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### The Imagined collection, a story

Nancy Knapik

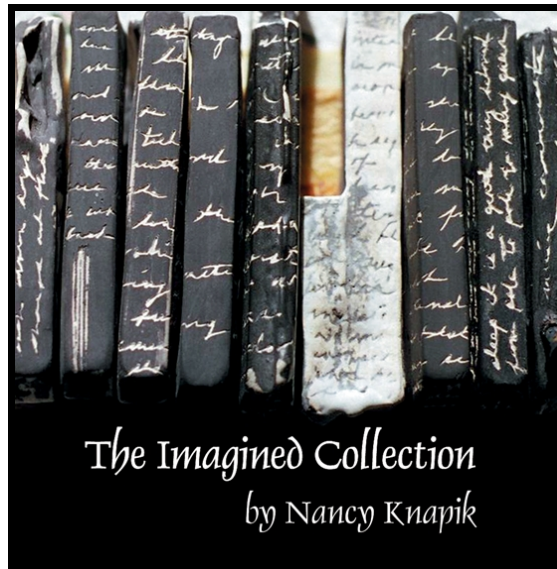
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*The Imagined Collection*  
by Nancy Knapik

MFA Thesis Paper

Rochester Institute of Technology  
School for American Crafts

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## *Abstract*

Music was the creative inspiration that provided the underlying rhythm to this body of work. It was guided by the concept of ethereal sound materializing into tangible found objects whose attributes included the ability to visually invoke the fleeting emotional memories of the listening experience. This written thesis serves to discuss the philosophies and aesthetic choices these conceptual themes prompted while making the work. It includes an artistic exploration of the fascinating nature of collection and the association between art and memory. The oral defense of the work brought to light the need to address the distinction between the *maker* and the *collector*. This written discussion addresses those two personas along with physical descriptions of the final body of work, inherent metaphors, researched influences, and the subtle intent for the work to resonate as a visual language.



## *The Imagined Collection, a story*

*The seats were excellent. Close to the stage, just off center, an ideal location to witness the passionate gesture and expression of the soloist. It was a humid evening. The rain hung in suspension awaiting the breath which could release it into a plummeting precipitation. The rain did happen prior to midway of the concert. An urgent note touched the heavy air and the resonance of rain joined the orchestral music.*

*She enjoyed it, that complete saturation of the senses; the touch of heavy air on her skin, the smell of wet foliage, the salty taste of the rain, the view of the soloist in the rapture of his art . . . . . and the music. The enveloping sound of music mingled with the humidity that hung everywhere. The music was everywhere. She closed her eyes and imagined it; the sounds, the notes. The thick air held the notes played by the musicians on stage. Flute, piano, cello, the notes emanated from each instrument and drifted out into the humid night. Moving upon invisible languid currents, the notes reached her. Eyes remaining closed, she imagined them, the exquisite notes, their forms and surfaces. Images fed by the auditory delight they carried with them. Her imagination held the concept and she no longer needed to close her eyes. It was all there before her.*

*This was a precious time, when the imagined could be seen clearly; when something that exists as an intangible idea begins to take on tangible attributes. She imagined the notes materializing in the spaces closely surrounding each instrument. Sheer at first, hardly detectable, weightless they drifted out assuming more substance and shape. Such hypnotic imaginings brought on by allowing the mind to submit to the senses. This was the effect music could have.*

*The concerto rose to a triumphant conclusion and the applause dominated the night. Her mind returned to the immediate physical world around her. Yet as she slowly exited the large amphitheatre along with the murmuring crowd, she could not help returning to her imaginings. They were still there ... the notes. Like invisible debris the crowd shuffled through them. Strewn about the ground, caught on clothing and tree branches, and some still drifting, taken by the air ..... far beyond reach.*

*To my teachers, friends and especially my family:  
Who believe my imagination holds dreams worthy of pursuit.*

**-Nancy Knapik**

## Introduction

“My originality consists in bringing to life, in a human way, improbable beings and making them live according to the laws of probability, by putting-as far as possible-the logic of the visible to the service of the invisible.”  
-Odilon Redon

While listening to music my imagination is set free to wander. I imagine the notes wandering through the air. Creative inspiration is an elusive process. The imagination can travel far in the vehicle of musical sound. Figuring out how to open the door and get in for the ride is the part which seems to require serendipity. I did get in and these porcelain piano keys are the souvenirs of my travels.

The final installation of work was set up as a small room housing five distinct components. The central focus of the installation was comprised of slip-cast porcelain piano keys designed to represent keepsakes or mementos which signify precious artifacts. The keys differed physically and conceptually from actual piano keys. Instead of mechanical components of a musical instrument, they were objects meant to convey meanings. The technical process of learning how to make the keys resulted in hundreds of these intimate little black & white porcelain forms. They accumulated in my small studio like letters finding their own *alphabetic* order only to be reassembled in the pursuit to rewrite new *words* and implied meanings. I like to imagine this continued shuffling by myself and others imparted each piece with its own history; its own numinous memory. With this foundation, I viewed the keys as words within a language of art. They were an imagined personal language speaking through specific cultural imagery and form. Since the making process involved the transliteration of a musical language into a visual language, the narratives revealed were often abstruse in nature and content yet at times familiar and clear. As with any language there are many levels of personal interpretation and it was my intent for some meanings to remain obscure. The installation contained the complexities inherent in artistic ambiguity.

Quotes from influential artists have been interjected throughout this written thesis to provide further clarification and poetic insight. Historically, these ideas have been explored artistically in beautiful, strange and fascinating ways. What becomes apparent in the process of research is my gravitation toward certain artists and their particular aesthetic sensibilities and the discovery of the threads which tie them to my own interests and to each other. For me, this understood connection satisfied a human balance to the often solitary world of the studio.

This thesis paper concludes with remarks about the ability of art to resonate with ethereal thoughts and emotions that you just can not put a label on. Only the imagination can perceive these elusive qualities; like the keys materializing from the music in the visions of the key collector. In my closing discussion of the object transcending the form I suggest the existence of this sensitive moment of contemplation and pause. Having left the hands of the artist, the work is set free to speak its own language enticing the potential alchemy that can happen between the viewer and the art object.

### ***Topics of Discussion:***

- Music as Inspiration and Underlying Theme . . . . . (pg. 3)
- Language of Music, its Deconstruction  
and Representation as a Tangible Object . . . . . (pg. 4)
- The Piano Key as an Object . . . . . (pg. 5)
- The Object as a Collectible Memento or Artifact . . . . . (pg. 8)
- The Display of the Collection and its Effect on Context . . . . . (pg. 10)
  - Parts of the Installation . . . . . (pg. 12)
- Influences . . . . . (pg. 23)
- The Maker/Artist as Collector . . . . . (pg. 26)
- The Object Transcending its Form . . . . . (pg. 27)

## *Music as Inspiration and Underlying Theme*

“It’s very hard to write about the intangible, to find a way to write more musically. .... I guess that ultimately the work we want to go for is like music. You just have to sense it and just go with it because it will take you on a great journey and a very moving one. There is music you can just listen to again and again and you never tire of it. There is also music that is just for privileged moments.”<sup>1</sup>

As an artist and a student, I have tried to listen to what my own work is saying. I have struggled to develop a vocabulary which will help me to hear my sculptures speak. For me as an artist, the *written* form of the language of art is embodied not only in mark making, but also in physical objects. The process of making sculpture can be viewed as a parallel to writing a word, sentence or even an entire book. I *write* sculpture and it becomes a visual language with something to say. What I hear it saying can be very different from what someone else may hear. Art, especially visual art, is a complex language. It is capable of speaking to the viewer on a very personal level. This results in differences between individual interpretations. Sometimes, however, the language of visual art contains certain universals that can be uniformly understood. I think music as a language of art exemplifies this universal quality. Music has the potential to move many listeners very deeply. Beethoven’s music so moved his audiences that 20,000 followers mourned his loss by attending his funeral. Almost 200 years later, I too enjoy listening to Beethoven’s works along with many other composers past and present. There have been countless moments when I have wept, danced or simply paused due to the intense effect the music had over me. This is why I chose music as a defining concept within my own sculptural language. Where other art forms can present more challenges and obstacles, music has the ability to travel a more direct line to the pulses of emotional response.

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<sup>1</sup> *Through a Glass Darkly - Interview with the Quay Brothers* , Pg. 18

## Language of Music, its Deconstruction and Representation as a Tangible Object

Music is a unique art form because its process and creation involves its own written language. Sound is measured or quantified mathematically, translated into a language of symbols and transformed into a musical composition. It is important to differentiate between the *written* language of the musical process and the *abstract* language of what the music, as an interpretive art form conveys. These piano keys have a direct relationship to the three dimensional *translation* of specific musical compositions or the written form. Their decorative surfaces and how they are presented embody more of the *interpretation* of the music or the emotional response.

Fourth Concerto. 1

Dedicated to his Imperial Highness Archduke Rudolph of Austria.\*

Finished 1806 (?). Published in August, 1808, by the Kunst- und Industrie-Comptoir, Vienna and Pesth. Performed for the first time in public (1) by the composer on Dec. 22, 1808, in the Theater an der Wien.

Allegro moderato. (M. M., following Czerny (2), ♩ = 116.) L. van BEETHOVEN, Op. 58. New revised edition, 1883.

Pianoforte I.

Solo

p dolce

f

8 8 5 5 5 5 4 5 5 5 4 5 5 5 6 b 5 (7) 5 5 5 1 5 119.

10 25 black

107 108 109 white

Figure 1 - Deconstruction of Sheet Music

Beethoven's Piano Concerto IV, Opus 58 quietly begins with a piano solo that has always expressed a haunting, moving quality for me. Upon viewing the sheet music, I was able to *deconstruct* the introduction to this concerto into 119 notes (*figure 1*). These notes could then be replaced or represented with visual objects, in this case, porcelain piano keys. I use

the term deconstruct carefully because it implies a twofold disassembling of the music's physical written structure but also its architecture of meaning. This methodical task of deconstructing the written music then reconstructing it with three-dimensional objects was an attempt to rewrite or transliterate the music while maintaining its language structure.

The result was a silent arrangement that read and resonated visually. The placement of the keys, therefore, was intended to work together as a whole composition. Each key, however, needed to hold its own visually just as a single note can. How could a single auditory note be represented three-dimensionally? The possibilities of interpretation were limitless. In making this choice, I sought an object which could retain the integrity of the musical composition while possessing a unique beauty as a structural form. Apart from my own predilection to the sound and beauty of a piano, its sculptural lines, repetition of octaves and sheer grandness of size became an immediate magnificent choice. However, it was the piano's intimate, bone-like, black and white keys which offered themselves as sublime candidates in my eyes, as ambassadors of the visualization of sound.

### *The Piano Key as an Object*

Musical instruments in and of themselves can be works of art. Throughout history, the crafting of a fine instrument is synonymous with exquisite quality and beauty. The piano is a grand instrument. It is visually impressive as are its complex parts. So many individual components of musical instruments can be viewed for their sculptural beauty. I immediately think of fiddlehead scrolls of stringed instruments, tuning knobs, valves of brass instruments or the contrasting keys of a modern piano. Removed from the complete instrument, piano keys become fragments, silent remnants of the original elegant whole. Unlike the grand instrument, piano keys alone appear diminutive. Other than their material worth, ivory and exotic woods, they become humble, mute and simple forms lacking apparent value. Yet as recognizable components disassembled from a greater whole and therein from their original

function, they are now freed to be reconsidered within a whole new context.

“ But in isolating objects from their original context and making them museological, Boltanski also surrounded them with an aura that transformed these artifacts into modern day relics” <sup>2</sup>

My keys could be held in the palm of the hand. This allowed them to be intimate. They resembled mementos, precious artifacts of another time with an obscure purpose and narrative. What I desired was that we could see these keys anew, that we could experience them from deep within our memory and unexpected senses. In looking at the installation, the viewer realized whoever collected these keys understood them for something that touched a personal note.

As individual objects within a collection, we could further explore the physical attributes of the keys. Each key was different. Some had clean sharp edges and others were twisted and distorted. Some were dull and rough while others were glossy with accents of silver luster highlighting edges. These differences were unified in an overall color palette of black, white and tones in between. Like black letters on a white page; these keys, as objects, had an overall purpose of the translation of written music. The black and white therefore, reflected the visual interpretation of a handwritten sheet of music; black ink on a white page.

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<sup>2</sup> *Deep storage : collecting, storing, and archiving in art* pg.78 )





Figure 2 - Surface Design of Individual Keys

The surface further reflected the connection to written language. Most of the keys were etched with written words, serpentine scrolls and staff-like lines. Occasionally a few words could be deciphered, but most were unreadable (*figure 2*). This allowed the writing to be appreciated on a simple visual level. Without meaning affixed, the writing became decorative, undulating in varied rhythms. The illegibility also suggested a sense of mystery, an otherness of cryptic language and a deterioration of surface that indicated the passage of time.

“Old objects are endowed with a sense of “depth” by their historically minded collectors. Temporality is reified and salvaged as origin, beauty, and knowledge.”<sup>3</sup>

As the maker, the content of the surface writing was important to me. My desire was to instill these small forms with the quality of an ancient relic. The words etched upon the surfaces, therefore, were assuredly relevant to my themes. By staying true to this, my hope

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<sup>3</sup> *Art and Its Significance*, pg 626



was that there could be something felt or perceived within each key that went beyond literal meanings. Visually, they were a trigger to one's memory and emotion that could be felt without explanation from the maker. These memories did not need to be specific. They could be experienced like a familiar scent or taste which we know well yet, the identity had been clouded or lost over time.

"There are things that move you deeply because you can't trap them down. They're beautiful in their elusiveness."<sup>4</sup>

The full meaning and purpose of the keys remained elusive, but through accumulation of a collection and also thoughtful display of the collection, we could appreciate their significance. By deconstructing the piano, and presenting that part of it which was touched by the fingertips of the pianist, we could begin to see and *hear* more than a collection of keys. We began to understand the keys as objects which were organized in such a way as to direct our focus to their individual and overall histories. Just as their ambiguous story told of the visualization of musical notes, their assemblage suggested a musical sanctuary of artifacts/mementos.

### *The Object as a Collectible Memento or Artifact*

"through collecting, the passionate pursuit of possession finds fulfillment and the everyday prose of objects is transformed into poetry, into a triumphant unconscious discourse."<sup>5</sup>

The philosophies surrounding *collection* are complex. Part of the complexity arises from its intersection with definitions of *accumulation*. Collection requires the classification of attributes of the objects compiled whereas accumulation does not. There is something alluring about multiples of similar objects. The acquisition of like objects is the beginning of collection. What constitutes a collection often depends on the collector. It is the collector who determines the criteria and boundaries of what is of value or significance. The collector strives to satisfy

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<sup>4</sup> *Through a Glass Darkly - Interview with the Quay Brothers*, pg 17

<sup>5</sup> *The System of Objects*, pg 93

their sometimes insatiable desire to collect. So, what are the common criteria for collection? Criteria can be universal on a basis of monetary value, rarity, beauty, or historical value.

“The critical history of collecting is concerned with what from the material world specific groups and individuals choose to preserve, value, and exchange.”<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned, individuals can determine what is collectible. Since my collection was based on the imagined, it was just that, very personal. Once my role as maker was complete I then became the collector. As the collector, I made choices on how the found objects were to be sorted and displayed. This was a very important step within the whole of the work. It was through the presentation of the keys that I gave them new intent. I removed them from their original context and presented them so as to suggest something new. I used the keys as components of a visual language to suggest the imagined; one person’s interpretation of seeing music and expressing music’s emotive quality. In my installation, the collector took the expression of sound and redefined it as visual composition.

Assembled as an entire musical instrument, the keys of a piano appear as a complete whole. Removed, they become odd little mechanical relics. It was important for the keys and even the boxes which housed them to appear as found weathered objects.

“Collecting—at least in the West, where time is generally thought to be linear and irreversible—implies a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss. The collection contains what “deserves” to be kept, remembered and treasured. Artifacts and customs are saved out of time.”<sup>7</sup>

Along with aging, assembling the keys into a collection supported the understanding that they were a valued discovery. The small, decorative piano keys became artifacts or in a more emotional sense; mementos of a temporal musical piece. The life of the resonating music with its tempo, rhythms, and movements is fleeting. The little mementos were what embodied a memory of the experience. They were a representation of a sensation and the

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<sup>6</sup> *Art and Its Significance*, pg 621

<sup>7</sup> *Art and Its Significance*, pg 627

lasting emotional response to listening.

“...visual representation takes shape, takes form, takes place as a ritual of remembrance.”<sup>8</sup>

“And as the historical continues to recede from the present, as contemporary events continue to defy and yet demand contemporary representation, it will remain the ongoing aesthetic and ethical challenge of the visual to find the means to make memory matter.”<sup>9</sup>

The art and object making process becomes a manifestation of our relationship to memory.

As Michael Auping states in his writing about Anselm Kiefer’s work:

“art is based on the assumption that a deep field of lost images housed in the memory of the modern mind will resonate through intuitive structures made by the artist.”<sup>10</sup>

The collection resulted as a form of revisiting that which moved the listener deeply. Specific visual elements triggered an inner memory response that returned the viewer to those fleeting moments. Even if subtle, or only suggestive, remembrance was tempted to a more conscience and visual level.

### *The Display of the Collection and its Effect on Context*

The act of redefining music visually required thoughtful and deliberate variations of display and presentation of the keys. Actual size, the piano key is a small object. To establish these small objects as meaningful, I chose to present some of them in glass lidded boxes suited specifically for their size and shape (*figure 3*). This allowed them to be presented in groupings. More importantly, it implied a certain value and fragility inherent with the placement of an object or artifact protected and displayed behind glass.

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<sup>8</sup> *Making Memory Matter*, pg.2

<sup>9</sup> *Making Memory Matter*, pg.24

<sup>10</sup> *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth*, pg. 49



**Figure 3 - Key Box with Glass Lid**

“The vitrine was originally adopted by the Church for preserving and venerating the relics of saints - a practice which helped to enhance the powerful presence of the holy and sacred. It embodies a very particular display aesthetic which has a singular ability to transform magically the most humble object into something special, unique and generally more attractive or fascinating. Once placed in a vitrine, an object is perceived in a completely different way by the viewer, as compared with when it is viewed in its original context.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, Pg. 14

Each component of the installation arranged the collection of keys in a different context. This enabled four necessary expressions:

- 1) The visualization of the intangible/ethereal.
- 2) Different translations/interpretations of music.
- 3) An underlying narrative regarding the concepts of collection.
- 4) An evocation of the object as a vehicle to trigger memory.

The following is a descriptive summary of each component of the key collection and the associated contextual ideas.

### *Parts of the installation*

The thesis work was installed for an exhibition at The Davison Art Gallery in Rochester, NY. The installation encompassed a small room within the gallery with a large open entryway. There were five distinct components comprising the installation. Each component represented a unique expression of the concepts embedded in the work. This exhibition was meant to be one interpretation of assemblage of the art objects. It was my intention that the many pieces could be installed into a multitude of compositions depending on the space and desired effect.

The following words were placed on the wall near the cement piece which represented the entrance of light and music through a window:

*“Notes resonate from a composition for piano.  
Like light through a window, the music permeates the room.  
That which is intangible begins to take form.  
A collection of imagined objects is revealed.”*

## *Collection Envelopes*

*(figures 4,5)*

This piece was visible from the outside of the room. It suggested the process of collection. The envelopes were labeled as to the type and specifics of the single piano key within. They were neatly pinned to the wall in a specimen-like display. They were also *aged* with beeswax to evoke an olfactory sensation since the sense of smell is a powerful trigger of memory. The envelopes were stained with tea, also to suggest age. There are a myriad of metaphors associated with tea. In this usage, the tea was symbolic of the presence of the collector. (This presence is determined from the ritual of tea drinking as one individual's time for personal contemplation. A moment of pause perhaps, when one will take time to fully engage in listening to a piece of music).





**Figure 4 - Collection Envelopes (on right)**



**Figure 5 - Collection Envelopes (detail)**

**Beethoven's Piano Concerto IV**  
(figures 6,7)

This assemblage of keys most closely related to the three-dimensional translation of a specific musical composition. The sequence of keys was determined by the actual sheet music (see *figure 1*). The wall represented the treble clef. The keys were hung at varying heights suggesting the placement of written musical notes along a staff. They also varied in size to suggest the stressing of volume or length of a particular note. The lower shelf was the bass clef. These keys were arranged on a thin steel shelf specifically chosen to visually represent a thin staff of music. Some of the keys on the shelf/staff were housed in clay boxes with glass lids. The boxes pulled this grouping of keys into a musical chord. The boxes also acted as miniature vitrines, reminding the viewer that this was an individual's personal collection.





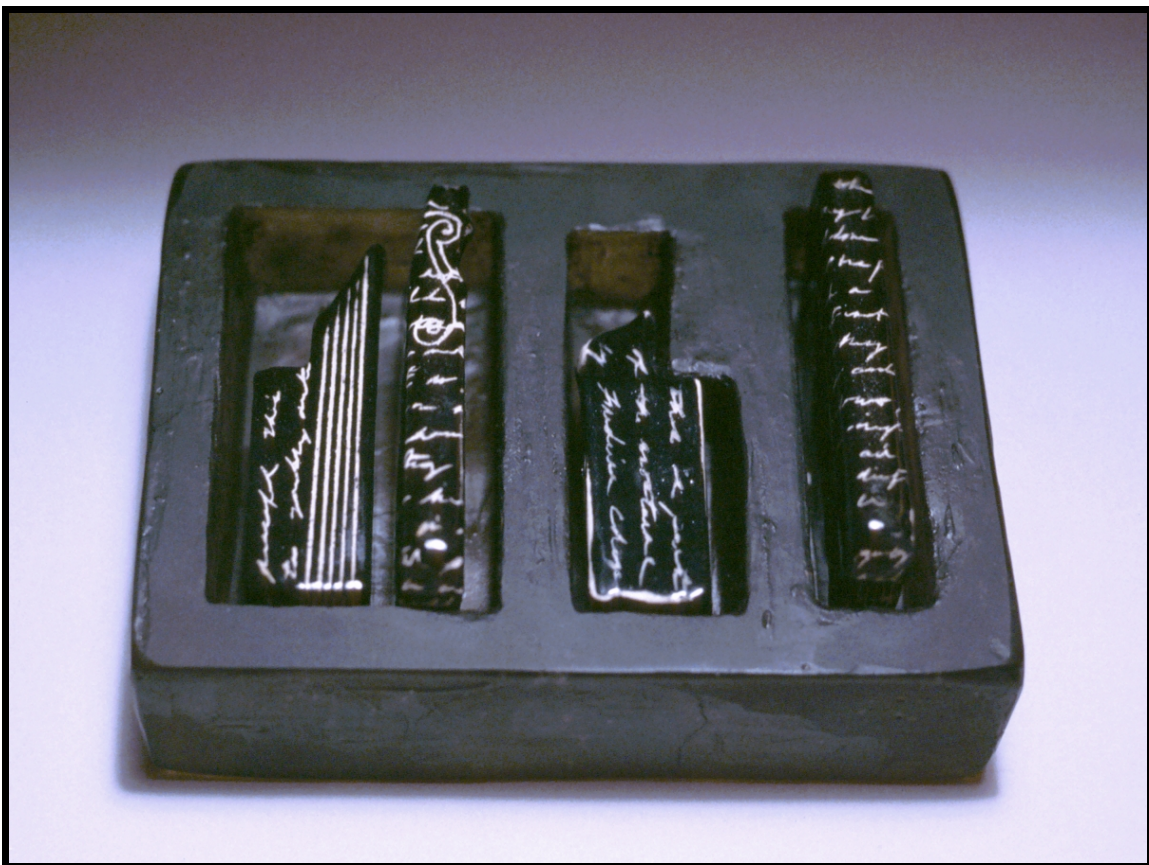
**Figure 6 - Beethoven's Piano Concerto IV**



**Figure 7 - Beethoven's Piano Concerto IV (detail)**

**Chopin's Nocturne for piano #20, opus 72 poth.**  
*(figures 8,9,10)*

All of the keys in this grouping were black (meaning not only flats and sharps, but also keys which are commonly white in modern pianos). Unlike the Beethoven piece, the Chopin piece was more of an interpretation rather than a translation of the composition's sheet music. The keys hanging on the wall were all flats or sharps. They were all spaced evenly and were level with one another allowing a visualization of rhythm and tempo. The boxes on the shelf were made from a darkly colored cast glass and remained un-lidded. All of these elements alluded to night and night music, the nocturne.



**Figure 8 - Glass Box with Black Nocturne Keys**





Figure 9 - Chopin's Nocturne for piano #20, opus 72 poth. (side view)

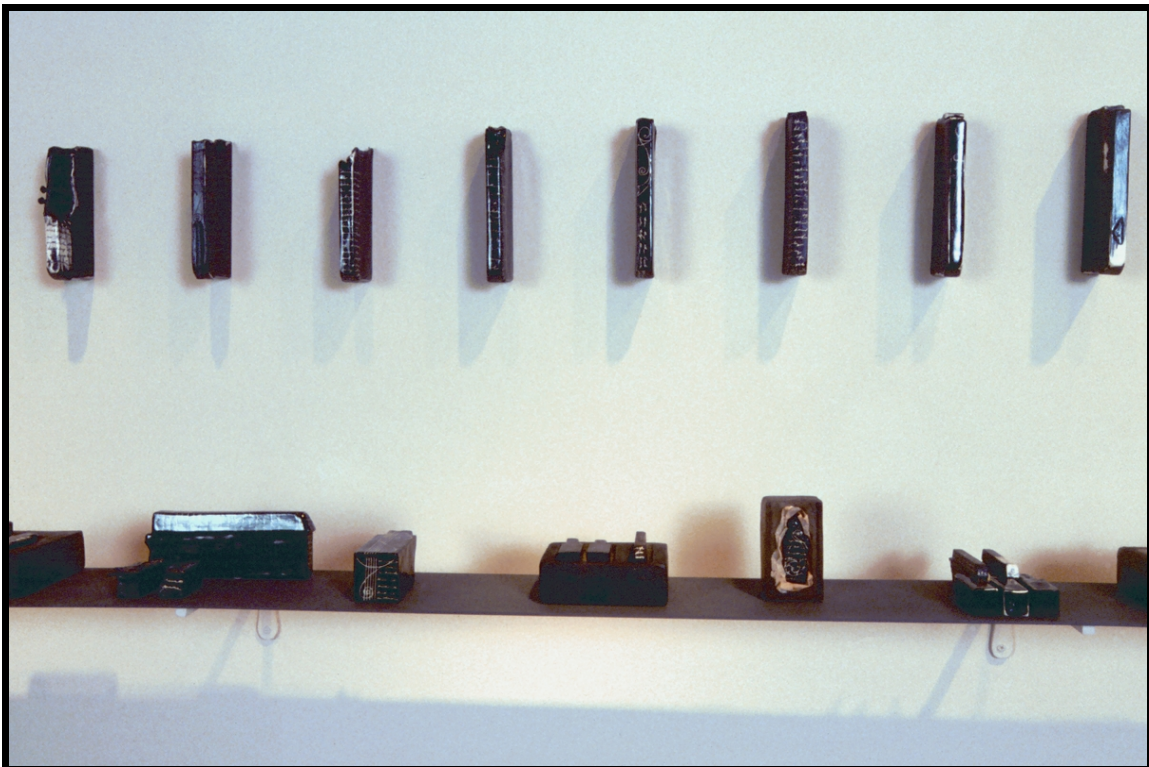


Figure 10 - Chopin's Nocturne for piano #20, opus 72 poth.

## **Cement Light from Window** *(figures 11,12)*

These keys and the way they were displayed became an allegory for the metamorphoses from musical sound into physically tangible objects. Here, the material used and the formal structure of the sculpture both had specific references. The form was comprised of six individual columns of cement housing the keys on the top surface. When viewed from above, the six columns resembled the silhouette of light which was cast onto the floor through a six paned window. The contours became more wide as they moved away from the window. Music enters a room intangibly as does light, yet, the light is visible and so too were the keys. The cement columns alluded to the keys not only being visible, but of tangible “concrete” substance. The concrete also suggested architecture. The keys/notes became part of the architecture of the world around us. The negative areas carved at the top of the columns housed the keys in a nest of tea leaves. Some of the keys appeared to be missing as if not yet materialized or perhaps removed so as to be added to the collection.





**Figure 11 - Cement Light from Window**



**Figure 12 - Cement Light from Window (installation view)**

### **Small Shelf with Two Keys and Spotlight** *(figures 13,14)*

This piece was set apart from the others on a large expanse of empty wall in the corner of the room. Two small weathered keys rested next to each other on a simple steel shelf protruding from the wall. The corner was dimly lit except for a bright, narrow spotlight which shined directly on the two small keys. The lighting effect was powerful. The two little keys visually resonated with a special presence. The impact of display affected the perception of value and importance of the objects. The composition was intentionally minimal to create a visually clear impression of the sweet sound of two notes. It was the simplicity of this visual context which carried its effectiveness.



**Figure 13 - Two Small Spotlit Keys on Steel Shelf**





**Figure 14 - Small Shelf with Two Keys and Spotlight**

## Influences

Music and specific compositions were the obvious underlying influences to this body of work. Naturally, I gravitated to composers who wrote/write for the piano. I would like to speak of six composers. So as not to muddy my response to their works with extensive verbiage sure to fall short of the experiences their music provides, I have chosen to associate one word with each composer. As each word could easily be interchangeable with the others, they reflect more of my personal sensitivity to each individual. All of the following artists compose/d for the piano. It is with these piano compositions in mind that I make my associations. **Frédéric Chopin** for purity, **Ludwig van Beethoven** for passion, **Erik Satie** for otherness, **Thelonious Monk** for style, **Sergei Rachmaninoff** for complexity and **Arvo Pärt** for spirituality. I have only to thank them all for the beautiful places their notes have taken me.

Historic and academic influences on the work derived from a rich source of visual and conceptual artists. Artistically, concepts of object collection and music have been explored in a multitude of ways. The following commentary acknowledges the salient artists and works which provided reference and inspiration.

In researching this thesis work, **Joseph Cornell's** assemblages of found objects were a wonderful starting point for exploration. His boxes of found objects are thoughtful compositions suggestive of personal shrines. In describing one of Cornell's bird boxes, *The Caliph of BagDAD*, c 1954, Lynda Roscoe Hartigan states,

“Listening to music on the radio in his studio frequently transported Cornell into a creative state of mind. This box is named after Francois-Adrien Boieldieu's opera, *The Caliph of Bagdad*, its sprightly overture heard on a cold spring morning as Cornell worked on several of his bird boxes. There is no direct relationship between the title and the work's imagery. Instead, Cornell's intent was to commemorate a fleeting moment that he considered intensely emotional.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination*, pg. 339



The installations of **Ann Hamilton** have affected my art making sensibilities in a myriad of ways. First and foremost, I am drawn to how intelligently she approaches her work. This is evidenced by the fact that I can enjoy the initial *experience* of a piece, but if I take the time to explore it further through reading or research, the experience grows. I feel conceptual art benefits from this strength of a layering of understanding. Ann Hamilton is a master of this strength. Part of this is facilitated by her fascination with language in its multitude of forms. An interest in the complexities of language therefore, being another attraction to her work. Additionally, she effectively creates an experience for the viewer either as a participant or through a presence the viewer can identify with, whom she refers to as “an attendant, a figure, or a tender.” In a symbolic way, I chose to represent my *attendant*, the key collector, through the presence of tea leaves.

**Christian Boltanski** has often used common objects and found debris assembled in shrine-like installations. I looked at these installations for their imbedded themes involving memory and his sensitive technique of giving new meaning to found objects via thoughtful presentation and arrangement. As with Ann Hamilton, there is a deliberate layering of concepts to be discovered in Boltanski’s work.

“Boltanski’s works frequently play on the contrast between the fallibility of human memory and official institutional archives which convey a stark, objective record of the past.”<sup>13</sup>

**Dolores Salcedo’s** use of common found objects in fabricated sculptures and installations provided powerful examples of how the perception of an object can be altered by altering the original presentation and /or context it is regularly viewed in. Her installation of hundreds of chairs occupying a vacant lot at the 2004 Turkey Biennial displays an effective use of multiples or a collection of common objects taken out of context in order to address new meanings. Her installation of niches housing the shoes of missing persons displayed

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<sup>13</sup> *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, pg 43

the impact a simple object or artifact can have on the viewer's memory sensitivities and emotional responses.

Emotionally and physically, **Anselm Kiefer's** work continuously inspires me. Through heavy textures, metaphors and powerful use of specific objects and materials Kiefer engages my imagination. In an exhibition catalogue of his work, the foreword by Marla Price, director of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, explains,

“Like many of the ancient stories to which Anselm Kiefer's works refer, his paintings, sculptures, books, and works on paper present mysterious and deeply effective images. Kiefer's subject matter, both cathartic and dramatic, captures a basic human instinct that reaches for transcendence.”<sup>14</sup>

The historical subject matter of his work employs a tattered, burned, weathered aesthetic reminiscent of ancient beauty and emotional memories. Even without a German heritage, or a complete understanding of his concepts, I am intensely drawn to a universal presence visually embedded within the work.

Finally, the film work of the **Quay Brothers, Stephen and Timothy**, never ceases to enchant me. I have used quotes from them because of their ability to so clearly and poetically articulate the process and desire of working musically.

“It's as if its secret inner music is what the objects are containing. It's this inner music that we want to release.”<sup>15</sup>

Their sensitive usage of light and music crosses boundaries of medium in vastly imaginative, sensual ways. Their films lift from the screen in textural focus of lighting, emotional narratives of music, and ambiguous placement of objects. They have taught me to throw away conventional methods of observation and artistic appreciation. This is a world where music, sound and movement replaces dialog. Instead, film becomes a choreographed ballet. A

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<sup>14</sup> *Anselm Kiefer: Heaven and Earth*, pg. 21

<sup>15</sup> *Through a Glass Darkly - Interview with the Quay Brothers*, pg 10

gallery of paintings is woven into the projection. Story and clarity of meaning are secondary to a language of artistic expression meant to be simply experienced on an individual and intimately personal level.

### *The Artist/Maker as Collector*

The act of collecting in my installation was obviously accommodated by the fact that the collector was the maker of the assembled objects. As maker, I was able to fashion the keys to fit personal aesthetic preferences. For example, all the writing on the keys was a personal dialog of my thoughts during the making process. The surfaces of the keys were blacks, whites, greys, and some were painted and glazed with silver lusters. I equate sound with color and these are quiet colors for me. I wanted to view this collection of porcelain keys as a place of introspection and quiet contemplation. Bright colors sing loudly in my eyes and therefore, were intentionally omitted. Lighting and shadows provided any desirable drama and punctuation.

“What happens in the shadow, in the grey regions, also interests us - all that is elusive and fugitive, all that can be said in those beautiful half tones, or in whispers, in deep shade.”<sup>16</sup>

All these aesthetic choices quietly translated a visual narrative. As the maker of the keys and boxes, all the materials utilized in my installation of work were thoughtfully chosen to enhance the implied meanings through metaphor. A suggested list of metaphors is as follows.

### *Metaphors of materials:*

- Clay (porcelain) / fragility and quality
- Clay prior to firing / tactility of maker to key & pianist to key, touch
- Glass (window) / entering of light/ the intangible
- Glass (box lids) / vitrine-like display, preserved artifact
- Tea / the presence of the maker, staining/age, a pause for contemplation
- Cement / tangibility & architecture

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<sup>16</sup> *Where the Dust has Settled: The Brothers Quay*, Pg. 1

- Beeswax / aging quality/ appeal to olfactory sense/ trigger of memory
- Steel Shelves (when viewed straight on) / the thin lines of a staff

What became necessary in the making of the key collection was to give it just enough history and age to distance the maker from the collection so it could be unbound from that individual's narrative. By instilling a sense of uncertainty, soft edges, stained surfaces, lids rimmed with patina, weathered line, the suggestion of passage of time released the objects from distinct purpose and understanding. Ambiguity became an invitation to multiple layers of narrative making the collection less private and more accessible to alternative interpretation. The unknown gave intrigue to a new audience.

### *The Object Transcending its Form*

It seems for me, this is ultimately the elusive desire. As an artist, we have the choice to respond to our internal focus on the work even if it strays from the influence of our audience. By remaining true to that focus, we risk the potential for the work to be marginalized. It is at this time when we have only ourselves as our audience, an audience of one that we answer to. In the creation of this installation, the choices I made served to satisfy my own aesthetic preferences. I knew the carefully arranged objects were cast porcelain piano keys. To another viewer this may not have been obvious. This did not matter. The intent was that they were visually intriguing enough to speak to the viewer and invite a moment to pause.

“A picture, a book, a piece of music, can remind me of feelings, thinkings, I did not even know I had forgot. Whether art tunnels deep under consciousness or whether it causes out of its own invention, reciprocal inventions that we then call memory, I do not know.”<sup>17</sup>

Not unlike a cabinet of curiosities or a reliquary of antiquities, the key collection was meant to tempt a reaction deep within the viewer; to trigger a memory response. Ultimately; this audience of one in the studio, hoped the passion I poured in to the making of the work was true enough to remain intrinsic to the finished objects so as to give them their own visual

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<sup>17</sup> *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, Pg. 13

voice, their own language. There is a quote that poetically describes this idea of the language of art. It is as follows:

“The artist, like the poet, eludes any system, whether good or bad, religious or moral; he negates himself, dies in favor of an unknown and indefinable force, and aspires to establish the right relationship with forms and their origins. He wants to succumb to their primacy and lets himself be shattered and overwhelmed not for any banal or general reason, whether it be ideological or sociological, anonymous or impersonal, but only for one exceptional reason: the survival of the language of art.”<sup>18</sup>

This quote was written by Germano Celant in response to the artwork of Anselm Kiefer. This quote secured a place on my studio wall as a challenge during the making of the work. I read it time and again and intellectually challenged its virtue. I read it and challenged myself to strive to be that artist who dies in favor of an unknown, an unknown that in turn would be able to speak for itself. It remains on my work space wall to this day because there, in my studio, it is not the common English language that prevails. There, my humble language of objects and marks are what resonate with the passions of my imagination.



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<sup>18</sup> *Venezia Contemporaneo: Anselm Kiefer*, Pg. 13

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