation of the subject. I present various systems for categorising the artist's book and investigate their use and purpose. I deduce that categories are important. As an analogy, I might say that these theories of categorisation are an attempt at constructing a structure of 'cubby-holes' into which individual artists' books can be slotted, although they do not always fit very neatly and may also often feel comfortable in more than one compartment. However, I suggest, it is useful to do this, just as it is useful to attempt a definition of an artist's book. If a system of categorisation is established, it provides a way for one to measure, observe and compare qualities and appearances. I conclude that sometimes this also facilitates observations that might otherwise have remained unnoticed. So a system of categorisation can act as a pair of glasses through which to look. And different lenses can provide different pictures.

I deduce that some of the pressing issues that need to be considered when thinking around categorising book art are the following:

(i) Book art spans two worlds: that of the book and that of art. It would be useful if a system could be devised that takes this into account. And perhaps this system could attempt to identify what aspects of a piece of book art belong to the world of book and what components more traditionally belong to the world of art? The equation of what belongs to the traditional form of the book and what belongs to the traditions of the art world, as well as other details of such scrutiny, are likely to be different in each case. A system that can accommodate such difference would be a useful tool for interpretation.

(ii) Book art takes on an enormous number of guises. This brings confusion to the subject and poses the question as to whether a system can be devised that reveals these guises and brings some systematic structure and ordering. This system would need to be flexible enough to accommodate the quirkiness of the subject and the variability and variety of forms that book art takes



(iii) Libraries have one set of needs for a system of categorisation, centred on storage and retrieval. Devotees, practitioners and commentators of book art may have another set of needs, centred on meaning making, commentary and interpretation. A single system is unlikely to be an ideal framework for the needs of all users.

(iv) Some of the traditions that are significant to book art, forming its lineage and influencing its present-day manifestations, are: the craft tradition of bookmaking, the fine art tradition of meaning making, the literary tradition of meaning making and the contemporary commercial world of book production. Each of these traditions has distinct goals, methodologies, methods of production, means of distribution and commercial gain. The challenge to book art is to see if a broad enough system can be devised and one that will take into account the different practices and orientations of the worlds of craft, of fine art and of the commercial book trade.

(v) It is suggested that it would be useful if a system could be devised to identify and isolate the sorts of features of book art that lend themselves to interpretation via the route of art theory and traditional art methodologies, and those features of book art that suitably lend themselves to interpretation through the sorts of interpretative strategies traditionally affiliated with the book. The system would have to take into account the varied nature of book art and its allegiance to the world of art, as well as to the world of book.

(vi) It is suggested that attempting to construct a system of categories, moving from art to book (for the purposes of assisting in the interpretation of book art), represents a logical approach. A possible system is outlined. It is a system based on the nature of art and the nature of book and a continuum between them (where the imaginary and theoretical midpoint is both art and book in equal measure).

Chapter Three, Volume One, deals with issues around interpretation. I deduce that literary theory, and especially theory pertaining to poetry, can offer a useful and rewarding route towards the interpretation of book art. I deduce that a useful starting point for interpretation is to view the artist's book as a palimpsest of texts – visual texts, word texts, textural texts, form texts and so on. I deduce that once this approach has been adopted, then the theory around text, emerging from the world of literary

criticism and the world of philosophy, becomes very helpful. I deduce that the construct of the poem is the closest literary analogy to the text of the artist's book. Like the artist's book it is a densely codified form. I therefore conclude that the adoption of certain interpretative strategies from the realm of poetry would provide apt tools for the unpacking of meaning in the artist's book.

I deduce, in the end, that interpretation remains a problematic domain. I conclude that there is a growing recognition that some book art challenges conventional reading habits and reader expectations of the book. Also, some book art challenges and alters the convention of viewing habits and deciphering practices of fine art. It seems that neither the conventional routes for accessing literary meanings nor the conventional routes for accessing fine art meanings is alone entirely sufficient. It may be that a more satisfactory route to approaching book art would be to combine reader and interpretative methodologies from the literary world and the world of philosophy together with specifically designed strategies from the art world and possible new strategies that may arise out of the domain of book art. Each book art piece is likely to present its own challenge. But is there a system that will assist in and help to clarify the bundle of interpretative strategies that might be useful for a particular piece of book art? I conclude that this is where a pertinent system of categorisation could assist. I conclude that my system outlined in Chapter Two is an attempt to do this and that much work could still be done in devising a more perfect system.

### **I.5 Selecting illustrative material**

In examples of artists' books cited, I have attempted to draw upon first-hand experience of books seen and handled. The disadvantage of this is that it has somewhat limited the selection. The advantage of a first-hand encounter with the art object is, however, potentially greater. It assists in developing a more finely nuanced and detailed response and in absorbing at first hand the atmosphere of a work, and in formulating personal opinion. Thus where I wish to provide an example of a book in order to illustrate a point, I have wherever possible chosen a book that I have personally seen and handled.

My major opportunities for viewing artists books at first hand have come from the following: two days in the company of Jack Ginsberg's impressive private collection in Johannesburg, and two trips to London, during which I made sorties to the British Library, as well as to the V&A. I spent some time browsing in the Bookartistsbookshop in London run by Tanja Peixoto. Moreover, I attended the London Artist's Book Fair, which was held in November 2003. This allowed me to meet some British artists working in the field and view their recent work.

## **I.6 Terms and terminology**

I include some book, writer and literature jargon. Most of it occurs where I discuss my artwork and draw upon some of the terminology in order to describe and analyse it. Appendix One provides a glossary of terms.

I include some terminology from the world of literary criticism. This terminology also appears in the glossary, where brief explanations are given. Then, with particular reference to my field of study, there are some terms I wish to draw attention to here. The first of these is the term, 'book art'. This refers to the type of art that occupies the space of a book or that refers to a book, and which is made by an artist of artists' books. The second term I wish to bring to the attention of the reader is the term, 'artist's book'. The artist's book is that sort of book made by an artist, which falls under the definition of book art. Confusingly, it is sometimes written as 'artists book' and 'artists books', without the apostrophe, and sometimes as 'artist's books' or 'artists' books' (when the plural of artist is used). Whether an apostrophe is included or not seems to be the simple preference of the writer. I choose to include it. In my usage, when the apostrophe comes before the 's', the singular is indicated and when it is after, the plural is indicated, as is standard practice. I also sometimes use the expression 'book artist' to refer to the maker of book art. The meaning of these terms becomes amplified in Volume One, Chapter One.

## **I.7 A Note on referencing**

The referencing system used in this thesis is based upon the *Harvard Method* presented by Marlene Burger in *Reference Techniques* (1992).

## *Chapter One*

### *The Challenge to Identity: Towards a Definition of Book Art*

If you want to be cured of worries about definitions, visit *Frankfurt International Book Fair*. Here they have one simple aesthetic: money. A book sculpted in marble, burned books as art objects. A book whose pages are six feet high flags fluttering in the square.

(Nicholson, 1994:94)

## 1.1 Debates and literature concerning a definition

The author, Stefan Klima, in his book, *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*, reviews the literature and debates around artists' books, and notes that an inordinate amount of time and paper and thought has been given to the question of defining the artist's book (1998:7). He postulates that the search for an adequate definition is one of three main arenas of preoccupation for commentators (Klima, 1998:7).

Perhaps the interest in defining arises from the fact that the field is relatively new. Perhaps also it is because the subject is multi-faceted and difficult to pin down. Perhaps it is also because, frustratingly for some, the artist's book belongs neither entirely to the world of art nor entirely to the world of the book. Artists and art critics may at times struggle to find pertinent and adequately elucidating language and theory for it, but so too do the book critics, librarians and the literary world in general.

Shining a broad search beam on the subject, Klima begins to narrow it down, but only marginally at first. To quote him:

Charles Alexander, having served as director of Minnesota Centre for Book Arts for twenty months, asked the simple question 'What are the book arts?' He could not find a satisfactory answer, though he tried. Somewhere, in a remote corner of the book arts, lay artists' books. (Klima, 1998:7)

It is to that remote corner that the search beam now begins to turn in the following sections.

## 1.2 The idea of the book: tradition and the new

As a book that is also a metaphor for the book, *A Passage* by Buzz Spector (Fig. 1) is compelling. It turns one's thoughts to the traditional function of the book and to new

ways in which the book can be perceived. It is a comment about the traditional function of the book, while undermining and questioning that function. It is one of those supremely elegant pieces of work that resonate and linger in the mind. It maintains its mysteriousness, while continuing to unfold new vistas around the subject and meaning of the book. It is a piece of book art that presents itself as a useful springboard for discussion around the subject of the artist's book. It uses conventional frameworks while questioning them. It touches upon ubiquitous themes, relating to the book, of recordkeeping, as well as the book as a vessel for knowledge and a preserver of memory.

From the outside, and placed on a shelf, this book could be mistaken for an ordinary library volume. When it is pulled from the shelf and opened, it becomes evident that it functions as both book and parody of book. A story is written over the surface of many torn pages. It is the same story on each page, and the manner in which the pages have been torn allows one to read the story as if from a single page, although the edges of torn paper create a soft visual flickering as they travel in a gentle downhill slope from the beginning to the end of the book. There is the idea that one is reading a single page, although one is acutely aware that one is reading the entire book, extending through numerous pages. The story is like a parable. It tells of how the author meets up with a friend from Hebrew school days. The author shows him some of his altered books containing torn pages and the friend responds by telling the story of a learned scholar who knew the Talmud so well that if asked to read a single line or letter from any page, he could quote exactly what occupied the same position on every other page. Buzz Spector responds that his books are not so much about what he knows, as about what he no longer remembers.

The book, as a receptacle for memory and a metaphor for knowledge, becomes superseded by the notion of the book as a metaphor for what we do not know. Just as the same story is told over and over again, books can be a site for entrenching sameness and repetition as well as for entrenching ideas and beliefs counter to the traditional wisdom (such as the traditional idea that books expand one's knowledge). And *A Passage* overturns the tradition of a book as a site where information and knowledge are captured. Its text suggests, unsettlingly, that there is much that it is not possible to capture, that cannot be recorded, and that is inevitably left out. Here an

artist's book subverts the usual tradition of the book as an encoding and recording mechanism, one which comforts us with a vision of being able to hang onto thoughts, ideas, histories, memories and experiences. It presents a disquieting vision of loss as opposed to capture, of what is gone as opposed to what is retained.

Drawing attention to what is gone, or what is rendered unavailable, is a theme in some of my book art. In *A Pattern Book* (Fig. 5), for example, pages that have been worked have, in some places, then been sewn closed. Elsewhere pages have been written upon with a pencil that is the same shade as the paper so that the writing more or less disappears. The common supposition is that books set out to make information accessible. Here information is observably hidden, censored and kept from easy viewing. The viewer is confronted with a book where there are texts that are out of reach, others that are only retrievable in a fragmentary form and others that have a secret and hidden quality and may go unnoticed altogether, but present themselves to the observant reader.

Another of my book art pieces is *A Flotilla of Fortune Cookies* (Fig. 18). In this piece I have deliberately created a grouping of texts that is intended for dispersal. The exhibiting of this piece will make that clear as each one of the containers (each holding a strip of text) will be offered for sale separately. Thus starting off as a single entity, this artist's book is intended to fracture itself into fragments that travel to different destinations, much as if single pages of a book were torn off and then handed out to separate individuals.

These pieces of book art are part of a tradition of artists' books, which set out to undermine our expectations of the book and bring to the subject of 'bookness' new thoughts, ideas and possibilities. Working from tradition, artists' books frequently attempt to push through the frontiers of the old and provide a new vision for the book, enlarging the scope and territory of the tradition.



### 1.3 Expanding our notion of the book

Artists' books routinely question the conceptual frameworks, conventions and standard practices affiliated with the making and consumption of books. They are often characterised as being books about books. Or perhaps they are objects about books. Or perhaps they are thoughts about books that have found some material form. They in some way provide an impetus to think about the book as a concept and how the formal elements of the book are an intrinsic part of its meaning.

I like the thoughts about artists' books expressed by Simon Morley in his essay *Gutenberg Elegies* (which appears in the catalogue published to accompany *The Book Show*, an exhibition which took place in London, 10 October – 22 November, 2003). With reference to the artists' books on that show, he says: 'In one way or another they all destabilise our expectations concerning the book – how it functions, what its purpose is' (2003:10).

As a maker of artist's books, book art and book objects (all terms for the same phenomenon), Les Bicknell reveals an insider's understanding. In the quote below, taken from his article, *500 Starting Points for a Conversation about Book Art*, which appeared in the *Artists' Book Yearbook 1996-1997*, he deliberately gives an expansive and open-ended definition of 'bookness' when he states: 'Bookness can be found all around us in blinds, bird's wings and the landscape. They are not books. Only possible starting points for one' (1996:25).

His intention is to open the mind to possibilities for the creation of books. He uses the term, 'bookness', in order to circumvent the usual defining and constrictive ideas and associations that accompany the concept of the book. Bicknell expands on his idea of 'bookness': 'Bookness exists in work/objects if the work or object contains elements which pertain to the idea of the book: sequential thinking, narrative, image, text, kinetic possibilities, physical resemblances and the context in which it is viewed' (1996:25).

Bicknell then broadly defines book art as 'work that intentionally encompasses elements related to 'bookness' (1996:25). And he advocates taking on board new possibilities for the book, which he believes is helped by not defining the terrain too tightly. So, for example, he makes statements such as the following: 'Broad and seemingly fragmented, catch-all definitions for book art allow for an individual/intuitive response to given situations rather than reproducing work within a pre-determined style' (Bicknell 1996:25).

#### 1.4 Qualifying 'anything goes'

When broad definitions are embraced, there comes a point where the edges go fuzzy and the definition does not serve to elucidate sufficiently but rather carries a tendency to confuse. This is a danger of the broad definition. The subject of the artist's book is anyway a confusing one to the general public not familiar with it. And other sorts of books are commonly confused with it.

Johanna Drucker, maker of artists' books and a prolific writer on the subject, is alert to these issues. One problem is that it is, as she notes in her book, *The Century of Artists' Books*, 'particularly difficult to keep the craft tradition of book arts and the expressive tradition of the artist's book apart – nor is there any need to – but they should not be confused with each other' (Drucker, 1995:10-11).

She also believes that within the orbit of the artist's book there ought not to be the attitude that anything goes in terms of quality. She gives her own advice, and again like Bicknell within quite broad perimeters, for book art that is more likely to be successful:

An artist's book should not be formulaic – it might be generic of a familiar type or established category of artist's books and make its contribution without innovating formally, and it might be wildly innovative and sloppy and badly made, and in many ways fall short of perfection or even good realisation – but ultimately an artist's book has to have some conviction, some soul, some reason to be and to be a book in order to succeed. (Drucker 1995:10-11)

## **I.5 The appeal of the book format**

Drucker points out that the book format has long appealed to artists, partly because of the flexibility and versatility it offers as an art form. She makes the point that it has appeared in almost every major movement in art in the twentieth century, providing 'a unique means of realising works within all of the many avant-garde, experimental and independent groups, whose contributions have defined the shape of twentieth century artistic activity' (Drucker, 1995:1). But, as she also points out, artist's books have at the same time developed 'as a separate field with a history that is only partly related to that of mainstream art' (Drucker, 1995:1). This development gained momentum after 1945 and increasingly the field has had its own artists and theorists (Drucker, 1995:1).

## **I.6. Some book art commentators and commentary**

In Britain some of the most lucid commentators in the field include the following: Simon Morley (an artist and writer), Susan Johanknecht (Subject Leader for the MA Book Arts course at Camberwell College of Arts) and Tanya Peixoto (Director of the *Bookartbookshop* in London and editor of a number of the editions of the *Artists' Book Yearbook*, which has served an invaluable task in promoting and disseminating information about book art in the UK). Then there is Stephen Bury (his book, *Artists' Books* was published in 1995),<sup>1</sup> who is a writer and librarian (at the British Library). Bury's writings on the subject include the book *Artists' Multiples 1935-2000* (published in 2001) and *The Book as a Work of Art 1963-1995* (published in 1996). The books of journalist and writer Courtney, include *Private Views and Other Containers* (published in 1992), *The Looking Book: a Pocket History of Circle Press 1967-1996* (published in 1996) and *Speaking of Book Art: Interviews with British and American Book Artists* (published in 1999). Artist and writer, Alec Finlay, edited *Libraries of Thought and Imagination; an Anthology of Books and Bookshelves*

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<sup>1</sup> However, as Klima points out in *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*, Bury's brief essays really only serve as an introduction to the many illustrations of book art (Klima, 1998:9).

(published in 2000); and writer, Simon Ford, is a well respected commentator on artist's books who wrote *Artists' Books in the UK and Eire Libraries* (published in 1992).

An outstanding contributor to research and theory on book art is Clive Phillpot.<sup>2</sup> Phillpot, who contributed both to the British and the American book art scene, was for a period the librarian to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Over a period of more than twenty years, beginning in 1976,<sup>3</sup> he wrote extensively on the subject. His writings appear in library and art journals, newsletters, museum and exhibition catalogues. Then there is the enormously useful, short book by Stefan Klima, *Artists' Books, A Critical Survey of the Literature*, to which I have already referred (see footnotes), published in 1998. It provides an excellent, brief survey of the book art scene and the literature and debates it spawned, primarily in America and Britain (until 1998).

In America there is the ubiquitous and prolific pen of Drucker, already referred to above, as well as that of Keith Smith. Both are also makers of artists' books. Most of Smith's writing is about the making of books and issues relating to their construction and design, such as bookbinding, typography and layout. Drucker writes about the subject from the angle of the art historian and commentator on contemporary culture. Then there are the numerous writers who contribute to the American journal, *JAB*

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<sup>2</sup> According to Klima, Phillpot is the most towering figure commentating on the artist's book (1998: page unrecorded).

<sup>3</sup> In 1976 Phillpot wrote 'Book Art Digressions' as part of a catalogue (*Artists Books* edited by M Attwood. London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1976: 40) for a traveling exhibition sponsored by the Arts Council of Great Britain. Other writings by Phillpot include: 'Books in Review: Artists' Books'. *Art Journal* (Spring 1980); 'Magazine Art'. *Artforum* 18, no. 6 (February 1980); 'Recent Art and the Book Form' *Artists Books From the Traditional to the Avante Garde*. New Jersey Rutgers University, 1982; 'Books Bookworks Book Objects Artists' Books' *Artforum* 30, no. 9 (May 1982); 'An ABC of Artists' Books Collections'. *Art Documentation Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America of North America* 1, no.6 (December 1982); 'Richard Long's Books and the Transmission of Sculptural Images'. *Print Collector's Newsletter* XV111, no.4 (September – October 1987); 'Twentysix Gasoline Stations That Shook the World: the Rise and Fall of Cheap Booklets as Art.' *Art Libraries Journal* 18, no. 1 (1993); 'Some Contemporary Artists and Their Books' *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, edited by Joan Lyons. Rochester, New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985.

(*Journal of Artists' Books*), which was 'founded to raise the level of critical inquiry about artists' books'.<sup>4</sup> Since 1994, *JAB* has been published twice yearly. Stefan Klima, in his book, *Artists Books, A Critical Survey of the Literature* (published in 1998), discusses the important contribution made by the art critic, Lucy Lippard, with a single essay, *The Artists' Book Goes Public* (published in 1977). In it she celebrates the art form. Her attitude is in keeping with her having co-founded an archive for artists' books in 1976, Franklin Furnace, in New York City (1998:33). Also significant, according to Klima, is the contribution made by the journal, *Umbrella*, international in scope, which has been the chief source for exhibition listings. Also important for exhibition announcements are *Print Collector's Newsletter*, *Art Monthly* and *The Annual Bibliography of Modern Art* (which list the collections of the library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York) (1998:8-9).

A major event for catapulting the world of book art into the public arena was the *Documenta 6* (24 June – 2 Oct 1977) in Kassel, Germany. It showcased artists' books in a significant manner, devoting to them one of the main exhibition spaces. The *Documenta 6* consequently spawned a surge of interest in the medium and eighteen reviews appeared in 1977, while six further reviews of the artists' books at the *Documenta 6* appeared the following year (Klima 1998:9).

Most of the writing on artists' books to date has appeared in journal articles, collections of short essays and in exhibition, museum and library publications and catalogues. Klima posits Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books* (published in 1995) as being, in 1998, the only monograph on the subject (1998:9). So, as Klima also notes, a large obstacle facing the debate around artists' books is the paucity of established theory, of what he (quoting the author Dick Higgins) calls 'right language' (1998:9). In the words of Dick Higgins, 'Most of our criticism in art ... is not geared towards ... artists' books ... that is why there is so little good criticism of the genre' (Klima, 1998:9).

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<sup>4</sup> *Artist's Book Yearbook 2003-2004*. 2003. Bristol: Impact Press. The quotation is taken from an advertisement for *JAB*, p148.

Klima notes that the chief players in the debates around artists' books come both from the book world and the art world: 'critic, librarian, bookmaker, historian, artist' (1998:10). I consider this to be an important point for the subsequent theory of categorisation I shall outline in the following chapter. It is significant to the construction of pertinent theory to take into account that the artist's book is a phenomenon that spans two worlds: art and book. And also that this has been a contributing cause of confusion in identifying and defining book art.

### **1.7 Book art, the *livre d'artiste* and the book made by an artist**

There are artists who believe they are makers of book art when their sphere of activity more properly qualifies their work as belonging to some other category. Also, there are categories of books that are sometimes mistakenly called artists' books, or book art, by both the publishers and the public.

While the terms, the 'artist's book' and 'book art' are difficult to define, they can be viewed as an arena of activity at the intersection of other disciplines, fields and ideas (Drucker 1995:1). This sometimes leads to confusion. There are certain types of books with which the artist's book is commonly mistakenly coupled. The first of these types is the *livres d'artiste*. This category of book-making came into being as a publishing movement in the mid-1890s when art dealers, such as Ambroise Vollard and Daniel Henry Kahnweiler started to produce deluxe editions of the work of artists they wished to promote, such as Rouault, Picasso, Bonnard, Matisse, Miro, Ernst and others (Drucker 1995:2-5). Johanna Drucker has the following to say about these *livre d'artiste*:

They stop just at the threshold of the conceptual space in which artists' books operate. First of all, it is rare to find a *livre d'artiste* which interrogates the conceptual or material form of the book as part of its intention, thematic interests or production activities. (1995:3)

So, although these books may be beautifully crafted (and may even contain examples of fine art), they do not fall within the sphere of the artist's book and book art. The deluxe edition or fine book, it can be pointed out, predates the *livre d'artiste*, and the

latter can be seen as one of its subcategories. There is a long history of books with large scale format and high production value. The books may contain such features as hand colouring, virtuoso printing, expensive binding and use of rare materials. But neither craftsmanship, nor fine materials, nor fine printing, nor fine content provide valid justification to call a book an artist's book or qualify it for the category of book art as the terms are currently understood by practitioners in the field.

Sometimes a book is mistakenly coupled with the concept of the artist's book or book art, simply because the book has been made by an artist. In a limited sense all books made by artists are obviously artists' books, but only in the sense that they are books made by artists. But something further must occur in the way the artist is using the book or the concept of the book, before it can be said to fit the category of the artist's book or book art in a wider sense – the sense in which these terms are currently used as terms for a special sort of art that plays with the idea and conceptual framework of the book as part of its intent.

So my book, *Notes from the Edge of Infinity* (Fig. 19), although made by an artist is not an artist's book in the sense that the concept is being delineated here. It is primarily a collection of photographs and notes that records a process of art making. And the fact that many of the photographs in themselves may be quite aesthetically beautiful does not make the book an artist's book. Rather, it qualifies it as a book containing art. The point is that there is nothing about this book that takes it into the realm of a conceptual meditation on the nature and possibilities of 'book' and 'bookness' (that which constitutes book). There is little self-reflexivity on the nature of the book. There is little investigation of the concept of the book. It is more a straightforward written meditation and visual recording of an unfolding and evolving piece of land-art.

### **1.8 Book art: a special sort of order**

Observing the working methodology and conceptual approach of book artist Keith Smith provides another route into understanding what constitutes an artist's book (or book art). For Keith Smith, the idea of constructing a suitable and expressive order at

every level of the book-making process underpins his approach to the artist's book. He writes about constructing order in his conclusion to *Text in Book Format*:

As I sit here this afternoon, writing these words into the computer, my old Webster's New Collegiate is at hand, I think about the fact that all modern English poetry is contained in the dictionary, the words reordered. The book I am writing is within the covers of the dictionary. My text is a reading of the dictionary through a convoluted itinerary. Meaning is more than a matter of word choice; it is the art of constructing order (Smith, 1997:113).

There is the constructed order of words, of the page and of the containing book. As a book artist, Smith explores all these domains. He views the task of constructing meaning in book format as a holistic enterprise, in the sense that the meaning-value of all the elements is investigated and harnessed, according to the task at hand. He inventively explores ways of extending the levels of meanings of words by also being visual. He investigates possibilities for bindings that meet the requirements of a particular book project. He explores the space of the page and uses inventive and meaningful layouts. He explores page sequencing and how this can be used to place meaning into visual and physical form. Taking charge of the whole book-making endeavour, he says, 'The key to constructing a manuscript as a book experience starts with the writer's awareness of individually composing each word, line/paragraph/stanza, and the page' (Smith, 1997:58). Continuing, he states:

Sometimes the composition of a page relates to the next, to the next, instead of the same design repeated ad infinitum. I prefer the design when Applied Arts are incorporated into Book Arts, for then, they are conceived to extend *from* the writing, conceived as Spartan or elaborate. (Smith, 1997:58)

Smith thinks as a book artist and maker of book art. It is instructive to notice that he considers the total book experience and how all elements can contribute to meaning making. And he is aware of setting up collaborations between meaning elements of the written text and meaning elements of the visual layout, page design and book construction. Constructing order, constructing form and constructing meaning become inseparable.



expression. And the traditional and historic forms often arrive with a new twist. *Pocket Book* (Fig. 22), by Larry Thomas, is an example of this. It is a pun on the old concept. A pocket book, traditionally carried around in the pocket or the purse, for the purpose of notes, jottings and recordings, becomes in this instance the purse itself. And the purse opens to reveal a recording. But it is not a written text. It is a miniature visual pop-up construction, recording an enigmatic and surreal scenario, like a movie-clip from the irrational world of dreams.

Julie Lasky, writing about an artist's book, draws attention to the aspect of the work that combines form and meaning, 'expression and artefact are conjoined as firmly as body and soul' (2001:22). This is the ideal to which many makers of artists' books aspire.

Les Bicknell puts in a plea for a holistic approach that takes all facets of the book-making process into account and unites them into an integrated and meaningful whole. He expresses his idealistic belief that it is this type of approach that is likely to infuse a piece of book art with a heightened frisson of meaningful expression that can potentially be used to express significant issues in a significant way:

It is essential that each and every element of the book is considered during the preparation and making. The elements should relate to each other and the core concepts from which the book originated. It is these 'holistic' bookworks, which are the most successful. They work on many levels. Their completeness allows them the capacity to transcend the medium and they are able to comment on larger issues of humanity (Bicknell, 1997:25).

Naturally, the attempt to link the form and formal considerations to meaning is not something new in the world of the book arts. Design considerations of this nature have always been close to the hearts of bookmakers. Beautifully tooled and bejewelled bible covers, produced in the middle ages, bespoke the value of the books' contents. Many commercially produced books today show great care and thoughtfulness in their design.

The artist's book often takes all this a bit further. It might be that there is scope for greater inventiveness because it is a unique book in an edition of one, or a very limited edition, each book individually made by the artist. It may be that commercial

considerations are not as imperative in the conceptualisation of the book. It may be that the nature of making an artist's book is often an individual activity and not a group project and this allows for greater personal expression. It may be that the nature of the artist's book game is more experimental than that of the commercial press. It may be that the makers of artists' books are artists, whereas those involved in commercial book production are usually not (although sometimes an artist or a graphic designer might be a member of a collaborative production team). The point is that the production structures, the priorities that are emphasised and the skills of the people involved, influence the outcome and appearance of a book.

Often the small press falls between the world of artist's books and the world of the mainstream book industry. Carolyn Keuber writes about this in her article, *For the Art of the Book*. She quotes Charles Alexander (of *Chax Press* in Tuscan, Arizona) who outlines the mission of his press as being,

...to create unique book arts editions of innovative writing' (2001: 55). He emphasises that 'Reading involves the space of the text and the context of that space ... my own practice is to think of the bookmaker or designer as a collaborator, working from inside the text to find the form of the book that is appropriate' (Keuber, 2001:55).

Form and content are emphasised as both being important. But the text is always the starting point and then appropriate formal qualities are sought. Although the design of an artist's book might proceed in such a manner, the scope of how it could come into being is much wider. Perhaps the artist begins with a visual idea. Perhaps the book evolves out of materials, that the artist is exploring, and then a form is found which suggests a textual content. Perhaps there are no words at all.

The artist's book as a separate field, says Drucker, '... interrogates the conceptual or material form of the book as part of its intention, thematic interests or production activities' (1995:3). In other words, the formal and aesthetic concerns of the work are linked: '... that is, [it is] a book which integrates the formal means of its realisation and production with its thematic or aesthetic issue' (Drucker, 1995:2). This can broadly serve as a working definition. It might help to add that it is usually created as an original work of art, and not simply as a means of reproducing pre-existing art.

However, there are some attendant problems in suggesting this. One problem is attempting to define an original work of art.

### **1.9 Book art and the concept of the book**

The synonymous terms, 'book art' and the 'artist's book', have come to refer to an art object that in some way refers to the concept of book. In itself, interestingly, it may not even resemble a book. However, frequently it is recognisable as a book but plays with the meanings tied up in the notions of a book and affiliated conventions of book making. The artist's book introduces a hypertext or metatext about the book. There is a self-referential reflectivity. In some way, the fact that the artwork takes the form of the book adds to its intrinsic meaning.

The involvement of artists in the making of books is as old as the history of books. The illustrators of medieval manuscripts were artists, as were the bookbinders, who created elaborately tooled and crafted covers. The oriental calligraphers of scrolls turned writing into art, so that the visual and the textual were integrated. The artist's book takes the history of this involvement of artists with books one step further. Also it opens up new possibilities for the integration of visual and textual elements of book-art.

### **1.10 Collapsing definitions: the world of children's books**

What about the case of a book conceptually fitting the idea of an artist's book but not being classified as such. Take the books of David Pelham, a children's book illustrator. He does not style himself as a maker of artists' books and yet one could argue that his books are artists' books. His books unquestionably extend the concept of 'book'. David Pelham produced a series of books that are in the shape of objects from life, such as a chocolate box, a picnic hamper, a sandwich and a hamburger (Johnson, 1996:9). They suggest, in a very real way, that the book is a meal; and also, by extension, that life can be read like a book (Johnson, 1996:9). They have

something to say about the nature of books and they say it in a way that conjoins form and content (Johnson, 1996:9).

Consider another maker of children's books. Henrik Drescher is the author of *Pat the Beasty* (Orion Children's Books, 1993), a book which contains a range of tactile experiences, like fur and plastic replications of animal body parts, a nasty smell, a mirror, pop ups and a book within the book (Johnson, 1996:9). The book is read and also experienced in a kinaesthetic and sensory way. Paul Johnson comments: 'In a very fundamental way it widened children's perspectives of what the book is in a conceptual way' (1996:9). The world of children's books offers many examples of books that could be called artists' books (Johnson, 1996:9).

### **1.11 Collapsing further definitions: when the artist is innocent of the categories**

From the arena of 'outsider' art<sup>5</sup> comes a useful example of an artist, James Castle, whose work is innocent of the rules and categories of the art establishment. He never saw himself as a maker of artists' books, yet we can regard his books as belonging to this realm.

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<sup>5</sup> There are many terms in current usage for the phenomenon of the artist who is an innocent. Some of these are 'outsider' artist, 'raw' artist, 'naïve' artist or 'visionary' artist. These artists frequently have had no formal art education and so are innocent of the rules and conventions of art-making. This can result in the work being naïve, or child-like in its rendering. These artists are in one respect or another often outsiders in their communities. In Castle's case, his deafness set him apart. The work often reveals an intensity of emotion and purpose, possibly heightened by the sense of isolation. These artists often do not regard themselves as artists. Their work is often created from materials from the everyday environment that come readily to hand. Castle used post-office supplies. Often the materials that are used are not the conventional art materials of the establishment art practitioners. This is simply another example of how these artists are innocent of the rules. Frequently the work is not made with the intention of exhibiting or selling; but from a primary and imperative urge to play with materials and express personal insights, which are not infrequently of a visionary nature. Often the activity of art making takes on the psychological proportions of a compulsion, lending a central meaning to the lives of the makers and taking up an enormous amount of their time. The subject of 'outsider art' is a personal interest of mine, and one of the best books that I have read on the subject is John Beardsley's *Gardens of Revelation*.

Castle was born in Idaho in September 1900, and lived until the age of seventy-seven (Trusky, 1996:50). He was born deaf, and he started making his books as a child (Trusky, 1996:50). He never learnt to read or write but produced hundreds of books – album books, calendar books, cigarette-box books, as well as reworked and appropriated books (sometimes he drew on blank flyleaf and text-block pages and on the top section of pages) (Trusky, 1996:50). In his reworked books he often tipped in his own illustrations drawn on found pieces of paper such as sheet music, US postal service forms and letters. As his parents owned a hardware store (which also served as a post office), in the small American town of Garden Valley in Idaho, Castle had a ready supply of USPS ‘art supplies’ (Trusky, 1996:50).

Castle’s books contain his ideas about books. With naïve and fresh insight, they convey the thoughts of an illiterate bibliophile about the function of the book in relation to maker and reader (Trusky, 1996:50). Consider the contents page from a book, the so-called (*Airway Coffee*) (Fig. 23), which takes its title from the material used to construct the cover. The contents page shows rows of scribbles, which are drawings of writing. There are also illustrations of five books and then a book-like rectangle containing a portrait. The books seem to indicate that the book is to be understood as consisting of books within the book (Trusky, 1996:51). The portrait shows a man with a slot in his forehead. The man’s head is depicted as a receptacle, much like a post box. Does this convey the idea that the content of books enters the head and becomes internalised? Does it convey the idea that the book is like a post box, holding thoughts and information in transit between sender and receiver? Another picture shows a man in a suit, with a head that looks like the page from a book. Perhaps this man is a reader. Perhaps his mind works like a book, revealing first one page of thought and then going on to the next. Perhaps Castle is indicating that the book is akin to a map of what goes on in the mind (an equivalent for consciousness). This is an intrinsic idea associated with the history of the book from its earliest inception.

Another intrinsic notion affiliated with the book is that it is a receptacle for memory, a keeper of records. Castle’s books are also about this idea of the book (Trusky, 1996:50-53). Tom Trusky (Director of The Idaho Centre for the Book, which hosted

an exhibition of Castle's work), comments: 'While the precise nature of memories in Castle's Books may never be completely understood by us, what is apparent is that Castle ... comprehended how books and memory are related' (Trusky, 1996:53).

Castle's books are metaphors for the book. They contain a meta-text or hypertext about the book. This is one of the defining characteristics of the artist's book. Castle was a maker of artists' books, although he never consciously set out to join the fraternity of artist's bookmakers, or even knew the 'rules of membership'. He is a case of an uneasy fit because of his innocence. His work, however, like the work of some children's book artists, is of interest to the world of artists' bookmakers and those interested in the subject (as evidenced by the Trusky article on Castle's work in the *Artist's Book Yearbook*, that I have referred to above). Artists like Castle are a part of the tradition out of which the artist's book movement has grown. There are also countless examples from the past of books that extend the concept of the book, or are in some way books that comment about the 'bookness' of the book. As a general convention, we do not call these historical books by the term 'book art'. Book art is a term that came into usage, as has been stated, in the second half of the twentieth century. It is used to describe the output of artists who make these special sorts of books, often referred to as artists' books, that in some way comment self consciously on the language and conventions and functions of the book; while the artists, themselves, are aware of the world of book art and its conventions.

### **1.12 Some thoughts from book artists about book art**

An isolated and innocent artist like Castle helps to remind us that definitions are created constructs. They do not always neatly fit a situation and it is sensible to remember that they are man-made and continually in living flux.

Maker of artist's books, Les Bicknell (writing in the *Artists' Book Yearbook*), puts in a plea for definitions, that are flexible. He has the following to say:

What is it that makes book art book art? Although valuable to attempt to make sense of this question, it is rather more useful to approach the idea of categories and the concept of 'book

art' from a slightly less prescriptive, more open point of view, to create definitions which allow for discovery, to be used as a starting point, rather than an administrative tool to define and control creativity.

Consideration of, and working within, the basic qualities of the book allow for unlimited possibilities. (Bicknell, 1996: 24)

Bicknell goes on to emphasise the importance of an informed historical perspective, as well as knowledge of contemporary practice. He stresses the importance of being able to stretch boundaries and think outside of the box:

Book artists, (like all artists), must consider their history and future. It is necessary to establish some sort of framework or understanding of one's working practice and its position in history and current practice, or art, and book art in particular, is unlikely to mature or develop. Some of the most interesting book art is to be found on the 'edges' of definitions and within cross art form collaborations. This relies on approaching the concept of definitions as a creative activity, stimulating discourse. If, for example, Andy Goldsworthy called himself a painter, we would then have to question what we understand by painting. This argument constantly stretches the boundaries, which enable us to examine and re-examine our own activities as makers.

Knowing the intention of the artist is essential for the contextualisation of the work.  
(Bicknell, 1996: 24-25)

Bicknell's approach, which I find appealing, is to be open-minded. And then he advocates that one allow current practice, in conjunction with historical perspective, to continually reshape the landscape of the definition.

Emma Hill, book artist and publisher, attempts a definition of the artist's book. Writing in the *Artists' Book Yearbook*, she articulates the rules that can be utilised or broken, the book as a space for imaginative action and as a site for understanding something new about language. Her approach is deftly open-ended. It allows the concept of the artist's book the freedom to change and expand, and the book artist the freedom to go on experimenting with what the artist's book can be:

A book comes with a certain set of rules that can be utilized or broken and I am less interested in debating what an artist's book is than in finding out what an artist's book can be. I am

encouraged by the view that, 'a book is a space for imaginative action'<sup>6</sup> – a particular kind of site where an artist can use what we understand about how a book holds language to make us pause, contemplate and look anew. (Hill, 2003:95)

One of the thoughts contained here is that the book is a receptacle for language and that the way in which it holds language is not a given. By altering the nature of the way it acts as a container for language it can cause us to look and think anew. I like Emma Hill's linking of the book to language as a wide concept. Take the example of one of my books, *Grumeti* (Fig 23), where the intrinsic theme is about ways of looking and ways of seeing, as well as ways of being blind. This book presents an account of a safari experience in the Serengeti and considers the typical tourist endeavour of attempting to capture the wild and take it home, via the camera. Through text and photographs the book attempts to investigate what is seen on the surface and what is missed altogether, because of worldview and attitude and blindness to the unfamiliar. There is an attempt to emphasise the idea that the tourist snaps taken by the camera, while seductively appearing to capture reality, actually fail to do so. This is accomplished by photocopying the photographs onto transparent paper. The photographs have been photocopied in a manner that creates a grainy and elusively faded appearance. In addition, the viewer sees through one photograph to the photos beneath. The text has been treated in a similar manner. The pages are left loose so that they can be moved into different orders. These devices for presenting the visual and the written texts build a broader language of expression than the average commercial book utilises. The language is built into material and technique and structure, as well as into visual and verbal texts.

### **1.13 Definitions and context**

ARLIS/UK and Ireland Committee on Cataloguing and Classification (1987-88), formulated a definition of the artist's book:

(Artist's Book): A book or book-like object, in which an artist has had a major input beyond illustration or authorship: where the final appearance of the book owes much to an artist's

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<sup>6</sup> Gooding, cited in Hill, 2003:100



interference/participation: where the book is the manifestation of the artist's creativity: where the book is a work of art in itself. (Ford, 1998:1)

This is the definition used by Simon Ford, in an article describing contemporary collection management of artist's books, in the UK and Ireland. While choosing to use it as his working definition, he comments:

There will never be one precise definition. Nor is this desirable, because as with other art forms there will always be artists who push the boundaries of the permissible and redefine what is possible. Categories in art are often found to blur and breakdown at the extremes of practice. (Ford, 1998:43)

One can describe the artist's book and/or the book object in many ways and from many angles. Different viewpoints add richness and depth to our understanding of the subject. They cast light on differing angles and facets. They can shift the emphasis and create new and subtle distinctions. Ford pertinently points out that it is not desirable to reduce our understanding to one precise definition. And most particularly this is the case when one is dealing with a subject that by its very nature is pushing boundaries and playing with the limits of definitions. However, there will always be practical reasons as to why it is important to come up with a definition. The needs of libraries provide an example of this.

Libraries that collect book art have had to think through their understanding of the subject as this affects collection policies. Two written policy statements from British libraries help to give a fuller picture of the artist's book, as they attempt to define its perimeters. The NAL has the largest collection of book art in the UK. It is housed in the V&A. The Tate Gallery also has an extensive collection.

The definitions of book art adopted by libraries provides only one of the determining factors in the building up of their collections. Other evaluative principles also come into play.

The *Tate Gallery* library has an interesting list of exclusions – books they will not consider purchasing (Ford, Simon, 1998:50). Their evaluation criteria have some built-in biases, as to what an artist's book ought to be. Also, as to what constitutes an

acceptable artist's book. As will be observed below, there are some considerations which exclude certain categories of artists' books for reasons not related to perceived quality or interest, but because of other factors, such as seemingly arbitrary decisions about budget limits and biased collection policies (Ford, 1998:50).

Sometimes whole categories of books are excluded because the particular category contains a large number of books that are not artists' books. This is the case with the exclusion of books that are a result of collaboration with literary figures, or have been inspired by literary texts (this is because these books are usually considered to be illustrated books, and outside the scope of the collection). Another area of exclusion is the one-of-a-kinds or very limited edition book. A collection policy, that favours the mass produced aesthetic, is also creating a gap in the collection, as many excellent examples of artist's books are unique books or one-of-a-kinds. (The NAL does not concur with the Tate Gallery and has a collection that reflects the production by book artists of one-of-a-kinds and unique books, as well as the mass-produced book.) The Tate Gallery also restricts the purchase of books over a certain price – books over one hundred pounds was the figure in 1996, which may have been revised upwards – which again reflects a bias towards the mass-produced book and the concept of the democratic multiple. Other exclusions include illustrated books/*livres d'artiste*, books containing original prints, especially if the prints are also available unbound and 'objects which cannot strictly be considered as "books" – although this is not always a straightforward matter!' (Ford, 1998:50)

We begin to see that evaluation is a political animal. It is subject to the winds of fashion, vagaries of taste and whim of policy makers. The decisions and powers of policy makers can be crucial in helping to define and judge the artist's book, by acts of exclusion and inclusion as well as by the covert and overt messages to book artists, of encouragement and discouragement.

The NAL's present acquisition policy states:

5.26. Book art.

A significant feature of one strand of late 20<sup>th</sup> century art is the creating of books as individual works of art. Some of these are produced by people who come from a background of traditional activities associated with books such as binding or book illustration and design. Others explore the role of the book in daily life and in our culture generally, and provide a forceful comment on the associations that books have for the individual. The NAL acquires major examples of works of book art in order to give a rounded view of contemporary attitudes towards the book and to introduce a dimension into displays and exhibitions that force consideration of what books mean. (NAL policy, cited in Ford, 1998:50)

#### The Tate Gallery Library Policy states:

As part of the overall aim to represent artistic activity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Library has developed a collection of artists' book works from the 1960s onwards, and will continue to add to it both in order to fill earlier gaps and to keep up with new publications, so long as book works of the type we collect are being made. Although anxious to avoid too restrictive a definition, our broad understanding of an artist's bookwork in the context of this collection is: 'A book (i.e. normally a number of pages attached to each other in some way) wholly or primarily conceived by (though not necessarily actually made/printed by) an artist, and usually produced in a cheap, multiple edition for wide dissemination.' (*Tate Gallery Library Policy*, cited in Ford, 1998:42-50).

The idea that the artist's book should be printed in a cheap multiple edition for wide dissemination unfavourably limits collection practices and effectively cuts out many excellent artists' books that are made as one-offs or in very small numbers. It not only unfairly discriminates but it also encourages a false idea about the artist's book, namely that part of its nature is to be produced in a cheap edition. The idea has a history. It arises from a time during the 1950s and 1960s when artists were rebelling against constrictive gallery practices, the hegemony of art dealers and the exclusivity of the market. They wanted more control over the dissemination of their work and ideas. They wished to be anti-elitist. They hoped to circumvent expensive and dictatorial gallery structures and reach a wider audience. To make a book into an artwork was a radical new way of having an exhibition in a book and of achieving the aim to cut out the gallery. To make it cheap and readily accessible was a way of assisting it in reaching a wide audience. The term, the 'democratic multiple', came into vogue to describe the cheap edition of the artist's book that was printed in sufficient numbers to ensure its widespread dissemination (Drucker 1995:119).

To adopt the idea of the democratic multiple as a present-day collecting principle for a contemporary collection of artists' books can be construed to be outmoded and unsound. This provides a nice example of how definitions can outlive their time and become increasingly obsolete as the world changes and new more appropriate ideas become current. One hopes that the Tate Gallery will take their definition of the artist's book back to the drawing board and attempt a redefining and a refining of the old concept.

#### **1.14 Some concluding remarks about defining the artist's book.**

This attempt to define the artist's book is being undertaken not because it is believed that it is possible to come up with the perfect definition. It is done, rather, in the hope of obtaining a temporary grasp on a slippery subject. It is done, moreover, as an entry into an understanding of the subject. It is done as a way of mapping out the territory, although it is understood that boundaries are not stable entities. Roland Barthes eloquently expresses this when he writes:

The text, in its mass, is comparable to a sky, at once flat and smooth, deep, without edges and without landmarks; like the soothsayer drawing on it with the tip of his staff an imaginary rectangle wherein to consult, according to certain principles, the flight of birds, the commentator traces through the text certain zones of reading, in order to observe therein the migration of meanings, the outcropping of codes, the passage of citations. (1987:14)

The purpose, then, of this attempt to define the artist's book is not to come up with a simple and watertight concept. It is to reveal some of the subtleties, variations and complexities of the subject and create the sort of definition that can live and grow and move into expanding territory as the artist's book continues to shape itself through the living practice of artists.

## *Chapter Two*

### *The Challenge to Placement: Towards a Categorisation of Book Art*

Dear John,

Here is a little bit that you may ignore if you like: Most art today, because it is a currency, is behind glass or must not be touched, but the art book is a form of expression working at the magical distance between eyes and fingertips – which involves the sense of touch. It is also as intimate as the letter and may involve the element of surprise. It is theatre, but you can touch the actors! Art books could be the biggest thing in this country since pottery!

(Lanyon, cited in *Artists' Book Yearbook*, 1994:12)

## 2.1. Introduction: some thought about categorisation

There exists no formal consensus as to how artists' books are to be categorised, although different commentators and practitioners have come up with different and useful systems. Categories are useful for a number of reasons. They are, for example, useful in libraries for the purposes of storage and retrieval.<sup>7</sup>

Categories are also useful for purposes of discourse around book art. They can help to delineate an understanding of the book. They can give a book a place on a map, contextualising it within a larger framework. They can establish the working principles inherent in its creation, as well as cultural and historical influences that are embedded in its material form. They can provide a background to foreground the book. They can enable the process of analysis and decipherment. They can further understanding and offer up frameworks for viewing and perceiving and the making of meaning. Categories provide a measuring grid, a framework against which differences stand out. None the less, they are artificial creations. One of the interesting and useful features about them is that different frameworks highlight different components.

As Simon Ford<sup>8</sup> points out, in an erudite passage on categorisation, which I quote below, one man's order is another man's disorder and classification affects how we see the world, while new systems help us think the unthinkable:

How knowledge is organized (classification) affects how we see the world. The Argentinian librarian and writer George Borges describes a classification scheme from a 'certain Chinese encyclopedia' in which it is written: 'animals are divided into a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) sucking pigs,' and so on (Ford, 1994:44). This passage illustrates how classification can be arbitrary as well as dependent upon ideological, historical and utilitarian concerns. One person's order is another person's disorder, and other systems of thought reveal

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<sup>7</sup> Many libraries with collections of artists' books are still attempting to find ideal ways to store and to retrieve and to catalogue them. Some libraries have the artist's books on open shelves amongst other books, catalogued according to subject matter or country of origin, or some other principle. Some have them in special collections. Differing cataloguing practices mean that artist's books can be difficult to find. A more consistent and universal policy of cataloguing would be helpful for easier access.

<sup>8</sup> Simon Ford, as mentioned earlier on in this chapter, is a cataloger at the *NAL*.

the strangeness of our own. Classification and forms of cataloguing do not just aid the retrieval of relevant material they impose limits upon what is assessable and therefore what is thinkable. (Ford, 1994:44)

## 2. 2. Some problems relating to the categorisation of book art

One difficulty with artists' books is that they defy easy categorisation. This is at times part of their purpose. They can be designed to push the boundaries of the book into unexpected places. Often they want to 'misbehave' themselves. They may wish to challenge or defy or play with existing codes. And they are often subversive. Sometimes they attempt subversion of the art world, and sometimes of the world of the book

Take the example of the early book artists who created the democratic multiple.<sup>9</sup> This group of artists deliberately set out to subvert the art world, and to do this through the vehicle of the mass-produced book. The democratic multiple was a form of art under the cover of book (or a form of book under the cover of art) that challenged notions around the exclusivity of art. The democratic multiple was a form of the artist's book that was produced by artists as a way of side stepping the expensive and elitist

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<sup>9</sup>The concept of the democratic multiple is linked to the idea of democratisation of society and mass production. The term and the ideas supporting it became popular from the mid-1940s onwards, at first largely within the avant-garde. Asger Jorn produced books in collaboration with the surrealist artist, Christian Dotremont. George Brecht staged mail art events. Part of the *Fluxus* movement, his publications of the fifties and sixties supported the stance of the artwork as non unique. In the sixties and seventies the prevailing social and political activism supported the production of inexpensive and disposable work. The book also functioned ideologically as an artist-controlled alternative in reaching an audience, bypassing the traditional institutions of museum and gallery. It was part of the testing of experimental forms; and a way of circumventing, if not challenging the establishment. However, in this respect it only partially succeeded. For frequently artists books were stocked by galleries and museums as an addition to their normal exhibiting practises and were regarded as an inexpensive sideline and a good way to generate publicity. Another form of the artist's book was also born: the publication that was a hybrid between artist's book and catalogue and was produced in collaboration with the museums and galleries promoting the artist (Drucker, 1995:71-75).

structures of the gallery and reaching a wider public. The book was chosen as a suitable form to bring art into the public arena. And these were amongst the first artists' books to present the challenging dilemma of categorisation for book objects that spanned the worlds of art and of book.

Two artists who worked extensively within the format of the book and who influenced thinking about books as an inexpensive edition or democratic multiple, are Dieter Roth and Ed Ruscha. Both used the book form, not as an addendum to their art making, but as primary art form. And for both, the making of books was a continuous and central part of their art-making production. As early proponents of the book as artwork, they make an interesting comparison. Their respective intentions and working methods differ so widely that their work can serve to demonstrate the breadth and versatility of the medium (Drucker, 1995:71-75).

Dieter Roth explored ideas around the notion of the book as physical form. His books are a structural investigation of the codex conventions such as pages, sequence and bindings. They are books about books and the conventions of books. By making his books in editions, which fit the conventions of publishing, he emphasises that his intention is that they are primarily books, not sculptures or multiple art pieces. He is also making the point that he wishes them to be read primarily as books in the guise of art. Roth is considered to be a breakthrough figure in the book arts (Drucker, 1995:71-75).

Ed Ruscha uses the book in such a manner as to neutralise the physical and structural features. An example of this is *Fires*, (Fig. 25). The book appears to be conventional and inconspicuous. The work is deadpan, operating within an aesthetic tradition of the banal (with notions of repetitive sequence), and adopting elements from the culture of pop art. When *Fires* is opened, the first photograph features a glass of milk, a match and part of an everyday table setting. The subject matter is commonplace. There is a sense of humour with an element of slightly brooding unease. Ruscha made his books inexpensive and attempted to circulate them widely. They were intended to have the look of neutral and incidental publications, as art in the guise of book. Ironically, they have now attained a cult status amongst collectors of artists' books. (Drucker, 1995: 75-77)



Another artist who has more recently put an interesting spin on the idea of the 'democratic multiple', is Martha Rosler with her art-piece, *Service. A Trilogy on Colonisation* (Fig. 26).<sup>10</sup> In a gesture which circumvented the gallery structures while at the same time reaching a wide audience, Rosler devised the original form of her trilogy as a series of postcards that arrived through the mail every three to seven days. In this way, the three books forming the trilogy (*A Budding Gourmet*, *McTower's Maid* and *Tyvana Maid*) became a postal serial. Later, the trilogy appeared as a book (published by Printed Matter Inc., New York City, Capital City Press. 1978). In the unnumbered introduction, Rosler comments on some of her intentions:

A serial communication can hook you, engaging your long term interest (intermittently at least). There was a lot of time and mental space around each instalment of these novels, time in which the communication could unfold and reverberate. So they are long novels and short ones (Rosler: 1978: p. unrecorded).

Rosler also possibly thought that the immediacy of mail might allow its message to penetrate the visual boundaries of perception. As with many other more recent artists, Rosler put the early form of the democratic multiple to personal use in order to articulate her own artistic conceptions. However, in keeping with the origins of the term, the work carries an ideological agenda. It focuses attention upon social issues of disempowerment and disadvantage. *Service* highlights, for example, the plight of domestic helpers and immigrants in an orchestrated political manoeuvre to alter conservative mainstream consciousness. Should this piece be classified as art or book or political pamphlet or social-message serial or as all of these? A good question to ask for this example and for the others is what insights are to be gained by viewing it under the different categories, both separately and jointly.

This leads to a problem that is identified and expressed by Simon Ford. He introduces it by referring to an observation made by Timothy Shipe: '... by

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<sup>10</sup> I looked at Rosler's *Service. A Trilogy on Colonization* in the collection of artists' books at British Library, London. It is one of the books discussed by Drucker (1995:86). She discusses it as an example of the artist's book as a democratic multiple.

cataloguing an artist's book you comprehensively affect the way it is perceived' (Ford, 1998: 52).<sup>11</sup> He goes on to say:

This is a field of contention similar to that found in museums where it concerns the relationship between an art work and its context. Art cannot escape framing structures, be they verbal descriptions (catalogues), architectures (libraries) or economics (value); if an item exists in a library context this will be a contributing factor to the viewer's experience. A contextless vacuum in which to view art does not exist. (Ford, 1998: 52)

Reader response theory offers up a similarly cautionary note about the dangers of placing a book or an object within a particular framing structure. It can lead to premature closure, and curtail the multivalence of meanings and readings. An artist's book, like *A*, by Andy Warhol, deliberately attempts to make a mockery of categories. I do not provide a visual illustration of this work (which I viewed at the NAL and which photographed poorly) so I shall provide a detailed description: In a deadpan way, it emulates a perfectly average cheap paperback that has been covered in greaseproof paper. The work implies that things may not always be what they seem to be. A plain cover may mask the sleazy and sensational. Warhol's witty and ironic *A* mimics the genre of the cheap paperback, deliberately making use of ordinary and everyday methods of production and non-precious forms. On the back cover it advertises itself as 'An Evergreen Black Cat Book. \$1.75.' and sets out 'A Layman's Guide to Some Scenes the Reviewers liked best.' In bullet points, these include 'How to become a Professional Homosexual', 'Young Girls Interviewed at the Factory', 'Arrival at Irving du Ball's' and 'Ondine's Bath'.

My artist's book, *Book of the Gates* (Figs. 30-34), can be used as an example of a book that unsettles categories. It might pass as a travel journal in a bookshop. It could be viewed as an artist's book, when placed in a gallery context. It deliberately mixes genres to unsettle reader habits and open up interpretative possibilities. There are chapters devoted to written text and chapters given over to photographs alone. The photographs are devoid of titles, suggesting that they are not dependent upon words for their interpretation, and inviting a visual investigation. The sections of written

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<sup>11</sup> Shipe, T. *The Monographic Cataloguer and the Artist's Book: the Ideal Reader*. *Art Documentation*. Vol. 10, no., 1991:24. Paraphrased by Ford, 1998:52.

narrative give way to sections of visual narrative and then return again to written narrative in a backwards and forwards movement. Within the sections of written narrative, the main body of the text, about Egypt, is continually interrupted. Fragments of story and detail, coming from other sources, have been inserted. This is not a straightforward travel journey. Nor is it a straightforward photographic essay. Rather, it is a collage of fragments that in an infinite variety of ways form links with one another.

Simon Ford writes about how cataloguing is now 'following developments in the field of computer science where flexibility is the order of the day, superseding the idea of pigeonholing knowledge in precise positions on a fixed two dimensional diagrammatic space' (Ford, 1994:44). He believes that, with respect to library cataloguing, and in particular the cataloguing of such subjects as the artist's book, catalogues will become multimedia based, allowing them to carry visual material as well. He writes about multimedia cataloguing:

Its main effect is that it supersedes forms of communication that rely on ideas such as centre and margin and replaces them with concepts of paths, webs and networks. Multimedia does away with fixed sequence, with beginnings and endings, and destroys the idea of a text's singularity and unity. One of the most radical aspects of multimedia is its utilisation of images. The mind can assimilate images far easier than text: this is why most of the traditional 'art of memory' systems involve associating concepts with images. (Ford, 1994:44)

### **2.3 Categorisation and purpose**

Categorisation is always for a purpose and the purpose should be identified and investigated so as to avoid the awkwardness of attempting to use a system of categorisation for a purpose for which it was not intended. Here I shall use the categorisation of artists' books by Keith Smith as an example of this.

Keith Smith classifies books into four main structural types. These are the codex, the fan, the oriental fold and the Venetian blind. Each has its own history. For the contemporary bookmaker each of the four structures provides a range of unique possibilities.

In the West the most common structure for the book is the codex. Its distinguishing feature is that it is bound along one edge and 'is the only type of book that allows for two-sided display' (Smith, 1997:115). Keith Smith comments on the advantages of two-sided display: it 'removes the codex from the limited concepts of writing within the four corners of the single-sheet format' (Smith, 1997:115).

The fan format is one that is used extensively in the South Sea Island cultures. It utilises a one-sided format and is bound at one point (Smith, 1997:115-122). In the oriental fold book the binding can be described as mechanical: it is accomplished by folding a piece of paper backwards and forwards upon itself. It is usually conceived as a one-sided display (Smith, 1997:115-122). The Venetian blind structure is also used in the South Sea Island cultures. It is bound at two points and, traditionally, palm leaves were used as sheets, with carved wooden covers (Smith, 1997:115-122).

Smith's categories only highlight the difference in basic structure between book types. Many other sorts of information that could be thrown up by categorisation are excluded. The information that his system offers is likely to be of more use to the makers of books (as a source of inspiration and ideas and historical prototype), than as a system for aiding and enriching interpretation (although obviously it could still be employed as a springboard for interpretation).

It has been suggested above that there are dangers attendant upon unthinking categorisation. It has also been suggested that artists' books are sometimes aberrant 'characters', and often too slippery to be firmly held by any one system of categorisation. It has been proposed that systems of categorisation can be useful. Like putting on different pairs of glasses with differently tinted lenses, different systems of categorisation can reveal, expose and highlight different aspects and angles of the subject. Also, for discursive purposes, a system of categorising can provide a frame of reference so that similarities and differences between book objects can be observed, comparisons made and conclusions drawn.

The existence of libraries draws attention to another reason why books, including artists' books, should be categorised – that of information storage and easy retrieval.

Artists' books have always provided a rather unique challenge for librarians. They come in many shapes and sizes and storage can be tricky; they are often valuable acquisitions and so are not best left on open shelves; they pose the problem of whether they are best identified by visual means or by descriptive text; they often defy other established systems of categories or can readily belong to more than one category. The NAL (National Art Library), housed in the V&A (Victoria and Albert Museum) in London has the biggest collection of artists' books in the UK. They have chosen a simple and pragmatic system of categorisation for their collection, but one that is not particularly revealing about the nature of the subject. They chose to categorise according to the country of origin of the book: Italian books, German books, British books and so on. Within this framework, Simon Ford relates something about the system presently being employed and what he envisions for the future: 'In the case of artists' books cataloguers are still concerned with conversion of visual information into textual information through controlled terminology' (Ford, 1994:44) But he believes that current trends in cataloguing are 'bringing ever closer the object described, and its description, the book and its virtual twin are becoming one' (Ford, 1994:44). Ford wrote this about ten years ago. Today, when one visits the NAL, the cataloguing of artist's books is still largely text based, although one can ask at the counter for some special folders on artist's books that have been prepared to display individual examples of artist's books together with a selection of photographs of them. However, at present these folders only record a very small and select number of the artists' books in the collection. This move towards the inclusion of visuals is to be welcomed. And there is now work underway on a NAL artists' books website where visual material will be displayed.

This makes another point. Systems of categorisation are established for their usefulness. What is useful for a library may not be very useful for the interpreter. Purpose is important – the purpose for which the system of categorisation has been devised. So, for example, Drucker, wanting to cover the field widely, as well as provide some handholds for interpretation, comes up with the following chapter headings in her book, *The Century of Artists' Books*. These headings give an overview of her approach to categorising the artist's book:

*1. The Artist's book as Idea and Form*

2. *Conceptualising the book: Precedents, Poetics and Philosophy.*
3. *Artists' Books and the Early Twentieth Century Avant-Garde*
4. *The Artist's Book as a Democratic Multiple*
5. *The Artist's Book as a Rare and/or Auratic Object*
6. *The Codex and its Variations*
7. *Self Reflexivity in Book Form*
8. *The Book as Visual Form*
9. *Books as Verbal Exploration*
10. *The Book as Sequence: Narrative and Non Narrative*
11. *The Artist's Book as an Agent of Social Change*
12. *The Book as Conceptual Space (Performance and Exhibition)*
13. *The Book as Document*
14. *Metaphor and Form: The Artist's Book in the Twentieth Century*  
(1995: unnumbered contents page at the beginning of the book)

There is a lot going on in Drucker's book headings. There is some theory, some history of the development and functions of the book, some description of book making technologies, some description of how and where art and the book come together in the artist's book. And there is some attempt to group books thematically. These headings provide us with many pairs of interpretative spectacles for examining the subject. We circle it and look into it from different viewpoints, gathering an accretion of information and a widening knowledge of this multifaceted field as we progress through the chapters.

Drucker has set up a grid system. Books often occupy more than one position on her grid. There is a good deal of overlap. There also does not appear to be an underlying pattern that links categories to one another. Her system, of some use in guiding interpretation, is more orientated towards describing certain features of the artist's book and also finding suitable pigeonholes for specific artists' books. Although her system contains a huge amount of information about artists' books, it seems somewhat arbitrary in terms of a sensible and logical way to categorise. There is no single and cohesive overall plan. Different categories arise from different first principles and different histories. Sometimes the categorising principle is theme and content, sometimes it is the aura or feeling quality of the book, sometimes it is political and social history, sometimes it is production values, sometimes it is the manner in which text and image play off against one another, and so on. The artist's

book is discussed from many different facets and angles and the knowledge of her subject that Drucker displays is multifaceted and richly interesting. Although there are many headings (and sub-headings), which inevitably set up her grid, Drucker does not purport to be offering a systematic system of categorisation for artists' books. However imperfectly ordered, her writings are valuable in that they help us to think around the subject of the artist's book as a complex entity.

So while categories can be important aids to understanding and interpretation, things can go awry if the purpose for which categories (or constructs or methodologies) are established is not clearly understood and if things are fitted into inappropriate constructions and constructs. The German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer drew attention to various forms of mismatch in his book *Truth and Method* (1960), where, for example, he is critical of modern approaches to the humanities that model themselves on methods taken from the natural sciences. He investigates what we do when we interpret things and draws attention to historically embedded consciousness that is both acquired from a particular culture and history, and continues to shape it.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.4 The purpose of interpretation

I now wish to elaborate upon the purpose of categorisation for interpretation. What I set out in the section below, in this regard, is largely taken from personal notes made during a number of informal conversations with Dr Wilhelm Liebenberg (erstwhile senior lecturer in *Afrikaans en Nederlands* at Wits).

Literary criticism has looked at genre classification and come up with theory. In literature, it is accepted that genre categories are important, because, in effect, what one put in is what one gets out and the way one 'bills' something determines audience response. It determines what one expects from something and what meanings will be found. So one can say that in most of art and literature, the categories into which one

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<sup>12</sup> Hans Georg-Gadamer. In Wikipedia. Gadamer also talks about a 'fusion of horizons'. This is the term he coined for what happens when a scholar interprets a text and attempts to find the ways that the text's history resonates with his/her own background.

fits things determine the reader/viewer response and the manner in which sense is made of it. Categories basically structure response. They give signals to the recipient about what codes to apply to make the text meaningful. Therefore, in literature and art, categories are really very important: for once one recognises the category, this activates the codes one uses for interpretation. As soon as one places an object in a category, one has a very specific sort of handle on it. This then influences one's approach to it. As an example of this, the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp come to mind. These illustrate the point that when something is put into a new category, it activates a new set of codes in the recipient. Another example of this might be to consider a piece of fiction that looks like a prose poem when put into a book of poetry, because category radically determines our response (Liebenberg conversations, 2003-2005).

The way in which one categorises a subject can also place it into a set of cultural hierarchies, which in turn determines interpretation. In the case of artists' books, it can be observed that different genres come into play. For example, there is the genre of craft and the genre of art. What might the relation of an artist's book be to each of these, presuming it has elements that are common to craft objects and elements that are affiliated with art objects? How might the reader interpret the book if it is placed under the category of art rather than craft? Or, alternatively, if it is placed under the category of craft, rather than art? Depending on the category through which it is perceived, it is likely to elicit different interpretations. Categories can be more important in determining reception than as a realistic description of an object (Liebenberg conversations, 2003-2005).

One can observe that in the humanities categories change over time, even genre categories. There was a long time, for example, when the novel was not seen as a category. As the literary and art scene changes, theorists keep changing the categories and new categories and genres come into being. Built into this scenario, there is always a transition time, when things have come into being but are not as yet recognised as a genre. Once the time lag has occurred and a new genre becomes accepted, people then use their understanding of the new category in order to interpret art and literary work. Categories are continually changing because how we perceive and understand reality, and what we consider to be significant, changes. One could



argue that the artist's book category has only recently emerged from a transition phase into a distinct genre of its own. But because it is still so new, its perimeters have not been firmly established. And an established system of sub-categorisation within the genre has not yet been firmly put into place. In addition to this, as has already been suggested, the artist's book is a category of endeavour, that by the nature of its programme, will be continuing to push boundaries – both against genres of the book and genres of art. It is probably not going to easily allow itself to be stabilised (Liebenberg conversations 2003-2005).

A useful writer on the subject of genre is the structuralist/post structuralist French literary theorist, Gerard Genette. He considers the genre definitions that theorists have used through the ages. He analyses what principles are embedded in them and how these are not stable. In trying to find a set of principles, theorists, to a certain extent, are forcing principles onto matter. Sometimes it becomes clear that the framework that has been established is insufficient. This opens up possibilities for new sets of criteria to be found. Genette writes about new attempts to create systems, which in turn, can change the practice. There is an exchange between theory and dialogue, the one causing the other to change, and creating a continually evolving dialogue between the two.<sup>13</sup> To return to the example of the novel – as practice changed and as theory changed there came a point at which it made sense to talk about the novel as a category of its own ([www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen](http://www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen)).

John Lye, an English professor at Brock University, California, points out that 'reality is culturally defined by the segmentation and identification of experience' ([www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen](http://www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen)). He goes on to point out that Gerard Genette directs the reader to consider how genre segments experience in certain ways, and in addition, controls attitudes towards it. ([www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen](http://www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen)). Lye comments on structuralism's significant contribution to genre theory ([www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen](http://www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen)):

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<sup>13</sup> Genette coined the word 'architext' to describe how different genre theories have always changed through an ever-evolving creative interaction between theory and practice. (Liebenberg conversations, 2003-2005).

Structuralism opens the study of genre to a new light. Different genres predispose the reader to different attitudes, different expectations (cf. the saying attributed to Voltaire that life is a comedy to he who thinks and a tragedy to he who feels, which saying suggests a way in which genres might look differently at experience). Different genres lead to different expectations of types of situations and actions, and of psychological, moral and aesthetic values.

And then he makes a subtle point about the importance of establishing genre conventions (which provide conventional expectations) as a crucial springboard for difference and creativity to happen. ([www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen](http://www.brocku.ca/English/4570/gen)):

Without conventional expectations we cannot have the difference, the surprise, the reversals, which mark the more brilliant exercise of creativity. Hence creativity is, in a sense, structural, as it depends on our expectation, which it then plays upon.

So in a sense we can say that we set up rules so that we can break them. We can set about establishing categories (such as I shall be doing for the artist's book) so that the categories can subsequently be found to be inadequate and unduly restrictive, and creative thinking in friction with existing categorisation can result in new ideas and new theories for book art.

## **2.5 A relationship between categories and production**

An important point about categories, then, is that there is no single underlying set of fundamentals. The principles that are applied keep changing and shifting, and so the categories do too, according to how relevant they are seen to be. The theory that is used, determines the categories.

What do theorists do with the new material objects that the practice throws up, and that do not fit into the existing system? There is an opportunity for theorists to devise new theory. This in turn can give artists new ideas for creation that can push new frontiers. So the categories influence production and then production influences the categories and the cycles continue (Liebenberg conversations, 2003-2005).

## 2.6 The ambiguous artist's book that spans categories

When attempting a classification of objects, there are those that are ambiguous. They can go either way between two categories or sometimes between several categories. This is the case with many of the artists' books that I describe under some of the systems of categorisation that I outline below.

Ambiguity sets up an initial tension – one does not know how and where to place an object. Then, after a number of years, one might have a genre for it that has become established. And the established genre might have an established system of sub-categorisation. (Setting up systems of sub-categorisation helps to familiarize, fix and establish a genre.) But then what is lost is the initial tension. Following from this, perhaps the strangeness of the original artist's book is likely to disappear once the artist's book becomes a familiar category. Then, what people expect from an artist's book is likely to have become more established, whereas while categories are more fluid, expectations are likely to be less standard (Liebenberg conversations, 2003-2005).

## 2.7 Clive Phillpot's diagrams and definitions

Phillpot, in his extensive writings, was at pains to both clarify a spectrum of terms used in connection with book art and to position the artist's book within a framework that clarified its relationship to the world of art and the world of book. In a paper given to the fourth *European conference of IFLA Section of Art Libraries* (given at Oxford in April, 1992) he outlines a diagram of four concentric circles bisected by a vertical line. Klima describes the diagram:

The outer circle represents the field of art; within this lies a circle representing book arts, within this, a circle representing artists' books. Finally within all three lies the smallest circle, representing book works. The area to the left of the vertical line represents unique works; that to the right, multiple works. (1998:32)

Firstly, it is useful to clarify Phillipot's use of terms. On the cover of an issue of the principal journal for art librarians (*Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Association of North America* 1 no 6, Dec 1982), of which he was the editor at the time, Phillipot published the following elucidating list (1998:27):

BOOK: Collection of blank and/or image-bearing sheets usually fastened together along one edge and trimmed at the other edges to form a single series of uniform leaves.

ARTBOOK: Book of which art or the artist is the subject.

ARTIST'S BOOK: Book of which an artist is the author.

BOOKART: Art which employs the book form

BOOKWORK: Artwork dependent upon the structure of the book

BOOK OBJECT: Art object which alludes to the form of a book.

Phillipot's visualisation of nesting circles nicely clarifies some of the distinguishing components of book and art and how the two fields overlap. It also helps to clarify distinctions between the world of the artist's book and the world of the art book. And within the world of the artist's book, certain tendencies and phenomena (such as the book object) are identified.

It is significant that Phillipot's circle diagram is intersected by a vertical line separating unique works from multiple works, indicating that both unique and multiple works can appear in any of the circles. But more than this, the significance of the line is that it points to the lively discourse that occurred around the artist's book as a suitable vehicle for the cheap edition, the art multiple that could reach the masses. This discourse is tied up with the politics of anti-elitism in the art world. Over and over again, attempts were made by theorists and commentators to annex the artist's book for the purposes of a social cause. And much sermonising was heard against the creation of unique books. Being potentially close in concept to the precious object, the unique book carried unfavourable connotations of wealth, privilege, elitism and the control of information.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Klima makes numerous references to the debates around the artist's book and the politics of elitism in his book, *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*. See sources.

A passage from an essay written by Phillipot illustrates how he was at one time one of the voices of coercion on artists, and also illustrates how hierarchies of intent and political agendas help to set and establish categories:

If one is concerned with the book as artwork, then bookworks are generally the most significant of the subdivisions of book art. Multiple bookworks, as opposed to unique bookworks, are also more expressive of the nature, and indeed the purpose of the book. Unique bookworks are often only one step away from mute sculptural book objects that at best simply provoke reflections on the history and role of the book as a cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, art conceived for mechanical replication, and which therefore incorporates exactly repeatable verbal, visual, or verbi-visual narratives, is not only realised through the agency of the printing press, but as a result, is also disseminated more widely. Compared with the unique artwork, the multiple artwork has an enormously expanded potential audience simply because of the multiplication of its locations, for the original artwork can reside at each location simultaneously. Art presented almost surreptitiously in the familiar form of the book also achieves the potential to reach many people who would not cross a threshold framed with classical columns in order to see books or art behind glass. (Phillipot, cited in Klima 1998:29)

Here Phillipot is viewing the artist's book as potentially serving a useful purpose akin to the mobile caravan library. Because Phillipot was primarily concerned, as a librarian, with combating illiteracy, he liked to view artists' books as no different to books on gardening or philosophy. He criticised writers and critics who 'take a purist view ... of so called artists' books ... books which happen to be by artists and which do not differ fundamentally from books by writers, scientists, gardeners or philosophers' (Phillipot, cited in Klima 1998:29). Thus although he gave a good deal of thought to the subject of the artist's book and his simple classifications are useful, his biases perhaps interfered with him developing theory that alongside and integrated with classification would help to unravel and explicate the emergence of the book in the guise of artist's book. The question of whether the artist's book requires a new mode of reading, another version of literacy remained in the background.

## 2.8 Another proposal for the categorisation of book art

As the survey of Drucker and Phillpot's work has shown, there are certain pressing issues that need to be considered when thinking around the question of categorising book art. In the course of this study, I have come up with the following five:

- i) Book art spans two worlds: that of the book and that of art. Can a system be devised that takes this into account, perhaps looking at what aspects of a piece of book art belong to the world of book and what portion to the world of art? The equation and details of a scrutiny are likely to be different in each case. Is there a system that can accommodate this?
- ii) Book art takes an enormous number of guises. This brings confusion to the subject. Can a system be devised that clarifies the guises and brings some systematic structure and ordering? Can it be flexible enough to accommodate the quiriness of the subject and the variability and variety of forms that book art takes?
- iii) Some of the traditions that are significant to book art, forming its lineage and influencing its present-day manifestations, are the craft tradition of bookmaking, the fine art tradition of meaning making and the contemporary commercial world of book production. Each of these traditions has distinct goals, methods of production, means of distribution and commercial gain. Can a broad enough system be devised to take into account the different practices and orientations of the worlds of craft, of fine art and of the commercial book trade?
- iv) Some book art challenges conventional reading habits, as well as challenging reader expectations of the book. Also, some book art challenges and alters the conventional viewing habits and deciphering practices of fine art. It seems that neither the conventional routes for accessing literary meanings nor those for accessing fine art meanings are alone sufficient. It may be that a more satisfactory route to approaching book art will combine reader and interpretative methodologies from both the literary world and the art world. Each book art piece is likely to present its own challenge, but is there a system that will assist in and help to clarify what bundle of interpretative strategies might be useful?

v) Specific needs exist determining specific approaches to book art. Libraries have one set of needs for a system of categorisation, centred on storage and retrieval. Devotees, practitioners and commentators of book art may have another set of needs, centred on meaning making and commentary and interpretation. A single system is unlikely to be an ideal framework for the needs of all users.

With the above points in mind, let me outline one possible system that answers some but not all of the present needs: it is, for example, more likely to be of use as an interpretative rather than a cataloguing tool. There are many possibilities for the manner in which artists' books could be categorised. Here is simply one interesting proposal for genre categories.

I have attempted to devise a system that takes into account the book's relationship to art as well as its relationship to the book, and the different variations of this. In this way a continuum is formed. At one end, of the continuum the books are clearly books but not artists' books. At the other end, the material product is clearly art but whether it is a book is debatable. In between is the territory where books may (or may not) be artists' books and where they do something with the language of art and something with the language of book.

A system of sub-categorisation could look at different overlaps between book and art. Or, to phrase it differently, could distinguish degrees of art and degrees of book. It could use the following subcategories:

- i) The book containing or presenting art (The book as gallery).
- ii) The book incorporating art techniques
- iii) The beautiful book (Pertaining to the aesthetic beauty of the book).
- iv) Both book and art object
- v) The book as art object

- vi) Artwork using book techniques
- vii) The book as conceptual art.

Book art can be found in any of these categories although it is more likely to be found in some. The point of the categories is that they give a reference point on the book-to-art spectrum so that it becomes easier to see what components belong to the tradition of the book and what derive from the world of art. Whether a book work is regarded as an artist's book, will depend on the many factors that go into defining the nature of book art, as was attempted in Chapter One of this thesis. There it was concluded that definitions do not provide leak-proof vessels. They are never the final word. And one aspect of what makes and defines an artist's book, which now needs to be considered as a most significant factor, is where the book is likely to be found. For this radically determines perception and affects reception. A book displayed and sold in an art gallery may be viewed as an artist's book in that context, whereas the same book sold in a bookshop might not be seen as an artist's book.

Where a book is most likely to be found, displayed and sold, might also serve as a starting point to reveal how it is perceived on the art/book continuum. So, for example, The book containing or presenting art, The book incorporating art techniques and the beautiful book are likely to be found in a bookshop. These are not so likely to be read as artists' books. They are more likely to have too much of the 'straight-faced' book in them and too little of the sort of 'art' or 'book' that would turn them into artists' books. However the category, Both of the categories, book and art object and the book as art object might well be found in either a bookshop or an art gallery. Artwork using book techniques and the book as conceptual art are likely to be found in an art gallery. These are the books/objects that may more readily be recognised as artists' books.

Artists' books draw upon the tradition of the book. Many artists' books 'lift off' from the history of the book. Traditional book types and genres, as well as other aspects of the history of the book (such as the use of particular methods and materials), inspire the artist's book. This system of categorisation really looks at how books style and



present themselves (whether as 'book' or 'art' or both, in what context of reception, alluding to which established book genres, etc). It contests that the artist's book needs to conceptualise itself as some part 'art' and some part 'book' and must be self-conscious about how it draws upon traditions of the book and traditions of art.

The system is not a 'litmus test' for artists' book. First a book must have been established as an artist's book, or a possible candidate in the opinion of the reader/viewer, and then the system can be of use in drawing attention to certain features of the work and as an aid to interpretation, as well as possible verification of its status as an artist's book. The system attempts to identify, for each book, which of its components can be viewed as 'art' and which as 'book'. It then looks at how it is both 'book' and 'art'. It identifies different ways in which 'book' and 'art' combine, coming up with the seven variations.

It also draws attention to the fact that both systems of book classification and systems of art classification could be, usefully, taken into account in order to penetrate the complex intermingling of languages and traditional genres that constitute the genre of the artist's book. One of the complicating issues around the artist's book is that it is a relative newcomer on the cultural scene. Another issue, and related to this, is that many people get confused between artists' books and other categories of art and book. Drucker, in an article, reminds us that the artist's book is 'a quintessential late 20<sup>th</sup> century artform' (*The Artist's Book Yearbook*, 1996:42), which developed rapidly from the middle of the century, building on precedents 'in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century avant-garde'(1996:42). She argues that it has now become an artform in its own right, 'fully developed, varied, complex'(1996:42), but that its identity still seems to be:

... elusive and context sensitive to an extraordinary degree, except among the many practioners, who, like specialists in any field, attuned to distinguish the finches and sparrows of their domain, know perfectly well the difference between a small press publication, a fine print edition and an Artist's Book (Drucker, 1996:42).

Perhaps one of the strengths of the system of categorisation outlined below is that it is context sensitive. For, as Drucker also reminds us,

there is a continual effort to act 'as if', the identity of a work were simply, completely a result of its inherent properties – rather than its relation to a set of conditions, constraints and circumstances – ALL of which contribute to its status (Drucker, 1996:42).

Perhaps another of the strengths of the system is that, contrary to the idea that a small press publication or a fine print edition are excluded from the fold of the artist's book, it opens the gates to books of all descriptions and art of all descriptions and then contemplates what is being done with book and what is being done with art; and it can aid in establishing whether the alchemy of the two has transmuted the object into an artist's book.

Having outlined these categories briefly, I now discuss them in considerably more detail.

### **2.8.1 The book containing or presenting art**

This category refers to books found usually in bookshops containing original art or illustrations of art or illustrations that are art. These books are not usually artist's books. However, artists' books obviously can and often do contain art. It depends how the art is used to point to the artist's self-consciousness about the book format and how the art helps to comment on the concept of the book. When an artist's book employs art in book form, it is usually to be found in a gallery setting and, for the purposes of this categorisation, is placed under one of the following categories: art using book techniques, or book as art object, or both book and art object, or Conceptual Art.

A book that could belong in this category is *Primer* (Fig. 32) by Sophie Artemis. This is a unique work. It is both an English and Hindi alphabet book. It has a precious and handmade feel, with watercolour illustrations on handmade paper and is stored in a slipcase. It could also be fit into the category of the beautiful book. And further it could fit into the next category, the book incorporating art techniques.

## 2.8.2 The book incorporating art techniques

One aspect of the use of art techniques would be an emphasis on the design features of the book. There are many books that use innovative or compelling solutions to design problems. Some use expressive and original typographies and typographic layout. Some use interesting papers, sometimes hand-made. Some have unusually crafted covers. Many books incorporating art techniques have elements of handwork and contain original art. Below, are a few examples of books that in different ways, incorporate art techniques.

A contemporary artist's book that relies upon typographic layout for its meaning is *Father's Garden* (Fig. 33) by Ken Campbell. It is a book that the artist created about the death of his father. I found it to be a solemn and beautiful piece of work, elegiac in its intent. On each page there is a poem, only it is the same poem – repeated again and again. Yet the poem, as it is laid out on each page, is only partially readable. For sections of it have been ruled out with strong black lines. This erasure is a reminder to the reader that death is an erasure. Fragments of the poem reveal themselves: 'our father's juice flows everywhere', 'unlaced in springtime', 'a buck in a bush kept to his morning furrow', 'such a day brought such a boy from golden morning hoof to the hammered dead of the afternoon; history rang on the boiler of his engine', 'Father's garden ran his ship', 'How many gates are there to the city .... And let it be eight. There are seven gates to the city ... and one they wont talk about'. Through the revealed fragments one slowly accumulates a larger picture of the full poem. The accompanying silk-screened texturing and illustration is atmospherically redolent of a garden. And it is at times suggestive of obliteration. The design elements - lettering, typographic layout, colour choice, texturing and visual imagery are exquisitely orchestrated to amplify meaning.

Another design component, as mentioned above, with which artists and bookmakers frequently play, is the choice of paper. The manner in which the paper is folded, shaped, surfaced and inscribed can become an important component of art technique in the realisation of the artist's purpose. Take the element of paper surface. The artist's book *Fragments of an Interior* (Fig. 34) by Victoria Edwards, shows a sensitive and expressive use of paper in this respect. The book becomes a metaphor

for the body through the choice of colouration and the textured surfacing of the paper, rendering it reminiscent of blood and skin. The appearance of the paper background also forms an expressively suitable surface for the text that is written upon it. A central theme of the book, the wounding and the repair of body and soul, is reflected in the fragments of text such as 'The soul is blackened by the body' or 'Carrying the wound hidden beneath this fine layering of skins, I see the veils torn away as your soft fingers reach in and pull me apart'. The book, upon which words describing wounds and healing are transcribed, relies heavily for its emotive impact on the visceral artistic treatment of the paper surfaces.

Another aspect of design, referred to above and that is often given considerable expressive significance by the makers of book objects, is the cover. An artist's book with an unusual cover, that supports the meaning of the book, is *Carmen Dalekorum: Dalek Symphony, Being Songs of Stephen Micalet, Bearded Bishop of Leisure* (Fig. 35) by Mark Hudson. The book is bound between two etched copper plates that are appropriately joined together with a piano hinge (given the musical nature of the work). The pages are embossed and printed. An extra touch is the inclusion of an etched copper bookmark. There is a history to the etched copper plate, which conjoins it to the production of the book, and makes this material an interesting and suitable choice.

A design aspect worth mentioning here again is the imaginative attention paid to the interrelationship between word and image. This is, in some way, a feature of all of the examples given above. But here I also specifically want to point out that many old manuscript books skilfully and marvellously employed art techniques. For example, they frequently used typography and illustrated borders in a way that beautifully integrated the visual and the verbal text. Many of these old manuscripts also had exquisite and precious covers, displaying excellent artisanship and, in addition, the covers were often imaginatively expressive of the contents of the work. Although the term 'artist's book', was not yet coined at the time these books were made, today we can look back at many of them and recognise them as early versions of what we today refer to as artists' books. There is a codicil here. A highly artistic book, whether historic or contemporary, is not an artist's book simply because it is artistic. This still

does not mean that it displays that necessary self-conscious relation to the book form that the term demands.

This category, then, the book incorporating art techniques, is reserved for books displaying good design, artistry and artistic skills. Some of these books will be artists' books and some of them will simply be books containing art or displaying artistry. Some of the books in this category might be found in a bookshop. And some might be found in an art setting.

### **2.8.3 The beautiful book (Pertaining to the aesthetic beauty of the book)**

The books in the category of the beautiful book are sometimes comfortable in bookshops (but are also found in some galleries, museums etc) and usually employ high-value production methods. Bindings may be expensive, paper of a good quality, illustrations lavish. Often they are limited edition books. Often they are labour intensive. Many of the old medieval bibles and other manuscripts are 'beautiful books'. Again, an artist's book can draw upon the tradition of the beautiful book, and make of it something more that also conceptually extends the idea of the book.

What artist's book might be regarded as having drawn upon the tradition of The beautiful book? I think of a number of the books described under Drucker's category of The artist's book as rare and/or auratic object. An example of The artist's book as rare and/or auratic object that is also fitting for the category of The beautiful book is *Above the Trees* (Fig. 36) by John Eric Broaddus. This is a unique work that styles itself as a short novel. Broaddus uses a copy of the two volumes of J Bohan's novel, *The Descension*, and creates his own work on top of it. The pages have been cut, painted, airbrushed and also include collage. Each volume is stored in a decorated slipcase and wrapped in cloth secured with a piece of black elastic. Creating a rich palimpsest, Broaddus reworks and reinvents the pages, using the bottom layer as a springboard for the top layer. As the old book becomes a 'canvas' for the new, the layering creates an image evocative of fugitive memory, a sense of what is and what was. The visual beauty of the book, accomplished through labour intensive artistic

process and dependent upon a developed aesthetic sensibility, makes this artist's book a good example of the beautiful book.

My two-volume artist's book, *A Pattern Book* (Figs. 2-17) would also fit this category. This one-off example of book art is several hundred pages in length. It contains pieces of writing, drawing, painting, collage and mixed media work. It makes use of a variety of special papers. It is labour intensive, and includes the expressive use of extensive hand stitching.<sup>15</sup>

#### 2.8.4 Both book and art object

These books can be seen as one thing or another, depending on context. They manifest a degree of ambiguity. In a bookshop they are likely to pass for an ordinary book and in a gallery context they are likely to be seen as art. My artist's book, *Book of the Gates* (Figs. 27-31), fits into this category. As a regular book it could pass for travel writing. As an artist's book it attempts to question hierarchies and presuppositions pertaining to written text and visuals. It does not display the visuals as illustrative, nor as secondary to the written text. The photographic sections are chapters in themselves. Each photograph is displayed on its own page and without a written title. This is to put emphasis on the notion that meanings are to be sought in the photographs and that the images need to be contemplated. An attempt has been made for the written texts and the visual texts to both contribute in more or less equal measure to the unfolding meanings of the piece. Thus two sets of tools are asked for by the text: the interpretative tools commonly expected of the reader of written texts

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<sup>15</sup> The hand stitching is used for the binding of the pages, as well as a method of adhering papers and objects to pages. It is also used as a method of expressive mark making. The stitching in the binding is deliberately akin to the method of tacking clothing that is under construction; and is suggestive of the formative nature of the book object which was taken apart and sewn together again in different configurations many times. The concept of reconfiguring is one of the underlining themes of *A Pattern Book* which attempts to investigate the patterns of thought or mind maps that people carry around in their heads and transpose onto their lives as grids of interpretation. The work deals with how such paradigm grids get overhauled and reworked from generation to generation. Yet we always live within a particular world-view which unwittingly constricts and shapes perceptions, beliefs, behaviours and outcomes.

and the tools that are developed in order to interpret visual material, more commonly found in the domain of art. This book sits squarely in the two camps of art and of book.

Another book that could be placed here is *Real Fiction* (Fig. 37) by Telfer Stokes and Helen Douglas. *Real Fiction* is a subversive look at the book. It styles itself as an inquiry into the 'bookeresque'. It is published by Weproductions, the Scottish publishing company of Telfer Stokes and Helen Douglas. A number of their publications could slip into this category, passing comfortably both as 'book' to be found in bookshop and 'art' to be found in gallery. In word and image, *Real Fiction* explores the territory of the book. Playing games between real and illusionary space, the book becomes metaphor for body and mind. The page becomes a metaphor for threshold and doorway into a new place, a new thought – 'And as you pause on the threshold, one door opens and another closes' – a part of the text takes on the meaning of page-turning and ritual entry into new territory. The book begins 'Light falls, the shadow is cast, projecting into the dark *carte-blanche* for constructing thoughts' and the book is the journey into the land of book.

Sometimes these sorts of books blend so well in bookshops because they employ production techniques that resemble the average mass-produced book. This is the case with *Book of the Gates* (Figs. 27-31). Another reason they might blend so well is that they have been designed to fit effortlessly into one or more of the existing categories that bookshops use to display their books. They do not jar with existing genres. And they do not challenge or confuse the categories too radically. Nor do they jar with the established book presentation and design and packaging of the genres. On a recent visit to Exclusive Books in Constantia Village I made a list of the shop's book categories: African History, Books of Africa, African Literature, African Picture Books, Natural Science, Birds of Africa, Computers, Travel, Armchair Travel, Business, Maps, Magazines, E-Commerce and IT, Sport, Biography, Science Fiction, Humour, Transport, Stationery, Music, Video, Arts, Design, Interiors, Antiques, Childcare, Health, Alternative Health, Psychology, Inspiration, Mind Body Spirit, Science, Reference, History, New Non-fiction, Philosophy, Religion, Children, Fiction, Gardening, Cookery, Crafts, Photography, Maps, Current Affair, Classic Poetry, New Fiction.

This led me to think of Keith Dietrich's *Horizons of Babel* (Fig. 38), a quirky artist's book finding inspiration in the conventions of early topographical and mapping conventions, and whimsically altering them in order to suggest something else about the history of the land. How would this book fit into the *Maps* section? In the book, a traveller's journey is recorded. The artist is the traveller who travels to certain fixed destinations upon the maps that are displayed in the book. These points on the maps have been predetermined by the artist's programme: the points, when joined, all make up a half circle. The point furthest south is Cape Agullas. The point on the maps 180 degrees from here is Cape Colombine. The epicentre is the farm, Babelonsfontein (from which the book derives its name). For each of the seven destination points on the maps, a landscape panorama has been painted in watercolour, based upon a sequential series of photographs taken by Dietrich at the respective vantage point. These panoramas have been included as fold-outs at the back of the book. When they are opened up and placed in sequence they form another half-circle, a sort of horizon line that merges the landscapes of the seven geographically distant places on the map. The book, through the creation of a personal inscription on the land, is investigating the facts and fictions of mapping conventions, ways of seeing and customs of ownership. To extend this idea, the book might suggest that each man is the centre of his own mapping of his own world and establishes his own horizons. Images on the maps, such as the hand, are reminiscent of old mapping traditions, which overlaid maps with images of the human body, combining the notions of man and map. In this instance Dietrich has poetically altered the body image: the hand is bandaged. We might deduce that the land has been injured. We might also deduce that this form of fantasy mapping is not so much scientific as poetic and metaphorical in intent. These are maps about maps. This map book would confuse the categories between *Maps* and *Travel* (if not *African Picture Books*, or *African History* or even *Autobiography*). It is more likely to be found in a gallery venue than a bookshop, and would be better categorised under the next heading, The Book as Art Object.



### 2.8.5 The Book as art object

The book as art object styles itself as art wrapped in the cloak of the book; or book, wrapped in the cloak of art. This is the mainstream territory of the artist's book. How it uses art techniques and how it uses book techniques becomes very interesting.

One example of art wrapped in the cloak of a book, is *The Bad Dream Book* (Fig 39) by Thomas Larry. This is a book on wheels (like the wheels of a child's toy truck) and it carries the idea of 'runaway' or things careering out of control. On top of the book is a sculpted lady's hand, a little smaller than life-size. It is holding yellow porcelain roses, of the sort one might find on a grave. Thus the book is reminiscent of a gravestone. Opening the book, the titles are in a child's writing and another typeface is created with rubber stamps. The pictures are also rubber-stamped. The child-like rubber-stamping is an artifice that creates an atmosphere of innocence. The pictures, together with the text, form a catalogue of catastrophe or bad luck or superstition: one is invited to imagine oneself to be in trouble if one should be unlucky enough to see the objects and creatures that are described (cat – hard luck, boat in muddy water – trouble). *The Bad Dream Book* could equally be categorised under the heading below, Art using Book Techniques. As an example of the book as art object it makes use of the form of the book in a quirky and original manner in order to express a cluster of meanings and create ripples of associations.

As an example of book wrapped in the cloak of art, I will describe a work of mine, *A Flotilla of Fortune Cookies* (Fig. 18). The 'loose-leaf' scraps of pages and their 'slip-cases' are made from high-fired porcelain. Each scrap has a handwritten message (or partial message) written onto it with a ceramic oxide pencil that after firing resembles the marking of an ordinary art pencil. But, unlike the regular pencil, it cannot be erased. It is permanent. And the scraps of porcelain resembling fragile and disintegrating paper are from a substance that, although breakable, is actually a vitrified substance akin to stone.

The title, *A Flotilla of Fortune Cookies* (Fig. 18), carries various allusions that I wish to discuss here. The first is to a nautical fleet. The idea of the fleet expresses itself in the multitude of container 'slip cases'. The idea of floating objects links this piece to

the tradition of the message in the bottle. The other allusion in the title is to the fortune cookie. The 'slip cases' are folded and designed so as to partially resemble pastries and remind the viewer of food and baking. Thus it is suggested that these are edible texts. As fortune cookies, they are also oracles. Like a pack of tarot cards, these fortune cookies are waiting to be picked out by the oracle participant. The fortune cookies are displayed together, with the intention that a selection will then be made by the participating viewer/reader, much like a cookie might be picked off a platter. As an example of the book as art object, this piece does posit the possibility of extending the conventional boundaries for what might qualify as 'book'.

### 2.8.6 Artwork using book techniques

Here the emphasis is on art, but some book techniques have been employed. Art using book techniques frequently carries enough of the right sort of allusions to and metaphors for the book to take it into the definition of the artist's book (as I have been at pains to describe it). But, of course, it depends on each individual case. As in the other categories, each artwork would have to be weighed up.

It is interesting to look at how book techniques have been modified and expanded as they have drawn upon art; and also to consider how art techniques have been annexed and used by the bookmaker. The art of paper construction is one arena that the makers of artists' books have explored. There are the books of Smith, like his *String Book* (Fig. 40). Two other artists working creatively with paper are Julie Chen and Elizabeth McDewitt. They collaborated on the book, *Octopus* (Fig. 41), under the auspices of Flying Fish Press in 1992. *Octopus* has a concertina structure that is attached to boards at either end. It is designed to pull out so that the viewer looks down, as it were, into the depths of the ocean. This book is also an example of the ingenious integration of word-text and structure. The words read:

Who are you to talk of rigorous intellectual honesty  
you who use ink as an octopus does  
you for whom words are a decoy and a disguise  
a blue cloud in which I flounder  
not finding you?

The top level of the concertina carries one line of text; the second level carries the top two lines; the third level carries the top three and so on down the 'well' (which also carries allusions to an ink well as well as the octopus 'squirt'). When the concertina structure is pulled up, the overlapping layers permit one to see the last line on each level (with a hint of the rest), so no repetition of text is read and the text reveals itself as the flow of words quoted above. Yet one is aware of all the words unseen or partially seen. *Octopus* has the ambiguous quality of the book that could be in the category, Both Book and Art Object. It could pass, in a bookshop, as a creative poetry book or a sort of 'adult' children's book (where paper construction is a familiar genre).

In *Artists' Books in the Modern Era* Robert Flynn Johnson discusses this sculptural aspect of artists' books:

The unique artist's book has become a popular form for artists working in the realm of book art. Often more of an artistic book/sculpture than a 'true' book, these works tend ... to be complex. Many ... are massively labour intensive. (Johnson&Stein, 2001:208)

This book then is both art and book. A question to ask is when a book could start to be called a sculpture. But this is not a question to be answered here. For the purposes of this category it is enough that sculpture is a sub-section of art (and it seems, also of book). Artists' books can take up residence in any of the sub-sections of art. Or put another way, any of the sub-sections of art and of book can take up residence within the camp of the artist's book.

### **2.8.7 The book as conceptual art**

Art that conceptually plays with ideas about the book may easily become an artist's book, but may just as easily retain a prime allegiance to conceptual art. A book that

might fit into this category is Colin Hall's *Book in a jar*<sup>16</sup>. A book, which is in the process of decomposing, has been bottled in a murky liquid. Simon Ford writes about it and comments on this type of book which seems to deconstruct itself and which is not possible to read in a conventional sense: 'This type of book has become so prevalent in the NAL that we have adopted the genre 'unopenable books' to group them' (Ford, 1994: 45). Another 'unopenable book', that I came across at the NAL, is *The Story of Art* (Fig. 42) by Arias Fernando. The artist has taken a copy of Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, and bolted it closed at the four corners. The bolts are long enough to substantially protrude at the top and the bottom of the book 'standing legs' for the art object, both in the upright position and upside down.

Yet another 'unopenable' book is from the *Flockophobic Press*. It is titled *The Bee* (Fig 43), and the envelope containing the work is completely encased and sealed in beeswax.

Still another 'unopenable' is *Time: The Weekly Magazine* (Fig. 44), by Yohei Nishimuri. The magazine was somehow treated by the artist and then transformed by firing it in a kiln at a high enough temperature for it to solidify. He uses a similar approach in *The Open and Closed Book: Contemporary Book Art* (Fig. 45). Here Nishimuri is ironically playing with the notion of the book as a cultural object of permanence, something that preserves knowledge and information. Although preserved in a durable way, the magazine and the book have now become devoid of their original content and purpose. The information they once contained has vanished. They have become akin to archaeological finds. I draw attention to these works by Nishimuri because they display similarities to a conceptual art piece of mine, *The Scrolls of Betrayal* (Fig. 46).

*The Scrolls of Betrayal* is kiln-fired to a high temperature. The material that is used is porcelain containing a percentage of paper. The clay was rolled through a pasta machine to create very thin sheets that, after firing, have the appearance of paper. Twelve stories about betrayals around a single incident have been inscribed on the

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<sup>16</sup> Unfortunately I have not managed to access a visual here but feel Hall's decomposing book is worth mentioning.

paper-like porcelain tablets. Each story occupies a number of sheets. The sheets have adhered to one another in the kiln and so, except for the top layers of the piles, the stories are not accessible to the reader. Rather, they provide tantalising glimpses of unobtainable narratives. It is an 'unopenable' book. This is a part of the meaning of the work. The stories have been processed so that they are now inaccessible and largely buried. If in Nishimuri's work the records and writings disappear without trace, here they are still present but sealed up. They provide a metaphor for a psychological frame of mind. The stories record distressing real-life events. The way that they are presented suggests that there is a reason to tell stories as a form of 'holding to book', setting down a record for accountability and so that forgetfulness will not happen; at the same time there is a reason to close the book and put the past behind. The work attempts, conceptually, to hold in tension the balance of these two opposing needs. Also, the heat of the firing has petrified the scrolls, turned them, literally, into a vitrified, stone-like substance. So they have become like monuments to a past event, permanent markers of experience. Although they appear to be made of a delicate and decaying paper, they are in fact preserved in a durable substance. While the sheets have fused together, a bit like pages that stick together when a book has been left out in the rain, the pages can be delicately pried apart, but only at a risk of breaking them into fragments. As an example of the book as conceptual art, this 'unopenable' refers to the tradition of the book, as a repository of record and story, while at the same time allowing full access to that tradition so as to divert the focus of attention to other possible meanings and conceptual implications for the book.

Another such work, but one not altogether 'unopenable' is *The Book Bomb* (Fig. 47) by Gregory Green. From the exterior it appears to be a perfectly innocuous copy of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. When it is opened, it changes its meaning. A box has been cut into the pages, which contains a fake bomb. Simon Ford calls this:

... probably the most hazardous type of book a library can buy. A book that could mean the end for both the booklover and the art lover, and the place where they carry out their dangerous liaisons, the library. (Ford, 1994: 45)

The idea of using an existent book as a form of ‘cubby-hole’ safe is common practice. Only more traditionally it is a place to hide valuables, such as jewellery, to protect them from theft. Here the tradition of the book and safekeeping is usurped to create a form of space for the self-destruction of the book, and perhaps even an entire library. The book is, conceptually, in jeopardy; as is the location into which the book is placed. All could disappear.

Another Book as Conceptual Art ‘book’ of mine is *A Page of a Page*<sup>17</sup> The work can be called a ‘book’ because of the reference to the language of the book in the title, which has implications for the way the work is likely to be interpreted. Yet it has travelled far from the conventional notion of the book. It is made up of twelve small paintings, designed to fit together as two larger paintings. This happens when the small paintings are placed in a certain arrangement. But each of the little paintings is designed to be a self-sufficient work, hopefully able to be a satisfying little composition, even when viewed as a fragment of the whole. The intention in the modular physical structure of the work is that the paintings will be exhibited together as two whole larger ‘pages’ but that each of the twelve little paintings will be offered for sale individually, and will potentially be able to travel away to different destinations. This piece is a meditation on things that come together for a short time and then disperse. The imagery in the paintings is of arrangements of objects that suggest codifying, deliberate signage, meaning making, the stuff of language formation. I am attempting to play with the edge between form and formlessness.<sup>18</sup> It

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<sup>17</sup> This work is still in the process of being completed and consequently I have not included a visual

<sup>18</sup> It is not always easy to articulate verbally what it is that one thinks that one is doing. With this piece I feel that I am still too ‘close-up’ to it for adequate reflection. In a sense, also, the work is always its own language and the primary source is the place for contemplation, not the secondary commentary. So this attempt at articulation appears to be merely skirting around some of the themes and issues I was dealing with, many at an intuitive level that I am only beginning to partially grasp. Here are some thoughts about what I think that I might be attempting, some thoughts about some of the identified preoccupations around the work: I am interested in finding the place where the human hand and mind is becoming evident and so language and meaning-making begin to evolve from the chaos of disorder before returning to disorder. And in the works, also, is a reference to the oracle: for instance, the ‘chance’ throwing of the *sangoma* bones that offers up patterns of meaning and significance for the interpreter. I am interested in how the particular moment and the detail can reveal larger patterns. This is encapsulated in the idea of the hologram, the part for whole. The title, *A Page of a Page*, is also a

grew out of a series of land-art interventions I made at the seashore. I recorded these works photographically and my notes about the process are compiled and written up under the title *Notes from the Edge of Infinity* (see Appendix Three).

Another example of book as conceptual art is the piece of art of mine titled *The Dress Diaries* (Fig. 48). Although in the title there is the identification with the diary mode of the book, the diary is not in the shape of a book at all. It takes the form of a number of black dresses that have been papered over with starch-saturated tissue paper. The tissue paper is of the sort that newly purchased items from a dress shop or store might be wrapped in. Usually breakable items are wrapped in this sort of paper. I collected the tissue paper over a number of years, from items that had I purchased. The dresses were also collected over a number of years and were worn by me. This is thus an autobiographical piece. The dresses, which are mine, represent a personal history. Each has a cluster of memories associated with it: where it was worn and when. The work was made at a time when I was moving house and clearing out the clutter of the past. The concerns of the work are around memory and how one chooses to deal with personal history. The black dress, with its associations with special events ('the little black dress' for smart occasions that is a traditional item in a woman's wardrobe), seemed a suitable icon to select. The associations of the colour black with mourning seemed a suitable expression for a sense of sadness at packing up an old life. Again, as in *The Scrolls of Betrayal* (Fig. 46), the tension exists in this work between acknowledging past and burying it. As objects, although not 'books' in the traditional sense, they refer to the tradition of the book in general and the tradition of the diary in particular.

## **2.9. Some thought about this system and some general conclusions**

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reference to the respect I have for viewing the world in this way. Also present in the work are references to the making of impermanent prayers and offerings to the gods, such as I observed in India at roadside shrines and in temples: mandalas created from orange marigolds, chalk designs drawn onto floors and so on. Here and in some other works, I am beginning to regard art making as a living process that, in itself, is a form of offering and prayer and ritual (and oracle).

As in Drucker's system, there appears to be a good deal of overlap in this system set out above, with many books able to occupy a position under more than one heading. But then perhaps, as Degenaar says, 'The aesthetic experience does not consist in the grasping of the idea but in the adventure of discovering the labyrinth of links which constitute the meaning of the work of art' (1986: 68). As in Drucker's system, the categories can be visualised as a grid, with book objects often able to slot into more than one place.

A question to ask about grids is whether the different ways that the book object fits into the grid implies anything about the codes that might be used to interpret it. A particular position on a grid might point to the way one might go in order to look for meaning. Of course, the codes that are used for interpreting are themselves not fixed, changing. If a book object can be placed under the category of conceptual art, how one might interpret it would be dependent on what has happened in the arena of conceptual art and where the theory, thinking and practice is at, in the present. Now, if this same book object is placed in another arena, it may be appreciated in a new way and with another set of codes. It could be interesting to see what happens when a book is looked at in one category and then in another – especially where books are potentially ambiguous.

The use of a continuum from art to book makes it easier to see links with the world of art, as well as the world of book. If the artist's book stretches definitions of the book, it suggests that it is equally able to stretch definitions of art. Within this system it may be useful to look more closely at the mechanisms of visual texts and of word texts as well as of the texts of the book and the texts of art, and then to apply this. A lot of work could still be done on the system that has emerged from my research.

In addition it is necessary to be aware of the cultural sub-texts and politics of the literary world and the world of the book arts and the world of art. Sometimes these different worlds are not in harmony and at times they appear to conspire against one another. Drucker reminds us of this. Commenting on a talk she attended, in which the speaker attempted to pull together the art/books/literary worlds and see them as related, she says: 'Sounds so obvious. Doesn't it? And yet – it's not' (1996:42). She goes on to explain:



See, literature has no cultural capital. It can't be sold, not really, not poetry. And Art is definitely a high ticket commodity. It's actually possible that Poetry will lower the value of an Art object, and the Craft of the Book is such that its integrity relies upon its formal terms (as far as the Tradition goes). These worlds actually threaten rather than reinforce each other. Literature can die embalmed in fine print. Art can be diminished by literary aspirations, and Books in the Artist Book world tend to have Form not Content – certainly not Words, not lots of them, not enough to require more Reading than you can do standing up. So the idea of pulling all these things together is actually radical. (Drucker, 1996: 42)

Cultural *cachet* has a way of shifting ground. But within the various overlapping worlds of art and book one needs to identify how the game is being played out at any given time; and in this instance, how it impacts on the life of the artist's book. The system of categorisation that has here been outlined may be a useful pair of spectacles in this respect, in that it does help to clarify and identify features of the worlds.

In general, artist's books have proved to be a difficult entity to pin down. They rove into many unusual and unexpected shapes, sizes, forms, and covers. They are not always found in the expected places. Many have an element of subterfuge or a spark of subversion. Many have the intent to challenge existing structures, orders and categories. So to tame them into categories will never entirely succeed. Nor would one want it to succeed. For then they might cease to push the boundaries and definitions they now edge up against. They might become 'safe' and predictable objects. The aberrant character is a more interesting entity. And as has been pointed out above, categories tend to determine thought. Whatever categories are chosen for the artist's book, the critic and reader would profit by bearing this in mind. Whatever categories are chosen, it is always a good idea to check whether the category fits the purpose and not treat shoes as if they are hats or humanitarian studies as if they are scientific research. In the above chapter, I have suggested a system of categorisation for the purposes of aiding interpretation. It is a system that takes into account the book component and the art component of all artist's books and attempts to isolate the variations on the theme from art to book. It seems a sensible way to deal with a complicated subject. There are bound to be numerous other sensible ways that other thinkers about the subject will find and present. I have attempted to set forth some of the strengths and weaknesses of the particular system I have devised.

## *Chapter Three*

### *The Challenge to Reading: Towards an Interpretation of Book Art*

A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.

(From Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*. First published 1840)  
(online unnumbered, [www.wildhoneypress.com/Audio/Defense.html](http://www.wildhoneypress.com/Audio/Defense.html).)

### 3.1 Book art: a relationship to language

The artist's book belongs both to the world of book and to the world of art. One of its distinguishing features is that it can hold many different sorts of text. When books are interpreted it is the words that are interpreted. When artists' books are interpreted, the object, like a piece of sculpture, might carry a complex interweaving of texts. Artists' books are compact bundles of meaning, as is poetry.

A small artist's book, by Greg Daville, evokes and celebrates the imagination. In appearance, the book is humble and effacing. It is pocket sized and made from inexpensive brown paper. The twenty-four pages are stapled together. In its intentions the book is more ambitious.<sup>19</sup> The artist is provocatively suggesting that what is imaged in the mind through words (even through second-hand words, such as a report from a friend), and therefore able to be experienced through an act of the imagination, can perhaps be regarded as an equivalent aesthetic experience to viewing a painting at first hand. In other words, the artist suggests that words are sufficient to create an artwork in the 'mind's-eye'.

The title, *Double Glazing the Large Glass* (Fig. 49), is a clear reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass*. In the introduction, the artist comments:

For some time I have been interested in the idea of putting on an art exhibition that would be made up entirely of descriptive text, as opposed, for example, to descriptive painting. The text itself would act as a set of inscriptions for the imagination, from which the viewer could then construct an image in their own head. This book is a collection of pieces made with the intention of being 'seen' rather than being read. The next step will be to make and exhibit the

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<sup>19</sup>It attempts something that I also attempt to do. The artist is working conceptually with words (and the type of reality they create in the 'mind's eye'). Like my work it leads to questions about whether images in the mind produced by words should be regarded differently from images in the mind which come from visual images (or physical substance in the world of the tangible, tactile and sensory.)

text as large individual pieces of work; but until then I hope you will enjoy them as you now find them: a pocket sized collection of spectacles for your mind's eye. (Daville.1993: unnumbered)

The words are very small, almost illegible. To read them a magnifying glass is desirable. This gives an edge of secrecy, a sense of entering a world that is intimate and private, and will only reveal itself to those who go to some trouble to uncover it. Here is an example of one of Greg Daville's spectacles for the 'mind's eye':

Something a Friend Saw

The sea front  
Two old ladies are seated on a bench  
They chat.  
They look at the sea.  
One of them pours tea from a thermos flask.  
The other knits a pullover for her Grandson.  
The sea rolls in and out.  
Behind them is a high concrete wall.  
Painted onto it  
(in six foot tall capital letters)  
are the words  
DESTROY YOURSELF.  
A gull cries overhead.

(1993:7)

And here is another example. This one takes on the history and relevance of the book as its subject:

The British Museum  
London  
The 29<sup>th</sup> February  
6pm precisely

As the clock strikes six, every book in the  
Library spontaneously disintegrates.  
Simultaneously, they burst from their shelves and cases in waves of paper dust.  
With weary sighs, they fall in heavy  
Drifts, filling the room below

(Daville, 1993:13)

The pictures are conjured up through language. The book suggests that it is through language that we find images for the mind. Language is the mediator of experience. In this little book the language is the written word. But the written word stands in for the visual 'word'. The book can be seen as a parable about language. It sets up a relationship between words, pictures and the world. The world is a subjective world. It is in the 'mind's eye'. Some philosophers suggest that all experience is subjective and moreover our way of relating to the world is through language. The detour of language is crucial and it is primarily through this detour that we are able to think and to express.

One philosopher who has been influential in shaping thoughts about the function and relevance of language, is Hans-George Gadamer. His writings point to his view that our use of language is largely unconscious. Yet it forms our thinking. He makes statements such as the following:

The more language is a living operation, the less we are aware of it. Thus it follows, from the self-forgetfulness of language that its real being consists of what is said in it. What is said in it constitutes the common world in which we live and to which the whole great chain of tradition reaches us from the literature of foreign languages, living as well as dead. The real being of language is that into which we are taken up when we hear it –what is said (Gadamer 1996:33 tr. Cited in [www.wikipedia/Gadamer](http://www.wikipedia/Gadamer)).

Perhaps it can be said that language makes us as we make language. Gadamer's opening sentence, in the above quote, points to his understanding of the level of unawareness of this facet of language when it is a living operation. When language is a living operation, the self-forgetfulness of language creates a semblance of it being a 'real' entity rather than a man-made sign system. However, some sorts of language texts are intrinsically more self-conscious about their operations, hence alerting the reader/listener to the artificiality of the construct and to the complex relationship between language and life. These sorts of texts can be said to be more self-conscious and more self-reflective about their operations. Poetry is a system of language making that fits this description. And so is the language of the artist's book.

### 3.2 Book art: a comparison with poetry

The most sophisticated use of language in written text is to be found in poetry. Therefore the theory of poetry is an interesting place to start when discovering something more about how language functions. Artists' books carry their own form of language that, unlike written poetry, is not constituted from a single text constituted from words; but often from many different texts all contributing to the build-up of a very complex language of communication. In its compactness and complexity, the artist's book resembles poetry, I would like to suggest here. And one of the reasons it resembles poetry is that both in poetry and in the artist's book meaning grows out of form, and form grows from meaning. The meaning is inseparable from the form. Something powerful, can one even say mysterious, happens when this occurs. The following quote describes this, while talking about poetry:

Poetry may well be the art of the unsayable. A good poem lies somewhere beyond mere words. It is the intangible, an exultation in things vaguely apprehended, something which emerges out of its own form. Any poem that can be completely understood or paraphrased is not a poem, therefore, but simply versification or emotive prose (though not the worse for that). ([www.poetrymagic.co.uk/whatispoetry](http://www.poetrymagic.co.uk/whatispoetry).)

Meaning inseparable from form is what characterises a good poem and what makes a good artist's book. *The Book of Pages* (Fig. 50) by Mira Schor provides an example of how, in the artist's book, the meaning ideally becomes impregnated into the stuff of the book's construction. In this work, private ritual and ceremony become vehicles of psychic transformation (Drucker 1995:103). The making of the book becomes in itself a form of ritual and fetishist activity (Drucker 1995:103). The pages are dark and discoloured in places and the text at times becomes illegible or is deliberately blotted out with white paint. The quality of the rice paper from which the book is constructed allows a bleed-through transparency to occur. The edges of the pages are weathered and frayed. In places the book gives the impression of partly coming apart, with pages half adrift. The entire book (written text and material construction and

appearance) carries auratic signals of the inner distress of the author (Drucker 1995:103).

Another work, already described, where the integration of materials and meaning is also very evident is in *Fragments of an Interior* (Fig. 37) by Victoria Edwards. Here the colour and texture of the paper become a metaphor for skin and blood. The text of the poem appears to be inscribed on the body itself.

### 3.3 Some remarks about poetry and prose

I would like to draw another connection between the artist's book and language. Just as it can be observed that prose language is different to poetry, so the ordinary book is different to the artist's book. Poetry has special features that the usual prose does not display. As one might make a comparison between prose and poetry, one can make a distinction between the artist's book and the conventional book. The artist's book has special features that the usual book does not display. I want to say a few things about poetic language in order then to suggest that the artist's book can be understood as a form of text, which, more than the usual book, makes use of poetic devices in its form and content. One of the devices I shall consider, that is a feature both of poetry and of the artist's book, is the extensive and sophisticated use of metaphor as a gateway to meaning.

First I wish to turn to a distinguishing feature between poetry and prose. Quoting from a poetry website,<sup>20</sup> one essential characteristic of poetry, is the 'more sustained and elaborate attention being paid to its constituent parts'. This is as true an observation about the nature of the artist's book, when compared to the standard book. And then there is the point about how poems evolve out of the materials and the process that constitute the making process. In poems the building blocks are words:

Words, for poets, have meaning, appropriate uses, associations, connotations, etymologies, histories of use and misuse. They conjure up images, feelings, shadowy depths and glinting

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<sup>20</sup> [http://www.poetrymagic.co.uk/creative\\_writing.html](http://www.poetrymagic.co.uk/creative_writing.html).

surfaces. Their properties are marvellous, endless, not to be guessed at from casual inspection. And each property – meaning, association, weight, colour, duration, shape, texture – changes as words are combined in phrases, rhythms, lines, stanzas and completed poems. Out of these properties the poetry is built, even if the end cannot be entirely foreseen but grows out of the very process of deployment, that continual two-way dialogue between writer and poem ([www.poetrymagic.co.uk/creative writing](http://www.poetrymagic.co.uk/creative-writing)).

In the artist's book, the materials and processes may include words and the tooling of the written text. They may also extend into other arenas, such as visual imagery and three-dimensional form.

### 3.4 Multiple texts

Perhaps it can be said that the language of the poem, employed by the artist's book, is one of multiple texts, all inter-relating. We are looking here at an animal with many legs, a potentially complex interweaving of textual elements, an arena for the interaction of many and varied expressive possibilities. Because it frequently and easily blurs the distinction between genres, the artist's book can be described as quintessentially<sup>21</sup> a post-modern form.<sup>22</sup> This is only one of its potential

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<sup>21</sup> I use the word, 'quintessentially', somewhat ironically with regard to post-modernism. This is because post-modernism fundamentally rejects the stance that the 'essence' of things can be pursued and found. Rather it embraces the stance that there are no ultimate truths, no grand narratives, nothing beneath the surface; and all is bounded by the provisional and the incoherent.

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Mary Klages, in her article, posted on the Internet, and titled, *An Introduction to Postmodernism* ([www.colorado.edu/English/ENG201Klages/promo.](http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENG201Klages/promo.)), discusses some of the characteristics of post-modernism, from a literary perspective. Included in this is the blurring of distinctions between genres so that, for example, prose becomes more poetic and poetry more documentary. Other features that she identifies include what she describes as impressionism and subjectivity: an emphasis in both the visual arts and writing on how seeing/reading/perception takes place, rather than on what is perceived (my book, *Grumeti*, (Fig. 15), explores this theme, contrasting various different modes of perception.). Another characteristic of post-modernism, identified by Klages, is that it tends to move away from apparent objectivity of narrators, points of view and moral positions. One manifestation of this is the multi-narrated story. This is also a characteristic of much of my work, as for example in the many stories making up *A Small Web of Grief* (Fig. 9). Although I do not wish to go into too much detail about post-modernism here, it seems interesting to affirm, in general, that the artist's book is as an apt vehicle for the post-modern stance; and, in particular, to align my work with the attributes of post-



characteristics that cast it as a suitable postmodern role-player. Another is its tendency to manifest self-reflexivity and self-consciousness about the production of the bookwork. So, for example, in my book, *A Pattern Book* (Figs. 1, 6 and 7), there are references to its identity and status as a book. There is the reference to the book in the title and the suggestion that this is a book about patterns, as well as a prototype for the book. There is the device of the book within the book, drawing attention to the concept of book, and this being a book about the book. And attention is drawn to book-making techniques, such as the binding of pages and the attachment of a cover through the use of stitching. And here the stitching is not the usual functional, discreet and neat stitching that characterises the professionally bound book. It is untidy and makeshift, deliberately resembling the stitching used when tacking, in dressmaking – thereby declaring itself to be a provisional and temporary putting together of the structure. And to emphasise this theme, the binding shows evidence of having been put together and taken apart over and over again. In this bookwork, use is made of visual, verbal and structural elements of 'text', and these jointly and separately contribute to the build-up of meaning.

A good example of an artist's book that displays a layered and integrated use of different textual elements (visual, verbal and three dimensional), is *Octopus* (Fig. 41), by Julie Chen and Elizabeth McDevitt (already referred to above). Here the words are

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modernism. In aligning my work with post-modern attitudes, I will briefly introduce two more of the defining characteristics that Klages discusses ([www.colorado.edu/English/ENG201Klages/promo](http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENG201Klages/promo).) and with which I identify, in my work. The first of these is the manner in which the post-modern text draws attention to itself as production, as something that is constructed and consumed. By drawing attention to itself thus, it does not pretend to stand in for another reality, but overtly declares itself as a language construct of signifiers and there is an implied critique of signifiers pointing to the signified: '[F]or post-modern society there are only surfaces without depth, signifiers with no signified'. The tenuous and ultimately self-destructing relationship between signifiers and so-called reality is a major theme of my work, *A Pattern Book* (Fig. 2-17). And then Klages draws attention to the emphasis on fragmented forms in the post-modern text: 'Frequently narratives are discontinuous and there are random-seeming collages of different materials'. My work, the *Book of the Gates* (Fig. 27-31), with its emphasis on the fracturing of realities through the use of a collage technique is an example of this that will be further discussed in this thesis.

shaped on the paper as is customary in concrete poetry<sup>23</sup> so as to accentuate meaning. Also, the shape of the book, itself, is a metaphor for a descent into the watery depths. Shape, form and arrangement of words on the paper all contribute their expressive components to the orchestration of meaning.

In the above example, the overall shape and form of the book have symbolic and metaphoric meaning. An example of a book of mine, where shapes within the book contribute significantly to the making of metaphor and symbol, is *Through a Glass Darkly* (Fig. 51). This is an account of war and its effects. In part of the book, the true story of a fighter pilot is related. The story is written onto the back of black silk flaps that are designed to elicit various associations. There is an association, in their shape, with uniform lapels, such as might be found on the uniform of an air-force pilot. Their shape is also intended to carry a resemblance to the wing of an aeroplane. And the black silk is used as a badge of mourning and of death. They are, in addition, embroidered with markings that carry allusions to such vulnerable objects as butterfly wings and the tender new growth of plants. Therefore, the one simple shape, repeated with slight variation, is designed to hold a cluster of associations.

An intelligent and expressive use of concrete poetry is to be found in a book by Keith Smith, *Book 107: Out of Sight* (Fig. 52).<sup>24</sup> Here the size, shape and positioning of

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<sup>23</sup> As concrete poetry is a frequent inhabitant of artist's books, it is appropriate to provide a definition of it. The definition that follows, here, is taken from the Internet: Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/concrete-poetry>):

Concrete poetry is a poetry in which the typographical arrangement of words is as important in conveying the intended effect as the conventional elements of the poem; such as meaning of the words, rhythm, rhyme and so on. It is the self-consciously radical form of the technique of visual poetry (a term sometimes applied to concrete poetry).

And the Wikipedia adds: 'Although the term is quite modern, the idea of using typography to enhance the meaning of a poem is an old one'. I would like to add that this is equally true of the term, 'artist's book'. Although 'artist's book' it is quite a modern term, the idea of the book referring to the concept of the book and taking on expressive features over and above those conveyed by the meaning of the words, is not new and examples of it can be found throughout the history of the book.

<sup>24</sup> There are fifteen pages of text on cream paper. To quote the text with line breaks gives some idea of how the lines flow in relation to the meaning, which is one small reproducible aspect of the expressive investigation of the book that it is possible to replicate here: 'Dearly I/draw him/near/me/He is/close

letters and words on the pages contribute significant expressive meaning. At the same time attention is drawn to the many expressive possibilities to be found in the creative and inventive usage of typography alone.

There is a different sense in which poems and artist's books (and in fact all language forms) hold multiple texts. It is the fact that texts hold no one essentialist meaning. Meanings are as varied as the readers who come to the texts. Roland Barthes draws attention to this point. He also suggests that interpretative practices can constrict meaning. To quote Barthes:

There are said to be certain Buddhists whose aesthetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean. Precisely what the first analysts of narrative were attempting: to see all the world's stories (and there have been ever so many) within a single structure: we shall, they thought, extract from each tale its model, then out of these models we shall make a grand narrative structure, which we shall reapply (for verification) to any one narrative: a task as exhausting (ninety nine percent perspiration, as the saying goes), as it is ultimately undesirable, for the text thereby loses its difference. (Barthes, 1974:3)

To see a whole landscape in a bean is a reduction of a vast outlook to a minute and narrow dimension. It is this that Barthes protests against – the reduction of meaning. Barthes uses the analogy of a landscape in a bean to suggest that interpretative practices can constrict meaning. He is critical of thinking that implies there is a single essentialist structure or meaning to be found behind the surface of a piece of art or the words of a written text.

To grasp the point that there is no single essentialist structure or meaning opens the mindscape created by an piece of art to infinities of potential meanings. In my work I am aware that I attempt to introduce devices that assist in opening doorways to multitudinous potential meanings. In this respect, I find the technique of collage to be useful. I use it in my writing and in some of the visual texts. By the term collage, I am referring to the practice of taking snippets from one source and introducing them into another source, so that the outcome is the conjunction of different sources that

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by/revolving/roar of/laughter/ and/ sigh/ lent/ lee/ falling/ rain/ Tenderly I/ draw him/ near/ again/ shadows/ over me by/ now evolving/ pictures of/ lighter/ tones and/ lower/ contrast/ dissolving/ space.'

together build a composite picture. So, for example, in *A Pattern Book* (Fig. 8), I have taken the legs of a woman and sewn them onto the image of a garden plan. The plan becomes both garden and body of woman. A sort of metamorphosis of the two happens that opens up new possibilities of meaning as one contemplates the conjunction of human figure and garden.

Another method that I use for opening up a plurality of meanings is to take the same basic image, yet altering it slightly and/or altering its context. I do this with the shape of the black triangle in the opening sections of *A Pattern Book* (Figs. 2-5). It starts to gather skeins of meanings: night, black-out, eclipse, bad weather, immanent disaster, mourning insignia, omen of doom, something hidden, a blind spot and so on. I do it again (that is, using the same basic image with accumulating meanings) with the imagery of the clouds and then with the imagery of the slippers, the imagery of the gardens, the imagery of the letters, the imagery of garments, as well as in many other instances.

### 3.5 Interplay between signs

There is no single essentialist structure or meaning beneath the surface of language—that is what Barthes and the post-structuralists propose. They also propose that meanings are constituted from signs. There are only signs and the interplay between signs. The interplay between signs creates threads, skeins, tangles and webs of meanings. Meanings cannot be ultimately pinned down, are never static and cannot be reduced to a final point or a single interpretation. The meanings that man creates through the constant interplay between signs are continually in flux. History changes the meanings, so does geographic location, so does the mind frame and frame-of-mind of the individual sign reader/creator. The usage and interpretation of signs becomes a personal game in which individuals are the co-creators of the meanings of an artwork, and the meanings of a literary text, and, by extension, the meanings of every aspect of their lives.

The theory regarding the sign (outlined above) presents itself as a form of blueprint for the manner in which I approached the creation of both *A Pattern Book* and the

*Book of the Gates*. So it is perhaps interesting to observe the end result of a creative process that takes as its foundation this aspect of the theory of the post-modernists. How I put together *A Pattern Book* (Figs. 2-17) was by literally observing signs and the relationships between them. I started by observing signs in my world and then I began the book by appropriating a few signs that intuitively felt significant – the black triangle and the dress pattern, and the butterfly wing for example. I then began to play around with these signs, finding ways in which they related to one another and also observing the other connections that came to me as I worked. So, for example, it fell into place that the slippers should also become a metaphor for butterfly wings. As I worked, a rapport began to happen between signs in the world and signs in the book, as well as between one sign and another in the book. Layers and encrustations and elaborations of meaning began to happen. While I was working on it the piece was very absorbing and it was as if I entered a world full of significant connections that kept leaping out at me and insisting on being included. The imagery of transformations and veiled knowledge, such as the butterflies and clouds inevitably wound their way into a range of alchemical signage and a language of transmutation. Then came the garden imagery of structured new life, and on it went. It felt as if the piece took its own impetus and direction: shaping itself like an elaborate piece of music around a certain selected range of signs and the relationships between them which formed their own internal impetus of meaning in an hermetically sealed world that was yet also a metaphor for the daily world that I lived in, it drew its life and inspiration from that.

### **3.6 relationships constitute meaning**

On the subject of a world being created only inside of relationships, Terry Eagleton, the literary critic, offers a cautionary note. The structuralists were concerned with the structures of language and the general laws by which they operate.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, there

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<sup>25</sup> It is of significance that although structuralism began as a movement in linguistics, its methodologies and understandings have come to be applied to fields of knowledge outside the original domain. It is a particular view of language as a system of interrelationships between signs that is of interest to the structuralists; and this can be made widely applicable to other systems of signs outside of

was the belief that the separate units of a system only have meaning because of their relationship to one another.<sup>26</sup> To illustrate this point, Eagleton describes a typical structuralist attitude to a poem containing sun and moon imagery:

... you become a card-carrying structuralist only when you claim that the meaning of each image is wholly a matter of its relation to the other. The images do not have a substantial meaning, only a relational one. You do not need to go outside the poem to know what you know of suns and moons, to explain them; they explain and define each other. (Eagleton, 1983: 94)

This type of thinking can lead to the separation of form from content. The form is believed to be what matters, the structure of relations between the units. Sun and moon could be exchanged for man and woman and the same essential 'story' or pattern of relationships between the elements preserved. A criticism levelled against structuralism is that this is an affront to common sense (Eagleton, 1983: 94).

It is of interest to me that the interrelationship of signs within a creative work can then also set up an interrelationship with the world, so that a circuit is created between work and world. I articulate this because it seems to me that that is precisely how my creative work takes its shape. A conversation of sorts starts to happen. It makes creative sense, as well as being common sense, to 'go outside the poem to know what you know of suns and moons'.

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linguistics. The anthropologist, Levi-Strauss, for example, transposed the methods of structuralism to the study of human culture and the analysis of myth. The insights of structuralism (and subsequently post structuralism) have been extensively used in the fields of art theory and art history. My annexation of some of the methods of structuralism for the purposes of arriving at some understanding of my artists' books falls within this established tradition.

<sup>26</sup> In this respect, it is important to note that there are two types of relationships that can be named. These are intra-textual relationships and inter-textual relationships. Intra-textual relationships are the relationships between signs in the text. All contribute in relation to each other to the overall meaning of the text (the one part/sign has its meaning in relation to the rest). In inter-textual relationships the text has its meaning as a (complex) sign in relation to other texts.

Working on the *Book of the Gates* (Figs. 27-31) I was very aware of the exchange between work and world going on, as I was with *A Pattern Book* (Figs. 2-17). This influenced my decision to include the interludes (the written parts in italics) as part of the form of the work and as a manifestation of how my domestic and everyday world (from which they come) seemed to be ‘conversing’ with the Egypt diary.

### 3.7 The self-contained system

As is evident from the examples given in the sections above, in the artist’s book, representation of content, coherent form and emotive expression are not constrained to the meaning of the words alone, or to the medium of a single text, but spill over into many forms of text. And where the texts are skilfully played and combined, the crucial element of an internal consistency is retained so that the art piece becomes a self-contained system. The creation of an integrated self-contained system is a fundamental endeavour of all forms of art, according to some theorists.<sup>27</sup>

An example of an artist’s book that functions well as an autonomous and self-contained system is *Scrutiny in the Great Round* (Fig. 53).<sup>28</sup> It was created by Tennessee Rice Dixon and Jim Gasperini, with music and sound by Charlie Morrow. This comes in the form of an interactive compact disc. Taking its inspiration and form

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<sup>27</sup> John Holcombe expands on this idea in his essay, posted on the Internet, titled, *Aesthetics*. [www.textetc.com/theory/aesthetics.\(2006\)](http://www.textetc.com/theory/aesthetics.(2006)). He identifies some of the crucial components that contribute towards art functioning at an engaging and interesting level. Amongst these are that art should be emotionally alive; it should display internal consistency; it should have a coherent form; and it should express itself as an autonomous self-contained system.

<sup>28</sup> The packaging advertises it, effusively, as ‘[I]nteractive art as you have never seen it before!’ and ‘[A]rt in a class by itself’. It then continues to provide a promotional description of the ‘book’: ‘[S]crutiny in the Great Round is a captivating and hypnotic interactive experience which offers a totally new way to think about and interact with art. Enjoy over 250 film sequences and animations and thousands of collage images with morph on screen. Navigate through a banquet of interwoven images, metaphoric icons, audible symbols and words, interacting with the title over and over again without replicating your experience. Manipulate the moon cursor to replicate the feminine, rhythmic cycle of life; use the sun cursor to see and hear the linear, masculine perspective revealed; click on the infinity cursor to start a loop of sequences.’ There is perhaps an element of send-up.

from the computer game, it allows the reader/viewer to interact by clicking on various parts of the screen, thereby turning day to night and one scene into another as the fairy-tale-like story progresses with its internal variety of permutations and possibilities. Artists and poets have in common that they are often attempting to find a new way of regarding the world and then attempting to forge a matching language for their visions and endeavours.<sup>29</sup>

An important point is that a matching language is attempted; and the signified is never identical with reality. The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, arrived at the insight that the signified<sup>30</sup> is not identical with reality and that this allows one to treat language as a self-enclosed system (Degenaar, 1986:59). A creative work starts to increase in believability and depth and interest in proportion to the number of interconnections and internal relationships it sets up and weaves together in the establishment of its unique pattern, its unique self-enclosed system. For a working artist this is a useful insight, and it also becomes a marvel when a work starts to become a world that is filled with elaborate internal relationships. When this happens, the artwork can be described as its own environment. Andrew Eason, a book artist and writer who lives in Bristol, comments on this aspect of his book objects, as he likes working with the idea of the book as a self-contained world.

I use artists' books to put stuff in. They have a privileged narrative condition that allows me to approach subjects in a self-contained manner that I couldn't work with in any other way. With books I can set up an environment where I can intervene on a subject under conditions prescribed and controlled by me. (Cited by Bodman, *Artist's Book Yearbook 2003-2004*: 164)<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This attempt to find a new way of regarding the world; and a language to match experience, is also sometimes the object of other sorts of endeavours, such as the endeavour of philosophy. John Holcombe quotes Heidegger, as an example of a philosopher who attempts to do precisely this. See the website, <http://www.textetc.com/theory/heidegger.html>.

<sup>30</sup> The influential Swiss structuralist, Ferdinand de Saussure, divides the sign into the signifier (the visual or acoustic part) and the signified (the conceptual part).

<sup>31</sup> Bodman, Sarah (ed.) *Artist's Book Yearbook 2003-2004*. 2003. Bristol: Impact Press. Also see [www.andreweason.com](http://www.andreweason.com) for artists' books by Andrew Eason as well as useful links to other book arts sites.



Telfer Stokes, whose work has been described in this thesis, comments on the book's ability to offer a self-contained illusionary world: 'Because a book is a physical object that you can hold, it has built into it LAYERS, or layerings, between the actual physicality, the presence of it as an object – and an opportunity to create an illusionary world within it.' (Stokes, 1996:28)

But here he also makes another point about book art. The actual physicality, the presence of the book as an object acts as a counterpoise and point of tension and interaction with the imaginative world created within the book. This is an important point for the language of book art as the physical aspects of the book are so often an integral part of the concept. Form is frequently used to create, extend and elaborate upon meaning in a far more extended and elaborate way than in the usual book. The layers, or layering, of the physicality of book art are part of the language of art for the book artist. It is the possibility of moving between the language of art, with its many appearances and possibilities, and the language of book, with its emphasis on written texts, and its literary affiliations, that presents the special challenge to the book artist.

Emma Hill, a maker of artists' books (who is also a director of The Eagle Gallery/EHM Arts, London which is involved in publishing artists' books) is drawn to the journey that a book can take the viewer/reader on due to the fact that, as a maker of artist's books one has the opportunity to draw upon many languages and ways of making meaning (while also working within a structure that contains the unfolding of time). She says this about the books she makes:

I make books because I think books are important. When you take a book into your hands you are taken on a journey that leaves you somewhere different from where you started. I make artists' books because they can contain more than one creative language in a structure that holds time. I make books for the same reason that I imagine most people are drawn to making them, because they are satisfying to make. (Hill, 2003: 95)

Other artists are also drawn to this particular aspect of book art: namely that it combines ways of making meaning from the world of art and from the world of book. Roberta Bridda is an Italian bookmaker. In her thinking about the artist's book, thoughts surface about the book as private place, as metaphor for home and body and

journey. It is for her also a site where one can think about language. She says that the book:

... creates a need to think about language, a place where codes mix together, where the text can be an image, and the image can also be text. With books, the idea is to stay awake in front of reality and dreams, living one's multiple lives. (Galbraith, 2003: 83)

For her, books allow the possibility of mixing the codes from the world of art and the codes from the world of book, as well as the possibility of expressing the multifarious and multifaceted nature of one's consciousness. The artist's book, for her, is a rich and versatile medium for expression.

Ferdinand de Saussure, in addition to viewing language as a self-enclosed system, also views it as an arbitrary system of signs, making the relationship between signifier and signified (and between sign and reality) a man-made convention. Meaning then is not seen as something that is immanent in the sign but that comes about because of the sign's position in a set of relationships. Its position provides its difference from other signs, both present and absent.

In my work, at times, I consciously make use of the sign's position in a set of relationships as a technique to establish meaning. One example of this is in the opening section of the second volume of *A Pattern Book* (Fig. 9). There is a reproduction, photocopied onto transparent paper, of a painting by Bosch showing John the Baptist reclining in a landscape with plants, trees, animals and birds. Into this picture I have sewn a frame of black thread. It frames the inner section. At the top, outside of this frame, is the image of a weaver-bird, sitting atop a woven nest. On the following page is a piece of written text, a story about an important scientific finding, now out-of-date. Out of the middle of this story I have torn a hole vaguely resembling the perimeters of a flower. Inside this shape is a pencil drawing on transparent paper of the bird and the nest. Not only is this image of bird and nest outside of the black frame pulled into significance, but the rest of the images from the painting that have been left out are there like absent echoes. Their absence is perhaps emphasised by the picture being faintly discernable through the back of a transparent page.

Another useful set of terms is ‘syntagmatic’ and ‘paradigmatic’. These terms describe the relations between signs. The syntagmatic is pictured as a horizontal axis upon which a sign takes up a position in a sequence. The paradigmatic is pictured as the vertical axis. It reveals, that attached to the meaning of the visible sign, are other related signs that are not present. In the above example it might be all the signs except the bird and the nest. Or it might be something else, like all the times references are made to birds in *A Pattern Book*. Although they are absent at the moment that the page is open at the pencil drawing of bird and nest, they are deemed to be present. Paradigmatic relations apply to different categories of words (or images): with the same grammatical function, with related meaning, with similar sound patterns, or some other grouping device (Degenaar, 1986:60).

### 3.8 The route of images

The route of images<sup>32</sup> is one of the devices artists find useful in the creation of the self-contained world. This is because images have associations. Images, and their associations, often come couched as comparisons, where one thing is compared with another, which in some way can be seen to overlap.<sup>33</sup> Comparisons come in many forms. There is the simile,<sup>34</sup> where the likeness is spelt out by the inclusion of the word ‘like’ or the word ‘as’ (the man is like a bear). There is analogy,<sup>35</sup> where pairs are compared. Then there is metaphor,<sup>36</sup> more compact and potentially powerful,

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<sup>32</sup> The website, <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/litterms/image.html> defines image: ‘Image is language that evokes one or all of the five senses: seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling’.

<sup>33</sup> Another level at which comparison happens is the primary level of language itself in relation to life. For language expresses something outside of itself. It is not life but an expression of life, a symbol system or equivalence. Built into its very nature is the element of mimesis where one thing stands for another thing. It seems to me that this is intrinsically the world of the comparison.

<sup>34</sup> The website, <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/litterms/simile.html> defines simile: ‘Simile is the comparison of two unlike things using like or as’.

<sup>35</sup> The website, <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/litterms/analogy.html> defines analogy: ‘Analogy is the comparison between two pairs, which have the same relationship. The key is to ascertain the relationship between the first so that you can choose the second pair (part to whole, opposites), for example: hot is to cold as fire is to ice.’

<sup>36</sup> The website, <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/litterms/metaphor.html> defines metaphor: ‘Metaphor is the comparison of two unlike things using the verb “to be” and not using like or as, as in a simile’.

which takes a short cut to the comparison (the man is a bear). Then there is allegory, which can be viewed as a special form of metaphor.<sup>37</sup>

John Holcombe writes about metaphor in an article posted on the Internet ([www.textetc.com/theory](http://www.textetc.com/theory)): 'metaphors are not simply literary devices, but something active in experience, perhaps even the basis of language' (Holcombe, 2006: online, unnumbered) He puts a case for metaphors assisting in the organisation and expression of experience, as well as in the construction of alternative realities, when he says '... metaphors organise our experience, uniquely express that experience and create convincing realities' (Holcombe, 2006: online unnumbered). And he relates all this to poetry, saying '[P]oetry, which uses them instinctively, is following a scientific truth' (Holcombe, 2006: online unnumbered). He quotes Lakoff and Johnson: '[M]etaphors have entailments that organise our experience, uniquely express that experience, and create necessary realities' (Holcombe, 2006: online unnumbered).

Why does it seem important to understand, here, through the route of poetry, something about the mechanisms of language and the mechanics of meaning, when investigating the artist's book? The question could be partially answered something like this. Poetry, in a concentrated manner, highlights how language relies upon association and the connection of ideas in order to vivify experience and allow the familiar to seem strange, the old to seem new. It has been said that a poet is a man who sees resemblances in things.<sup>38</sup> Artists' books are like poems in many respects. As a defining feature, they attempt to codify experience in a concentrated manner and use the sorts of devices to do this that poetry employs.

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<sup>37</sup> The website, <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/litterms/allegory.html> has the following to say about allegory: 'Allegory is a form of extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative, are equated with the meanings that lie outside the narrative itself. The underlying meaning has a moral, social, religious or political significance, and characters are often personifications of abstract ideas as charity, greed or envy'.

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit-terms/metaphor.html>.

I find useful some of the ideas of the Russian Formalist,<sup>39</sup> Roman Jakobson. His ideas about poetics indicate that the poetic can be regarded as consisting of language placed in a self-conscious relationship to itself. In the poetic, language is used in such a way that the sign becomes disconnected from the object. The sign acquires independence and value. It draws attention to itself. It is not used only as a currency of communication. There is a nice parallel here to the artist's book. Functioning as a poetic form, the artist's book draws attention to itself. Frequently, architectural, visual and textual components of the artist's book act as poetic signs and the book is placed into a self-conscious relationship to itself.

Jakobson describes communication as involving six elements: an addresser, an addressee, a message passing between them, a shared message code, a 'contact' medium of communication and a message 'context'. He proposes, that in a communicative act, one of these may dominate and that when the communication focuses on the message itself, then the poetic function is dominant. In such a case, the words themselves become the foreground.

Something else happens when the poetic function of language is dominant. This can be described as the recalcitrance of the words and images to give up their meaning. 'The work of art can be said to consist of a set of relationships which resists immediate recognition', says Degenaar (1986:69), who adds:

The meaning of a poem is not on the face of the poem. It requires a journey of discovery. The structuralists would say it is typical of poetic language to resist understanding in terms of what is obvious. 'The poem must resist intelligence/Almost successfully', says Wallace Stevens; and its distinctiveness lies in the resistance: not necessarily the resistance of

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<sup>39</sup> Eagleton explains that Formalism is 'not exactly a structuralism'. But the views of the influential structuralist, Ferdinand de Saussure, influenced the Russian Formalists. Eagleton also explains that Formalism 'views literary texts 'structurally' and suspends attention to the referent to examine the sign itself, but it is not particularly concerned with meaning as differential or, in much of its work, with the 'deep' laws and structures underlying literary texts'(Eagleton, 1983: 99).

obscurity, but at least the resistance of patterns<sup>40</sup> and forms whose semantic relevance is not immediately obvious (Degenaar, 1986:69).<sup>41</sup>

It is the setting up of patterns and forms: visual, verbal, tactile and other, that is the task of the book artist. When it is done successfully, like good poetry, the book art resists intelligence almost successfully and the forms are such that semantic relevance is not immediately obvious. The best book artists are, in a sense, poets. And they are poets working across codes, often working with more than one text, for example, with both visual and verbal texts. The possibilities for setting up complex interactions and relationships are enormous. The degree of skill and sensibility required to do so is consequently also enormous. To use a musical analogy, the book artist plays many instruments, or at any rate, there are many instruments available for him to play should the decision be made to do so.

The theory of poetry appears to me to be of great assistance in understanding the sorts of meaning-making that confront the maker of artists' books. Also of assistance, in understanding more about the route of images used by poetry in order to create equivalences, is structuralism's study of the metaphorical<sup>42</sup> and the metonymic.<sup>43</sup> Both the metaphoric and the metonymic create equivalences. Eagleton explains that what happens when language is used poetically is that 'we pay attention to 'equivalences' in the process of combining words together as well as in selecting them: we string together words which are semantically or rhythmically or phonetically or in some other way equivalent' (1983:99). He expands upon this by saying:

... poetry similarity is superinduced upon contiguity: words are not just strung together for the sake of the thoughts they convey, as in ordinary speech, but with an eye to the patterns of

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<sup>40</sup> Degenaar points out that this view corresponds with a view held by Kant 'who emphasizes the ability of the imagination to discover a pattern in a work of art and to enjoy the way in which it fits together' (Degenaar, 1986: 69).

<sup>41</sup> Culler (1975:178-179) quoted by Degenaar.

<sup>42</sup> In metaphor one sign is substituted for another, because it has a similarity – fire might be substituted for sun.

<sup>43</sup> In metonymy a sign is associated with another sign – leaf is associated with tree. Used in a metonymic way, leaf becomes a stand-in for tree.

similarity, opposition, parallelism and so on created by their sound, meaning, rhythm and connotations. (Eagleton, 1983: 99)

So, for example, in the *Book of the Gates* (Fig. 27-31), the photographs that are put side by side on a double page spread are in no way random selections. They have been chosen as a pair because of certain equivalences that are observable when they are viewed in tandem. It may be something as simple as two starkly black foreground shapes, as in the picture of the black horse alongside the picture of the black-cloaked figure. Then, in the background of each, there is a small black shape, as if to re-iterate the significance of the colour black in these images. And absorbing both pictures, the mind is likely to make metaphoric connections, so that the two black shapes become associated or merged in memory. Horse also stands for black figure and black figure for horse. This connection is re-iterated through shape: the fact that the strange pointed hat worn by the cloaked figure is picked up in the shape of the horse's ear, as well as rhythmically repeated in the general shape of the head of the horse.

### 3.9 Direct and indirect reference

More than ordinary language, poetic language acknowledges that our experience of reality has, as Johan Degenaar expresses it in *Art and the Meaning of Life*, 'a rich texture, which cannot be exhausted by direct reference' (1986:73). This leads to the devices of indirect reference through the detour of language (1986:73). Metaphor is an ideal vehicle for indirect reference. An example of indirect reference, from one of my books, *A Pattern Book* (Fig. 10), is the use made of dress patterns to suggest many things other than the simple first level reference of the actual pattern. While this is always there when the dress pattern is used, it can be understood as the base level from which other references grow. The pattern pieces, cut up, re-shaped, re-constituted, inscribed and even sewn become a rich language of reference, and of metaphor. At one time or another they refer to the street map, the bird, the butterfly, the book, the aeroplane, the bride, the garden and much more. Thematically, the simple dress pattern becomes affiliated with many of the major themes of the bookwork. A gradual accretion of meanings gathers around the dress pattern as the book progresses. It was my intention that it should come to be affiliated with the idea

of paradigmatic mind maps: that which determines the ways in which we see our world. And then towards the end of the second volume it also becomes one of the metaphors for liberation from constricting and outmoded and unbecoming worldviews. Like our experience of reality which has a rich texture that is inexhaustible, images can be used in art in such a way as to build a richly textured language of reference and cross reference, direct reference and indirect reference. This rich layering of language is the familiar territory of poetry and of art where art adopts the methods of poetry and becomes its own form of the poetic text.

### 3.10 The readerly and the writerly text

And so, how should we read a text (visual and/or written or other)? Two ways of reading are possible, say Barthes and the post-structuralists. The one is the readerly and the other the writerly. The readerly approach is to look for the meaning and to find a closure of signification. The writerly approach is to discover an open text with a plurality of signification and a suspension of meaning. What of the texts themselves? What would constitute a writerly text and what would constitute a readerly text? Barthes suggests that the writerly text is not easy to find at all. For it is not a thing. Furthermore, he says:

... its model being a productive (and no longer a reproductive) one, it demolishes any criticism, which, once produced, would mix with it: to rewrite the writerly text would consist only in disseminating it, in dispersing it within the field of infinite difference. The writerly text is a perpetual present upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed. The writerly text is *ourselves writing* before the infinite play of the world is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticised by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (Barthes, 1974:5)

Whereas the writerly text is elusive, readerly texts are readily available, and are products. Most of literature and art is comprised of them. Barthes (in a sentence of great length, that is typical of his style of writing, and suggests the endless interplay of ideas) makes the point that interpretation for the readerly text is 'not to give it a



(more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it' (1974:5). He goes on to describe his ideal text:

... the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*; they are indeterminable (meaning here is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice); the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is upon the infinity of language. (Barthes, 1974: 5-6)

In my books I have attempted to work more towards a writerly mode, opening many interactive networks. Take the *Book of the Gates* as an example. Here the collaged photographs (as in Figs.27-31) create networks between different realities. Perhaps it could also be said that the interludes (those sections in italics) in the *Book of the Gates* help to do this by opening connections, often unexpected, between very different worlds.

### **3.11 The deference of meaning**

Post structuralism explores the fact that it is difficult to close one's fist over meaning. It emphasises the fact that meaning is not immediately present in a sign. Yes, the meaning of a sign is a matter of difference, as de Saussure proposed (Cat is cat because it is not bat or hat), but it is also what it is because of what it is not. Terry Eagleton explains that its meaning is always in some sense absent from it too (Eagleton, 1983:128). He goes on to say:

Meaning, if you like, is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers: it cannot be easily nailed down, it is never fully present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together. Reading a text is more like tracing this process of constant flickering than it is like counting the beads on a necklace. (Eagleton, 1983:128)

And, as Eagleton points out, there is another sense in which one cannot quite close one's fist over meaning: language is a temporal process. So when reading, there is always a sense in which meaning is deferred, not yet fully unfolded. Although a sentence, a paragraph, or for that matter a book may end, language does not. Eagleton describes this process:

There is always more meaning where that came from. I do not grasp the sense of the sentence just by mechanically piling one word on the other: for the words to compose some relatively coherent meaning at all, each one of them must, so to speak, contain the trace of the ones which have gone before, and hold itself open to the trace of those which are coming after. Each sign in the chain of meaning is somehow scored over, or traced through with all the others, to form a complete tissue, which is never exhaustible; and to this extent, no sign is ever pure or fully meaningful. (Eagleton, 1983:128)

To create pages that contain the traces of what went before, and hold intimations of what is to come, is a task that I attempt in *A Pattern Book* (Fig. 11). One of the visual ways I accomplish this is through the use of transparent papers. This allows a form of muted, forward – and - backward visual perception to occur. Sometimes I tear or incise or cut shapes into the paper to allow spy holes and windows to open up between spaces. This gives the viewer glimpses of pages that have gone and pages that are still to be fully revealed. The images begin to accumulate layers of meanings as the work progresses and as they become scored over by previous usages of image. By the end of the book, for example, the butterfly wing is no longer simply a butterfly wing (Fig 12). It has become overlaid with the traces of all the ways it has been previously used. So, for example, it is also Chinese slipper, aeroplane, skirt of wedding dress, kite, 9/11 causality victim, scientific specimen and so on.

Also, in each sign one can suggest, there are traces of the other words (or visual images) that it has excluded, in order to be itself. Cat carries residual flickerings of bat and hat. A visual example in *A Pattern Book* (Fig. 13) is how the folded paper boat with its triangulations carries residual visual flickerings of the shapes of many of the stars on other pages. Post structuralism views language as a system of signs, which can work in infinite ways. The analytical and 'pigeonholing' strategies of structuralism, where all the world's stories can be reduced to models that form part of a great narrative structure, are rejected.

The post-structuralists are not looking for one underlying meaning. The movement, which began in Paris in the sixties with anarchist students rejecting authorities, has come to stand for the rejection of all models and ideologies which dictate how one should think. A model is seen as the reduction of the infinite possibilities of meaning in order to be functional (however, a reduction of the possibilities of meaning may not be what one wants). In structuralism, models form the substratum, the underlying support for surface meaning. But in post structuralism, models become the surface, the superficial layer floating upon the infinity of meaning. Post structuralism breaks through the old rules of meaning and explores new possibilities.<sup>44</sup>

On one level what I have attempted to do in *A Pattern Book* (Figs. 2-17) could stand as a metaphor for what post structuralism attempts. *A Pattern Book* looks at the way that patterns, models and ideologies constrict and reduce thinking. This is a major theme of the work, as it is of post structuralism. The book draws attention to how models topple and then become superseded by another model and on it goes. There is never an ending. Models inevitably become blindfolds, the work suggests. Then there are, too, the gardens, the cocoons and the alchemical vessels in *A Pattern Book* (Figs. 14, 15, 16). In a world were the blind lead the blind there are always the continual flickerings and glimmerings of new connections, new meanings about to emerge, to birth, to bring new directions and growths. Metaphorically, this is the inner sun of the Alchemical tradition that I refer to in *A Pattern Book* (Fig. 17)

### **3.12 A historical connection with language**

Artist's books are frequently self-conscious about their status as books. They often covertly or overtly make allusions to their own nature and identity as book or object about book. And this is one more of their defining marks. The book is historically

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<sup>44</sup> The difference between structuralism and post structuralism is clearly illustrated in the decision of the French left wing intellectual magazine *Tel Quel*, to change its name. *Tel Quel*, meaning 'as it is' increasingly became a mouthpiece for the post-structuralists and changed its name to *L' Infini*, which translates as 'The infinity' (Liebenberg conversations: 2003-2005).

connected to language. It has for centuries been the primary receptacle for language, as written text. Therefore artist's books often have a lot to do with language in one form or another. They also frequently play with the ways in which language is used. Sometimes they even attempt to stretch usage. The territory they occupy is an ideal place from which to make forays and exploratory journeys into the nature and function of language itself, the relationship between language and book and the relationship between language and life. As the world of the artist's book grows and more artists engage with the medium, this is likely to be a fascinating theme to follow. In some respects the world of the artist's book is ideally situated as a site of exploration for language in its multifarious textual manifestations.

In the *Book of the Gates* (Figs. 27-31) I attempt to use language in such a manner as to set up a particular kind of relationship between language and life; and between experience and the recording of experience; and between parallel realities. For this I rely a good deal upon imagery and its attendant associations. One device I use to achieve this accretion of meaning around images, is that of collage where fragments from a variety of sources are conjoined. This happens in the written text as well as in some of the visual images. The collage technique has certain implications. In the written sections it creates a to-and-fro movement between the world of travel in Egypt, and the small incidents and events taking place outside of the Egypt journey. Yet the reader becomes aware, through placement of passages in proximity to one another, of levels of connections that can be made between the worlds. The worlds come together as the web of relationships grows. Their meanings begin to intertwine. Take the following example, where two passages from different times and places are put alongside one another in such a manner that the reader begins to gather a cluster of associations around the images of bird and boat and things in the deep:

*When I open the front door, I exclaim, hands to my face. Pencil in mouth, he heaves himself from the depths of the armchair and moves towards the door. Extracting the pencil, he sighs, 'Poor little chirper.'*

*'It's a gift from the cat,' I ruminates. 'See how carefully it has been laid out on the mat.' I take another quick peek. There are smears of blood and a profuse scattering of feathers. The body is boat-shaped. But a limp and headless torso begs the question as to what has happened to the bird's head. Could the cat have eaten it?*

We depart the island as the last glimmerings of orange light glow across the water and are extinguished. A cold vapour envelops the boat. We are silent. I think how the Temple of Isis was for years beneath the water, and of how many other temples have been submerged. Like sunken ships, they are abandoned. Massive colonnades are eerie subterranean forests of stone. The birds are gone. (Emslie, 2005:37)

In the first paragraph the bird is introduced as a 'chirper'. In the second paragraph the dead bird is equated with a boat. The body of the bird is 'boat-shaped'. In the third paragraph a real boat is travelling across water, and beneath the water there are submerged temples, described as 'sunken ships'. The dead 'chirper' becomes entangled in the web of associations clustering around submerged temples and sunken ships. And the final sentence, 'The birds are gone', reinforces the pathway of connections. The text of the *Book of the Gates* gathers meaning and significance through the continual layering and accretion of association and image. It is through this sort of linking device that the very different fragments of worlds are unified into an on-running narrative.

In the visual sections some of the photographs have collage elements set into them, which create, again, the coming together of images from different sources and worlds. The real elements and the fantastical elements merge. Where does the real end, where do dreams and fantasy take over? This is one of the questions that the structure of the book attempts to pose. Or to put the question another way: what is the nature of the relationship between private, subjective experience and public, objective experience? And is it possible to draw a line?

Sometimes the coming together of images from different sources happens within the frame of a single picture. An example of this is the blue crocodile against the carved stone window-screen (Fig. 33) in the chapter titled *The Book of the Eight Hour: Book of Dreams and Visions* (Emslie, 2005:143-153). The crocodile is a collaged element. Its placement in the picture then creates a rapport between the carved pattern and the texture of crocodile skin. And the manner, in which the arm of the crocodile is twisted, is echoed in the twists of the two columns that flank the window. These features help to lend to the crocodile a sense of 'fit'. The crocodile seems to have found a curiously apt backdrop. On the page opposite the crocodile there is an image

of a falcon flying down a street against the backdrop of an old building (Fig. 30). Both pictures have the common element of a rather surprising creature to be found in a cityscape. And both in addition are creatures affiliated with Egyptian gods. Therefore connections can be made between the pictures. Then, on the page after the crocodile, there is an image of a dragonfly set against a green window-frame in a mud wall (Fig. 31). Again a creature from the wild is set against a domestic dwelling. And this image also carries reverberations with the last piece of written text in the chapter titled *The Seventh Hour: Book of Sands*. The text reads:

I dream that night of green frogs held in the palms of my hands; and flying pre-historic dragonflies; and then I am finding a dragonfly fossil with wings of stone lace. (Emslie, 2005:142)

And here the image of stone lace links the dragonfly image to the image of the crocodile, set against the window of stone lace. The web of connections expands. So here there is linking happening between pictures of the same set, as well as between visual text and written text. This example makes the point that sometimes the images that reverberate against one another belong to different sorts of texts: the one is the written text and the other is the visual text. In this way a layering of texts is built up. This feature draws attention again to the important point that artist's books have at their disposal numerous sorts of texts; and often play with the overlapping of texts to create rich palimpsests of meaning. They are potentially complex and multi-layered entities; they have at their disposal a variety of texts with which to compose meanings – amongst which are words and images.

### **3.13 Dead language and language revitalised**

In the following section I turn again to the political philosopher, Johan Degenaar, for his thoughts about poetic language. These were given in a series of Summer School lectures in 1986 at the University of Cape Town and then published by the Department of Adult Education and Extra Mural Studies under the title, *Art and the Meaning of Life*.

Degenaar dwells on the theme of how language, when it becomes habitual, can go dead; and how the poetic mode has the power to activate language, and through language our response to life (1986:70-75). He emphasises much of what I have been positing in the above section: that we think through the structures of language and we gain access to what we are feeling and experiencing through the articulation of language (1986:70-75); that the ordinariness and repetitiveness of everyday language, and the paucity of exposure to new language structures and experiences, may prevent us from seeing things in a fresh and vital manner (1986:70-75). Ordinary language can contribute towards conditioning a set of stale and semi-automatic responses, whereas poetic language has an enhanced power to awaken new and fresh responses and insights; and open the doors to new meanings (1986:70-75). We may begin to see patterns where before we perhaps only saw sameness; and we may begin to see order where before there was chaos. Connections can establish themselves between unlikely and surprising objects and concepts, when the figurative modes, such as the mode of metaphor (and of course others too, including metonymy,<sup>45</sup> allegory, symbol) are activated (1986: 70-75).<sup>46</sup>

To return to poetic language, this mode has the ability to breathe new life into articulation. And poetic language does this through drawing attention to itself and its own existence as text. It acts as a form of self-conscious interface. The language of poetry is self-referential regarding its own existence as language (1980:70-75). Its very self-consciousness and self-referential nature as text are a form of yeast that ferments the power of language and the potential for renewal (1980:70-75). Through drawing attention to itself, it provides new ways of making meaning. Degenaar says: 'Man has become so used to the power of language to articulate experience that he loses contact with the magic of speaking and writing. Poetic language reminds us of the power of language' (1986: 73).

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<sup>45</sup> In metonymy, the part stands for the whole, such as in: 'The hand that feeds the poor ...' where hand stand in for person.

<sup>46</sup> It has been pointed out to me by Romaine Hill (who edited this text) that these thoughts about language, expressed here by Degenaar, have their roots in Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*.

Similarly, I suggest, the artist's book with its self-conscious relation to the book, and its re-invention of the language of 'bookness' (Les Bicknell's term [1996:24] for that which relates to the book), reminds us of the power of the book. And it, too, can be the yeast of poetic language in fermenting new meanings and insights. The re-invention of the language of 'bookness' may happen in innumerable ways. For the purpose of providing an example here, consider the way the codex book employs the convention of turning pages. The artist, Ron King, has played with this in a delightful piece of book art titled *Turn Over Darling* (Fig. 54)<sup>47</sup>. Here the pages of the book are embossed with images of a naked figure that can be viewed front and back. Speaking in metaphor, the artist's book is poem, where the ordinary book is prose. This is another way to define its nature, another route to understanding the language of book art.

### 3.14 First-order and Second-order reference to the world

Then there is a point to be made about first-order and second-order reference to the world. Degenaar writes about poetic language in relation to first and second-order reference:

Poetic language is a language game in which meanings are presented in terms of images. Images that are taken from our experience of the world are liberated from their first order references to the world by means of the new sign system in which they are incorporated. (1986: 73)

As an example, in *A Pattern Book* (Fig. 13) butterflies become constituted from other objects, such as from Chinese slippers used to encase bound feet, or from the image of a man in flight during the devastation of 9/11. This causes a first-order reference to the world to become overlaid and complicated by the introduction of another level of association, reference and meaning affiliated to the butterfly.

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<sup>47</sup> I looked at this work in the collection of Jack Ginsberg. However the photographed illustration I use comes from Drucker's *A Century of Artist's Books*.



This unchaining from first-order reference to the world is achieved through the structure of the text, and afterwards a new level of understanding can enter. Degenaar provides an example:

The senses inform me about chaos and birth and dance and star, but poetic language unchains them from their immediate contexts, and structures them in a new set of relationships, enabling Nietzsche to say: 'And yet we must have some chaos in us to give birth to a dancing star.' Imagery unchained, and chained anew by structure is the magic of art, which enables man to enrich his experience by means of new meanings. (1986: 74)

Poetic language creates a second-order reference. Poetic language has an ability to refer to reality in more than one way, and in doing this to refer to itself. Degenaar says: 'Poetic language has the pertinacity to refer to itself and its ability to do something new with language and to use an old signifier to refer to a new signified' (1986:74).

This is another way of saying many things about poetic language that have already been said in this chapter about the artist's book: that poetic language is self-reflective and self-referential; that it becomes a meta-text regarding language that enables it to refer to itself; that poetic language has the potential to create something new with language, that in poetic language structure is an important device, and is an integral part of the expression.

Take an example, again, from *A Pattern Book* (Fig. 2) of poetic language and second-order reference. The actual appearance of the two volumes is a metaphor. The volumes show evidence of having been taken apart and remade over and over, like pieces of clothing that have had to be taken out and taken in to fit themselves to a changing size, a changing shape. And the volume spines are akin to gussets. The covers are part of the metaphoric language that the two volumes embody, about the transitory and provisional nature of things.

In good poetry as in a good artist's book, structure and meanings mesh, form and content merge. What has been said about poetic language, in relation to second-order reference, could also be said about the artist's book. We could say that the artist's book utilises many aspects of poetic language, including second-order reference.

Again, I would like to suggest that artists' books operate like poetry; and this is because they are poetic texts of another sort, often operating with visual and sculptural components, as well as with written text.

I find this an interesting and useful way to approach the question of how to define and understand the special nature of the artist's book: when viewed as text, the artist's book can be understood to be poetic text. And when it comes to reading and interpreting the artist's book, tools and methodologies and theories, applicable to an understanding of poetry, are, by corollary, of use in understanding the artist's book.

### **1.15 A brief summary and some concluding remarks**

The field of literary criticism has many useful and interesting theories about language. The insights of the structuralists and the post-structuralists have provided a set of ideas that are useful for the interpretation of any expressive medium. The idea that a text is constituted of words has been surrendered to the broader definition of a text that can enter into any number of media. The theory of the literary domain becomes applicable to the visual arts and many other disciplines. This is significant for the artist's book as it is a creature spanning the world of book and the world of art. Literary criticism and theory around language reveal themselves to be a most suitable site for theory of interpretation applicable to the artist's book. I use examples of artists' books to demonstrate how this theory applies in practice to the interpretation of this genre. And I also use the theory to unpack some of the meanings and intentions of my book objects.

The concentrated manner in which artists' books incorporate texts, with an emphasis on the integration of form and meaning, aligns the artist's book with the poetic text. I therefore attempt to identify some of the features of the poetic text and show how these also manifest in the artist's book. I suggest that an understanding of poetics is an excellent skill for the critic of the artist's book to acquire, as artist's books can be regarded as poems constituted not just of words, but are objects created from multiple texts.

The palimpsests of texts that constitute artist's books create an enormously rich and varied language for the creative artist. And the artist's book has shown itself to be a place where much experimentation takes place that pushes definitions and challenges traditional thinking, both about the book and about art.

## *Some Conclusions*

My book and I, what a period we have presumed to span.

(Walt Whitman in *Artists Book Yearbook*, ed. Peixoto et al 1995: 64)

There are reasons as to why the artist's book remains a confusing entity. Firstly, it is a relative newcomer on the cultural scene. There has not been too much time to see it evolve and develop. The artists continue to explore the infinity of permutations, while the critics continue with the slippery task of attempting to develop adequate theory.

Secondly, the artist's book remains confusing because it occupies a place on the cultural map that straddles two territories. It has one leg in the territory of the book and the other in the territory of art. It is this observation that I have made the central theme of my research. It seems to me that an understanding of the artist's book as a cross-breed or hybrid is a useful starting point for the development of theory.

In this thesis I set myself three tasks. Each of these has taken up a separate chapter, constituting Chapters One, Two and Three. These three focal areas of discussion seemed to me at the time to be the three most significant current challenges in understanding the artist's book.

The first task, undertaken in Chapter One, was to attempt to define the artist's book. This seemed a necessary starting point. It led me to consider why it is that one should attempt to take a stab at defining things, in the first place. And, through the investigation, I became aware of the pitfalls in definitions that are too closed and too constricted. They artificially limit understanding and hinder the organic growth of a subject. In relation to the artist's book, I have become an advocate for the loose definition. I have become an advocate for hearing many voices. Because of its many manifestations, the artist's book has been difficult to pin down; but the many attempts at defining it are contributing towards building a richer, and more subtle understanding of what is happening

The attempt to define the artist's book was a useful task in that it cast light on a number of existing confusions and misconceptions surrounding the artist's book. It eliminated, as a candidate, the book containing art; and the rare book, where these books did not carry the defining mark of the artist's book. It helped to clarify what constitutes this defining mark. Answering this from many angles, and in numerous different ways, helped me to build a richer and more complex language of definition. To merely say the defining characteristic is the fact that the artist's book matches

form with content is true, but a thin answer. To say that the artist's book is a book about the book is also true, but also only part of the picture. The discursive investigation, which included the remarks and thoughts of many practising artists in the field, helped to add complexity and nuance to the undertaking of building a multi-layered and fuller definition. And it helped me, too, in a preliminary way, to think about some of the issues around categorisation, which was to be the subject of Chapter Two.

Chapter Two deals with categorisation. Some general issues around categorisation are discussed (such as the need to have a clear purpose in mind; and the need to identify a system that suits that material). These introductory sections reflect the research I did in order to clarify my thoughts around how to best present a system of categorization for the artist's book. Clive Phillpot, with his thinking around art and the book, provides a useful precursor to the system I eventually devise. For me, the real interest of this chapter is attempting to find a way to categorise artists' books that makes sense in terms of their identity with art and with the book. The idea of using a form of sliding scale with art on the one side and book on the other, and variations between art and book, occupying different points on the scale, seems a logical outcome for the problem presented. More difficult is deciding how to divide up the scale. It can be done in many ways. In the end, the headings I choose, in Chapter Two, seem to cover most of the variations from art to book (and from book to art) in a way that is easily understandable and provides a reasonably useful grid for identification and interpretation purposes. It was interesting to discover, as I was studying examples of artist's books, that having a system helped me to find language to describe them. This is both the beauty and the 'beast' of classification systems. They can aid articulation. They can sensitise perception. But the reverse to this is that they can limit thought; as one might be prone to censor out information that does not fit the category. Categories help to pattern thought and can trigger thought. But they also control thought. It is fitting to recognise their limitations and to attempt to use them only where appropriate.

This despite, an attempt at producing another system of categorisation seemed useful in the light of how little work has been done in this area and in light of the fact that the systems that do exist are imperfect in some respects. The one that I have produced

is no more perfect, but it does provide another viewpoint and angle, another yardstick by which to measure and apprehend, another lens onto a multi-faceted subject. For the artist's book does bridge the divide between the world of art and the world of book and a system of classification that takes this into account is therefore pertinent to its nature and likely to be of some use. Also, I have attempted to show that different systems of classification highlight and draw attention to different features of a work; and I would like to suggest that the concurrent use of a number of systems might provide a variety of useful and insightful spectacles through which to view the object.

Chapter Three was perhaps the most difficult section. Here I attempt a foray into hermeneutics, within the strictures of an investigation into how meanings are constructed in the medium of the artist's book. The body of theory that is the legacy of the structuralists and post-structuralists was of huge assistance in helping me to identify the important point that language has broad perimeters. Different sorts of language can all be viewed as text (the spoken word, written language, visual imagery, three-dimensional form, textural components, kinaesthetic elements and so on). Text is that which carries coded meaning and can communicate it. Different texts can be overlaid or put together in a manner in which they jointly contribute to meaning. Having grasped this, it became easy to see that the artist's book is a potential receptacle for a vast array of texts that can then work together in the co-creation of meaning. This makes it a potentially very complex and compact form. Having made this observation it seemed an obvious move to compare it to poetry. And then I began my investigation into finding appropriate tools for handling interpretation of the artist's book by researching some of the theories around language postulated by the structuralists and post-structuralists; and some of the methods of creating meaning employed by poetry. I adopted the approach of simply seeing the artist's book as a poetic text different from the usual poetic text that is constituted only of words. Working with this approach, while analysing artists' books along the way, I found very useful.

In this attempt to postulate some useful theory for interpretation I limited myself to the investigation of the artist's book as a poetic text. I am aware that this is a beginning, a first step into a big territory. The artist's book provides a special sort of challenge to its makers, to its readers/viewers and to its interpreters because of its

affiliations to the worlds of both art and the book. It may be suitably placed to promote the emergence of a new sort of literacy, as well as new theories around the creation and interpretation of meanings.

As a practising artist, a primary reason for undertaking this research was to equip myself with tools to better understand the work that I am making within the sphere of the artist's book. Within this investigation I chose to illustrate points by referring to my own work from time to time and where I felt appropriate. However this investigation has not been aimed specifically at analysing my own work. It was intended to provide me with a clearer picture of the field of the artist's book and to attempt to make some sort of personal response and contribution to the existing body of literature on the topic; it equipped me, at the same time, to understand my own work within a larger context. During the course of the research, I accumulated thoughts about my work and about my reasons for finding the artist's book an attractive medium. It did not seem appropriate to write about these in the context of the tasks I set myself in the preceding chapters of this thesis. Nor did I wish to continue my writing and investigations within the strictures of the methodologies adopted for this piece of academic research. So, in this concluding chapter, I should like to draw attention to the fact that there is a second volume to this thesis. In this volume I put down some thoughts about why I like the medium; a few thoughts about my work; and a few thoughts about thesis writing. The thoughts are sometimes presented in words, sometimes in images and sometimes through a variety of other means (such as the shaping of the paper or positioning of objects on the page or choice of materials). To turn now to the personal, with the insights gained from this study, seems a suitable way to move on to the second volume of this thesis. This volume takes on a very different style, a very different approach to the presentation of information and research. It has different priorities altogether. For it is an artist's book, in addition to being Volume Two of the thesis. It has been undertaken as a supplement and a complement to Volume One. It is not being submitted for the theoretical component of the MA in Fine Art Degree, but may be viewed among my other artist's books on my accompanying exhibition of book art.



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## APPENDIX ONE

### SOME USEFUL BOOK ART WEBSITES AND EMAILS<sup>48</sup>

Alec Finlay

[www.balticmill.com](http://www.balticmill.com)

[alec@balticmill.com](mailto:alec@balticmill.com)

Andrew Eason

[www.andreweason.com](http://www.andreweason.com)

Andrew Lanyon

[www.andreweason.com](http://www.andreweason.com)

Artists Book Archive

[www.artistsbookarchive.com](http://www.artistsbookarchive.com)

Artist's Book Sales

[www.artistsbooks.com](http://www.artistsbooks.com)

Brad Freeman

[jabeditor@earthlink.net](mailto:jabeditor@earthlink.net)

Bookartbookshop

[www.bookartbookshop.com](http://www.bookartbookshop.com)

Bookarts Web Resource Links

[www.bookarts.ua.edu](http://www.bookarts.ua.edu)

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<sup>48</sup> These websites have been taken from various editions of the *Artist's Book Yearbook*.



Booklyn

[www.booklyn.org](http://www.booklyn.org)

Book Works

[www.bookworks.org.uk](http://www.bookworks.org.uk)

[mail@bookworks.org.uk](mailto:mail@bookworks.org.uk)

Bristol Art Library

[headlibrarian@thebristolartlibrary.co.uk](mailto:headlibrarian@thebristolartlibrary.co.uk)

Foundry

[Foundry.press@virgin.net](mailto:Foundry.press@virgin.net)

Geelong Arts Alliance

[gaa@swift.net.au](mailto:gaa@swift.net.au)

Granary Books

[www.granarybooks.com](http://www.granarybooks.com)

Idaho Centre for the Book

[www.lili.org/icb](http://www.lili.org/icb)

[trusky@boisestate.edu](mailto:trusky@boisestate.edu)

Isabell Buenz

[www.papermagic.co.uk](http://www.papermagic.co.uk)

[isabuenz@hotmail.com](mailto:isabuenz@hotmail.com)

John Bentley

[johnbently@hotmail.com](mailto:johnbently@hotmail.com)

Kate Farley

[Kate.farley1@virgin.net](mailto:Kate.farley1@virgin.net)

Keith Smith

[www.keithsmithbooks.com](http://www.keithsmithbooks.com)

Les Bicknell

[lesb@tinyonline.co.uk](mailto:lesb@tinyonline.co.uk)

New York Centre for Book Arts

[www.centreforbookarts.org](http://www.centreforbookarts.org)

Otto

[www.ottoillustration.com](http://www.ottoillustration.com)

[otto@ottoillustration.com](mailto:otto@ottoillustration.com)

Paul Laider

[Paul.Laider@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Paul.Laider@uwe.ac.uk)

Printed Matter (artists' bookstore in New York)

[www.printedmatter.org](http://www.printedmatter.org)

San Francisco Centre for the Book

[www.sfcbook.org](http://www.sfcbook.org)

Sarah Bodman

[www.uwe.ac.uk/amd/cfpr](http://www.uwe.ac.uk/amd/cfpr)

[Sarah.Bodman@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Sarah.Bodman@uwe.ac.uk)

Steve McPherson

[Egp7297@hotmail.com](mailto:Egp7297@hotmail.com)

Susan Johanknecht

[www.pauperspublications.com](http://www.pauperspublications.com)

[gefnpres@ntlworld.com](mailto:gefnpres@ntlworld.com)

The Book Art Project

[www.bookart.co.uk](http://www.bookart.co.uk)

Tracy Bush

[www.cga.org.uk/traceybush](http://www.cga.org.uk/traceybush)

[fathom5books@hotmail.com](mailto:fathom5books@hotmail.com)

UK Based Exhibition and Information Website

[www.zyart.com/zybooks](http://www.zyart.com/zybooks)

Visual Studies Workshop

[www.vsv.org](http://www.vsv.org)

[press@vsv.org](mailto:press@vsv.org)

Weproductions

[www.weproductions.com](http://www.weproductions.com)

[zwep@weproductions.com](mailto:zwep@weproductions.com)

Wexford Artists Book Exhibition (an annual event)

[www.wexfordartscentre.ie](http://www.wexfordartscentre.ie)

Wild Pansy Press

[www.leeds.ac.uk/fine-art/](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/fine-art/)

## APPENDIX TWO

### SOME USEFUL BOOK, BOOK ART AND LITERARY TERMS<sup>49</sup>

#### Alternative transition

An author's constructed route through a book, meant to be read in addition to reading the pages in consecutive order (see Smith).

#### Artbook

Book of which art or the artist is the subject (see Phillpot).

#### Artist's Book

Book of which an artist is the author (see Phillpot). I would add that it must be more than a book containing art. The artwork must be conceived as a book (or, as an object referring to the book) because it is integral to the meaning that it is a book (or an object referring to the book).

Blank page. A sheet conceived as inkless as a time/space point in punctuation, as opposed to a void (see Smith).

#### Book

Collection of blank and/or image-bearing sheets usually fastened together along one edge and trimmed at the other edges to form a single series of uniform leaves (see Phillpot).

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<sup>49</sup> This glossary is taken from three sources: Keith Smith's book, *Text in the Book Format*, (pp115-122); the definitions of Clive Phillpot appearing in the book by Stefan W Klima, *Artist's Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature*, and from Beckson and Gantz, *Literary Terms, A Dictionary*.

### Book Art

Art which employs the book form (see Phillpot). I would add that it is also art which refers to the book form as a significant part of its meaning.

### Bookwork

Artwork, dependent upon the structure of a book (see Phillpot).

### Book Object

Art object, which alludes to the book form (see Phillpot).

### Codex

A type of book construction, bound along one edge, and allowing for two-sided display (see Smith).

### Consecutive viewing

Reading in a straight line fashion through pagination (see Smith).

### Continued texts

Composition of a manuscript more than a page in length which is conceived as seamless, with no thought of the final format: two-sided display of the western codex (see Smith).

### Diachronic and synchronic

A synchronic reading of meanings can be seen as a horizontal reading where the diachronic intersects to form the vertical axis. The horizontal synchronic axis is made up of all the words/concepts related to the words/concepts under discussion. The diachronic axis provides the historical time frame. It provides an index of how the word has been used at different moments in its past (see Beckson and Gantz).

### Display

That aspect of the reading experience which is presentation. Display has only limited concerns in the single sheet format, but potentials of format are expanded with the codex (see Smith).

### Fan

A type of book construction bound at one point, and that usually uses one-sided display. (See Smith).

### Folio

A sheet of paper folded to yield two leaves or four pages (see Smith).

### Leaf

The front and back of a page. Recto/verso. A sheet (see Smith.).

### Leaf flow

1. Unordered mechanical continuous movement from the front to the back of the book.
2. Reading the total book through consecutive order of pages.
3. Pagination (see Smith).

### Metaphor and metonymy

These are figures of speech. Metaphor is when one thing is substituted for another, as a way of describing it. Metonymy is when part of a thing is described in order to conjure up the whole. Each provides a different perspective, a different way of viewing and recording. Much has been written about the two different modes (see Beckson and Gantz).

### Motif

1. An element evolved as theme.
2. A structural device.
3. Symbolism (definition taken from Keith Smith).

### One-of-a-kind book / Unique work

A book in a single copy as opposed to a production book. Not to be confused with monoprint, a printmaker's term, or with unique, meaning special, which can refer to either a one-of-a-kind or a published book (see Smith).

### Pagination

1. Leaf flow. 2. Mechanical continuous movement from the beginning to the end of the book. 3. Reading the total book through consecutive order of pages. Not to be confused with the constructed serial pacing of the text.

The writer may devise a text with non-consecutively constructed pages. Through written instructions, or by visually coded pages, the reader is informed of this intentional, non-linear itinerary through the book. Such a disjunctive route is not through pagination, but an index (see Smith).

### Parallelism.

The arrangement of equally important ideas in similar grammatical constructions, often reinforced by verbal echoes. Parallelism, which acts as an organising force directing the reader's attention to the elements that the writer wishes to emphasise, also can help to give polish to a piece of writing. It is one of the most persistent rhetorical devices (see Smith).

### Recto/verso

The front and back of the same sheet. A leaf (see Smith).

### Repetition

One of the fundamental devices of art. Just as a composer repeats his themes after their development and a painter echoes the line of a figure in another part of the composition, so a writer re-uses various elements within the work: to be satisfied, the mind demands not only the revelation of the new but also the recognition of the familiar. A sequence of novelties inevitably seems formless; it is the reappearance of something known which the mind requires before it can accept a work as a unified whole, as, in fact, a work of art (see Smith).

The repetitive nature of some devices, such as the refrain and the repetend is obvious at once, but many others – assonance, consonance, alliteration, for example – are also based on repetition, as are indeed the rhythmical patterns of both verse and prose (see Beckson and Gantz).

### Sequence

1. One of three means of items amassed, along with group and series.
2. Contingent reference constructed by cause and effect, moves in a geometric zigzag, rather than an arithmetical progression of a series. Disjunctive order (see Smith).

### Series

1. One of three means of items amassed, along with group and sequence, or contingent structure.
2. One of two types of constructed movement, along with contingent reference. A series is constructed by linkage forward, a straight line consecutive revelation. It can be temporarily interrupted by preview or recollection, a contingent reference which is causal, and moves from one to another non-adjacent element (see Smith).

### Sheet

1. A leaf.
2. The front and back of the same piece of paper. 3. Recto/verso (see Smith).

### Theme

Motif which is chosen as an idea to be evolved in various ways as a unit of structure.  
A building block (see Smith).



### APPENDIX THREE

(This appendix is included as an addition to the illustrations [see fig.19] for the art process titled below)

#### NOTES ON THE EDGE OF INFINITY

Yesterday, I came across an old notebook with an entry about the process of art making that I have now titled *Notes on the Edge of Infinity*. It was written at the time I was involved in the activity. I did not write much about it at the time, which is perhaps a pity as this one attempt to express the art-making process has a useful immediacy and alludes to many of the ideas and concerns, which it attempted to articulate. I have chosen to transcribe the entry here as an introduction:

I am making patterns in the rock pools. I go down to the rocks and make circles or spirals or rows or compositions of some sort, revealing the hand of order, a conscious repetition. I am using, at present, what is at hand, what is available, what is close by, what is at the sea shore: - pebbles and shells and seaweeds and the stones and the sand and the little fish that swim past. I am using the shapes of the pools and the shapes of the rocks as my 'canvases'. In the water, the objects glow and shine like jewels. The colours come alive. Mother-of-pearl shimmers. Blacks look lustrous. Lovely things happen with colour - purple shells against orange lichen that is growing on the rock surface of a pool, for instance. There are such rich colorations. I am reminded of making a painting. I photograph the small offerings of order and pattern; and then I return later in the day, or the following day to observe and photograph again what has happened (if I can find any evidence left at all!) of how the elements and waters and tides have rearranged and disassembled my work in the pull and thrust and turbulence of wind and weather and incoming and outgoing tides, not to mention the disruptions of people and dogs walking past and through the spaces. I feel I am working like a child at play, making simple patterns, working with the elements of earth and water, working from the moment with found objects, and working from the fingers as a pattern or arrangement suggests itself. It might be lining the shells up around the contours of a rock; or covering a surface with rows and rows of oyster shells (like the black feathers of a bird's wing); or creating a simple radiating pattern like a daisy or a *mandala* image. Sometimes I am working more freely and with more abstraction. While still keeping a sense of the human ordering, the arrangements use balance and counterbalance. And there is deliberation about the formal elements of colour, shape, texture, form and composition. These ones feel like I am working on paintings.

What I am doing comes from an urge to do something quite elemental, primitive if you like, something that goes back to first urges, to childhood, to ordering my world, to delighting in cognition and volition, to be able to make choices, arrange patterns, play, create. Also to unite with grander forces, to pay homage and respect to the elements and to the spirit and the flow of nature; to that which moves and takes over in the forces of the tides, the energy of the waves, the pull of the moon and the workings of the universe. I feel like I am engaged in making ritual. Perhaps I am making offerings at the shore between order and disorder – a metaphorical space or line in my life. Because what I am doing feels like a way to heal myself, to emerge from shock and trauma and disarray. Tessa tells me that she heard somewhere that people in distress who rock backwards and forwards (like in a rocking chair), or do something repetitive, like knitting, are creating brainwaves that are restoring and healing and help them cope.

Disorder and order, controlling one's world and letting go of control, accepting when there is no control and all is out of one's hands and offered up to chaos; finding enablement and a form of peace. There is an element of all this in what I am doing. Also there is an element of magic making, of attracting certain outcomes, of creating the patterns of my life, and of the oracle. When I am arranging some of the stones, I feel like I am throwing the bones of the *sangoma*, or selecting tarot cards. There is a sense of making significant arrangements, even if I am not appraised of their meaning, even if I cannot interpret the oracles.

Something lovely happened when I was working and recording yesterday. The light was such that my shadow articulated and played and danced with me as I worked, falling over my arrangements, distorting in the water, lying across the rock surfaces, bending, elongating. It was like a dance: - self with self, me-person with me-person. And the excitement of the little fish darting in the rock pools was tremendous. And the ways they disturbed and altered and interacted with my patterns was too fast to photograph. Not all can be recorded. Recording is a form of ordering. Sometimes there is a preferred disordering.

The unfolding process was partially recorded with photographs. The title of the work, *Notes from the Edge of Infinity*, arose out of the awareness that I was playing at the edge of the ocean, a vast wilderness zone. It seemed apt to acknowledge in the title that the art making process had taken place on the edge of an infinity space. Sea, sky, distant horizon line and the shifting demarcation line between ocean and shore were present.

The play interactions that I made were, by intent, temporary and impermanent. I intended the arrangements of objects to be erased by the incoming tides and other

thinking about possibly using them that morning. I was influenced by what had happened to the beach and coastline on a particular day. Sometimes the tide was in and the rock pools were completely submerged. Sometimes the tide was low and one could wander far out onto the rocks and find miniature pools of water in small rock indentations and in crags and crannies. Sometimes the sea had washed in a quantity of flotsam, shells, pebbles and so forth. On other days very little was washed up. Sometimes the sun was out and cast shadows. On other days it was overcast. Some days the sea was calm, and then sometimes it was choppy or very rough.

Over the days and weeks I became aware that the content of my activity, was falling into a number of themes that I visited, left for a while and then returned to. I began to think of the following as some of the recurring themes:

#### THE UNDERWATER GARDENS

Although the underwater gardens were the initial impetus for the work, it was not a major theme in itself. But it led to an interest in the glowing luminosities of colour that happen when objects are below water. And it also developed into an interest in the body as garden. For I became interested in how, as the shadow of the body fell across pattern arrangements, they sometimes seemed to form gardens in the body, flowers opening within the interior landscape of the self.

#### THE LANGUAGE PATTERNS

Language patterns formed themselves from the urge to leave markings and traces of presence. The idea that someone had passed by and left something behind, even briefly, before it was washed away into disorder again, seemed significant. So one of my preoccupations was working at the edge of symbol making and looking for when arrangements revealed themselves to be the work of the human hand. I liked the idea of trying to keep a tension between order and disorder, pattern and chaos. I was fascinated by the manner in which the elements of nature would shift and alter my arrangements so that at some point they were no longer evident as arrangements and my presence and interface had been washed away. There was a transitory nature to the activity, which was of interest to me. So too was the awareness of the grand and

impersonal and powerful forces of nature and the delicate 'conversation' I was having with these forces. I created something and then waited for a response from the sea and the tides and the winds and the other disruptive elements coming and going on the beach.

#### AN EQUIVALENCE FOR PAINTING

I became absorbed in the visual and textural and sensual beauty of the work. The textures of rock, sand, pebbles, shells, feathers and water were tactile and marvellous. The colours of the natural objects were of interest to me and I began grouping tones and colours for the simple aesthetic pleasure of the experience. I played with the idea, in some of the work, that I was painting, only using nature rather than paint and brush. I made abstract arrangements much as I might make an abstract composition of shapes, tones and colours on a canvas, using oil paints.

#### THE PRAYER PATTERNS

I began to think of some of the patterns that I left on rocks and shore as prayers. They were prayers in the sense that they were notes from myself positioned metaphorically at the doorstep of the universe. They were my small personal markings and signatures left out to interact with the tides and other forces. They marked my presence as having been there. They were traces of my comings and goings. They were meditative observances. They were an acknowledgement of the power of the ocean that brought the elements for pattern making and then washed the patterns away, dispersing them back into the chaos of the ocean.

I was aware of the chalk patterns I had seen drawn on temple courtyard floors in India. These patterns were not permanent but seemed, like my work, to have been created to honour time and fragility and disintegration and the passing of everything in creation into erasure. They were transient flowers, often flower-like and *mandala*-like in their decorative markings. And they were there as a form of celebration and prayer and acknowledgement to the gods. The work that I was now making felt to me like the making of these chalk patterns – carefully constructed for their own disintegration. Both my work and the chalk patterns seemed to be carefully made to

honour the passing of time, the coming into being and the going out of being of creation.

## THE INTERFACE WITH NATURAL PATTERNS

I was interested in the thin interface between nature and culture. In some of the play I was absorbed by the attempt to make patterns that barely emerged out of chaos. I tried to find the point at which an arrangement was somewhat ambiguous so that the viewer might be in doubt about whether nature had made it or a human hand had participated.

Sometimes I found beautiful patterns and arresting arrangements and textures and colours. For example, an underwater snail might have walked pathways through the sand at the bottom of a rock pool. I might decide to place a few stones and shells into that which had already been laid down by nature and circumstance. Again, it was my 'conversation' with what I found that was of interest to me. I wanted to leave markings that created a personal signature, an observable intervention. I wished to shift what was initially there into another meaning zone, but not to be overpowering in the intervention; to enter into what was there in a delicate manner and simply leave a trace of a conscious presence having interfaced with the place.

I was aware, as I played, of the history of the shore. This shoreline had been visited for thousands of years by the San peoples. Hunters and gatherers, they had lived along this coastline. Because of the natural tidal pools, it was a favourite hunting ground for shellfish and other edible riches from the ocean. Walking along the rocks with my shadow falling across the landscape, I thought about the numerous other shadows that had fallen here.

## THE BOATS ON THE TIDE

Some of my play, especially at the time of the very rough oceans, was about interacting quite directly with the force of the tides. I might, for example, put out a pattern of feathers or of mussel shells (sometimes containing objects, so they became like boats with cargoes). I would watch as the waves came in to collect them and take

them out to sea. Mostly, my 'boats' on the tide got churned up in the chaos quite quickly. I would wonder where a feather or capsized mussel shell might next come ashore.

## THE SHORE AS BODY

I became interested in the shore as a metaphor for the body. I also became absorbed in how body and the shadow of body interacted with the body of the shore.

I began making lines of backbones and vertebrae across the rocks (at least that is how I thought of the arrangements of stones and shells that I laid out). But while having connotations of spine and marking the rock as affiliated to body, they were also sometimes directional pointers. Sometimes they would lead the eye directly out to sea or directly to the top of a rock.

Sometimes as I made a pattern on a rock face or beneath the surface of the water I became conscious of my shadow falling across it. I began to play consciously with the idea of the marked, adorned, bejewelled and bedecked body – nature giving a form of imprint on the body. Some of the 'imprints' also had associations of the tattoo; and some of them of the scar or wound. Sometimes they took on the appearance of internal organs and sometimes, to go back to the imagery at the beginning of the entire process, they suggested gardens. Only this time the gardens were inside the body. The body became alive in a way that united with nature. Inside the shadow zone, the body became garden, became flower, became prayer, became *mandala*. I was aware too, in these images, of a celebration of fertility and the power of the feminine force to create and procreate. They were amongst the last images I made. This particular process came to a natural conclusion because I was compelled to move house and so I no longer had the shore on my doorstep.

Also amongst the last images to crop up, were those that reflected a growing fascination with how body shadow, interacted with the natural shadows cast by the rocks, the seaweed and the other elements on the shore. The shadow of self sometimes started to integrate and blend with other shadows so that there was an effect of the self swimming into and becoming a part of the natural world. There was

a deliberate attempt to create a confusion of the forms of self and nature, so that it became unclear what was the shadow of self and what was the shadow of non-self. The shapes made by the body shadow falling across landscape would distort and warp with the landscape and the two become melded into sinuous and integrated new shapes.

## CONCLUSION

I thought of the activity as an engagement in loosely structured creative play. I had an urge to play as a child might play. But being a practising artist, aesthetic considerations inevitably became part of the play. The process also became a form of meditation.

I was in a state of personal shock when I began the play and in need of finding some physical umbilical cord to connect back again into the world, not my old world, but the new world in which I unwittingly now found myself. The initial urge was to interact with the elements of nature through a process that allowed me to be in the present and respond to the moment in an uncomplicated way. I was drawn to a process of playing that seemed symbolically to reflect my emotional and psychic condition. This made it compelling. Only as I continued to work did I begin to see it as art, although this seemed to be beside the point. The point for me was that I felt in some obscure way that the work had pulled me out of a place of disintegration and had given me a new sense of orientation, a new connection with the world.

Fig. 1

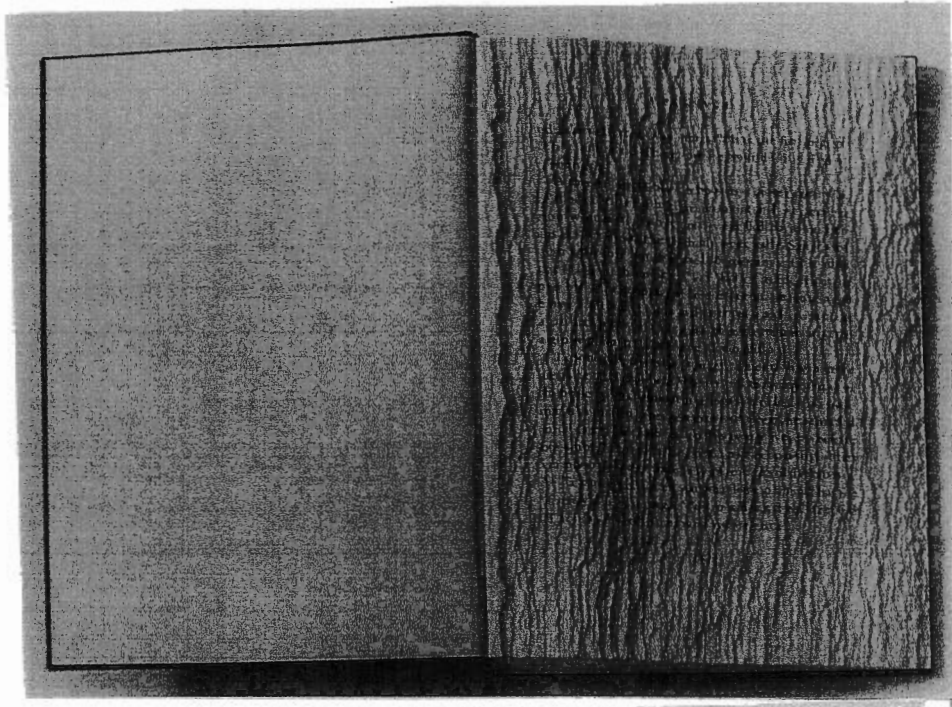




Fig. 2

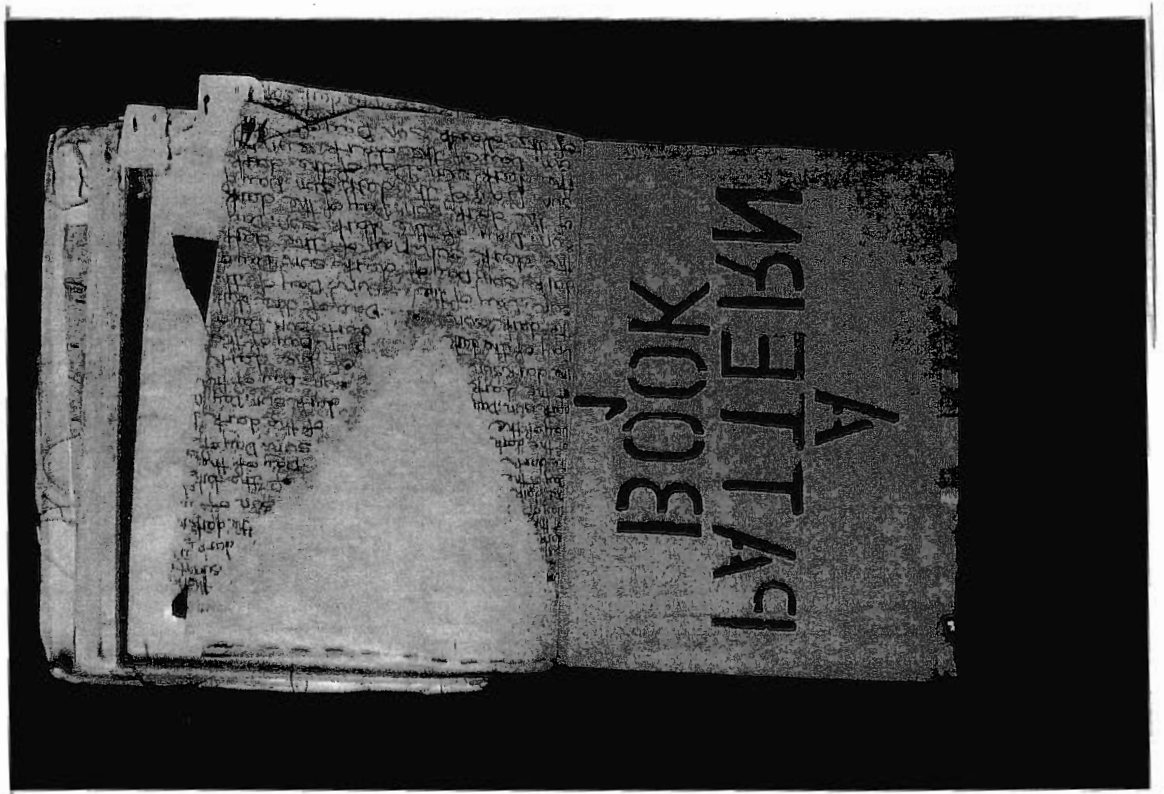
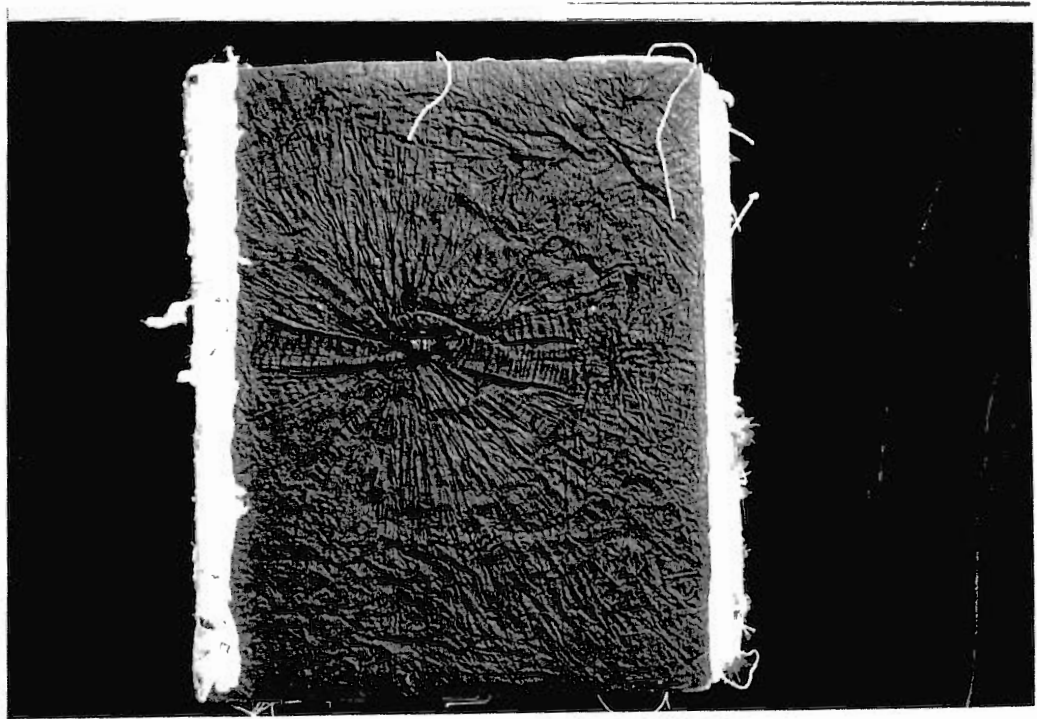


Fig. 3

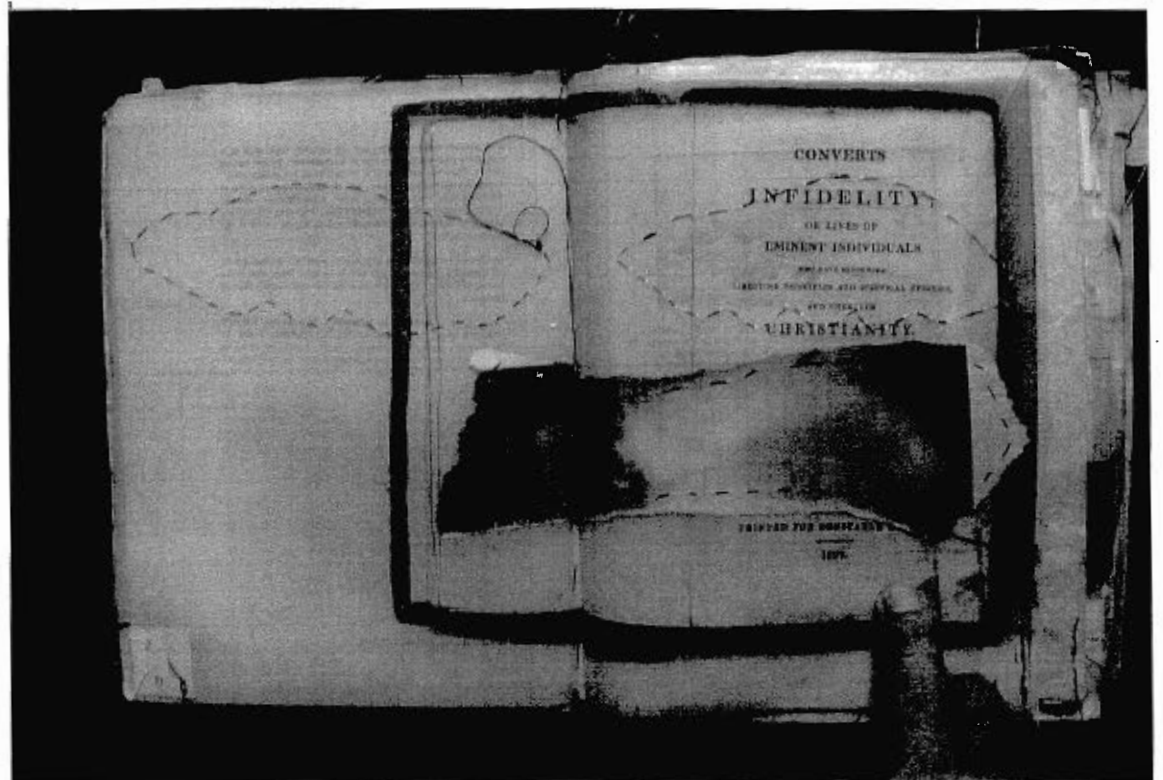
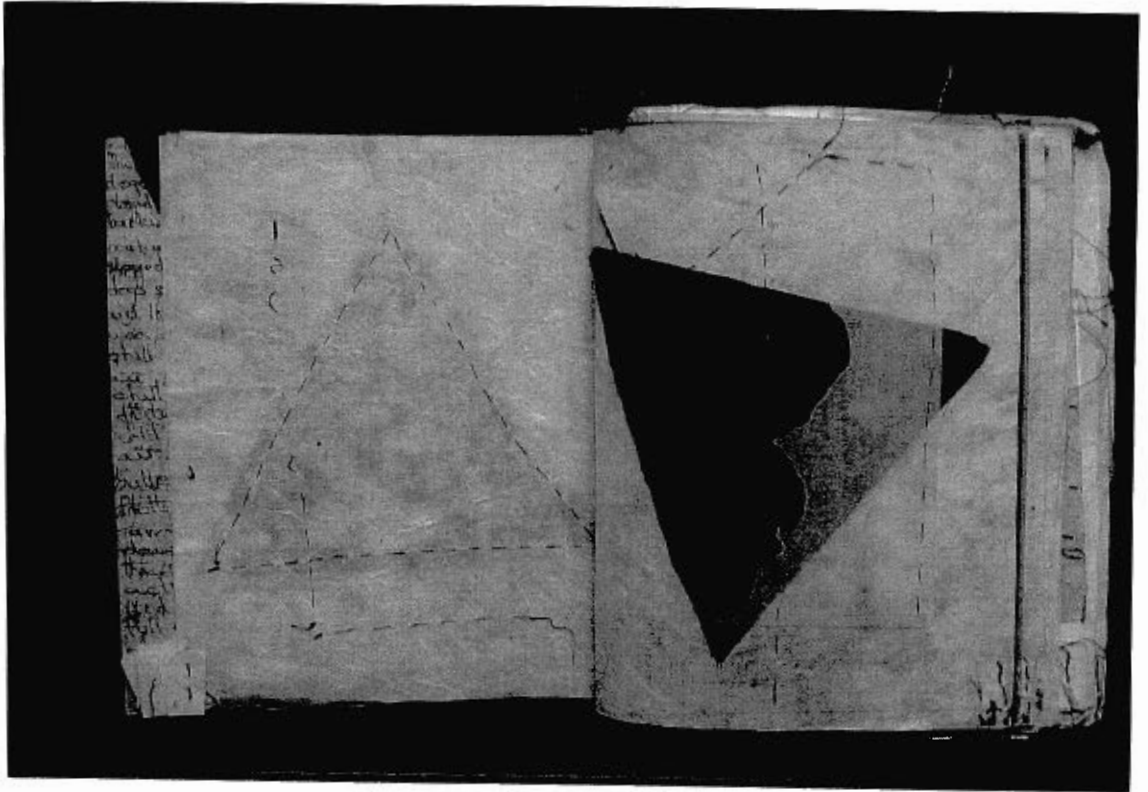


Fig. 4

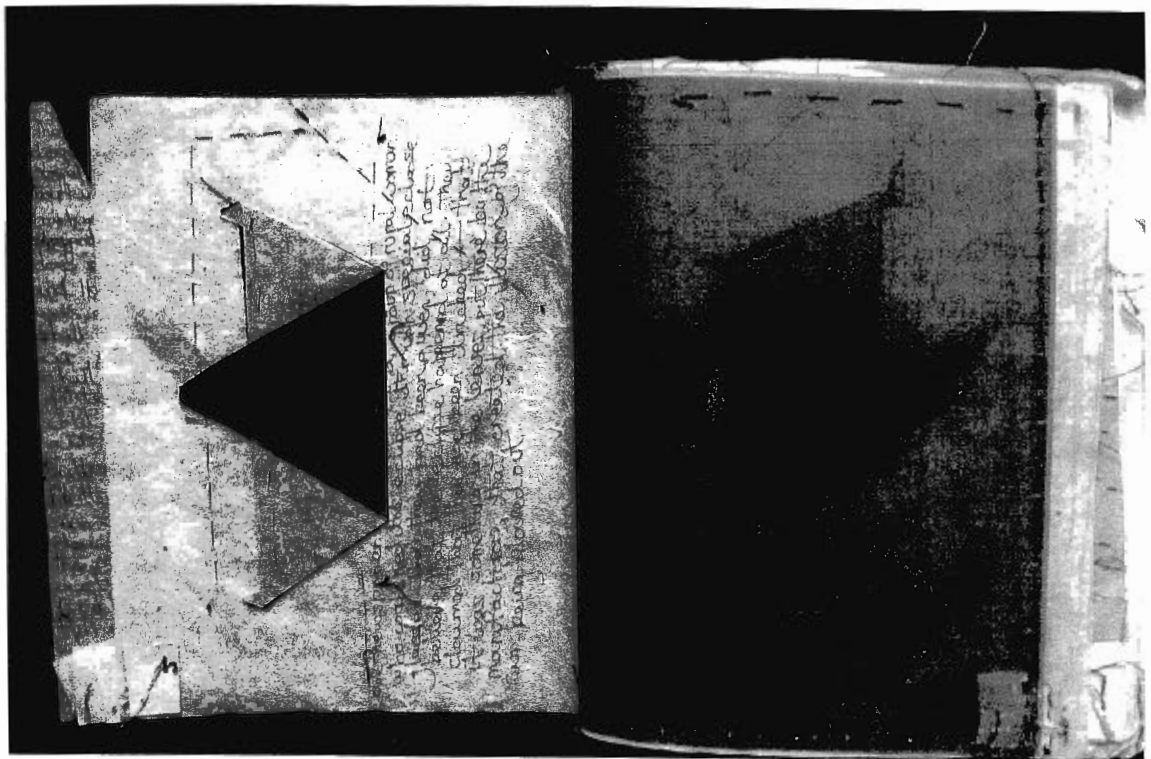
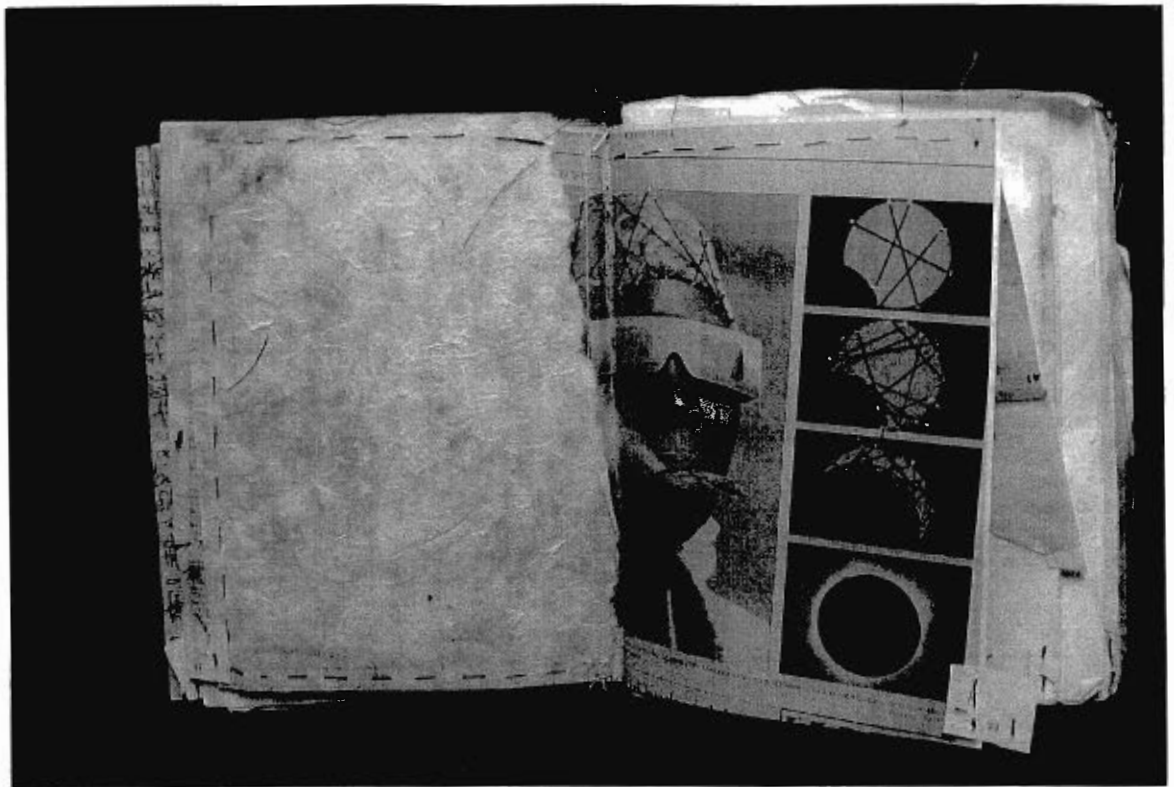


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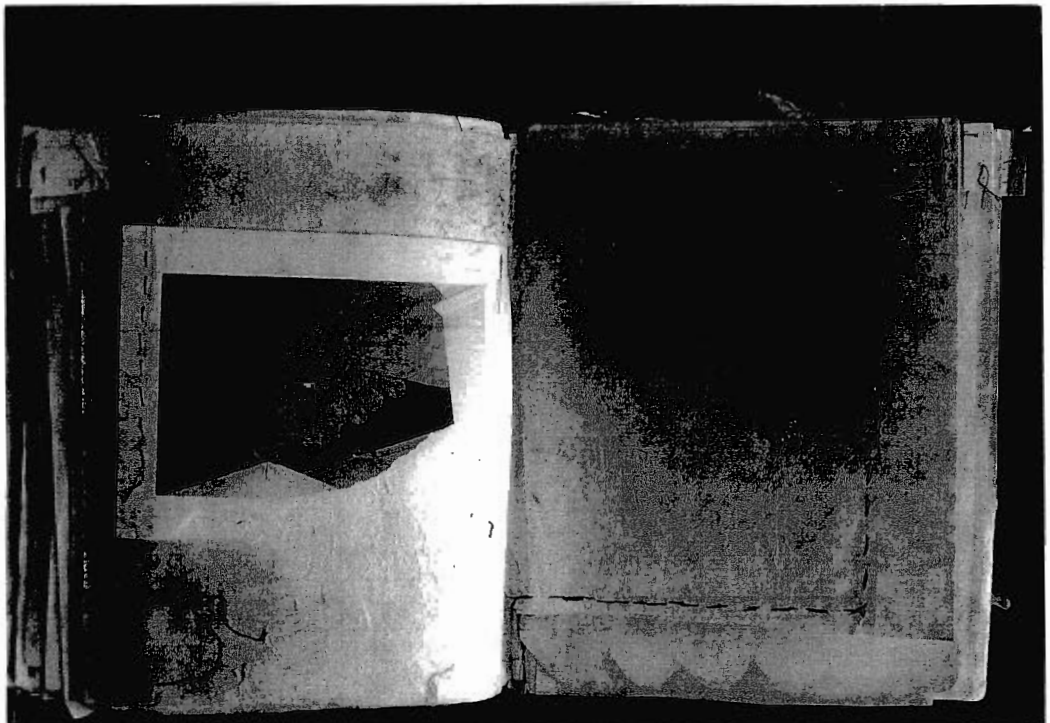
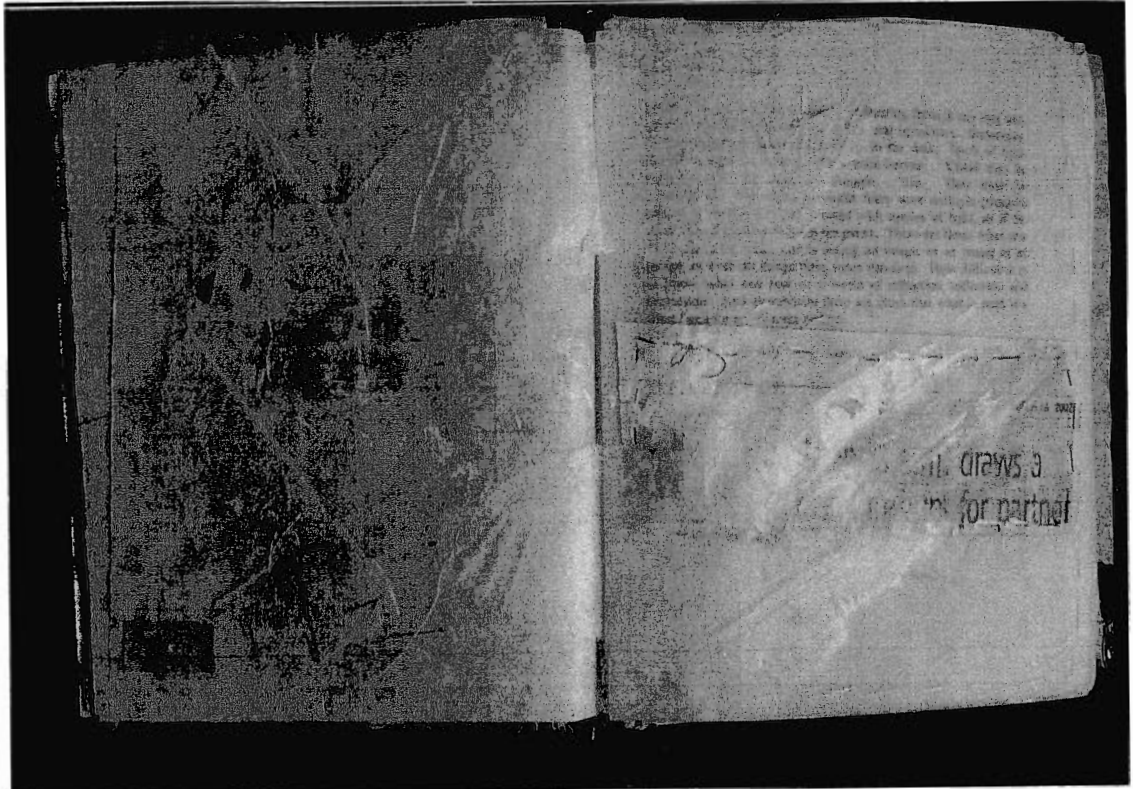


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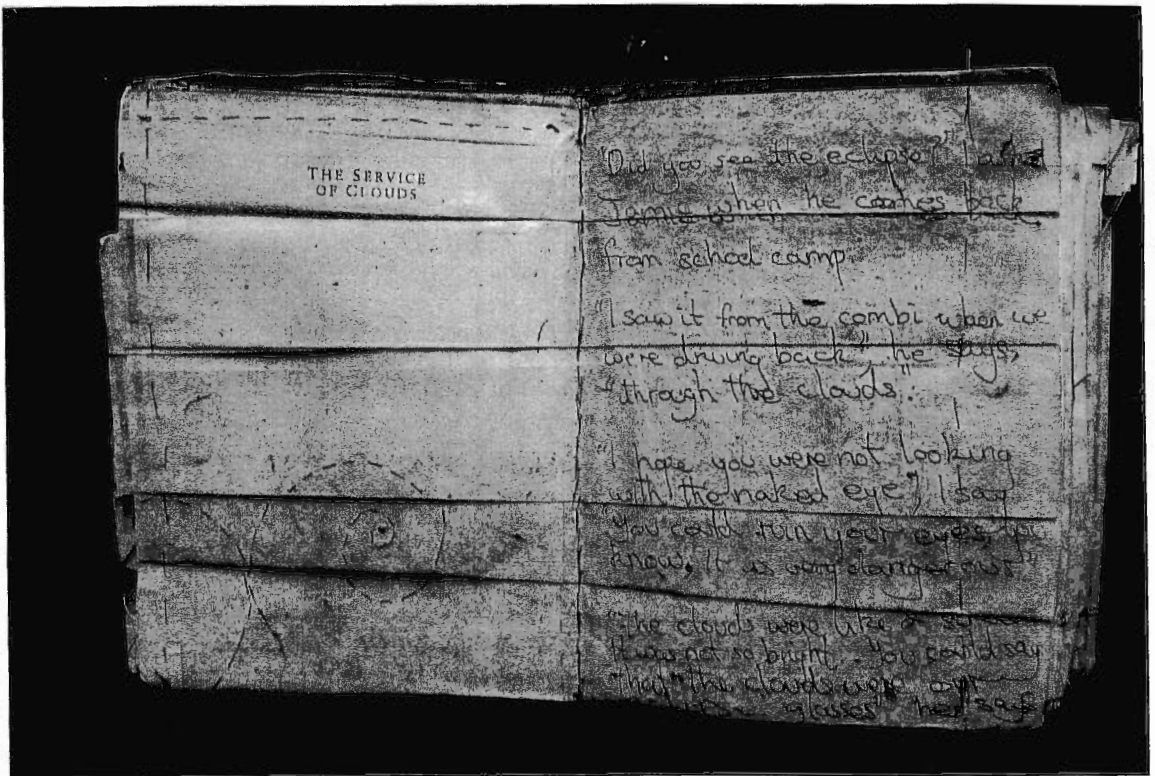
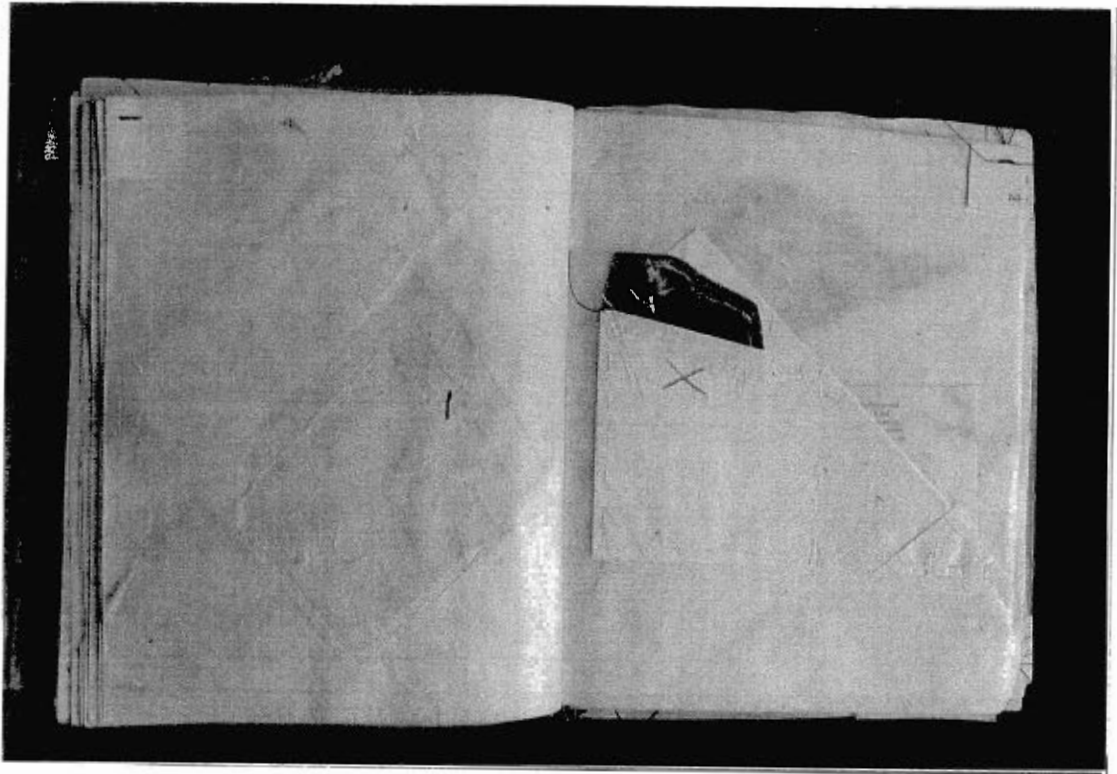


Fig. 7

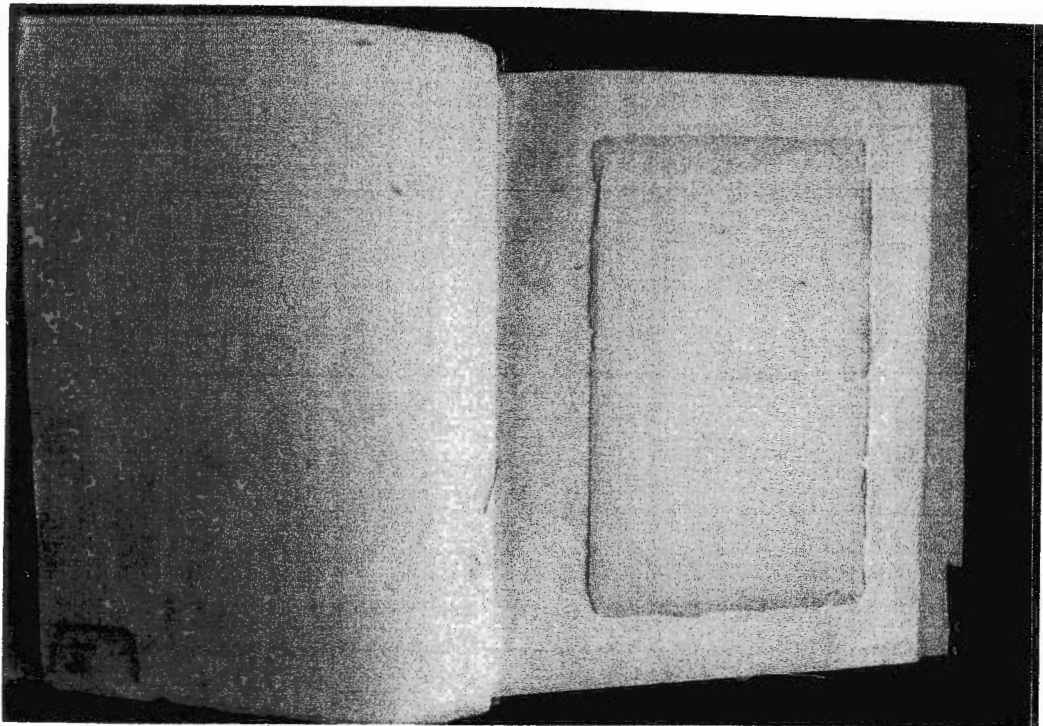
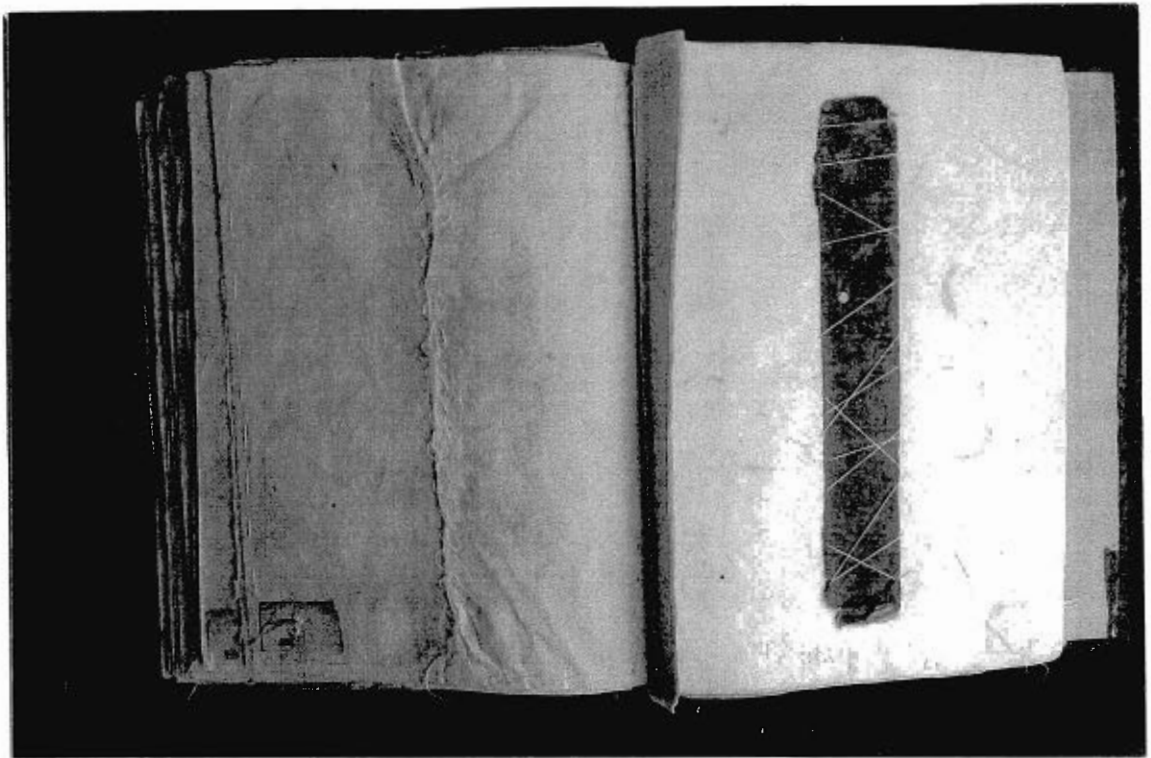


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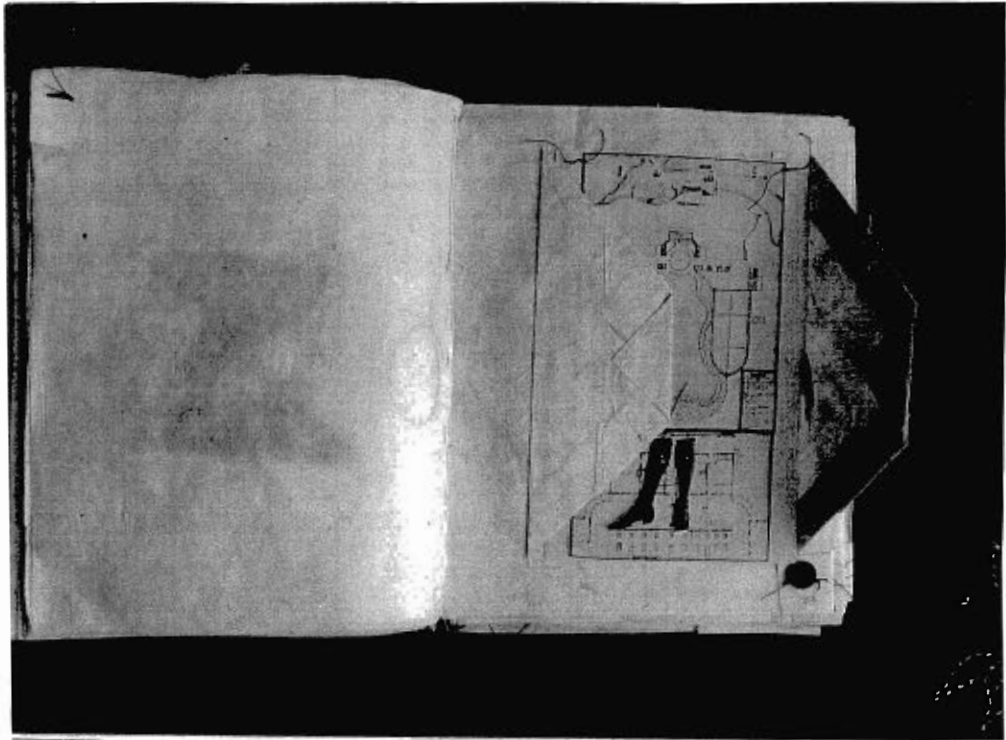


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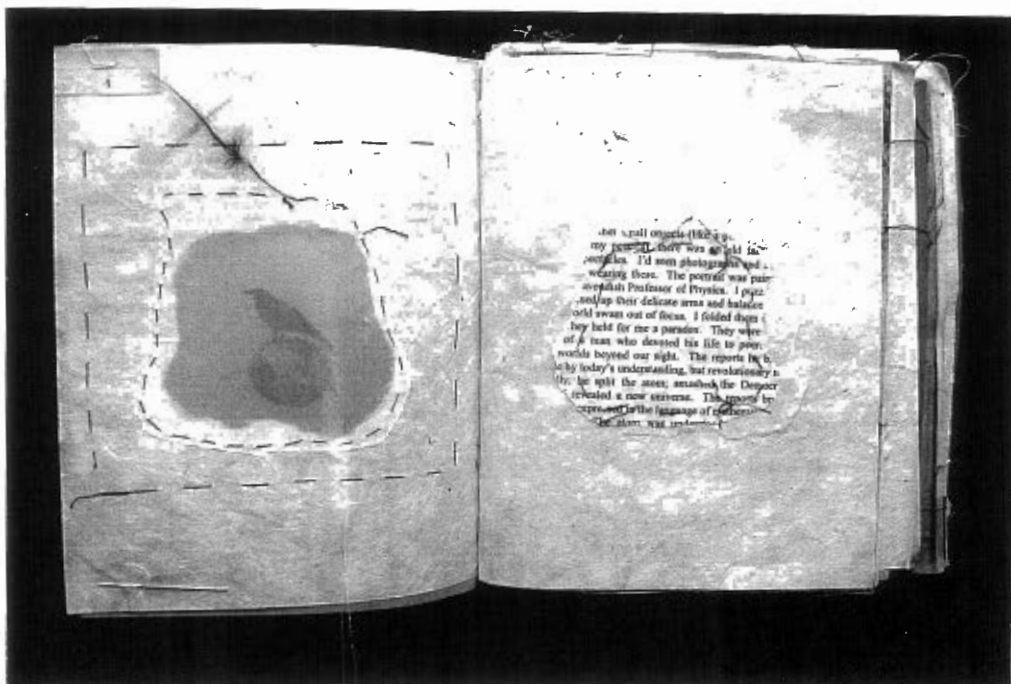
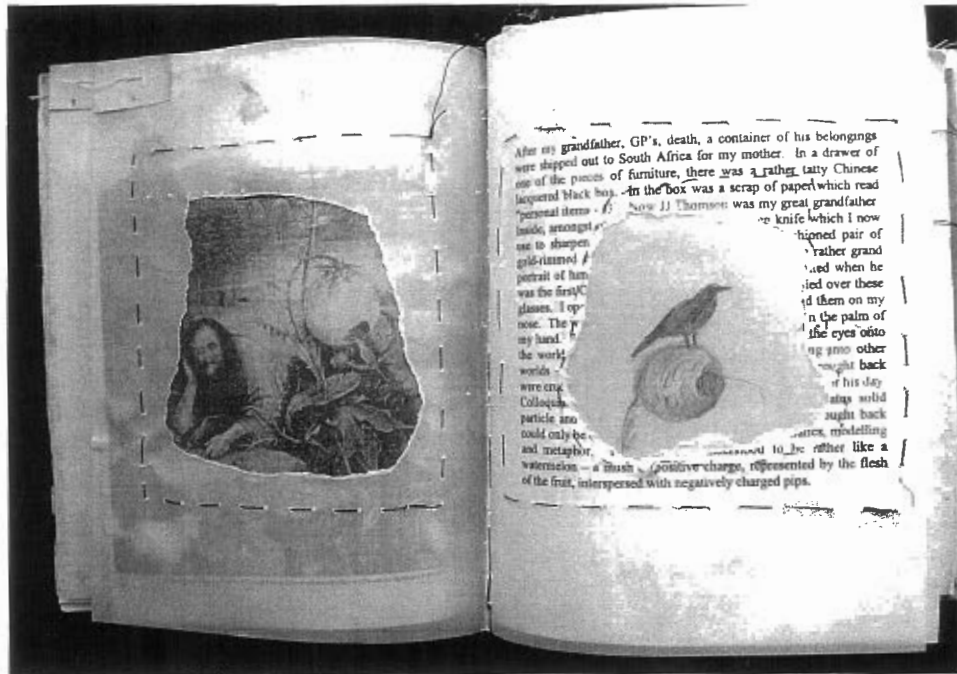




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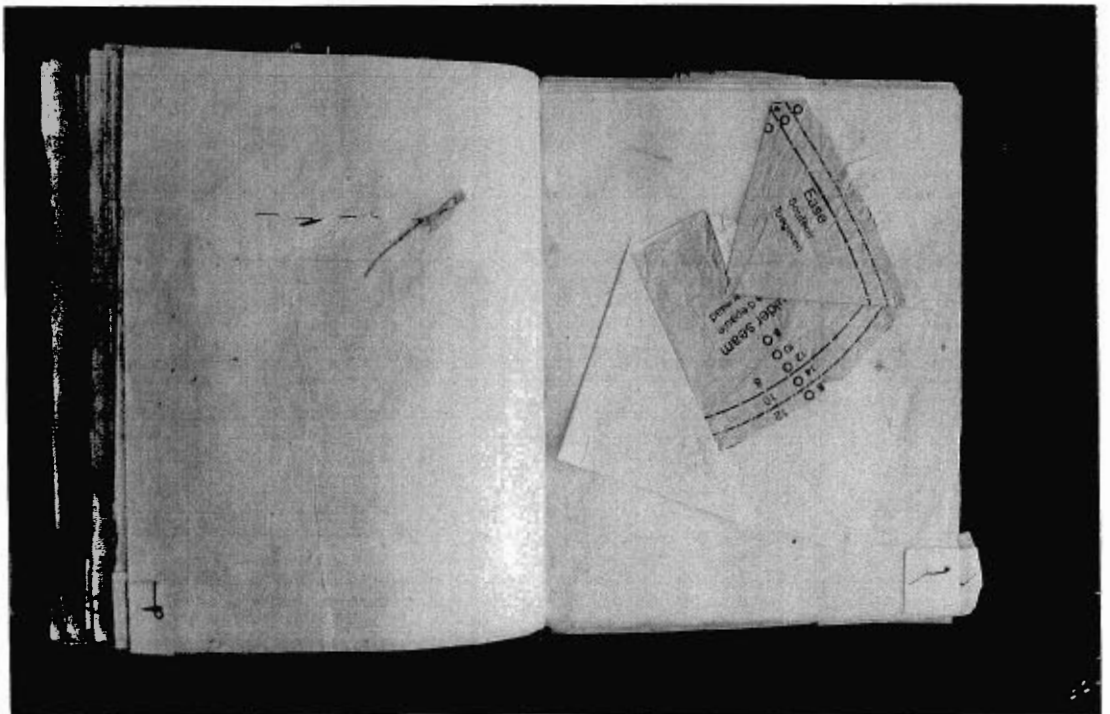
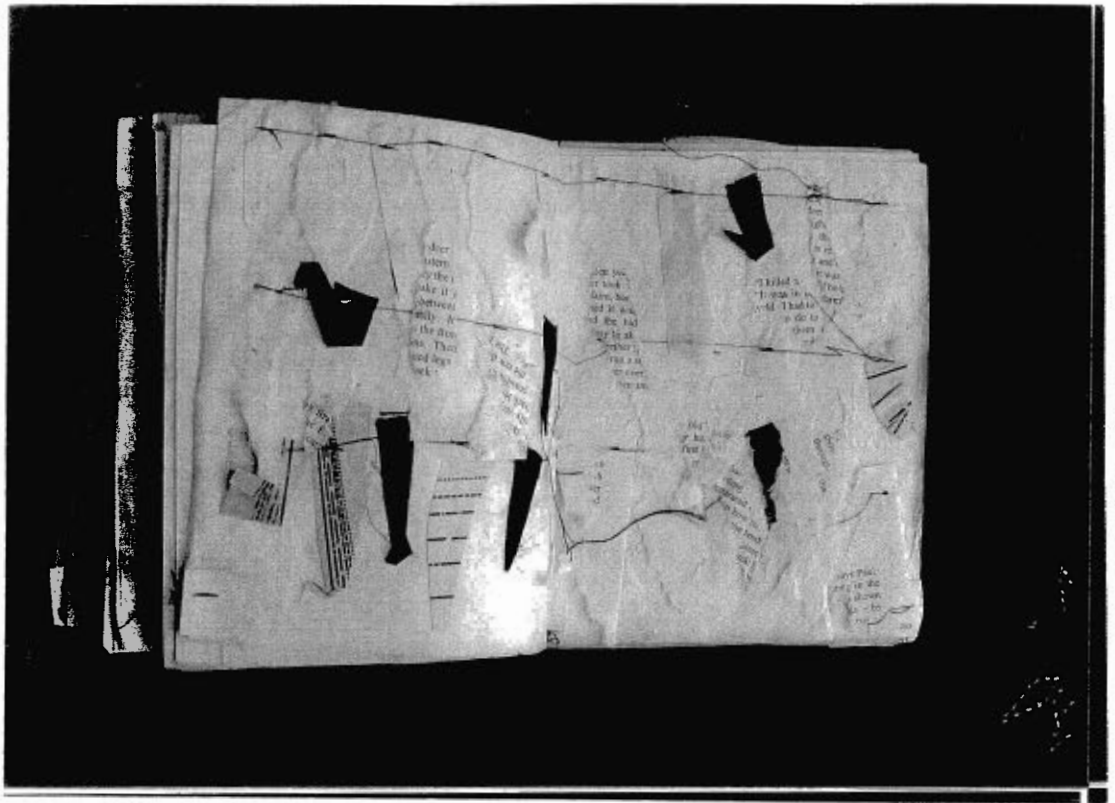


Fig. 11

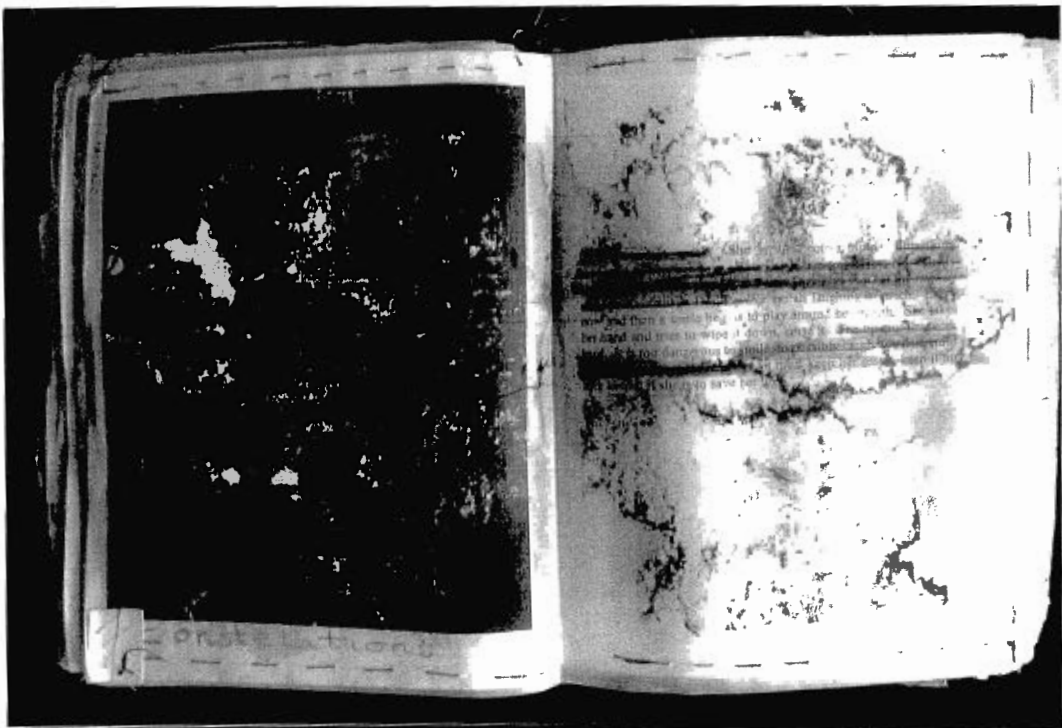
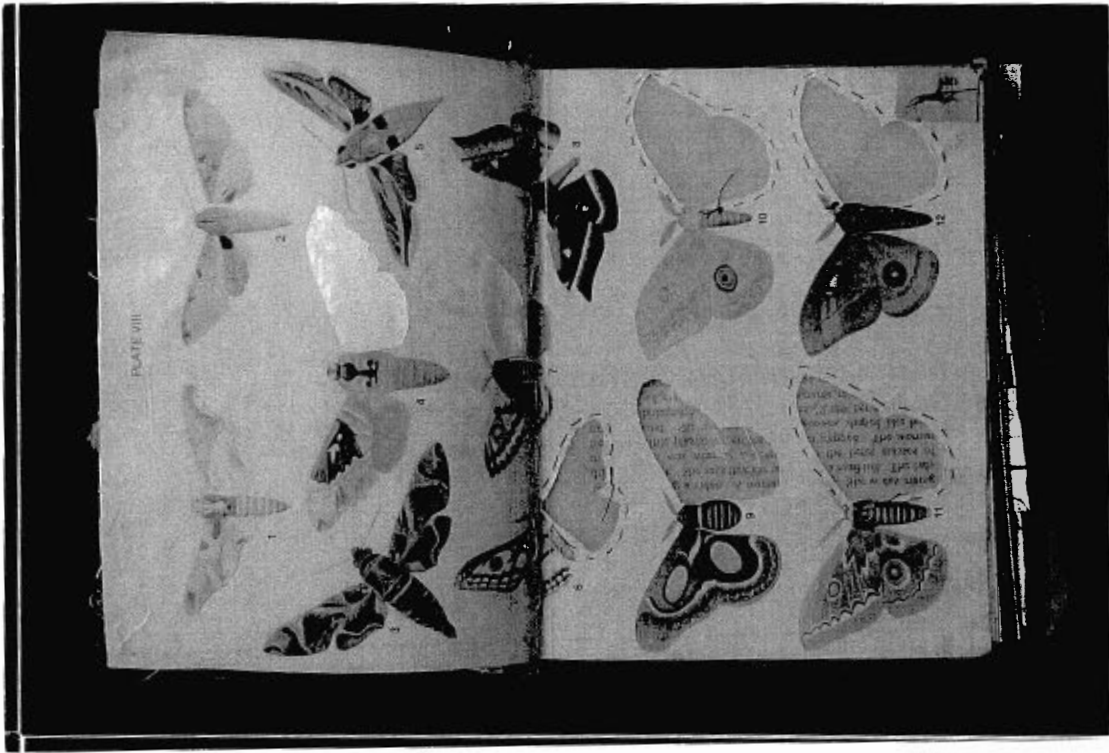


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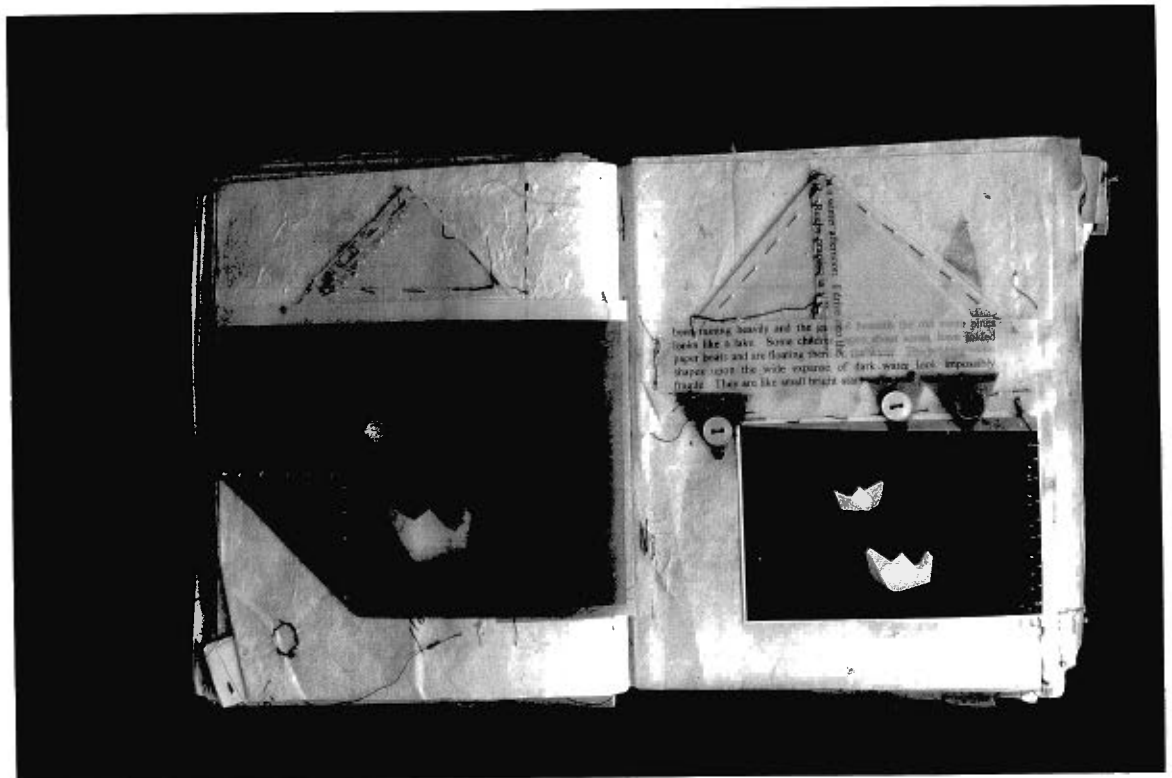
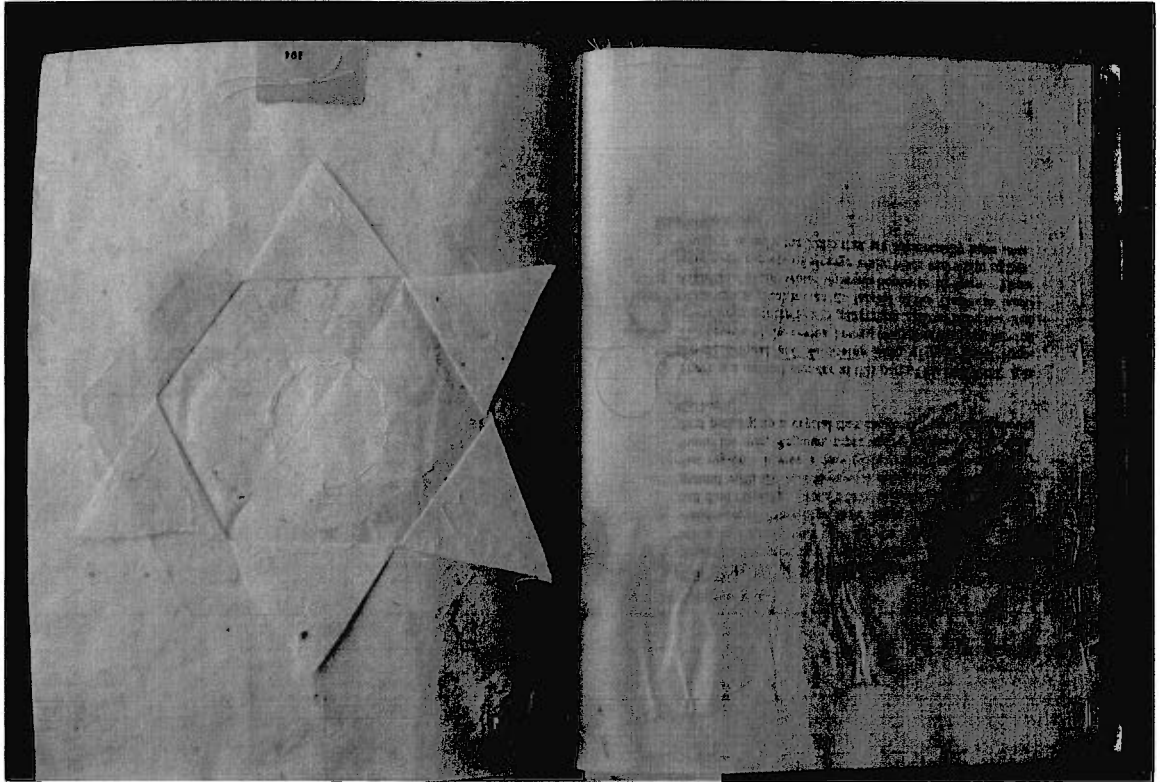


Fig. 13

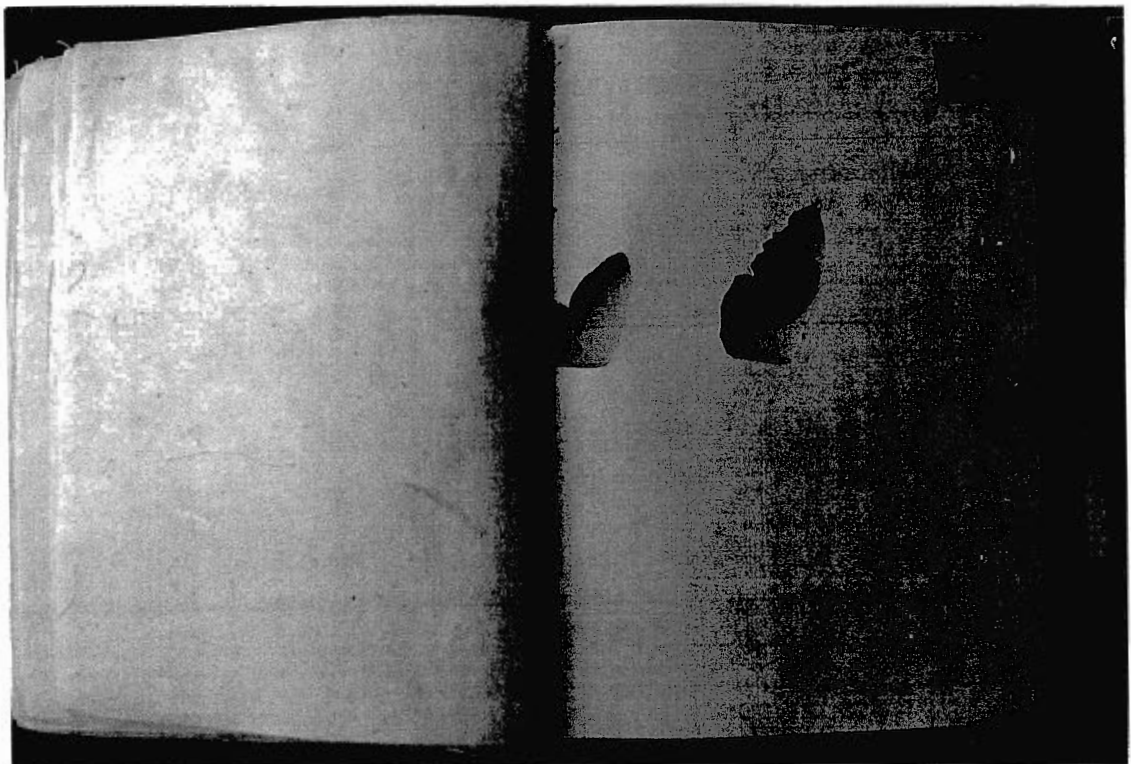
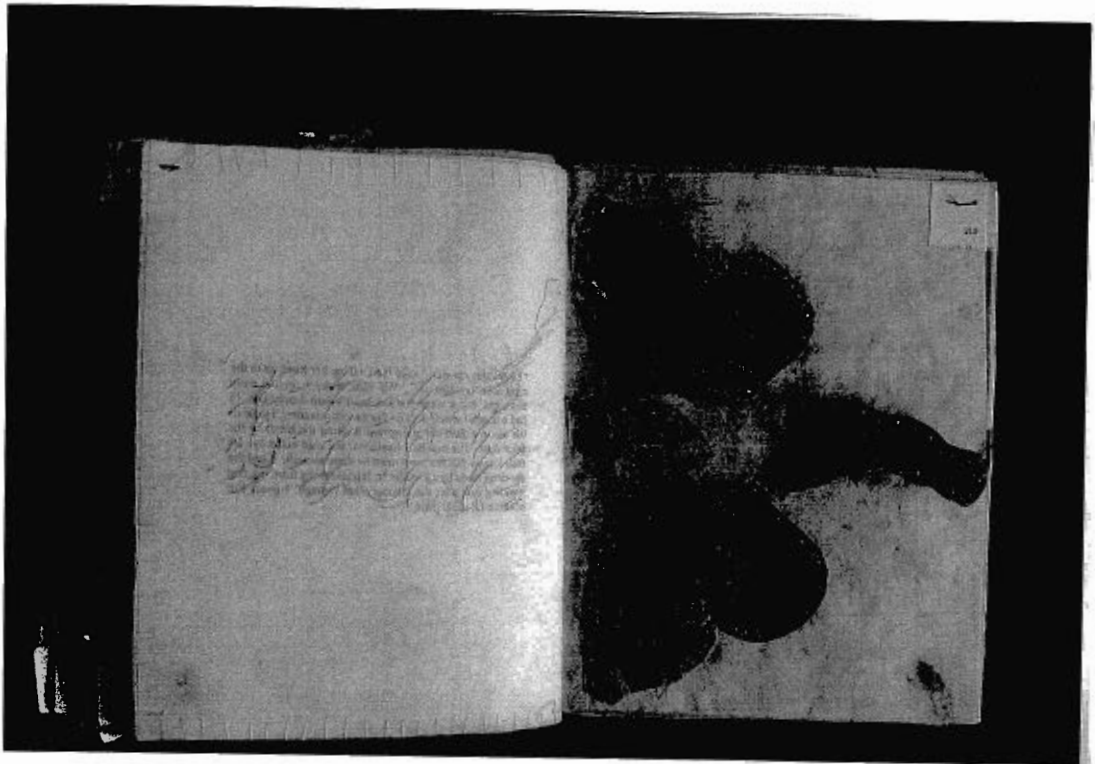


Fig. 14

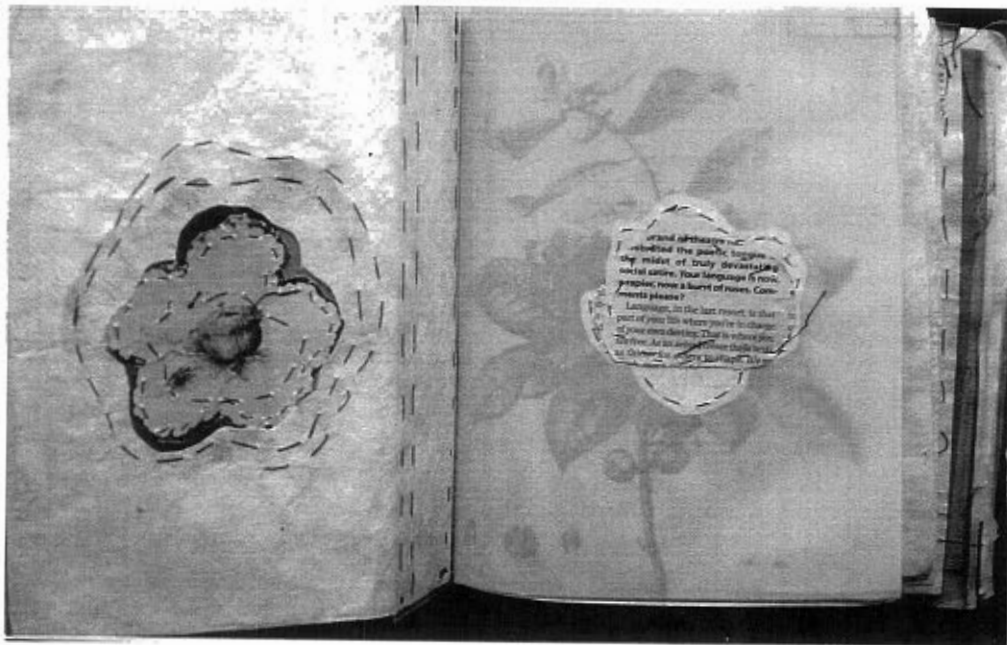
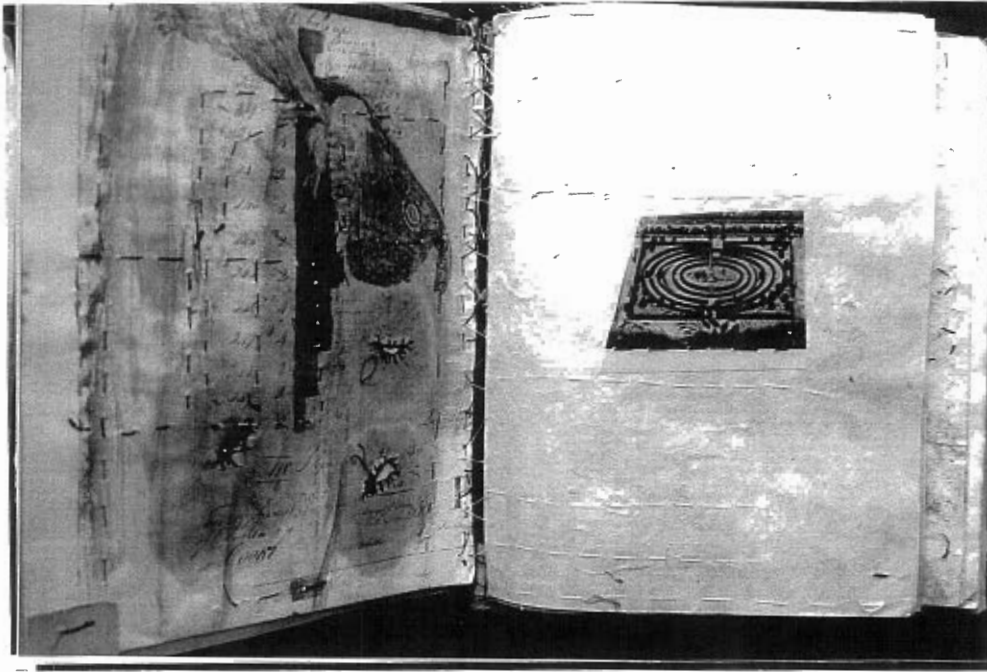


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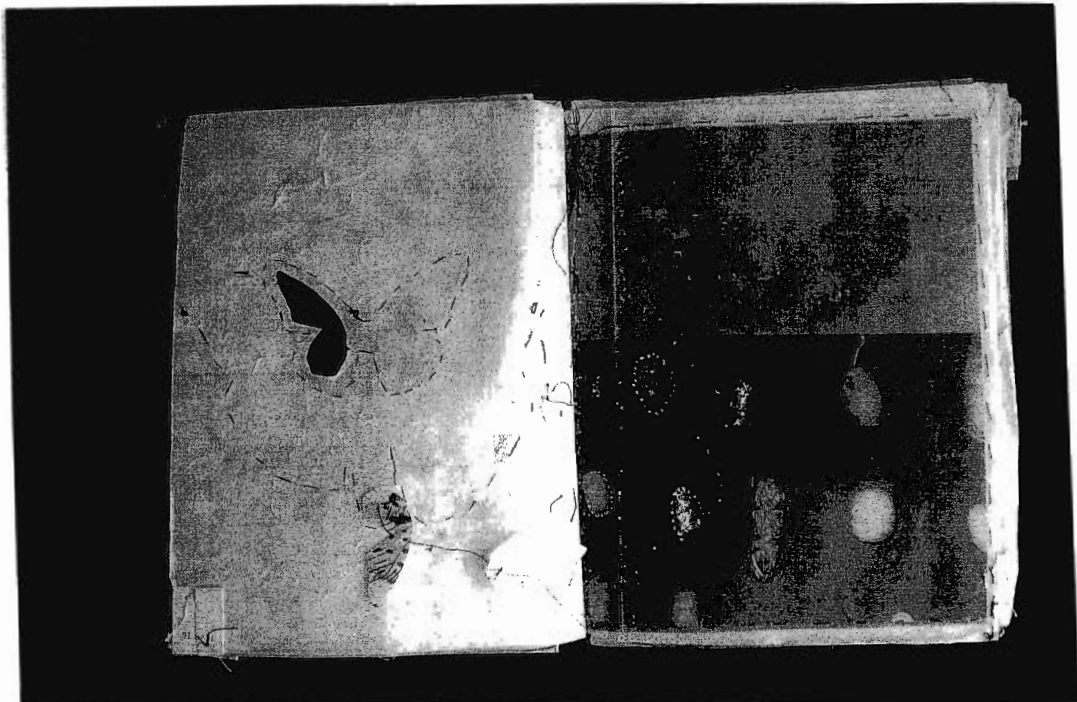
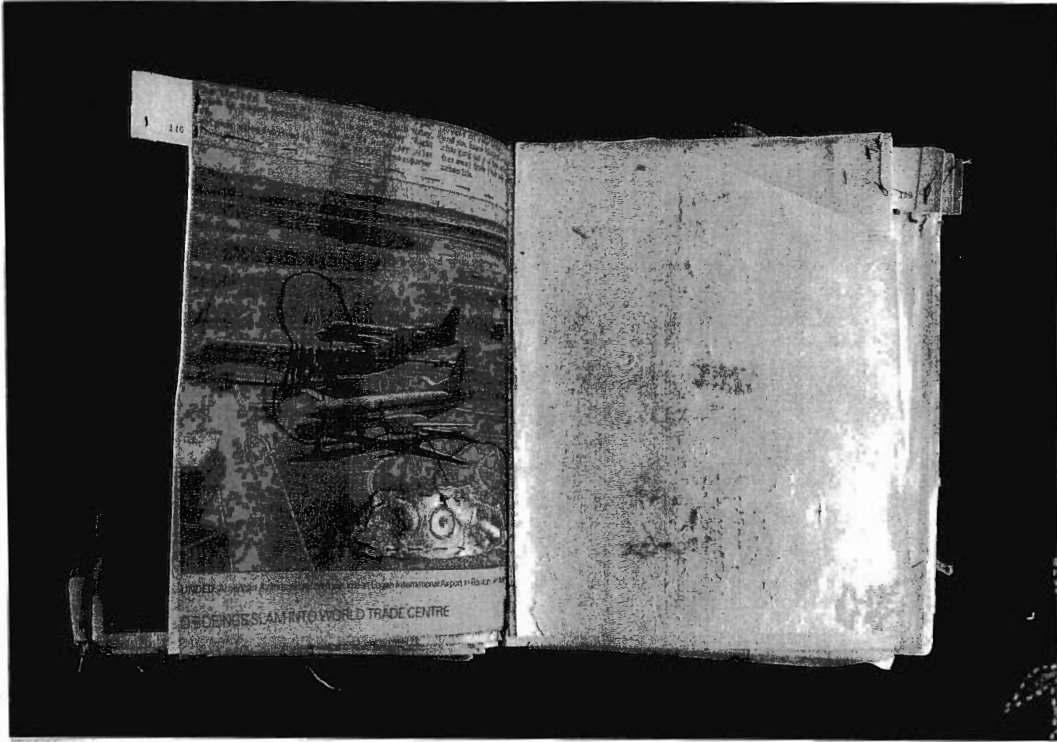


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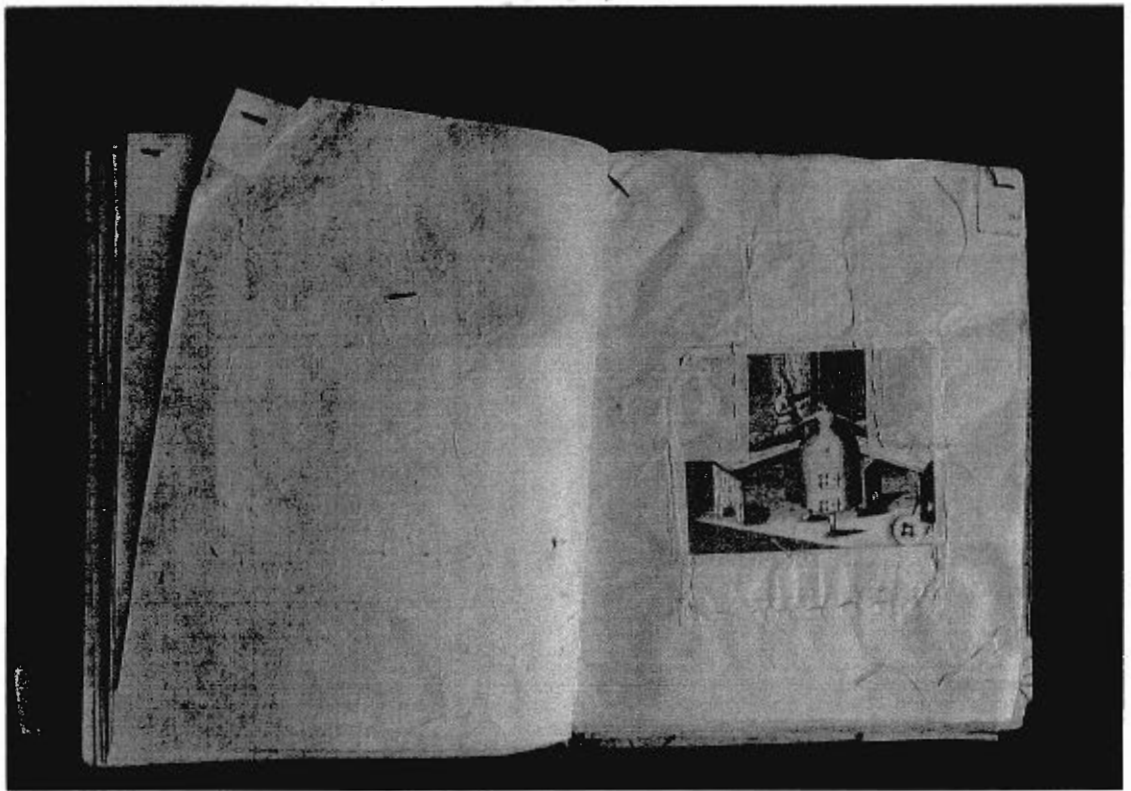


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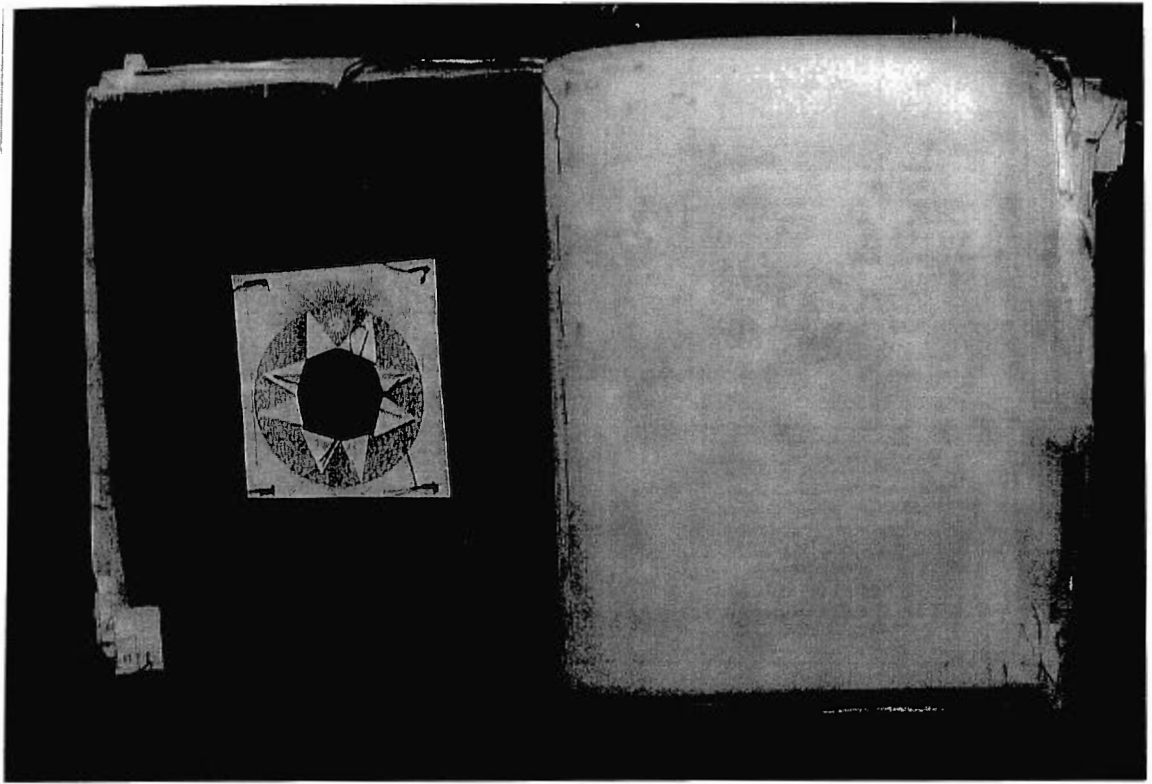




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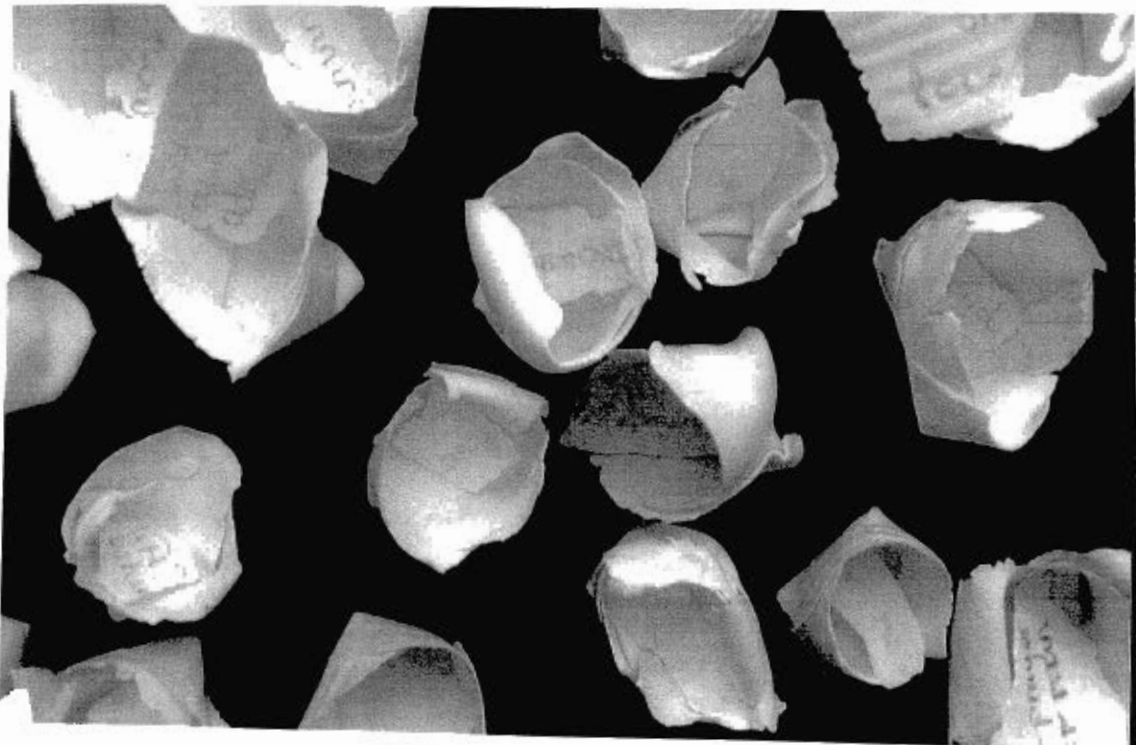


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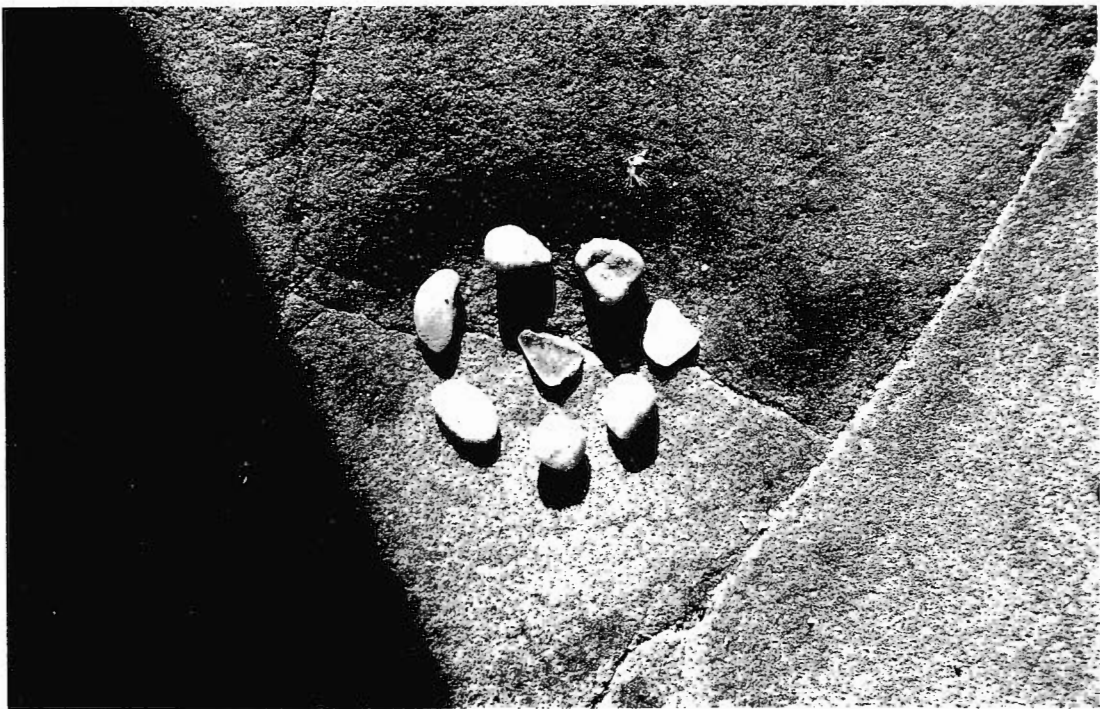


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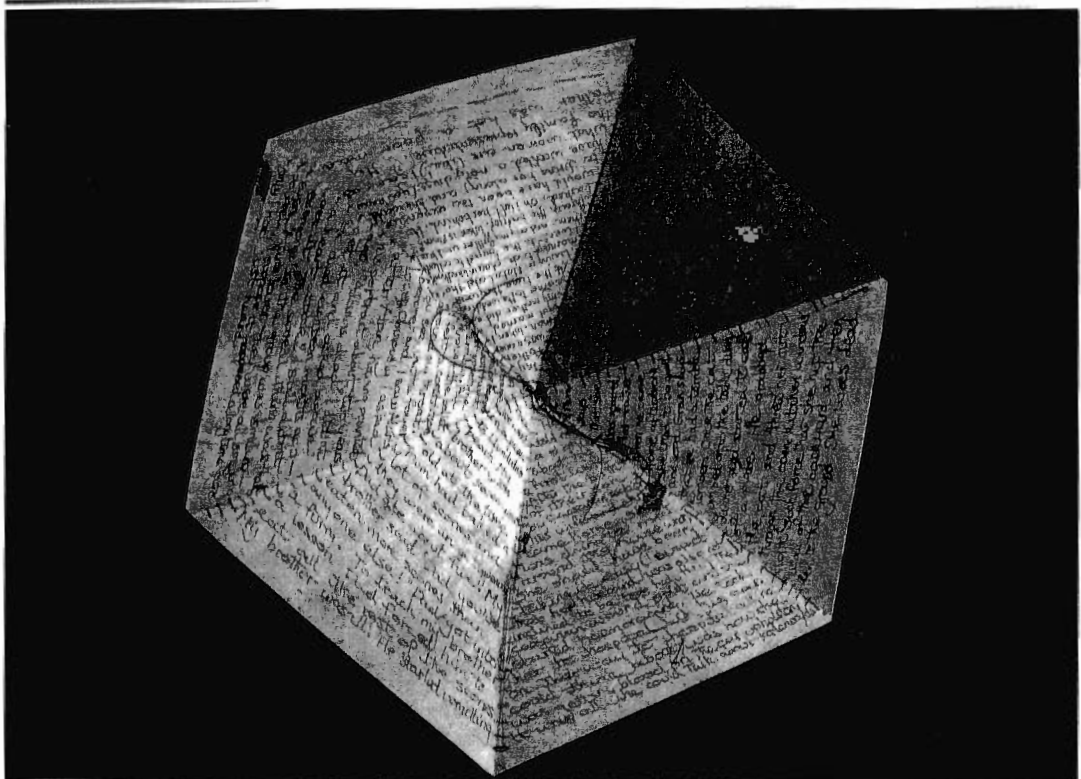
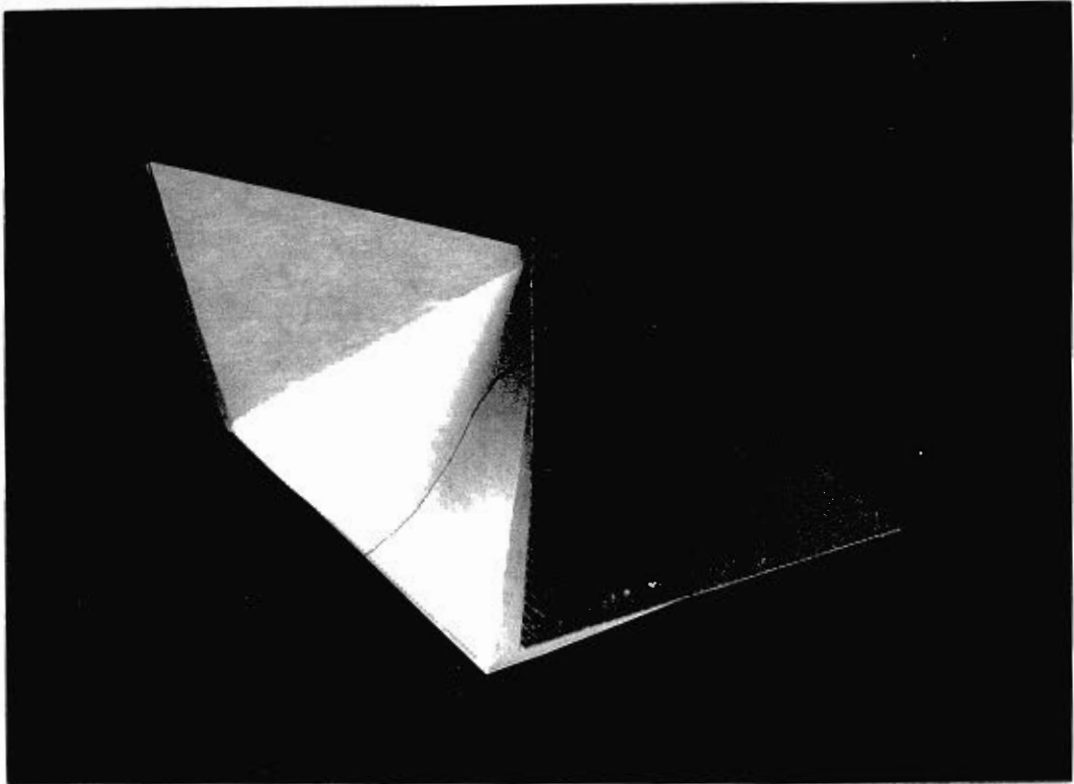


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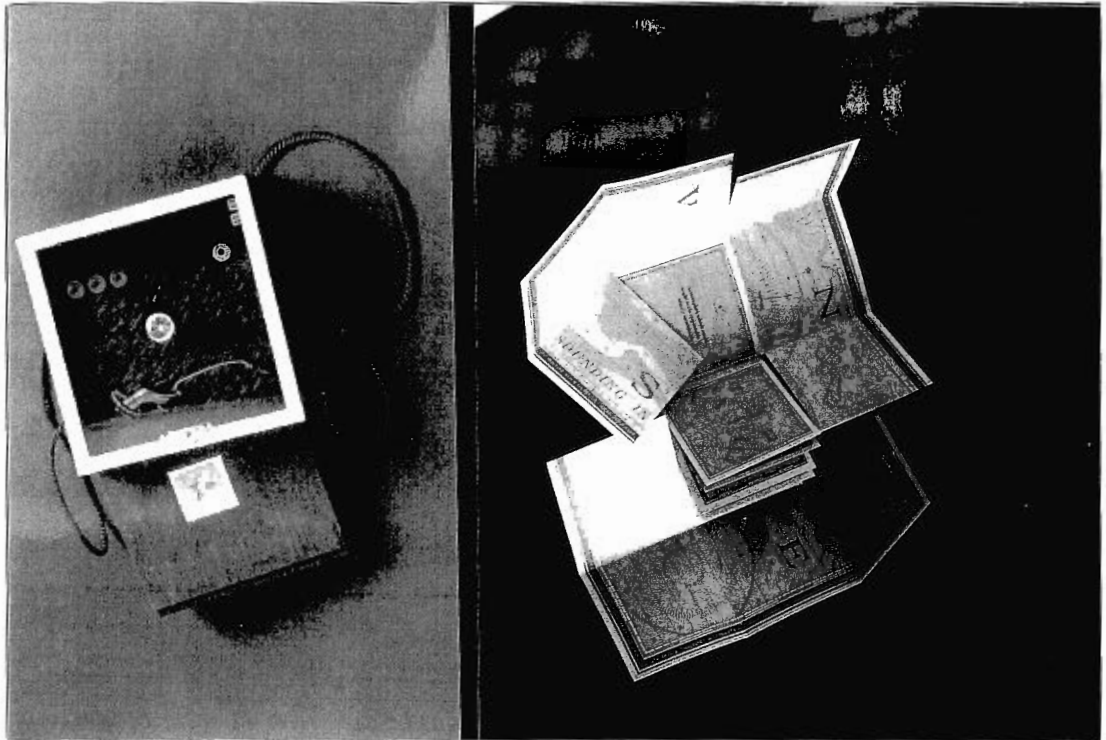


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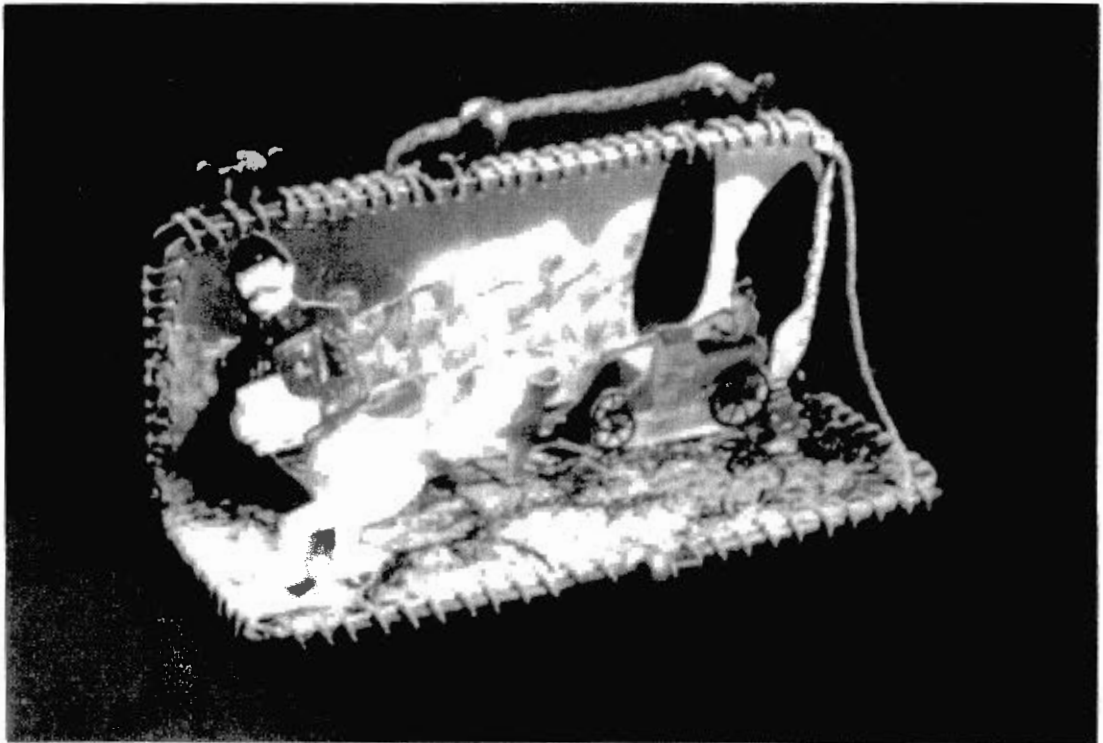


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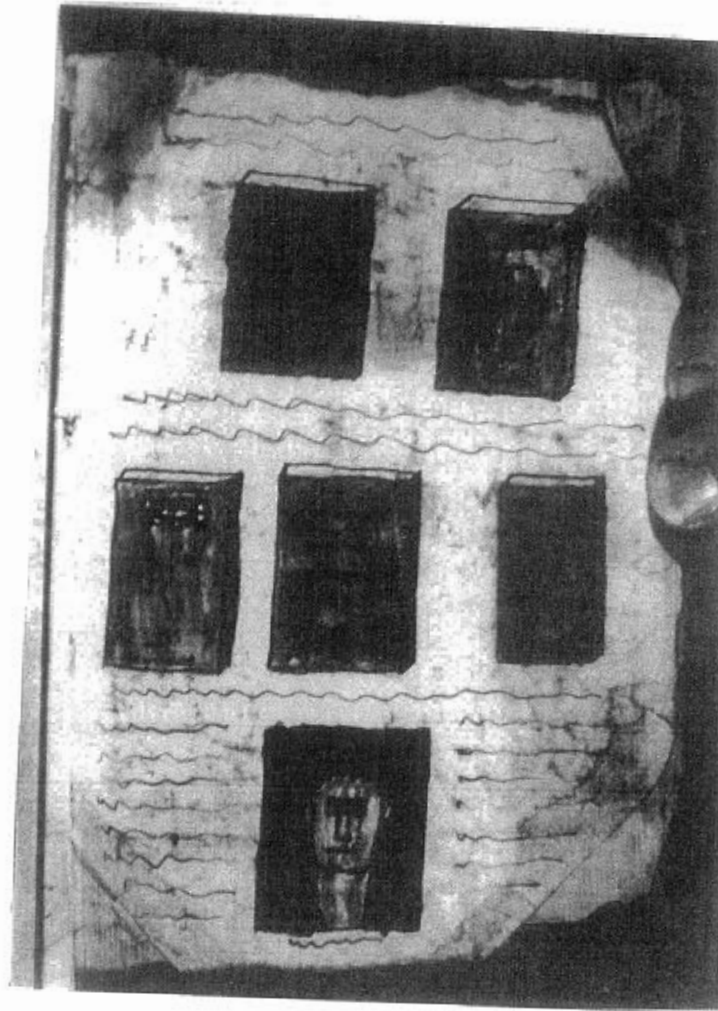


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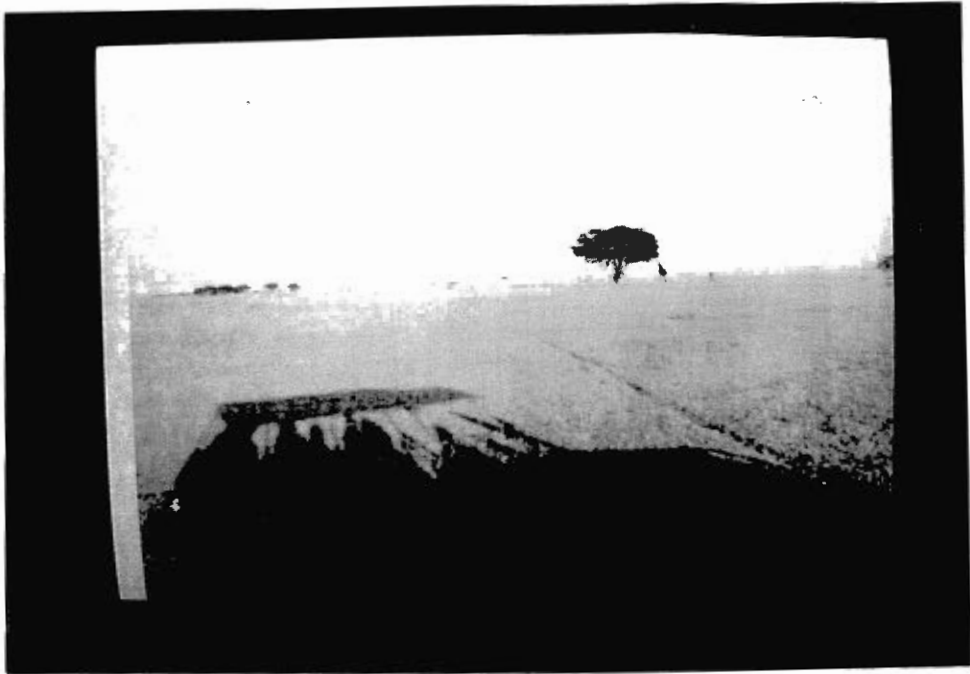


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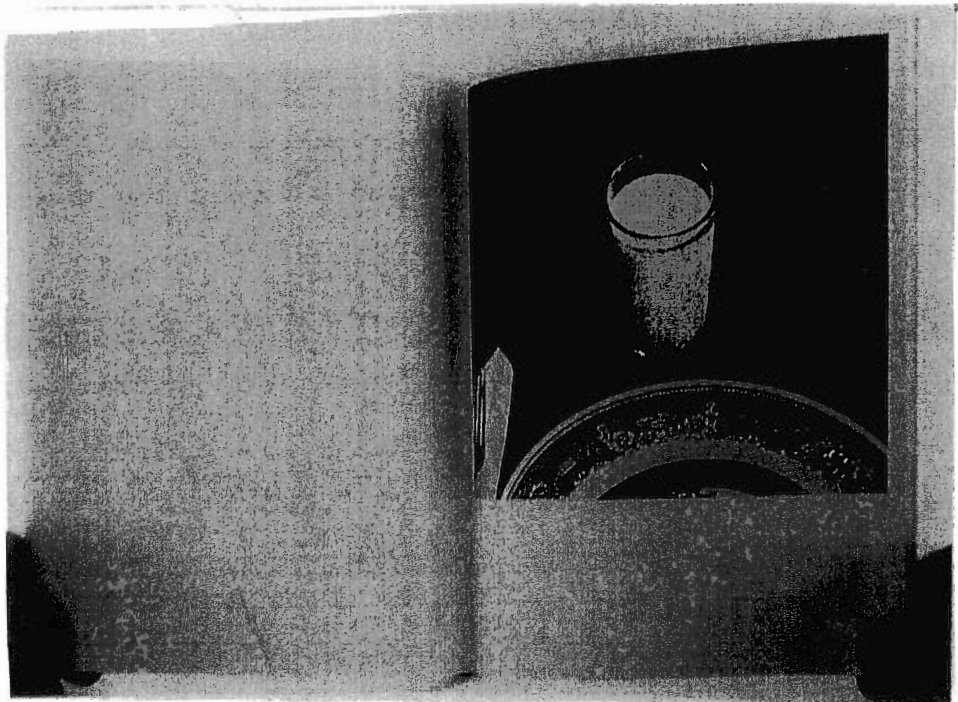




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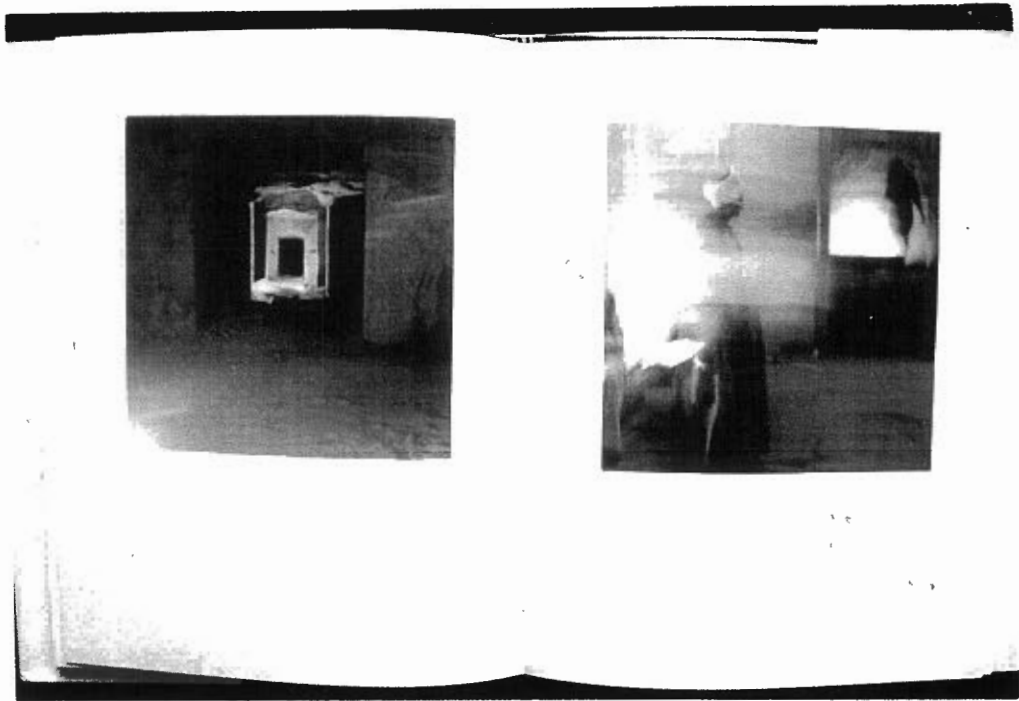


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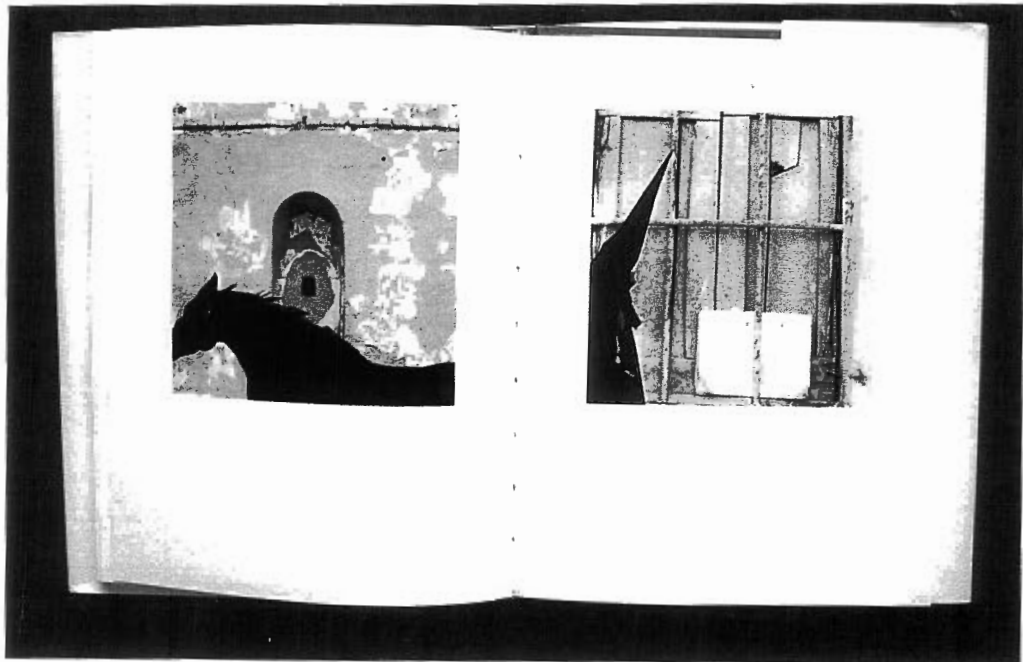


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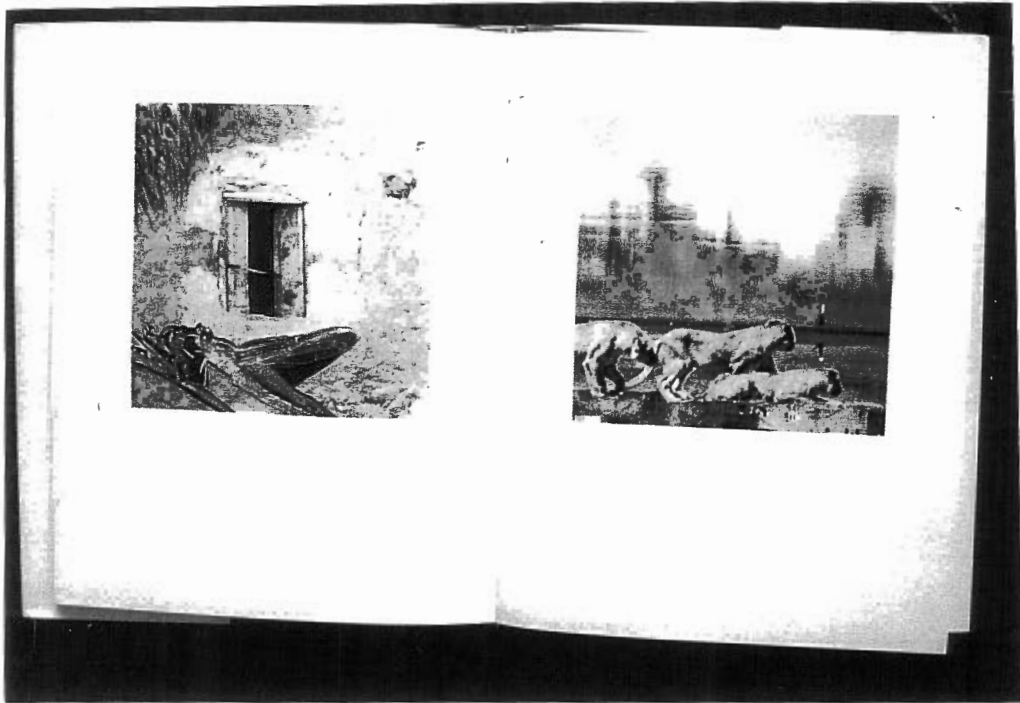


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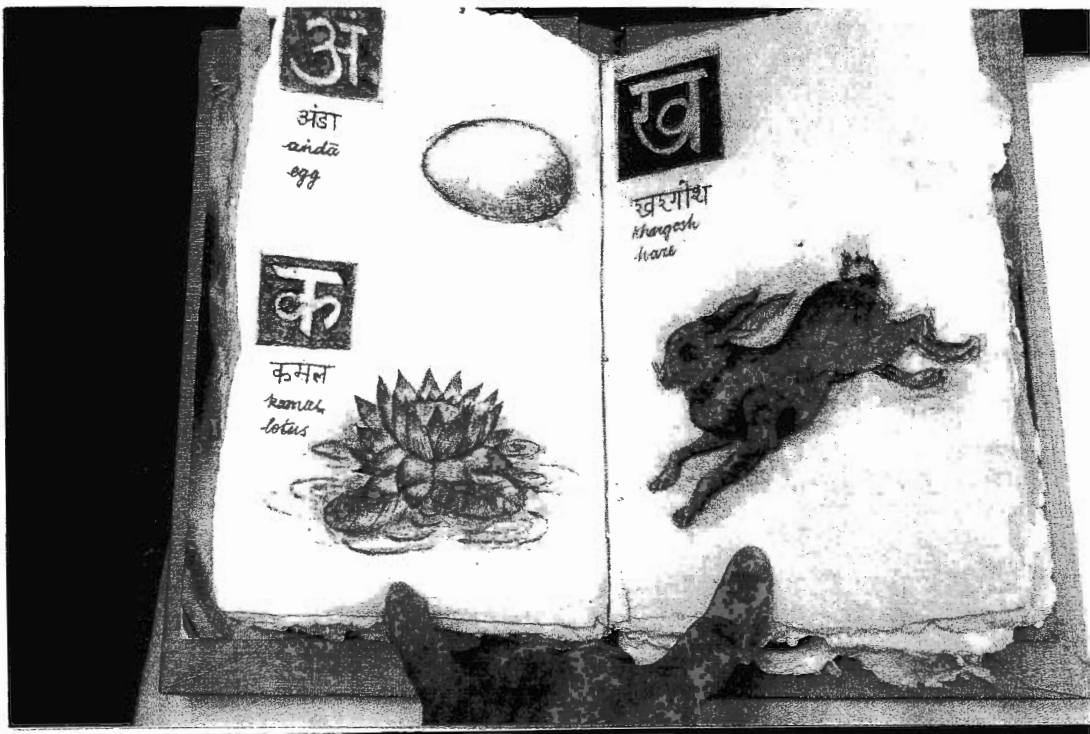
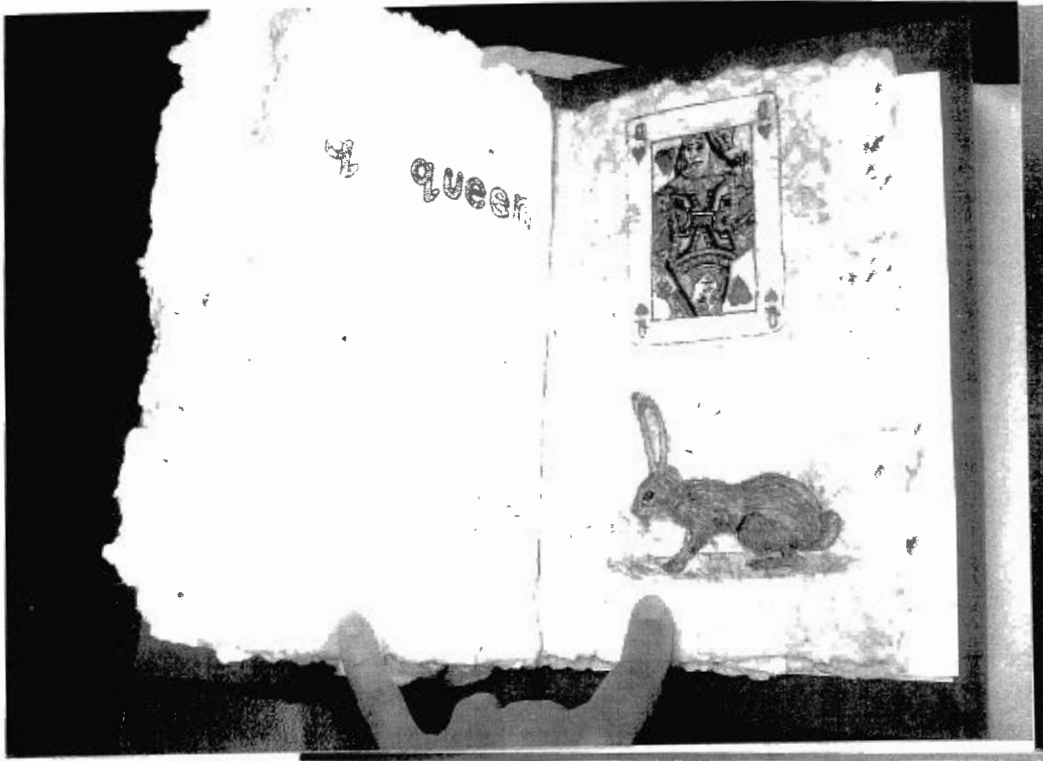


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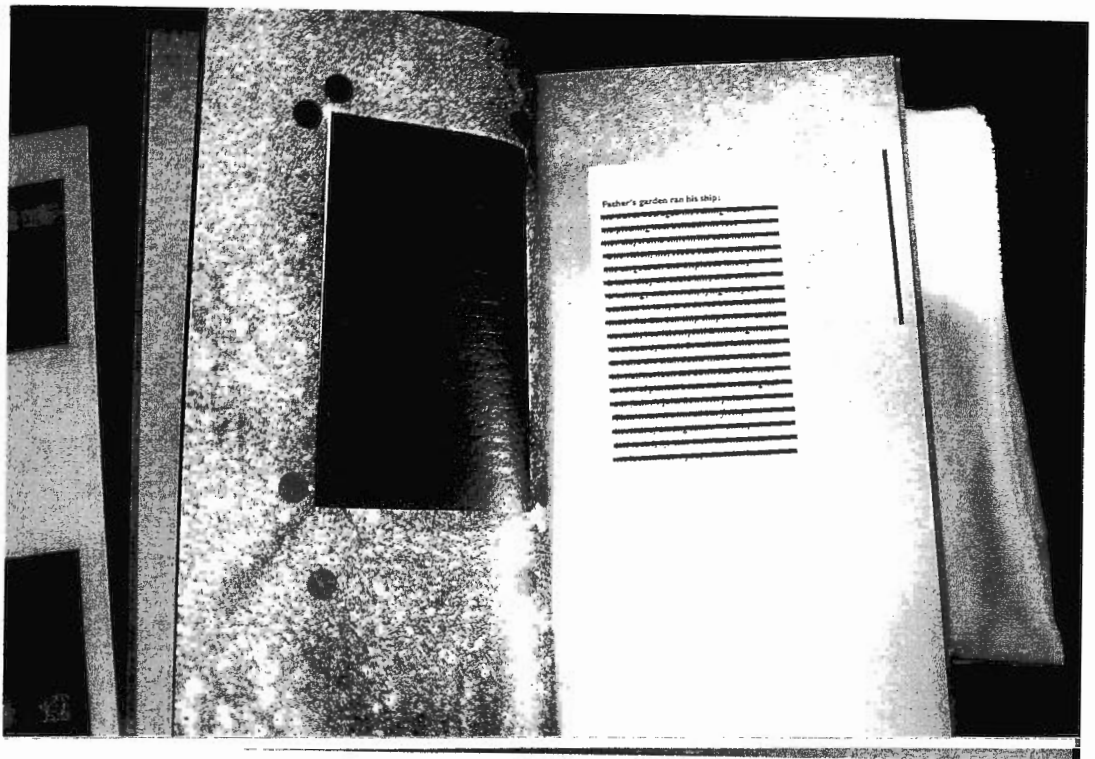
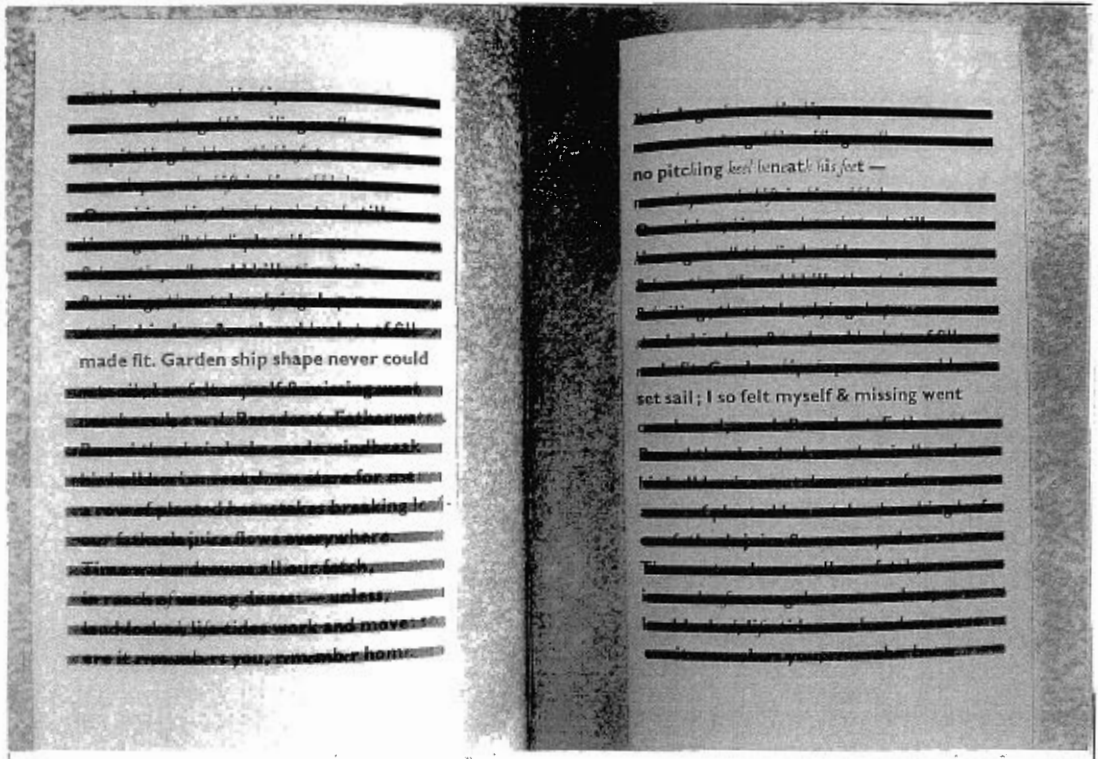


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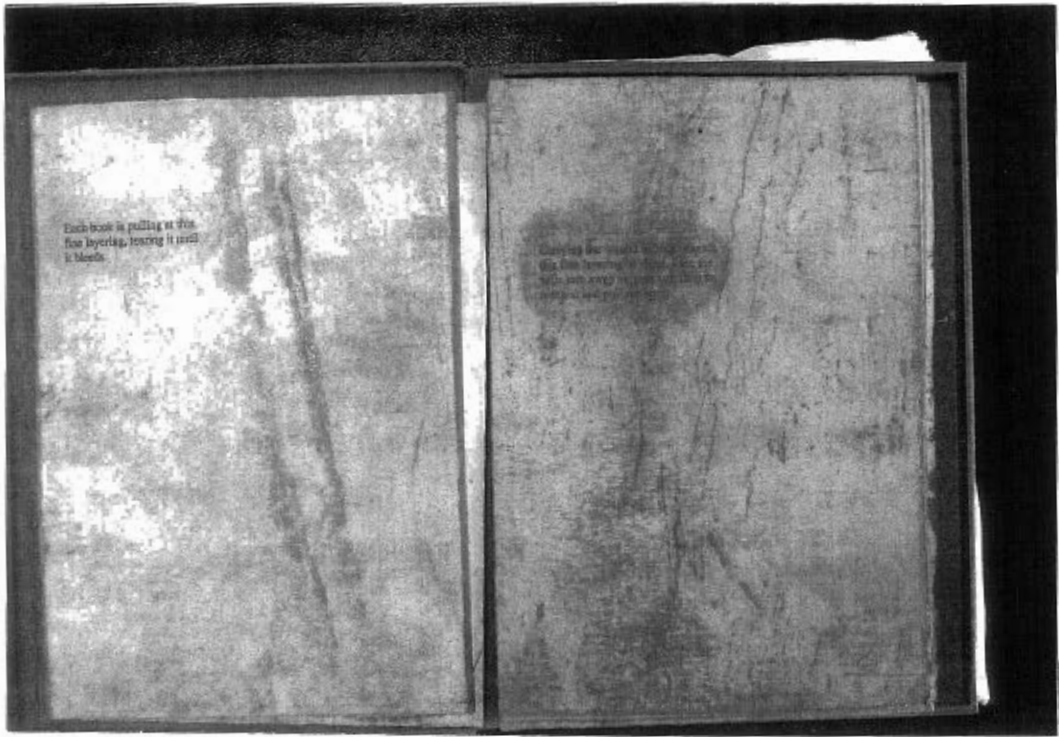


Fig. 35

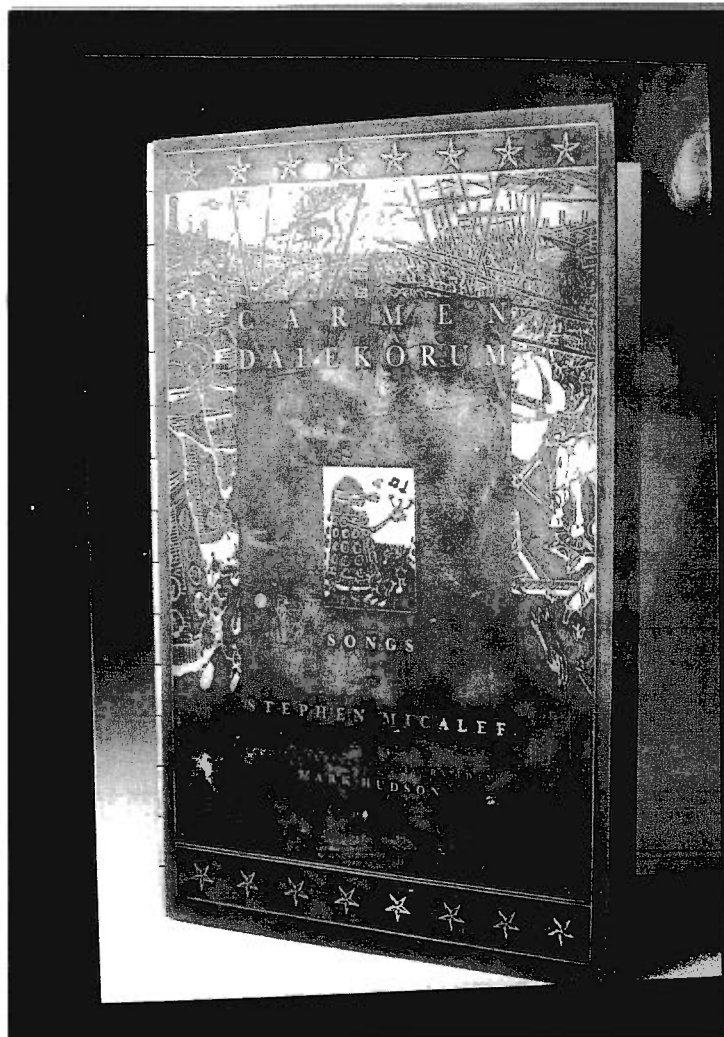


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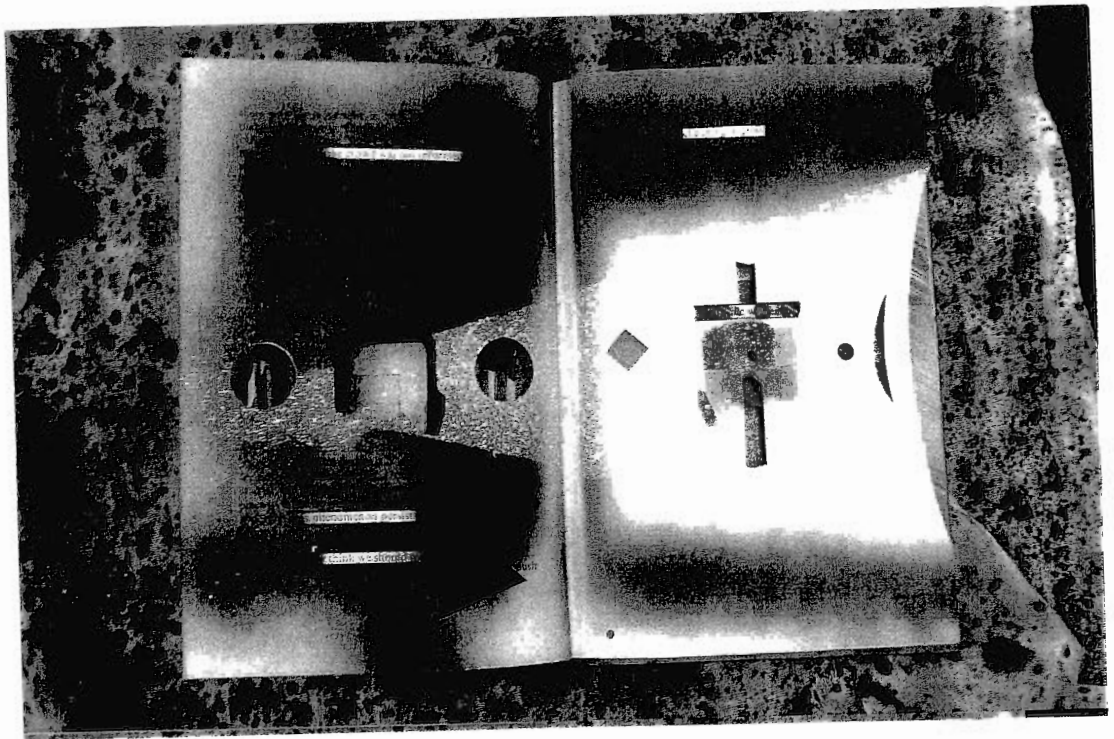
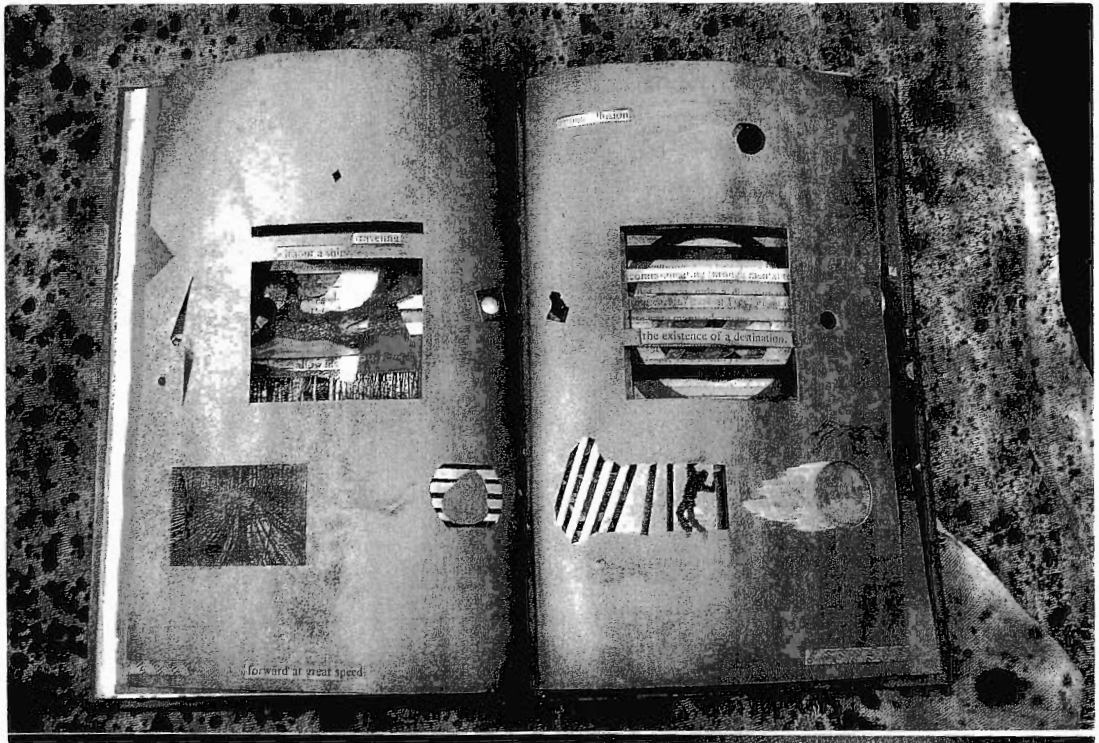




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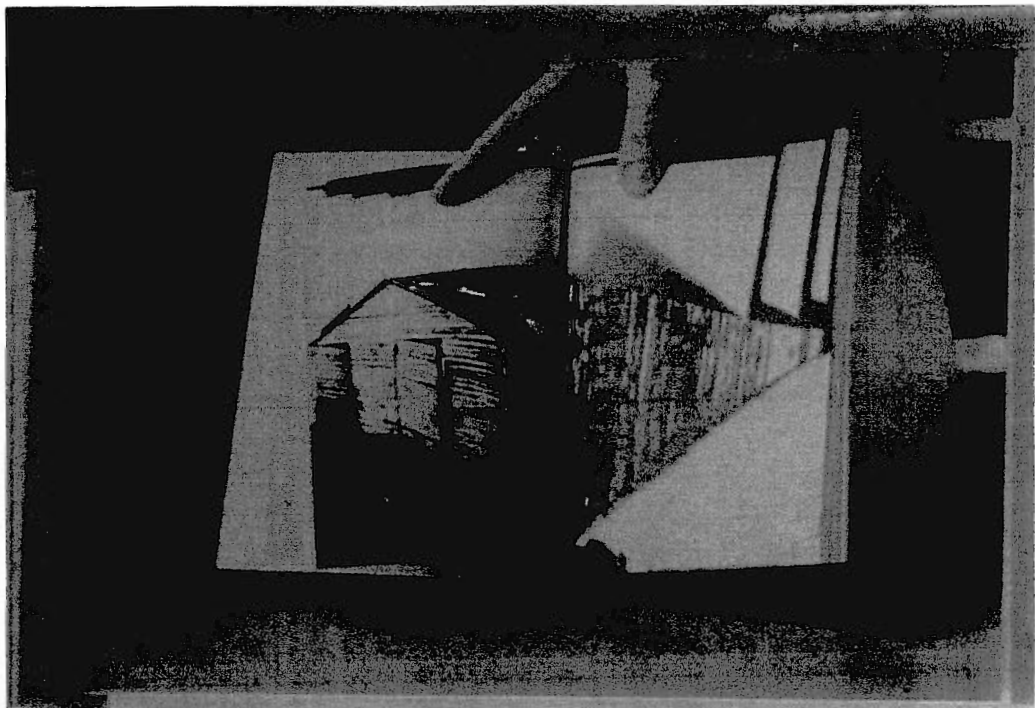
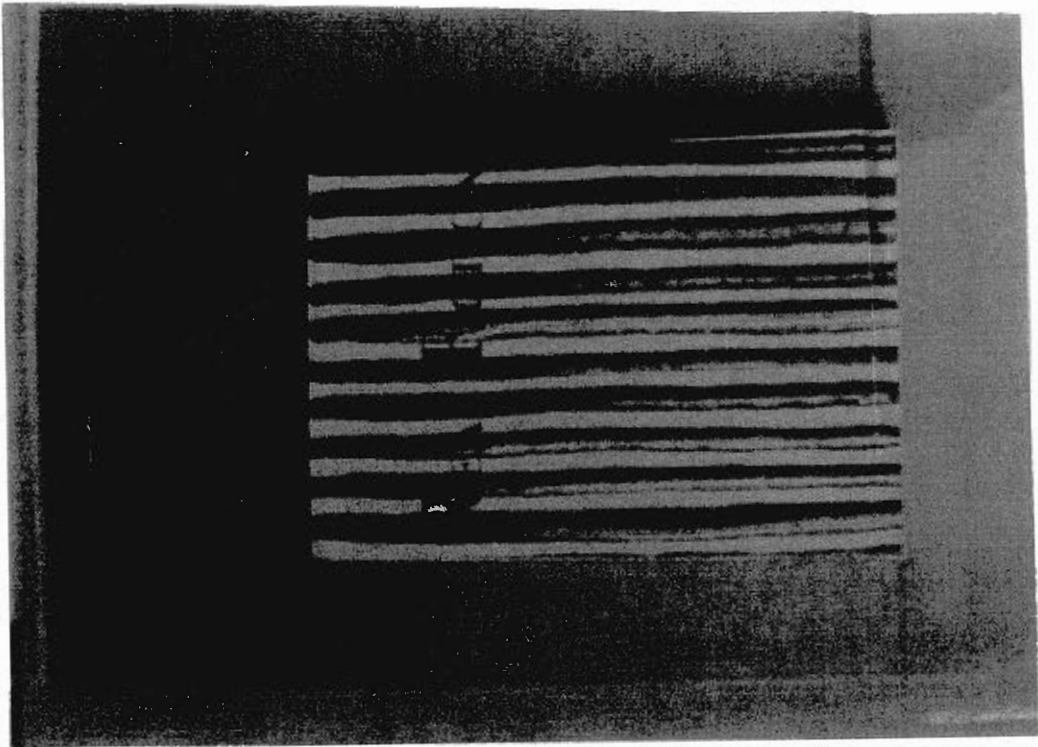


Fig. 38

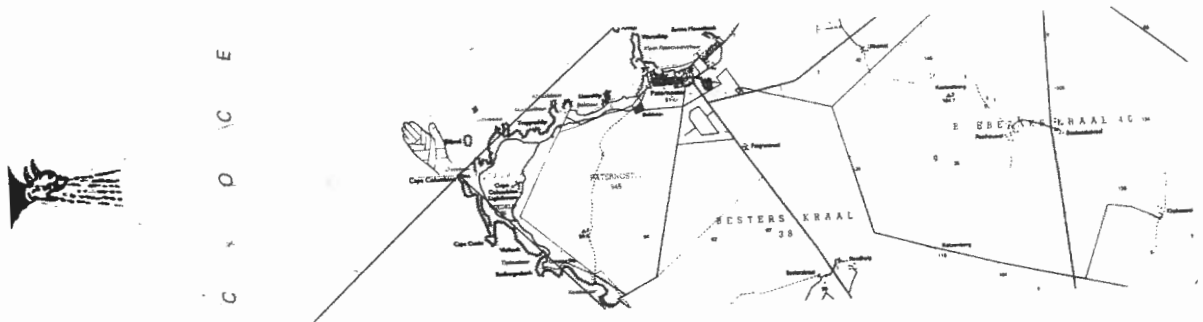


Fig. 39

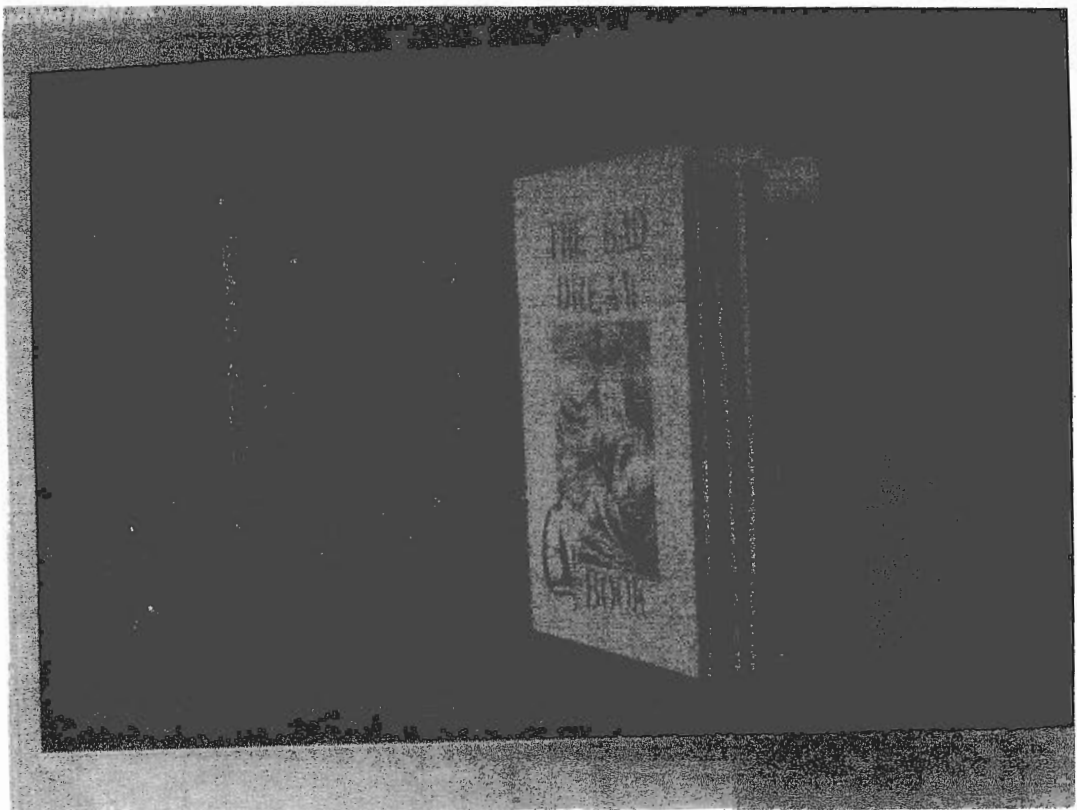
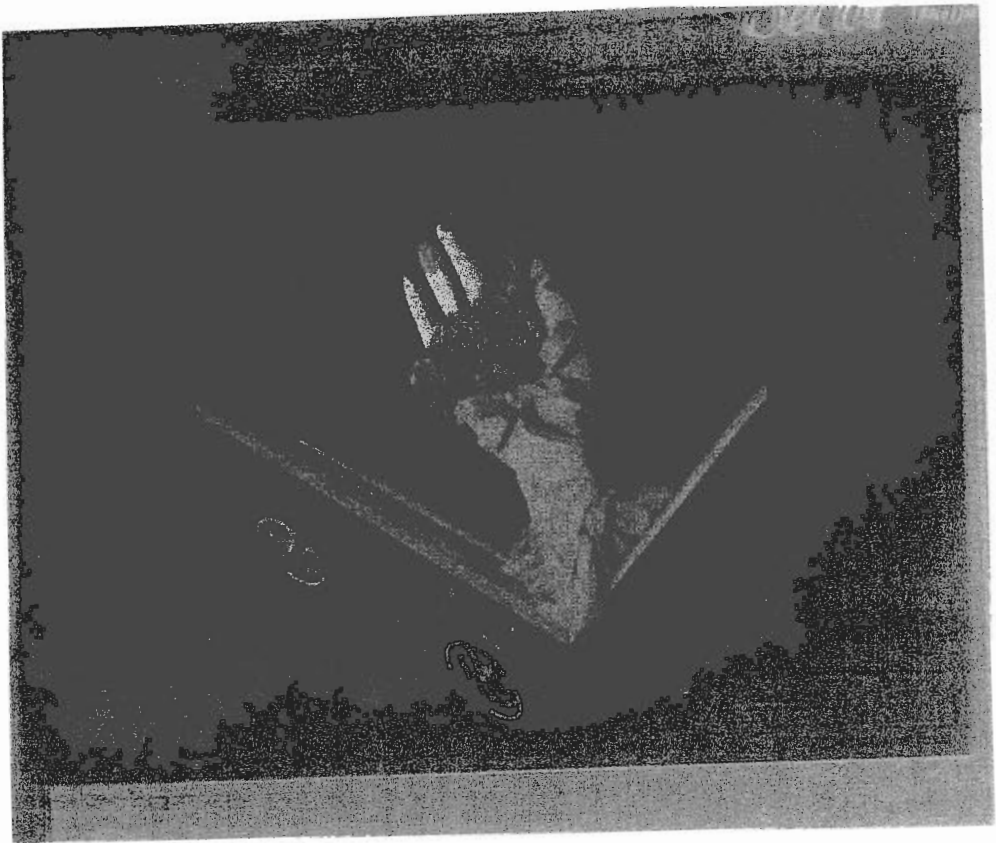


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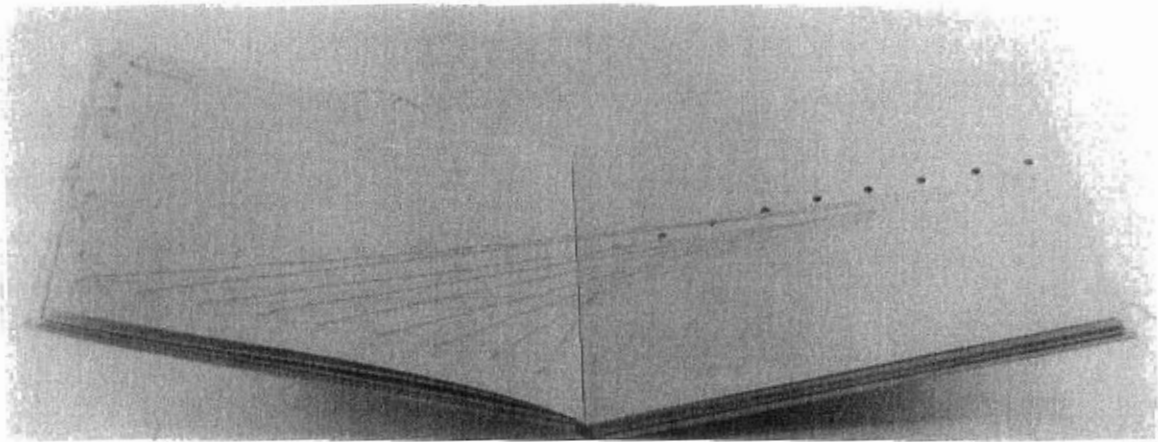


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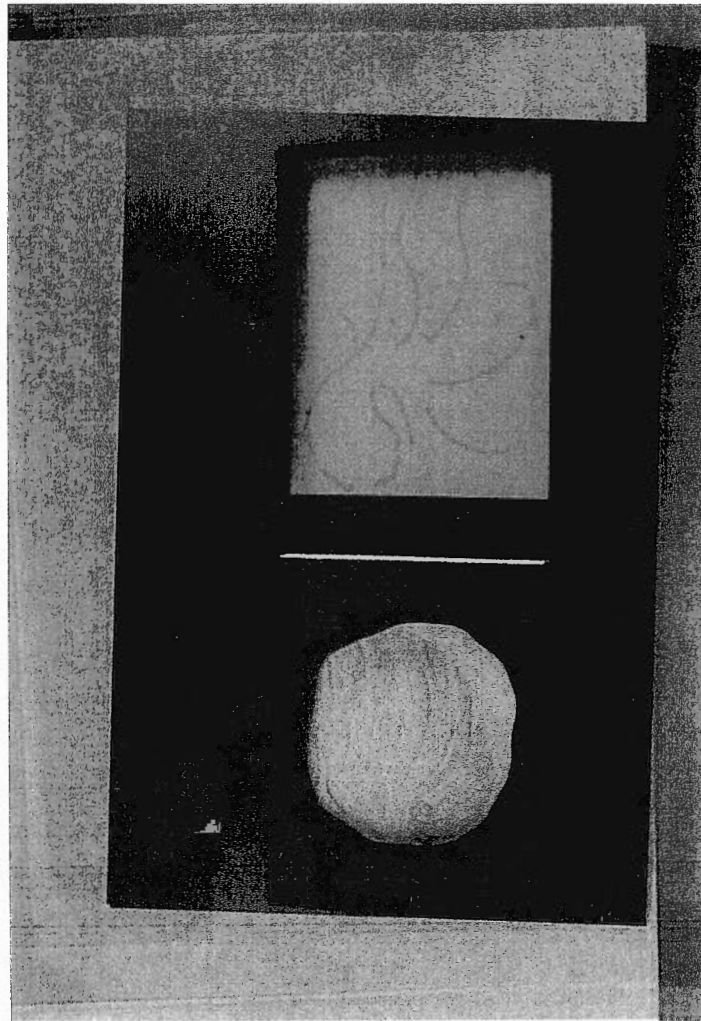


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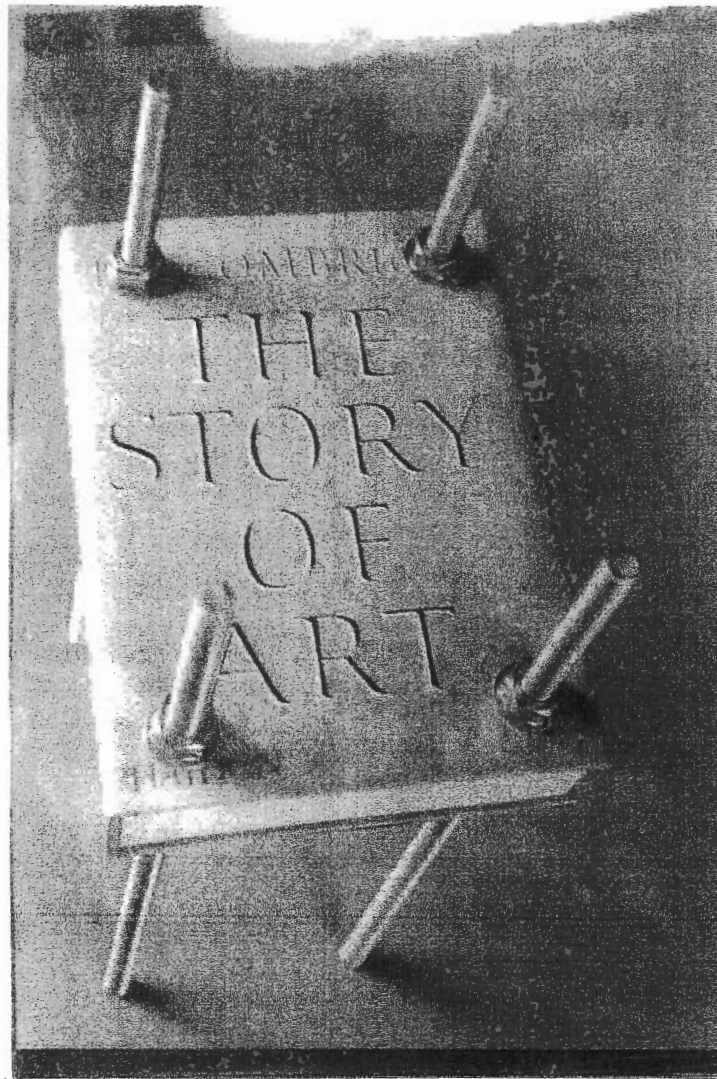


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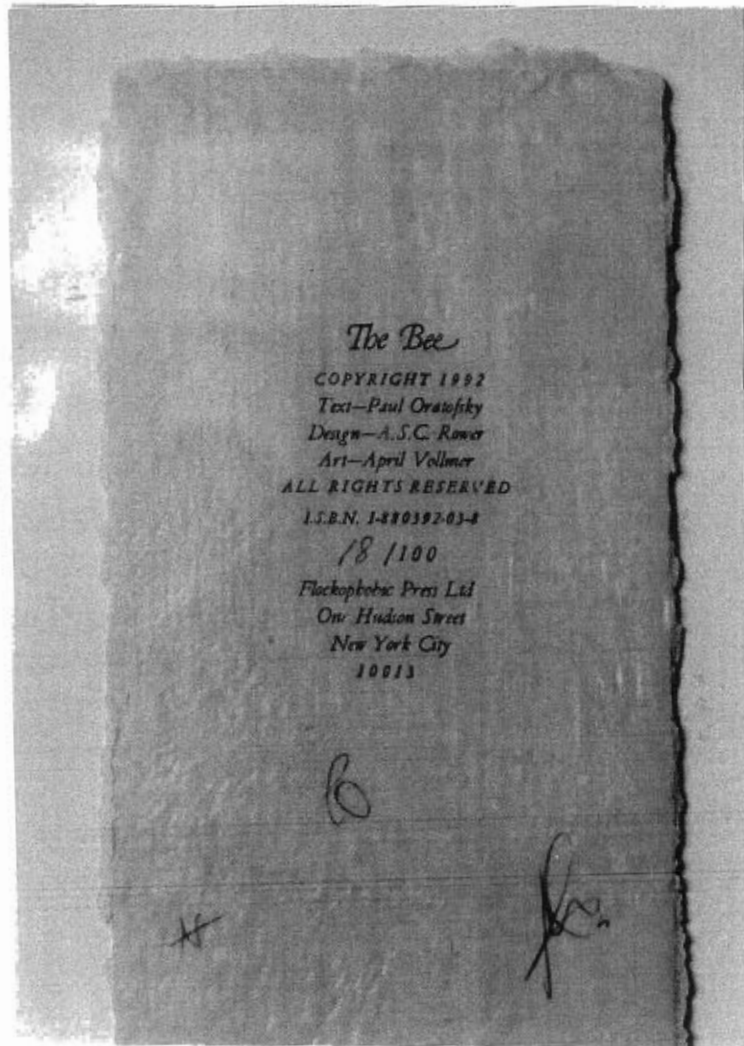


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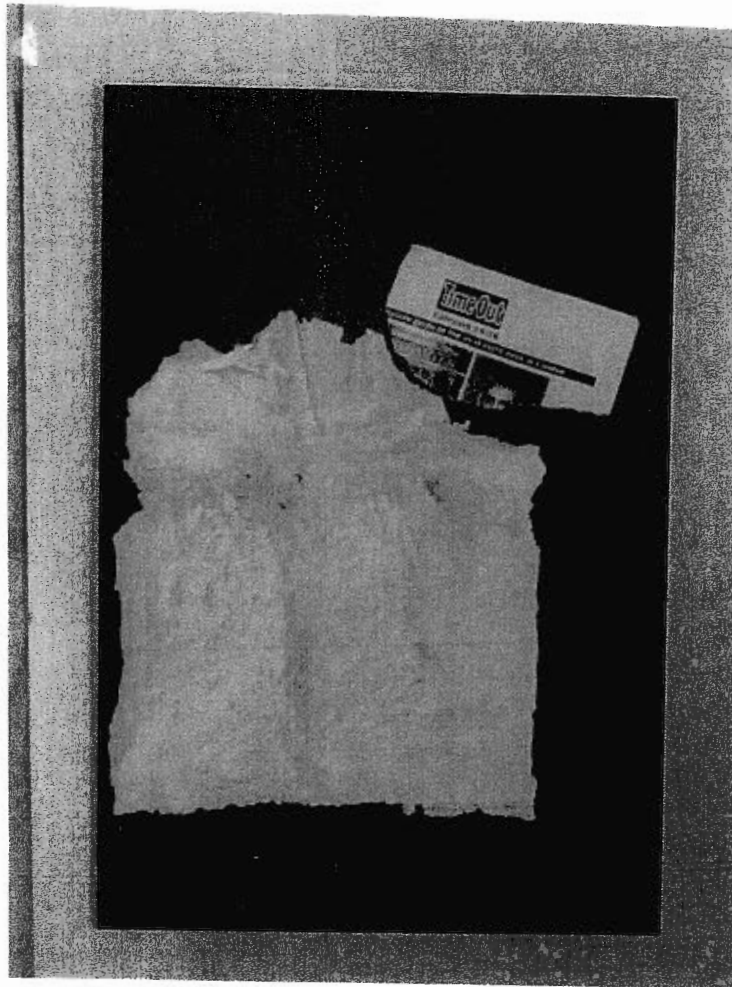




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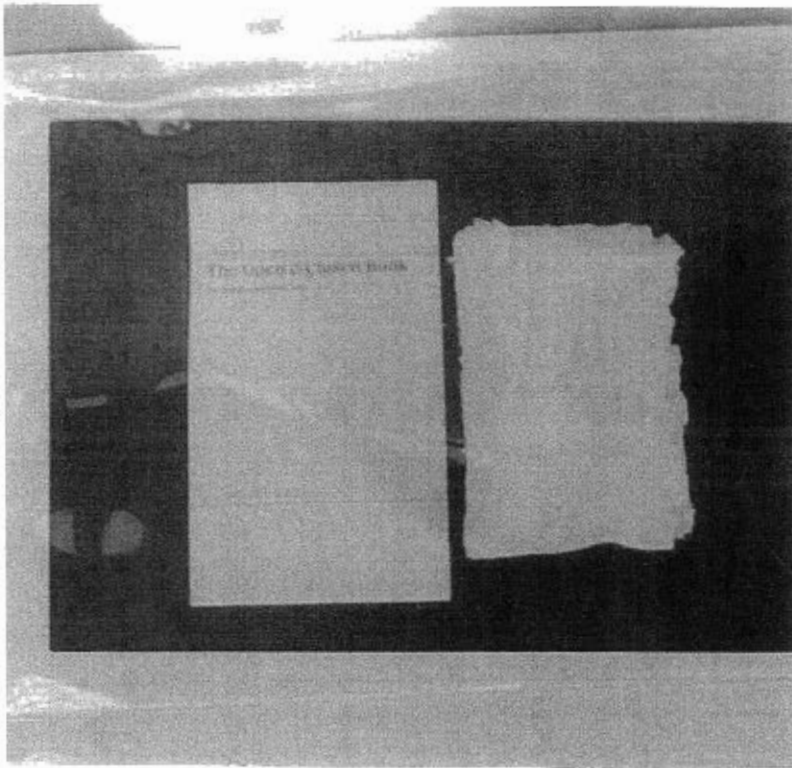


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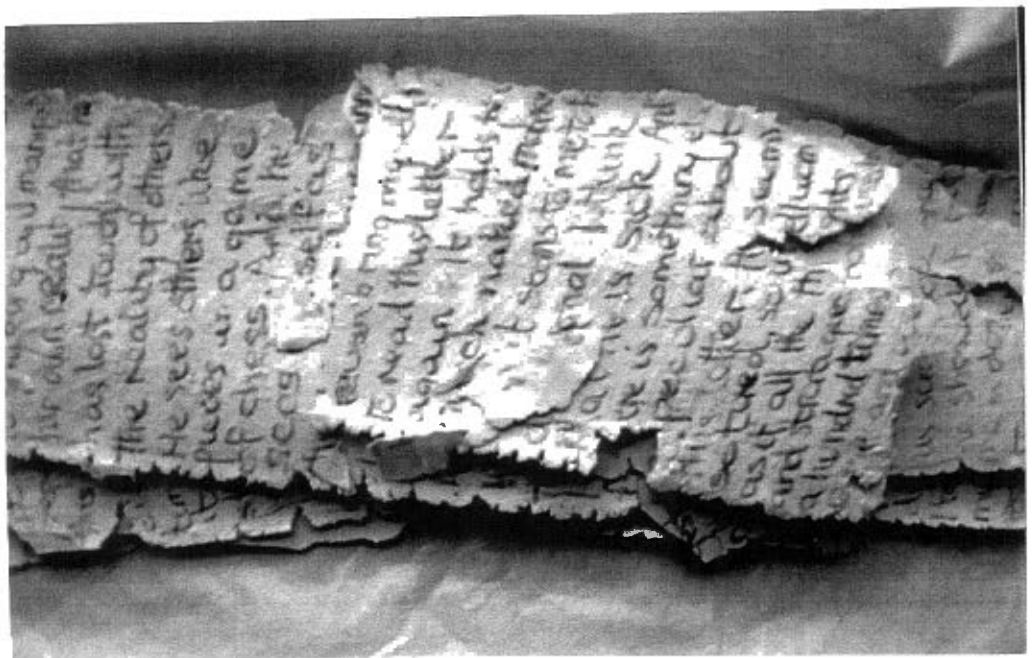
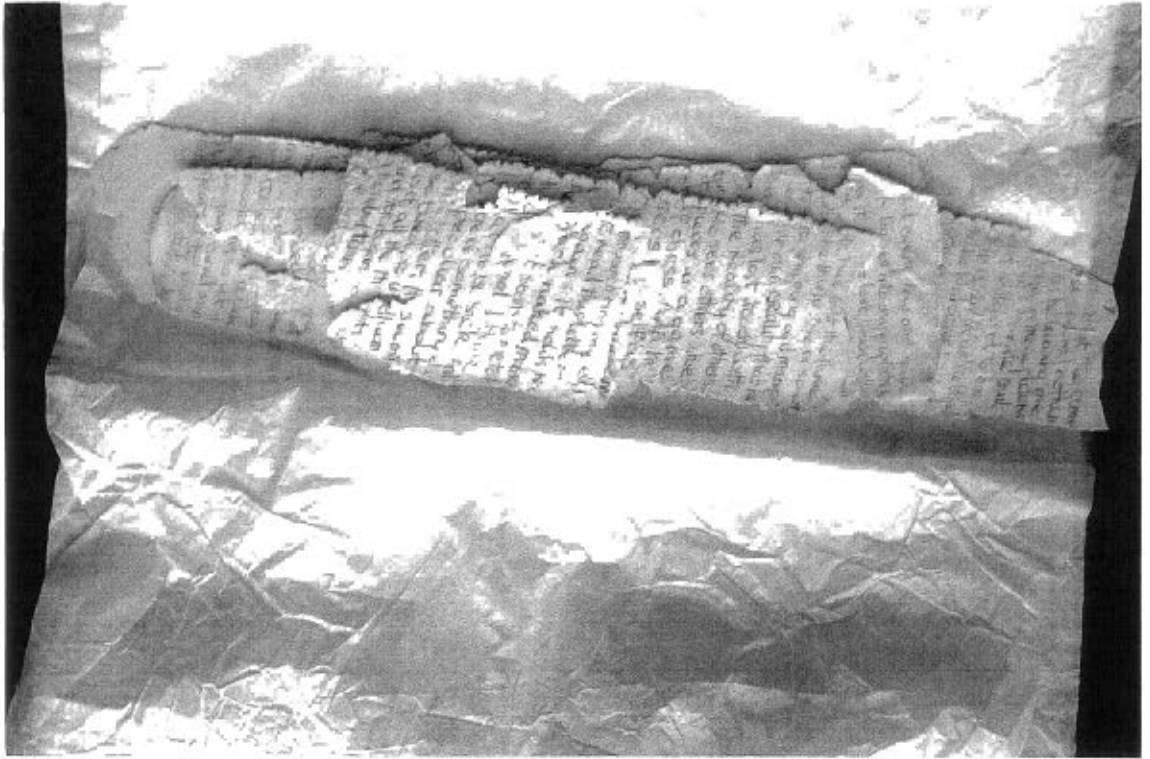


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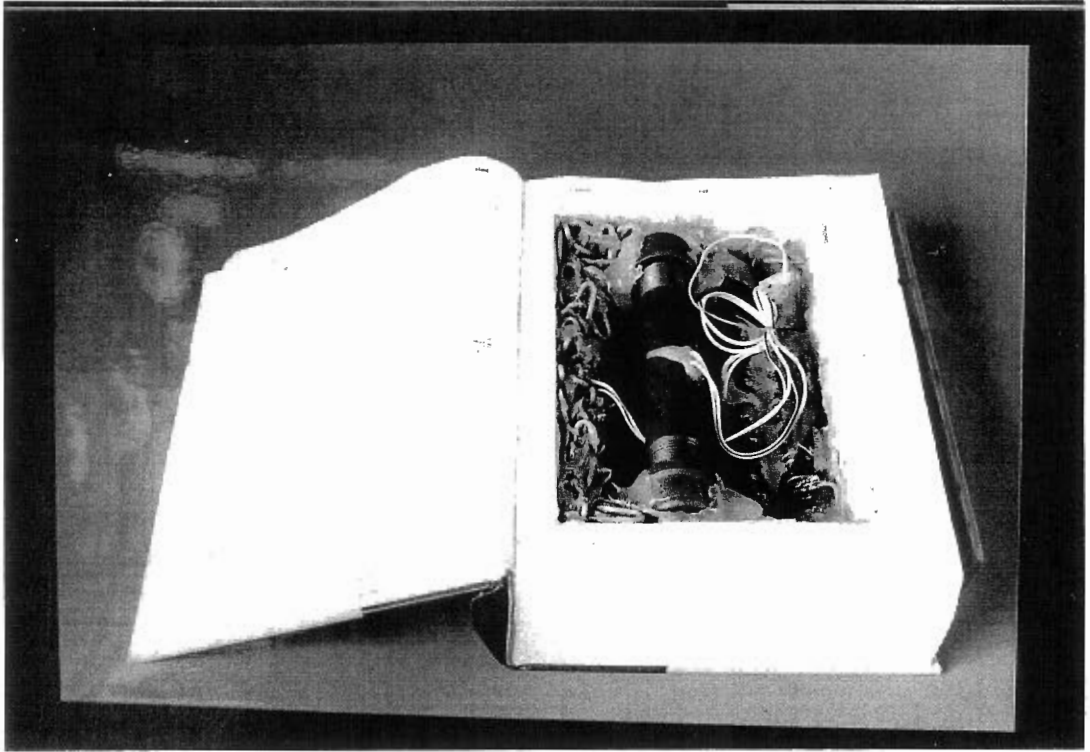


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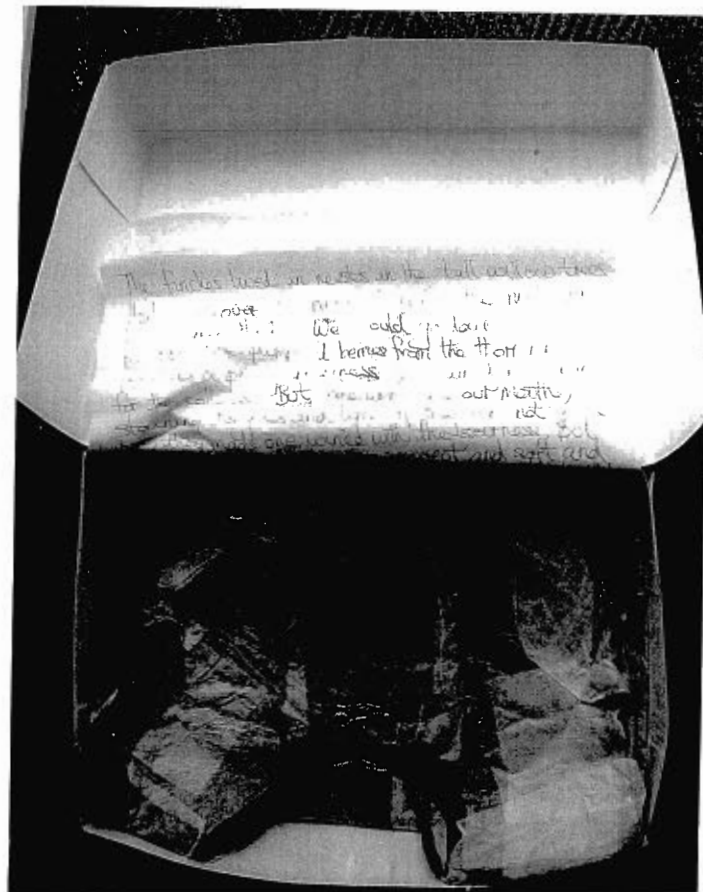
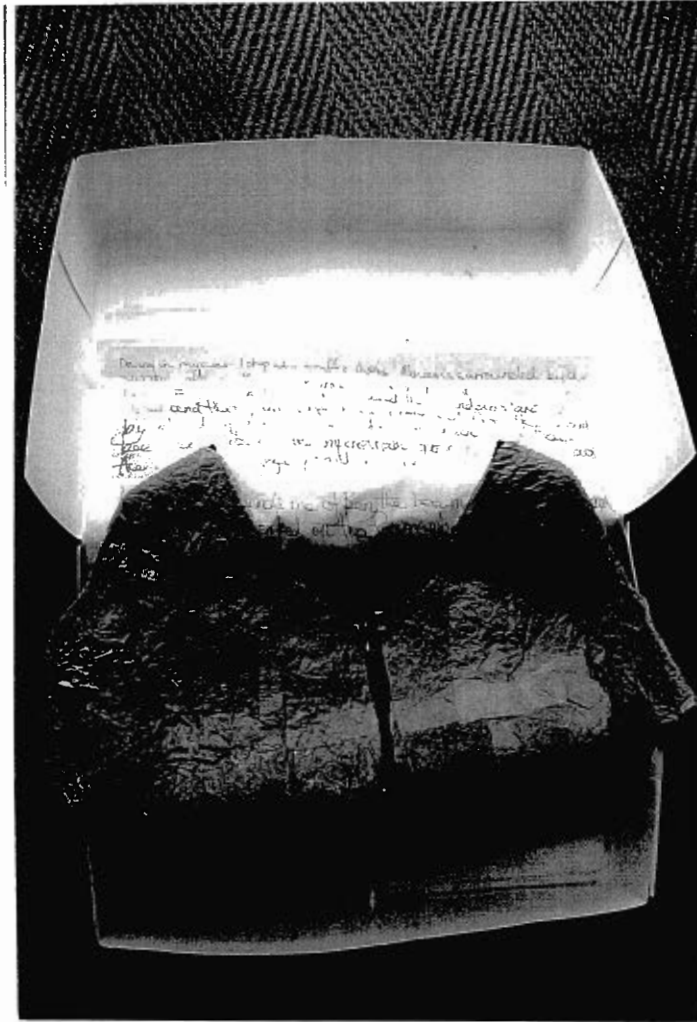


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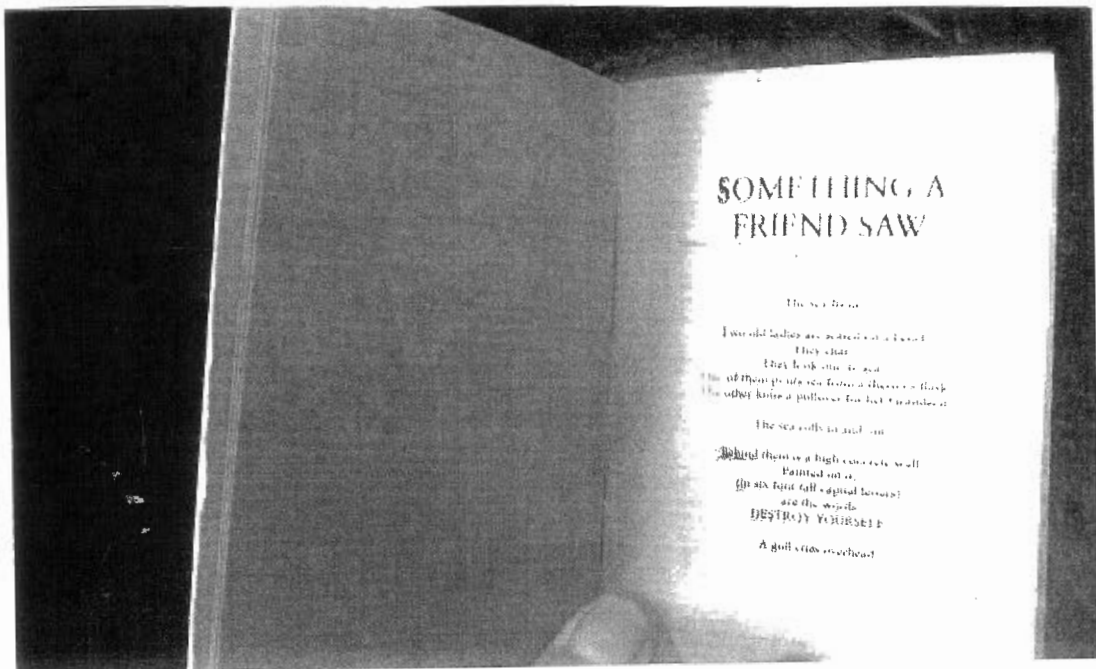


Fig. 50



Fig. 51

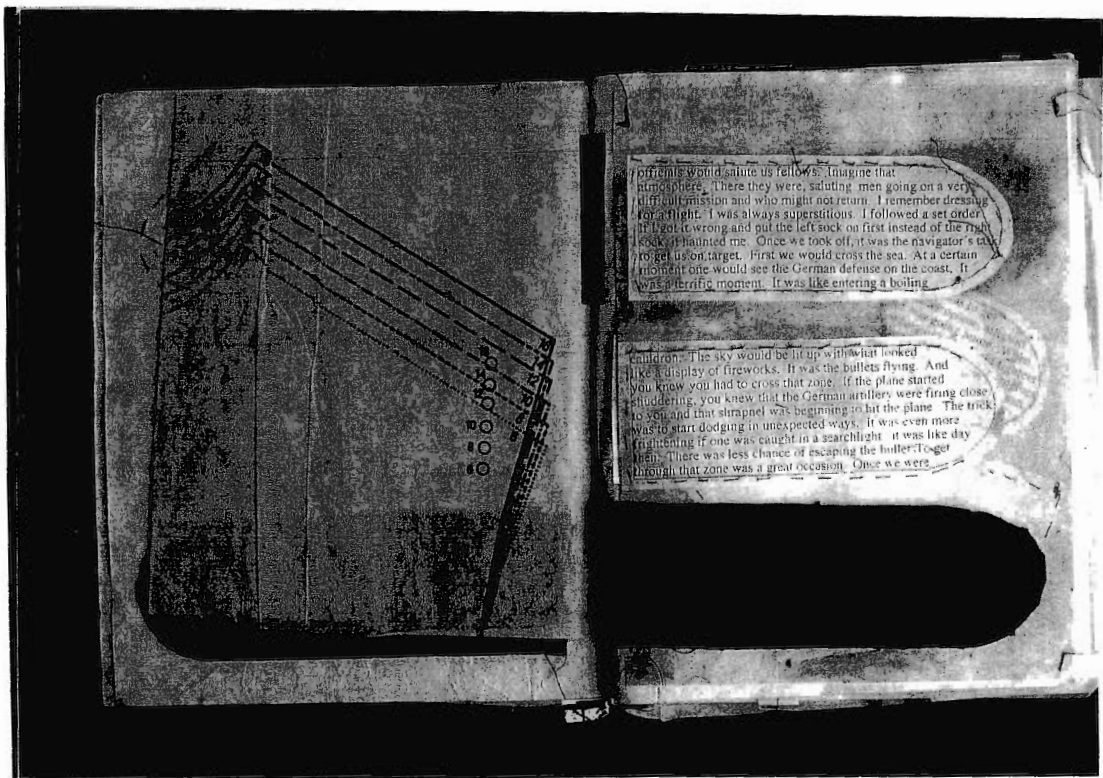
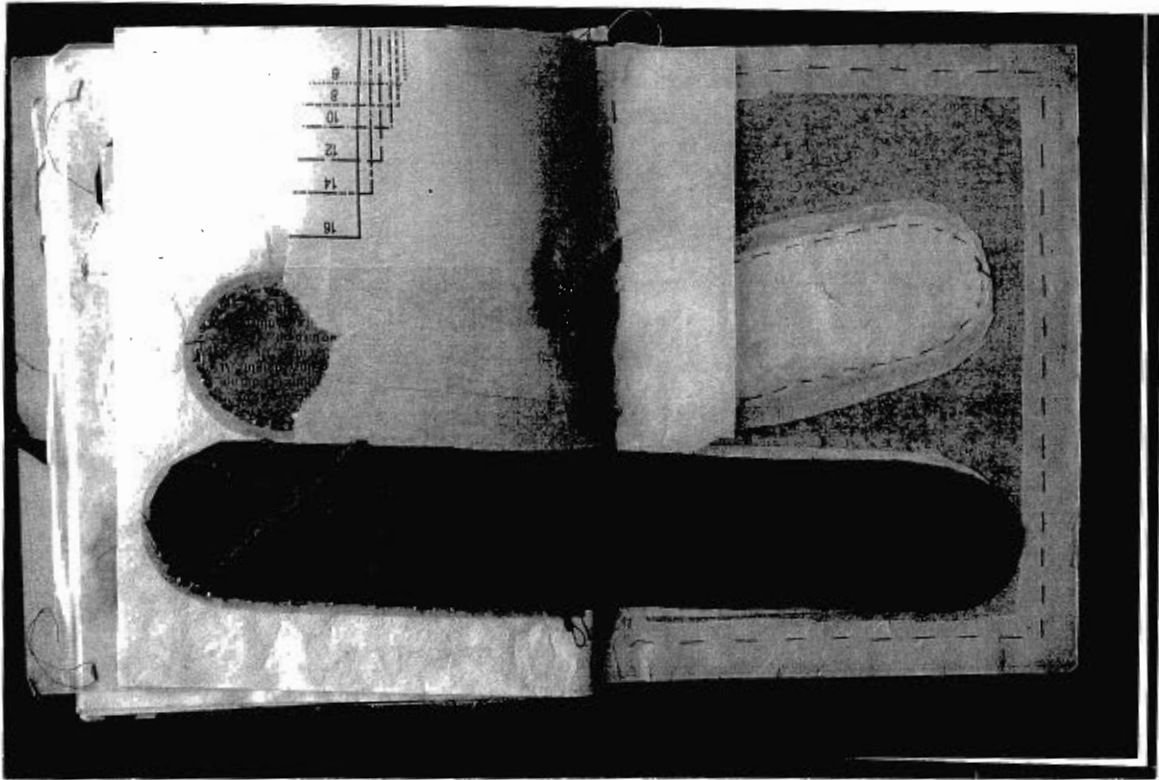


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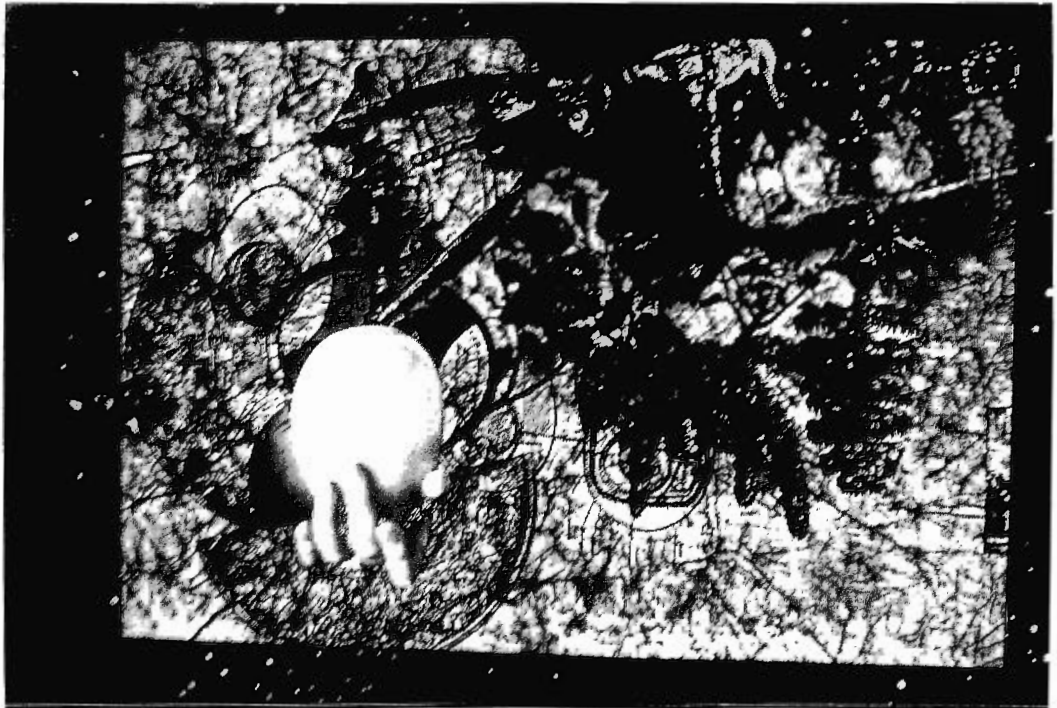




Fig. 54

