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## Exploring Visual Expressions to Articulate Thoughts on Human Existence

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**ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**Exploring Visual Expressions  
to Articulate Thoughts on Human Existence**

**By  
Mieko Tachibana**

**April 2007**

## Thesis Committee Approvals

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Date

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Date

To my husband, Khosrow Vakhshouri, who encouraged  
and supported my pursuit of a MFA degree.

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## **PREFACE**

I have been thinking about ontological questions since my childhood. At nights in bed, my mind would wonder about questions such as where was I before I was born?, what will happen after I die?, why do I exist?, what is existence?, what exists outside of the universe?, what is time?, if there is a beginning and an end to time, what existed before and what will happen after time? and ...so on. These questions made the existence of everything that I saw and experienced questionable. These questions made me fear that my existence itself was unreal and could disappear at any time. I assume that everyone has thought about these questions in one form or another. Most people forget or stop thinking about them, because either they are too busy with everyday life or they consider that it is absurd to ponder questions that probably have no definite answers. But, I remained curious.

I was the type of child who had thousands of questions about everything; from the dog next door to the universe. Schools and experiences gave me some of the answers, but my curiosity about human behavior and existence has developed over time. When I was in elementary school, I saw men walk on the moon on TV. A reporter was proudly explaining about this achievement of science and technology, and how much this project cost. On the next channel, there were the broadcast scenes of people suffering and dying from serious starvation in impoverished countries. I asked my father, that if there was money to spend on the Apollo project why they did not feed the starving people first? My father replied, "You will know when you grow up." I think I know what he meant now.

The purpose of the Apollo project was to further our knowledge and understanding of science with which we hoped in turn one day, would help us cure starvation. But our real intentions are far more complex. We feel sorry for the starving people but we can

easily ignore them. Biologically we are not programmed to take care of and provide happiness to others. We live by taking other lives. Although we don't eat each other, we do fight over power in our society.

Interestingly, we have developed a sense of morality in our society that wishes no harm to others. This behavioral conflict interests me. The recent development of animal and environmental rights issues further complicates this dichotomy; both the feeling of caring for other living creatures and the need to take other lives in order to survive.

Recently, my interests have led me to the study of self-consciousness, because the possession of self-consciousness is one of the important elements which separates us from other creatures and gives us our identity as "human beings". The existence of human beings and their identity interests me and has given me the motivation to create art.

# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to broaden my thoughts on human existence and identity in nature and the universe. It is also to explore the varied visual expressions of my thoughts, feelings, and ways to engage the audiences.

I am interested in the purpose behind human existence, human behavior and its relationship to nature. Our brains are far more developed compared to other creatures, and as a result, we are able to sustain our race on this planet. But at the same time, the same brain makes us inquisitive and curious creatures, compelling us to ask questions like “why do we exist?” We have tried to find the purpose to our existence for centuries, but so far have not found a good explanation. Without knowing our purpose, we are forced to participate in a survival game from the moment we are born into this world. Human beings have survived well on this planet. We have over populated this planet and have disrupted its natural balance. We kill others but we do so for our survival and this makes us feel guilty. Ironically with our advanced brain comes a moral responsibility that burdens and complicates our lives. This is the price we pay for our evolution.

To refine these thoughts, I researched other people’s thoughts about the existence of human beings, especially focusing on western philosophy and current cognitive sciences both of which have had great influence on this thesis project.

I tried to experiment with various possible visualizations of my thoughts and feelings through four different installations. *Video and installation 1* is about the existence of human beings. In *Installation 1*, I limited my personal visual images, and instead used language to convey my thoughts. *Installation 2* is about the relationship between human beings and nature, and is expressed through personal images about this issue using mixed media. *Installation 3* is about the existence of human beings on a historical time line incorporating printed images on wooden balls.

# **CONCEPT**

## **My Views toward the Human Race**

Human beings have endured on this planet by using their prominent brains. As a result, we enjoy the fruits of our prosperity. But we forget that we are just a part of nature and behave as if our existence is special. We consume nature as if everything in this world belongs to us. Mountains are cut through. Green forests and prairies turn into the gray forests of concrete. We keep multiplying and consuming natural resources recklessly. This has led to numerous numbers of living creatures losing the opportunity to survive, and so they have perished. The wastes that humans produce (both biological and non-biological) are not easily recycled naturally. This accumulation pollutes the environment. We are out of the food chain cycle. One can compare humanity with cancer, which eats away at healthy environments, and then metastasizes to other untouched healthy environments leaving behind nothing but a desolate, barren wasteland.

We treat other animals as if we own them. Many animals are forced to have painful lives. Domestic hens, for instance, are cooped in small cages with hundreds and thousands of other hens with only the space to move their necks to feed. They cannot move or spread their wings. Their entire lives are spent eating and laying eggs without socializing with others. Similarly, monkeys who are chained in laboratories for the purpose of medical research are too readily expendable.

We project a “ruling” attitude towards our planet, but we don’t even know who we are and the reason why we exist. Biologically, the purpose of existence of any species is to leave behind descendants. It is programmed in our DNA, and our will cannot control it. We are born and acquire the tools needed to survive in this world. We fall in love, marry, procreate, work hard to make a living and die. This process is repeated endlessly. Why do we do so? Is there more beyond this act?

While others live each day through their animal instincts, we humans spend a tremendous amount of time and energy searching for the answers to who we are and why we exist. Anthropologist, Loren Eiseley described well the isolation of human beings from nature in his book, *Star Thrower* :

“There is nothing more alone in the universe than man. He is alone because he has the intellectual capacity to know that he is separated by a vast gulf of social memory and experiment from the lives of his animal associates. He has entered into the strange world of history, of social and intellectual change, while his brothers of the field and forest remain subject to the invisible laws of biological evolution. Animals are molded by natural forces they do not comprehend. To their mind there is no past and no future. There is only the everlasting present of a single generation – its trails in the forest, its hidden pathways of the air and in the sea. Man, by contrast, is alone with the knowledge of his history until the day of his death. When we were children we wanted to talk to animals and struggled to understand why this was impossible. Slowly we gave up the attempt as we grew up into the solitary world of human adulthood; the rabbit was left on the lawn, the dog was relegated to his kennel.” (Loren Eiseley, 37)

Ironically the same organ, the brain, that has made human beings flourish on earth has also isolated us from other species and has resulted in our restless search for our own identity. Our fear and anxiety towards the unknown has given rise to our religious beliefs. We use religion to explain the unknown hoping that it will give us peace of mind. Unfortunately different religious beliefs have led to discord, hate and even wars. As a consequence, there will never be peace in our minds.

All religions in principle teach us to care about others, so do our morals. We care about others and feel guilty towards the plants and the animals that we hurt and destroy. Today, we advocate animal safety and protection, and we claim that the way we treat animals is morally wrong. But at the same time, we eat domestic animals. We turn a blind eye to how these animals are cruelly raised and we don't appreciate the lives that are sacrificed in order to feed us. Without any hesitation, we accept the western medicines that have been tested on animals. We stress the protection of environment, but yet we keep using

synthetic detergent and disposable utensils and recycle wastes only when we feel like recycling. We are hypocrites.

But, this self-centered and self-serving behavior is an instinct that every life form possesses in order to survive. We build our life from other life forms in nature. We dominate and manipulate our environment to create the best possible life for ourselves.

This is seen in Darwin's theories of evolution, which describes the origin of morals as having a self-centered purpose. Take the example of two types of birds; those that groom each other and those that groom themselves. The former group survives better as they remove life-threatening ticks from each other in areas they themselves can't reach. These birds groom each other because of self-centered interests. Human morals have developed from these same animal instincts over thousands of years (Uchii). But over time we have blurred the line between the animalistic instinct to survive, and the moral instinct to take care of others.

## **Research for Concept Development**

In order to further my understanding of human existence, I researched the western philosophies and their thoughts on humans and their relationship with their natural surroundings, as well as a more objective and cognitive explanations as thought in the field of cognitive sciences.

### **(The Western philosophy)**

What is the purpose of the world? Is the world everything that we perceive, or is there more that exists beyond our comprehension? What is the purpose of human beings in relation to the world? Why do we exist? These were the ultimate philosophical questions that have been pondered by western philosophers for centuries. They tried to understand the existence of objects in the world and their relationship to human perception. For example, if an apple exists in front of two people, how do we know if the two people see the apple in the same way? Perception is a private experience and we acknowledge the objects subjectively in our own ways. Furthermore, the philosophers thought that as long as we recognize objects subjectively we could not understand the “real” or “true” existence of the objects in the world. As a result, the philosophers questioned how we could acknowledge the existence of objects objectively.

Plato believed that there were two realms in the world: the visible realm (subjective world) and the intelligible realm (objective world). The objects in the visible realm can be recognized by the five senses. On the other hand, in the intelligible realm there are absolute entities, called “Truth” or “Essence” which are not identifiable through the five senses. The intelligible realm is eternal, absolute and superior to the objects in the visible realm because objects in the visible realm physically change over time and how one views them is subjective. But, the objects in the intelligible world are acknowledged objectively. According to Plato, a human’s ultimate goal should be to reach the highest realm (intelligible realm) but rather the “essence” of all visible objects are comprehended through cognitive state (Plato *Republic*).

On the other hand, some philosophers believed that there was only one's self-existence, and the world around us was just a phenomenon in our minds. Such believers were called "Solipsists." Descartes' famous statement, "Cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am or I am thinking, therefore I exist) describes solipsism. We can endlessly question whether the things in this world really exist or not. But we are not able to prove the existence of objects in front of us or even the existence of our own bodies, because it could be a dream that we are experiencing. However, the mere fact that we engage in thinking activities, suggests that the mind (which recognizes "I") must exist (Takeda 25).

Kant asserted that it did not matter whether the intelligible realm existed or not, the cognitive ability of human beings is limited so that we can't acknowledge the "Truth" or appreciate objects objectively. We also cannot answer questions such as what is existence (whether it be ours, the world, or God). We can only comprehend phenomena and the appearance of things around us (Takeda 28).

On the other hand, Hegel argued that we could acknowledge the "Truth." As adults and children have different cognitive abilities, the level of human's cognitive abilities gradually increases over time and eventually we can reach the level of the "Truth" (Ross 143).

Nietzsche insisted that the "Truth" or the intelligible realm does not exist, but instead, there are only various interpretations of reality. Individuals have different interpretations. There is no right or wrong interpretation (Takeda 32-33).

Husserl's theory was similar to Kant's theory in that there was no way to understand the objective truth. However, we are able to distinguish between dream and reality because we acknowledge the existence of objects in this world by how our perception works. Human beings' consciousness is roughly divided into memory, imagination, thoughts and perception. We can control these factors by either voluntarily recalling them or repressing them. However, this does not apply to perception. Perception is the awareness that there is more than just self-existence, that there is something else outside of the "self" (Takeda 193-197).

Heidegger further asked the fundamental question; “what does it mean to exist in the first place?” He asserted that the relationship between human beings and the world created the meaning to exist for both human beings and the world. To live is to have the desire to live and that depends on how the world appears to us.

According to him, there has always been a world around us, and we always have desires and interests in the world, such as the desire to live as long as possible, the desire to be comfortable, the desire to have pleasure and avoid uncomfortable pain and suffering, the desire to possess many things (such as materials, money and power) or the desire to be loved and recognized by others.

In order to fulfill these desires, we pay attention to the world around us, and we objectify it. For example, a chair is to sit on when we are tired, that it exists to fulfill the desire to be comfortable. A piece of paper is to write upon, such as love letters or a resume, with the purpose to fulfill the desire to be loved and recognized. We even show interests towards things that are not in direct relation to our lives such as the look of stones on a mountaintop or creatures in the deep sea. We are curious about our surroundings because they may in some ways effect our lives directly or indirectly.

Our desires change depending on how the world appears to us. The value, meaning and purpose of objects are constantly being reexamined in our minds. A chair, for instance, is usually to sit upon, however in case of a fire, one might use it to break a window to escape. This time, the chair is given a new meaning (or re-objectified) as “an object to be used to break a window” to fulfill the desire to live (Heidegger section 14).

As these examples show, we constantly have desires for the world, and we exist in order to fulfill them. The objects in the world, on the other hand, are given the meaning or the reason to exist by us and by our desires. We have also created space and time to fulfill the desire to go to certain places by a certain time. We understand ourselves by finding our desires in the world and by doing so we give meaning to our existence.

## **(Cognitive Science)**

Since Plato, western philosophers have tried to understand human existence through human perception. This search is succeeded today by philosophers like David Chalmers. He has tried to explain human existence through human cognition. He actively organizes and participates in conferences and associations, such as the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness (ASSC) and the biennial conference in Tuscon, “Toward a Science Consciousness” (sponsored by the University of Arizona, established in 1994). These associations and conferences bring people of different fields, such as cognitive scientists, neuroscientists, psychologists, social scientists, and philosophers together. Today, the issue of existence is no longer limited to the field of philosophy, but rather it has spilled into other disciplines such as the neurosciences, which attempts to answer the question through a more scientific method.

Human beings recognize the world around them through five senses - vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. These senses are recognized by neuronal activities in our brains. It is thought that there are over 100 billion neurons in the human brain. Their role is to transmit electrical impulses from one to another. The electrical pulses are transmitted through chemicals, called neurotransmitters from one neuron to the next through spaces called synapses (diagram 1) (Mogi 25).

We recognize and experience the world around us through these neuronal activities. However, these recognitions are private experiences. For example, when one sees an apple, the visual information is obtained through the eyes, passed to the brain to be processed. When two individuals see the same red apple, there is no way to confirm that the red that one sees and the red that the other sees are the same (Crick & Koch 1998).

We can to some degree communicate the things that we experience in everyday life through such tools as language, but we can't objectively share those experiences with others. We know that there is a world around us but we only experience things from “our” point of view. The things “we” experience and feel happen through firing of these

neurons inside our brain. Neuroscience has proved that human beings cannot recognize the world objectively, which philosophers had been arguing for centuries.

Many living creatures possess this sensual recognition, but human beings are one of the few who can distinguish self and others and recognize the existence of ourselves. For example, we not only recognize an apple, but we also possess the ability to recognize that we are recognizing an apple. This is self-consciousness.

It is thought that self-consciousness is the link between the five senses that leads to an experience. For example, the experience of eating involves the sight of the food, its smell, its taste and its texture. These senses are input simultaneously in parallel pathways into our brains, and information is treated independently in different parts of the brain. The role of self-consciousness is thought to be related in some ways to connecting these separate senses together and eventually converting them into an experience (Mogi 84).

This self-consciousness creates the awareness of “I” and ones existence in the world. “I” is created by electrical activities in the brain, and it exists in the brain (Mogi 13).

Neuroscience has tried to understand how the brain and its electrical activities can create the awareness of “I.” However, we still have a long ways to go.

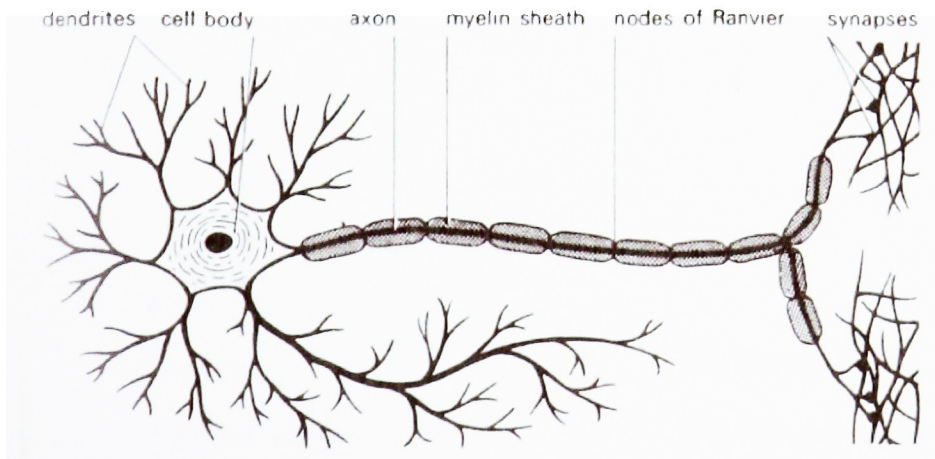


Diagram 1

Simplified diagram of typical neuron. Electrical charges are receives from other cells by the dendrites. Their overall effect on the cell body governs the rate at which impulses are sent out via the axon and transmitted to the dendrites of other calls at the synapses (Russell 35).

## (The influences of western philosophy and cognitive science on my work)

The theories of the western philosophies and the cognitive sciences have had a great influence on my work. For *Installation 1* and 2, the installation rooms represent a human brain. A viewer, who is inside the room, is physically isolated from the outside by the walls. By isolating the viewer, I try to express how humans recognize or perceive the world; the private experience in one's brain. For *Installation 1*, a viewer encounters hidden written words on the walls. It implies the way human beings communicate with others. For *Installation 2*, a viewer faces a centered object which represents the brain. This represents self-consciousness, which one can recognize from the outside looking into the brain (Diagram 2).

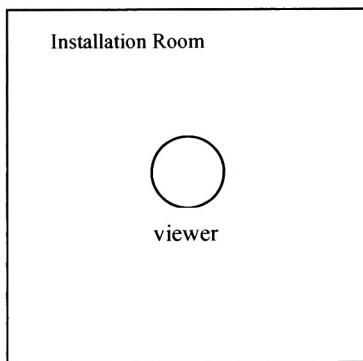
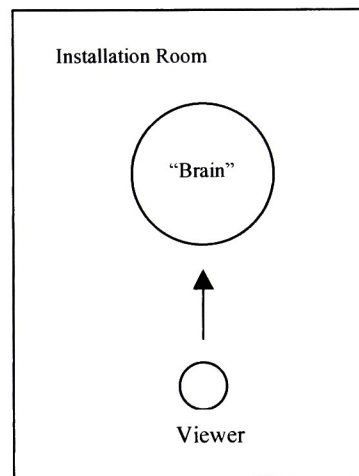


Diagram 2

### *Installation 1*

The installation room as a brain. A viewer is in the room isolated from the outside.



### *Installation 2*

Self-conscious model.  
A viewer sees the brain (oneself) from the outside.

## **VIDEO WORK**

Figure 1, *Untitled*

### **(Materials)**

Camcorder: Sony DCR-VX2100

Editing software: Premiere

Final product: DVD

### **(Music)**

Electro-acoustic music

*"Feather Weight"*

*"Soma"*

*"Panic"*

Composed by Vera Ivanova, Edited by Mieko Tachibana

This video was shot in an installation piece that was the preliminary version of *Installation 1*. The preliminary version of the installation was 24 feet x 24 feet, which was bigger than the *Installation 1*. *Installation 1* was smaller due to the circumstance of the space of the exhibition. The video runs endlessly, and a viewer can listen to the sound and the music of the video using headphones.

### **(Plot of the Video)**

A human subject (a female in this video) suddenly is dropped into a completely white room with white walls, ceilings, and floors. She looks around turning her head as if she is trying to figure out where she is, but there is nothing around but the white walls. She starts to touch and searches the walls with her hands, then, she realizes the walls are covered by a white fabric. As she continues to search the white fabric walls, she finds written words behind the fabric. The words appear through the white fabric when she presses the translucent fabric against the walls. She runs her fingers over the fabric along the words to reveal them.

"Why do you exist? "

Right after the sentence, an abstract image appears; black ink is gushing out and covering a white screen rapidly while changing its abstract form, like a bad omen or evil. She continuously searches and more words appear behind the fabric.

“Where were you before you were born? ”

The next scene involves another abstract image with more black ink.

“What happens after you die? ”

“How do you know you really exist? ”

“How do you know things you see really exist? ”

She suddenly feels anxious and uneasy. As she looks at her hands they begin to disappear into the white space along with her legs. Images of the universe gradually overlap on top of her. She is slowly and quietly assimilated and disappears into the white space. There is only tranquilly and serenity of the white room left behind.

### **(Conceptual Description and Goals of the video work)**

#### **Closed Space (The Room the video was shot)**

The room represents the physical existence of a human – the physical isolation of a human from the outer world. Everything “I” see, touch, smell, hear and taste are just phenomenon happening within our brains. Humans are confined to their brains and isolated from others. We can’t share any experiences we feel.

### **Emptiness of the space**

The emptiness of the space represents the state when we are born into this world. We start our lives from nothingness; the memories from our ancestors have been stored in our genes but our brains seem to carry no information – They are empty.

### **White Fabric**

Just as the skin of humans delineates the inner-self from the external world, so does the white fabric. It serves as that skin to act as a physical boundary between the inside and the outside. The fabric also acts as a veil. The ontological questions are placed behind the fabric. They are fundamental questions to human existence, but people are too busy in their everyday lives to think about them. The questions are “veiled” from our busy lives and are just one thin veil away from our consciousness.

### **The Color White**

The color white represents nothingness – when babies are born, they start from nothing. White also symbolizes the existence of everything; when all colors of the rainbow converge, it becomes white. The white also symbolizes “Fog.” Our lives are full of uncertainty; we don’t know our future. As we go through life, we are surrounded by the uncertainty of it, just as the person in the video walks through the fog.

### **Touching and Exploring the Fabric by Hand**

Exploring the fabric by hands represents an individual’s search for the meaning of life, and the human identity both in nature and in the universe.

### **Abstract Ink Images**

The abstract ink images imply the feeling of uneasiness and anxiety which comes from the unknown and the uncertainty of human existence.

This video is about our lives; from the time we are born, to the time we die, searching for the answers to who we are and what the purpose of our lives are, but inevitably dying without them.

At the beginning of the scene, a human subject suddenly appears in the empty space. This denotes the birth of the person into this world. The human life begins from nothingness. We know nothing when we are born; nor do we know where we are, who we are, and why we are here. Our first clue to the world around us is through touch. Newborn babies try to figure out the world around them by touching, and they try to distinguish the boundaries between their bodies and others by touching (Platek, Thomson, & Gallup 2004). After the person in the video appears in the empty space, she starts exploring the white walls with her hands. This act implies how we understand the world around us.

The person in the video continues to explore the walls. This gesture implies that we are struggling to survive and searching for the meaning of our lives. We are occupied by our everyday busy lives and struggle to survive in this society. The gesture of exploring the white walls also suggests seeking the future. Our lives are full of uncertainty; we don't know the future. It is just like we are walking through white fog, as suggested by the white fabric. We usually forget and suppress these fundamental questions in our busy lives. However, they sometimes come to surface in our consciousness, just as the written words appear behind the white fabric.

Once we recall the fundamental questions of life, they in turn invite other questions, and an uneasy feeling of the unknown gradually overtake us, just as the black ink in the video spreads and eventually overtakes the white surface.

We search desperately for the answers but we leave this world without them. Just as we are born into this world, we return back to nothingness (like the person in the video disappearing into the white empty space).

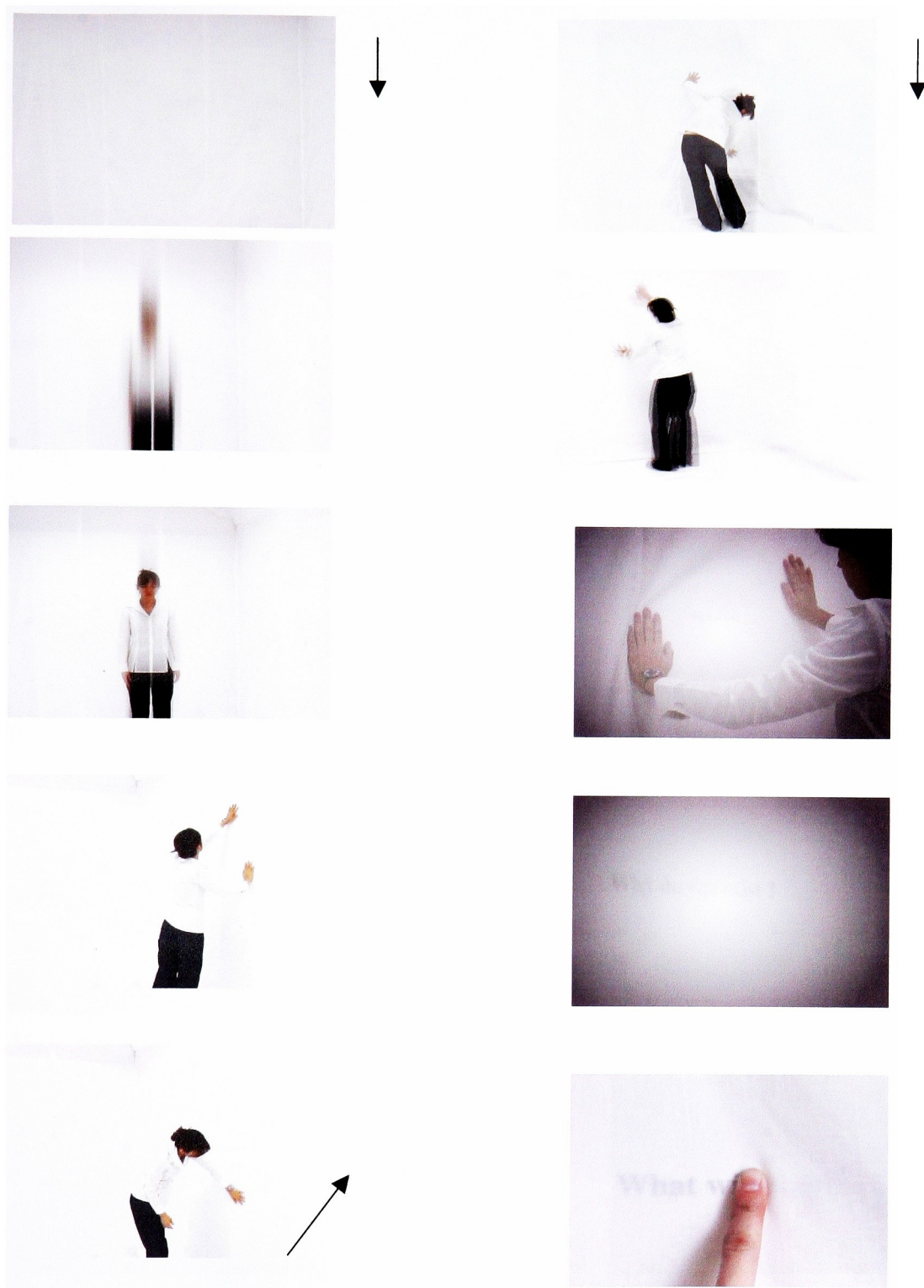


Figure 1  
Video Work

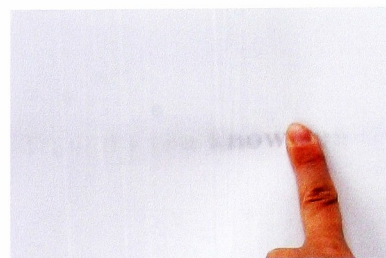
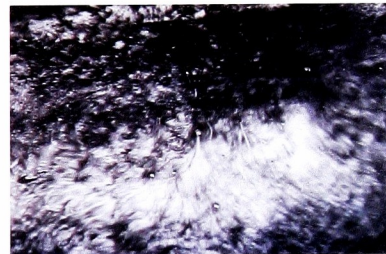
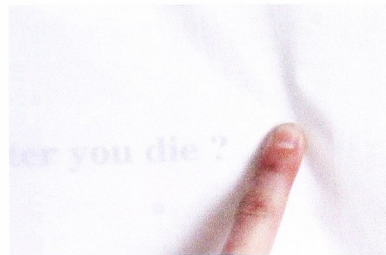
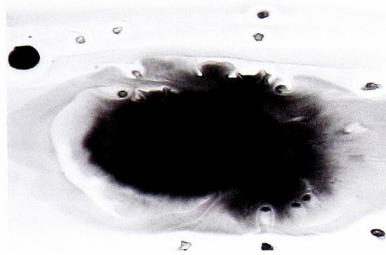
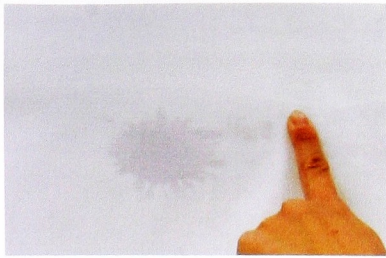


Figure 1 (continued from previous page)  
Video Work

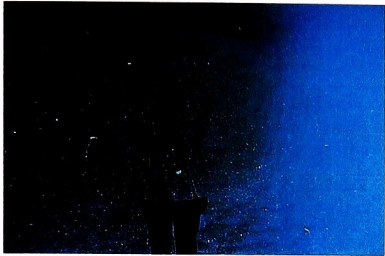
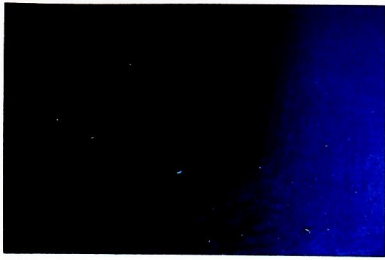


Figure 1 (continued from previous page)  
Video Work

# **INSTALLATIONS**

## **Installation 1**

Figure 2, *Untitled*

### **(Materials)**

White fabric

Words printed on papers

### **(Words on the Wall)**

“Please feel free to walk in to the room and explore the walls with your hands.”

“This room represents the world of human beings. We are suddenly born into the world without knowing the meaning of our existence. We are struggling to find this meaning, but leave the world without the answers.”

### **(Visual Description)**

*Installation 1* is a 4 feet x 8 feet room with all the surfaces (the ceilings, the floors, and the four walls) covered by white fabric. The light source comes from the ceiling through the white fabric. The light reflects on all the white surfaces and creates a bright white room. On the walls are written texts hidden behind a fabric. The room is designed to be viewed by one person at a time.

The written texts;

Where were you prior to your birth?

What will happen after you die?

What is existence?

Why do you exist?

What is the meaning of your existence in this world?

How do you know you really exist?

How do you know the things you see really exist?

What is this world that we are living in?

Was there a beginning to this world?

If so, what was before the beginning?

Will this world end? Then, what will happen after the end?

Is time infinite?

If time is infinite, how does infinity exist in this world?

Is there a beginning to time?

If so, what did exist before time?

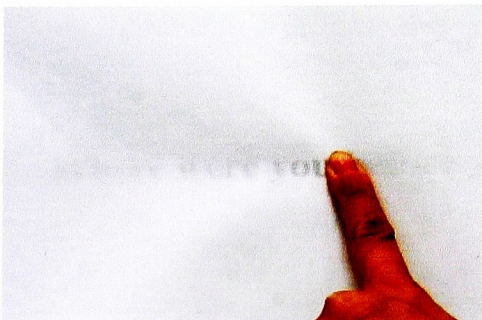
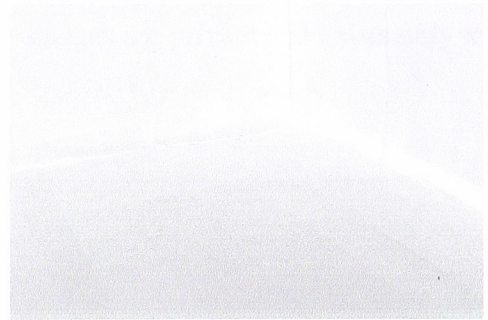
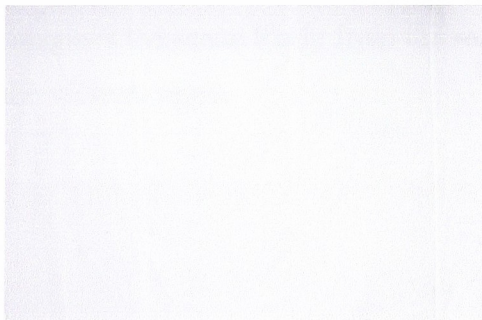
If the world was born from nothingness, what is nothingness?

### **(Scenario with the Audience)**

A viewer opens a white curtain and enters the installation room. The curtain closes by itself behind the viewer, and they are within an empty space with white walls. The bright white space surrounds the viewer in silence. The viewer is now at a loss – “what is this place, what am I supposed to see or do here?” A while later, the viewer notices that the walls are covered by a white fabric, and starts to touch and explore it. Then, they see something behind the fabric. Suddenly, words appear:

“Why do you exist?”

The texts appear through the white fabric only when the fabric is pushed against the wall. The texts are arranged sporadically on the walls. In order to read the texts, one has to press the fabric against the wall and run it along the entire length of the sentence. The audience searches for more hidden words by exploring the surface of the fabric.



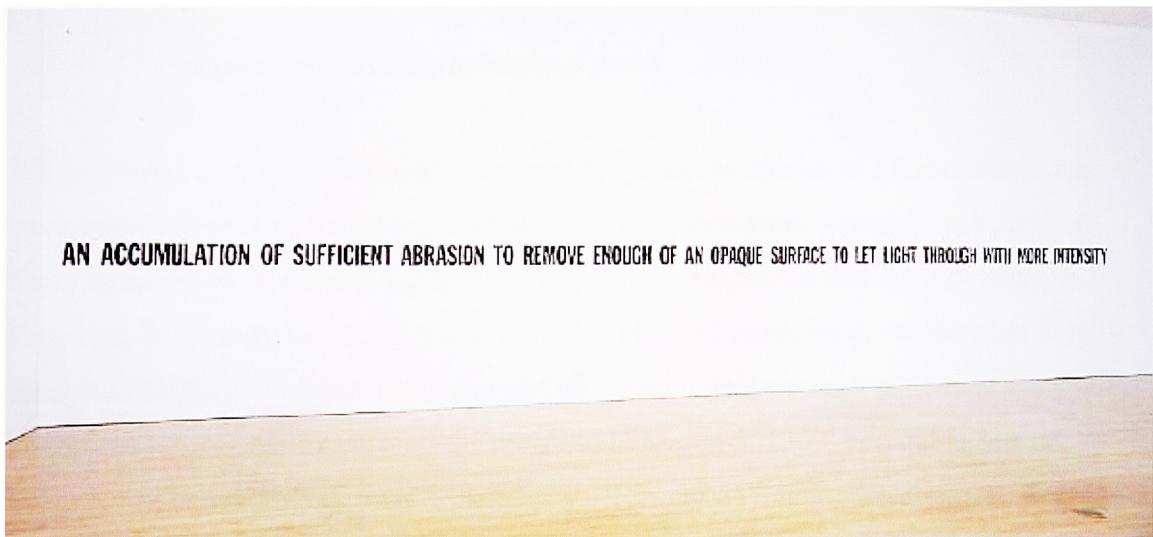
**Figure 2**  
*Installation 1*

## **(Linguistic Expression)**

### **Influence of Conceptual Art**

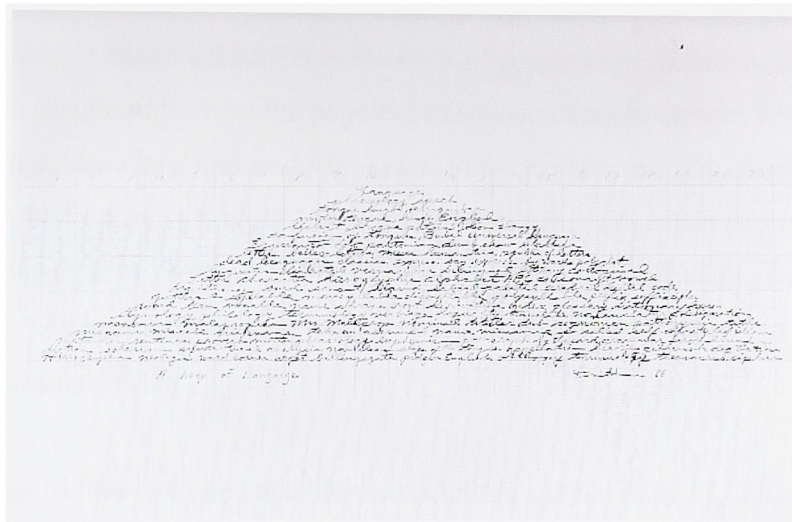
There was a time when I was strongly influenced by 60's conceptual art. I was not visually impressed but rather more interested by the way they expressed their concepts through the medium of art. Furthermore, the energy and driving force that they used to try and break through the conventional ways of expression fascinated me. The use of language as an art form was often what was used by the artists. Their concepts largely influenced me to use language on this installation.

For instance, Lawrence Weiner's work, **AN ACCUMULATION OF SUFFICIENT ABRASION TO REMOVE ENOUGH OF AN OPAQUE SURFACE TO LET LIGHT THROUGH WITH MORE INTENSITY** (1981), has no visual object except the words written on the wall. Because visual information is not given to the viewers, the audience imagines the scene freely from the sentence. The images are private and exists only in the viewers mind.



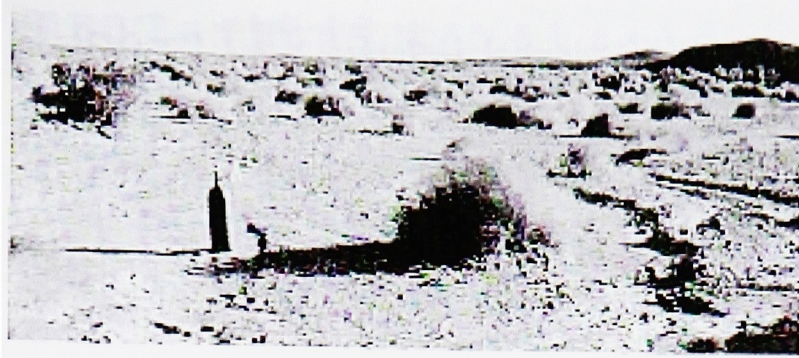
Lawrence Weiner, **AN ACCUMULATION OF SUFFICIENT ABRASION TO REMOVE ENOUGH OF AN OPAQUE SURFACE TO LET LIGHT THROUGH WITH MORE INTENSITY** (1981)

Weiner's sentences are written horizontally and the work limits visual expression. But Robert Smithson's *Heap of Language* (1966) creates a visual expression by how the words are arranged. Over 100 words related to language, such as 'phraseology' and 'hieroglyphic' are written side by side and arranged into a triangular shape. The word, 'language' is placed on top of the triangle (Rorimer 75). In addition to the things viewers imagine from the written words, this triangular shape also makes them associate it to something such as a mountain or a pyramid. The shapes that the words create are still abstract enough to give the viewers the freedom imagination.



Robert Smithson, *Heap of Language* (1966)

While Weiner and Smithson tried to release one from the chains of a fixed image and encouraged viewers to create private images of their own from written words, Robert Barry intended to express invisible concepts, such as emptiness and infinity through language. For example, his *Inert Gas Series: Helium (2 cubic feet)*, exhibited at Seth Siegelau Gallery in March 1969, showed no visual object except a statement mentioned on the catalog: 'Sometime during the morning of March 5. 1969, two cubic feet of Helium will be released into the atmosphere' (Rorimer 85). The viewers try to imagine the scene from his statement. He described the series, these works are "made of various kinds of energy which exist outside of narrow arbitrary limits of our own senses" (Rorimer 85). The language expresses the concepts.



Robert Barry, *Inert Gas Series: Helium (2 cubic feet)* 1969

\*The photo was taken as the record of the project and used for his poster for other exhibitions.

The goals for these conceptual artists in the 60's who employed linguistic expression was to release ones imagination from the physical existence of conventional visual images, such as paintings, drawings and sculptures, and to let viewers imagine freely from just the language. Ian Wilson, who is also a conceptual artist using linguistic expression, described his work as 'I've freed art from a specific place. It is now possible for everyone. I'm diametrically opposed to the precious object. My art is not visual, but visualized' (Rorimer 91).

I used language for the first model of this installation. At the critique, it was suggested that I use two or three-dimensional images instead of language, however I chose to use language because like Weiner and Barry, I tried not to give viewers fixed images, namely my images about human existence.

The questions of human existence are fundamentals that all human beings share, but our ideas and perspectives are different depending on our different cultural and religious beliefs. If I express these ontological questions with visual images, the reflection of my culture, religion and private views on the images can not be avoided. Visual images act as distracters and prevent one from fully and purely focusing on the questions of human existence. To avoid such a situation, the expression should be universal and hence language is a suitable media for this universal expression. My targeted audiences are all people regardless of their race, ethnicity, nationality, culture or beliefs.

The written texts on the walls are the same questions that the western philosophers have been pondering for centuries as well as the questions that I had when I was a child. However, the language for this installation was too direct and not attractive. The style of the sentences needed to be explored more, such as by adopting riddles or poems. Ian Wilson's text is a good example. His text from a discussion about his artwork, held at Stedelijk Van Abbe museum, Eindhoven in March 1983, appeared on the invitation cards for the project.

that which  
is both  
known and  
unknown  
is what  
is known

that which  
is both  
known and  
unknown  
as both  
known  
and unknown

whatever  
is known  
is just  
known

He applied the Socratic method to this text and encouraged the discussion about the relationship between the known and the unknown.

While words and text carry meanings, I tried to create a visual effect by arranging words, like Smithson. For the first model of this installation, the sentences were dispersed on four walls, but they were written horizontally, like Weiner's work, and placed almost at the same heights as people's shoulders. At a critique, I received comments that after viewers found the first text, they would easily predict the places of the rest of the texts with this arrangement, so that there was no role for the white fabric hiding them. So for the second model of this installation, I tried to arrange the texts in a way that viewers could not predict their locations.

The second model was not a room installation, but rather constructed by 3 feet x 7 feet flat surface with white fabric covering and hiding the texts on the walls. The texts were no longer written horizontally nor were at comfortable heights, instead, they were winding, curling, and up side down and ran from the floor to the heights of people's heads. Furthermore, I connected the texts and creating a person's profile with the lines. I also tried to represent human beings by visual images, because the questions were about human existence. I believe that, like Smithson's work, this image was abstract enough that it didn't reflect my own cultural or religious biases.

Only a few people actually noticed the shape of the profile, but I received good feedback from the viewers about how they had to find the texts using their entire bodies. The second model was exhibited for the Gesture Show at Gallery r in Rochester in 2003. In order to read, the viewers had to move not only their arms, but their entire bodies sometime squatting and getting on their tiptoes or tilting their bodies.

I carried this idea into my final model of this installation, which was exhibited at my thesis show. The ontological questions were placed on the walls with similar arrangements as the second model. However, I noticed that the number of the ontological questions that I prepared would not be enough to create a human image, and it ended up with just arranged texts. This needed further exploration.

## **(Audience Participation)**

In this installation, the audience participated by touching the walls and finding hidden words. The purpose of this audience participation was to involve and engage them actively.

However, sometimes audience participation makes the artwork become more a form of entertainment and the concept behind it may be compromised. The media-art installation, *The Marionette*, and the installation/ performance, *Sodan Cafe*, are such examples.

The media-art installation, *The Marionette*, was created by an American artist, Douglas Stanly, and exhibited in IC museum in Japan in 1997. It is comprised of an animated picture of a puppet that is projected on three walls. The audience is encouraged to participate and interact with the artwork, manipulating the puppet by pulling three handles on a table placed in the center of the room. When the pulleys are pulled, an internal motor pulls back with the same force preventing the audience from manipulating the puppet. This in turn encourages the audiences to question whether they are manipulating the puppet or whether the puppet is manipulating them. With this, the artist tries to imply the cynical relationship between human beings and technology. For example, computers, cell phones and pagers are supposed to improve the quality of our lives, however, we often feel that we are "chained" to these objects and are controlled by them.

Like *The Marionette*, the installation / performance, *Sodan cafe*, requires the audience's participation as well. In this artwork, a Japanese artist creates a working cafe in Watarium museum in Japan for 3 months in 1997. "Sodan" means to advise or to consult in Japanese. With every cup of coffee served, the artist also hands out a questionnaire to the "customers" (audience) asking them to give suggestions on ways to improve the cafe. Every two weeks, the artist changes the cafe, such as the furniture or the interior decoration and the service based on the suggestions that he receives. The artist's message in this artwork is that art does not need to be a one-way communication tool; the artist is the provider and the audience is the receivers. In this work, the artist actively seeks out

the audience and involves them in the making and shaping of his artwork (i.e. the cafe). Initially, the audience is surprised by this style of artwork. However, they are soon intrigued by their involvement in the making of the cafe to such a degree that they return to see how their suggestions have changed the artwork.

*The Marionette* and *Sodan Cafe*, both involve audience participation but use different approaches to attain this goal. One tries to connect with the audience by getting them physically involved and the other by providing the audience the opportunity to give input into the running of the cafe. *The Marionette* is successful because it captures people's interest and conveys the concept through the audience's physical experience. As human beings, we are curious individuals and are more drawn to objects that need to be explored than those that don't pose a challenge. The work, by itself, is incomplete unless the audience physically pulls on the handles. By doing so, an interaction between the artwork and the audience is established and the artwork is now complete and the audience is better able to sense the concept behind the artwork.

There are advantages and disadvantages to the artworks that require audience participation. The advantage is that the participation form invites people's interest toward the art. People are more curious to see a piece that has a hidden part rather than a piece which already reveals everything. Audiences also tend to spend more time with the artwork. However, the disadvantage is that the installation may be too entertaining and it may distract people from understanding the concept, as is the case with the *Sodan Café*.

The clues don't have to convey the artist's experiences or thoughts accurately, but it should be broad enough to allow the audience to have a more diverse way of thinking and interpreting the artwork.

*Installation 1* is created with this intention. I tried to engage the audiences with the work by letting them touch the fabric and search for the hidden words. The work would not be completed without audience participation, without them it would be just an empty white room.

## **(Goals of the Installation and Reflections)**

In the *video work*, the audience watches the video of someone else's experience. This is an objective experience. However, in *Installation 1*, the audience actually experiences the installation for themselves. This is a subjective experience. Although *Video and installation 1* were shown together at the thesis show, these two works stand independently.

My intention was to make the audience think of the purpose of the room when they entered it and by finding and reading the written words, I tried to encourage the audience to recall the fundamental questions of human existence that they might have thought about when they were children.

My purpose in encouraging the audience to explore the white room was not only metaphoric (our lives begin from nothingness), but I also was trying to create an "engaging" experience.

Today, we live in a world of information overload. Media, advertisements, even works of art try to grab our attention in different ways and we choose what information we want to conveniently absorb. We are not "active" in understanding the information that bombards us. It is conveniently packaged in ways that are easily received and appreciated by us. The purpose of this installation was to attempt to convert the audience from a passive viewer of the artwork to an active explorer of the artwork. To appreciate this, the viewers had to walk around and discover the hidden words behind the fabric.

I had hoped that the audience would spontaneously explore the installation on their own but it was difficult to make them notice the written words behind the fabric. By placing a note in front of the installation that read, "Please feel free to walk into the room and explore the walls with your hands" I was able to accomplish my intention.

A comment I received was that the installation provided a place to meditate. This was one of my objectives. I wanted to create an atmosphere of “emptiness” where the audience could reflect on what it meant to exist.

## **Installation 2**

Figure 3, *Untitled*

### **(Materials)**

White Vellum Paper (to cover walls and floor)

Black Ink

Glue

Meshed Metal Wire (to make the dome shaped object)

Plastic wire (to hang the dome shaped object from the ceiling)

Light bulbs with cords



Figure 3 -1 View of *Installation 2*

## **(Words on the Wall)**

(These texts were placed in front of the installation entrance.)

“Please feel free to walk in the room.”

“I believe that human beings are just a part of the universe - Just like a stone in a river. All existences in the world are equal. There is nothing above and nothing below us. However, because we just happen to possess pre-eminent powers of thought, the human race expands and continues to multiply uncontrollably. As a result, we consume natural resources aggressively and destroy the harmony of nature. As part of nature, we are struggling to find the meaning of our existence and our identity within it.”



Figure 3-2 *Installation 2* (detail)

## (Visual Description)

*Installation 2* is a 12 feet x 8 feet room. The room is shut in from the outer world by four walls, a ceiling and a floor. The light source is only the domed-shaped object (about 3 feet in diameter) that is floating about 4.5 feet above the center of the floor hanging from the ceiling. The dome is formed by meshed metal wire and covered by countless white translucent substances (made by glue) that are shaped like flat amoebas. Countless small light bulbs are placed underneath the amoebas. Although each amoeba is flat, they are overlapped vertically and horizontally on each other. The white light from underneath causes the amoebas to glow, casting shadows on each other as though they are alive.

As a whole, the dome's dim light softly illuminates the installation space. Several white cords with small light bulbs are emerging from the dome like tentacles, forming tree-like branches, and stretching upwards towards the surrounding walls. When the cords reach the walls, they crawl on the walls like ivy. The intersection of the cords and the white walls are stained black resembling corrosion. There is also a swirl-shaped black stain on the floor underneath the dome, the same size as the dome. A curtain falls behind the viewer once they enter the installation room.



Figure 3-3 *Installation 2* (detail)

## (Conceptual Description)

### Dome

The dome represents the human brain. The amoeba like shaped objects represent neural dendrites, and the cords represent neural axons. The small light bulbs represent firing neurons (see the diagram 3, P8). The dome also symbolizes a living organism. The amoeba like objects, with their irregular wavy shaped, represent energetic movement of the organism. The light bulbs symbolize life. The heat that the light bulbs create represent the organism's body temperature; the light bulbs that are turned on represent life, and ones that are turned off represent death. The cords that stretch in all direction like tentacles or tree branches represent the power of the growing living creatures. The dome represents the existence of the human being in nature.

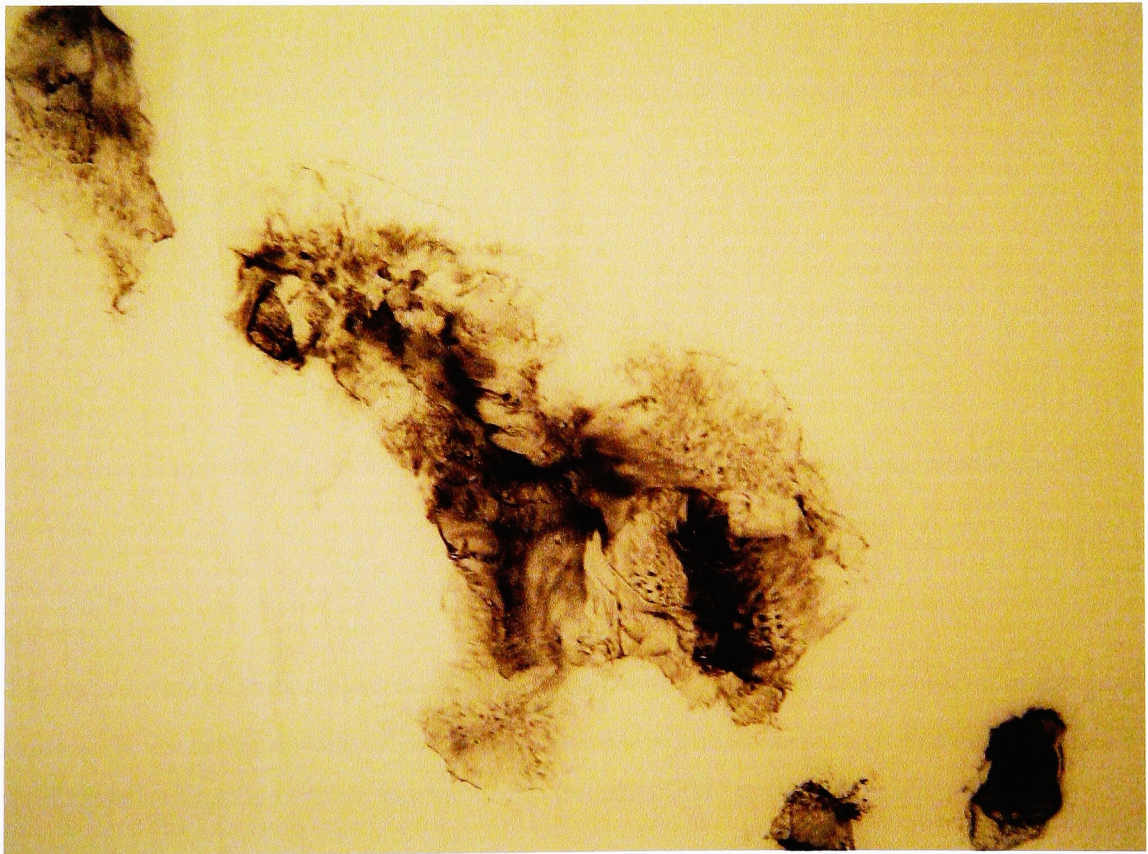


Figure 3-4 *Installation 2* (detail)



Figure 3-5 *Installation 2* (detail)

### **Walls**

The dome is surrounded by walls and a ceiling just as human beings are surrounded by nature.

### **Cords**

The movement of the outstretched cords from the brain into the surrounding environment represents the development of the human brain, along with human greed and the desire to gain more knowledge which has led to the uncontrolled consumption of natural resources.

## **Black Stains**

The black stained intersection where the cords touch the walls represent human contact with nature, and the blackness represents human's destruction of nature. The swirl-shaped black stain on the floor represents the dilemma that human beings face between the moral instinct to help others and the animal instinct to kill and survive. We can't help destroying nature because we have to consume other lives in order to survive. However, our moral instincts makes us feel guilty of this act.



Figure 3-6 *Installation 2* (detail)



Figure 3-7 *Installation 2* (detail)

## (Goals and Expression through Forms)

In this installation, I tried to express the existence of humans as a living creature in nature, and our relation to other living creatures and the environment.

In the first installation, I tried to limit my own visual descriptions and attempted to convey my thoughts through language. For *Installation 2*, however, I used my own visual descriptions. Through the objects and colors, I attempted to express the grotesqueness and aggressiveness of human beings as living creatures that live by taking other lives, and yet the beauty of life itself as demonstrated by the light bulbs.

The artwork was aimed at the audiences' senses and not at their logical or theoretical minds. As Oliveria describes the nature of installation in his book, *Installation Art in the New Millennium*, "The immersive space remains fundamentally an experiential and sentient place, though it is also a means of escaping our everyday conditions...disconnecting the spectators from their everyday surroundings and transporting them to a place of contemplation" (Oliveria 53). To use this aspect of the installation efficiently, I provided visual images (ink drawings) creating an unfamiliar environment that surrounded the audience wall to wall and ceiling to floor.

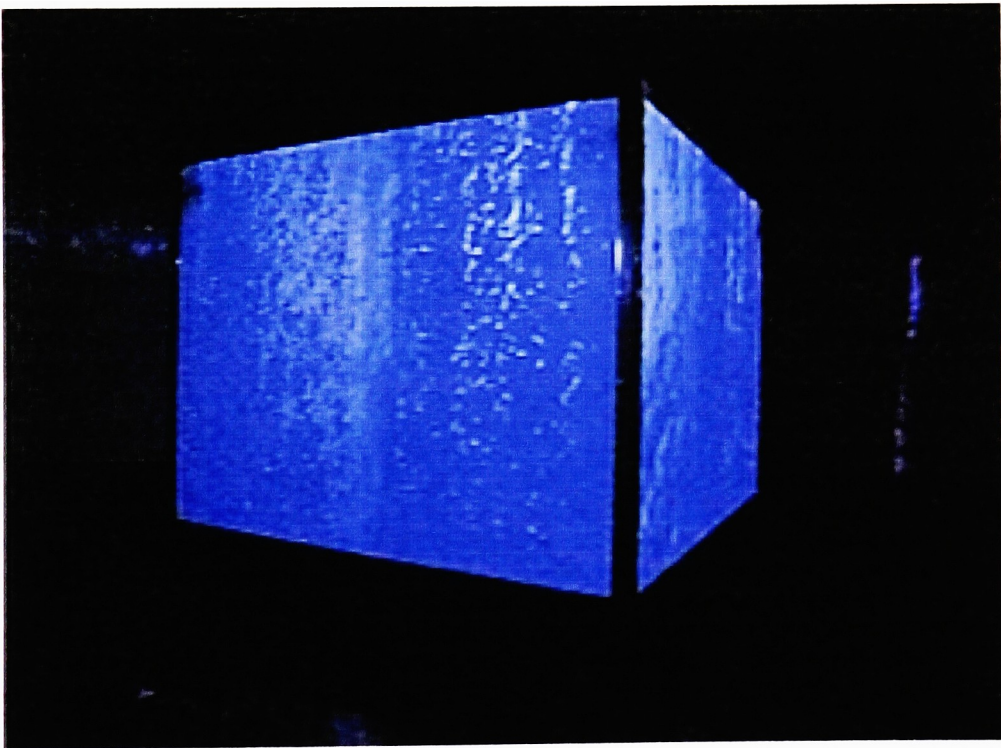
The goal of this installation was to create an artwork, like Motohio Odani's *9<sup>th</sup> Room*, exhibited at the 7<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennale in 2001. He was inspired by *La Divina Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*), written by Italian poet Dante Alighieri, and "*Blood Ceiling*" in Yougen temple<sup>1</sup> in Kyoto, Japan. The title, *9<sup>th</sup> Room* was named after the 9<sup>th</sup> room or 9<sup>th</sup> circle, the deepest level in hell where it is cold and icy and people are punished by

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<sup>1</sup> "**Blood Ceiling**" at Yougen Temple ("血天井" 養源院)

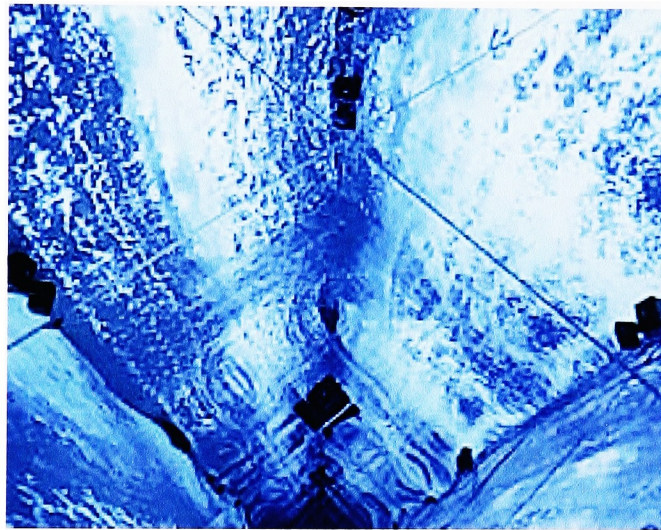
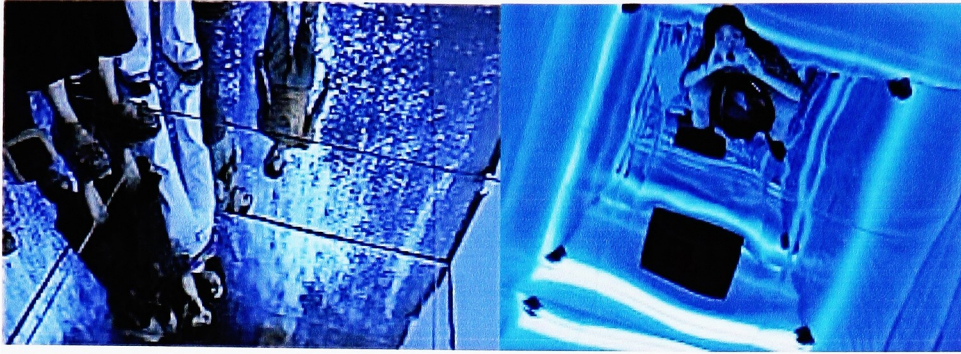
The Samurai warriors who were trying to protect the Fushimi castle in Japan from their enemies killed themselves by Seppuku. The blood soaked floor was placed on the ceiling in the Yougen temple to release the spirits of their obligations and allow them to rest in peace.

immersing them in ice. This appears in *The Divine Comedy* (BT 63). In a cubic room, a couple of different moving images such as continuous water falls and blood bubbles, are projected on the four walls with audio. Since mirrors are placed on the ceiling and the floor, the projected images on the walls reflect endlessly on the ceiling and floor creating a feeling of falling into the water fall or floating in the blood bubbles.



Motohiko Odani, *9<sup>th</sup> Room* (2001)

View from exterior



Motohiko Odani, *9<sup>th</sup> Room* (2001)

View from interior

### **(Reflections)**

I attempted to create an installation that spoke to the audiences' senses, like Odani's work. However, I think that the work did not engage the audiences as well as planned and this was a shortcoming of my work. One reason was that the materials used were not everyday materials, (audiences could not recognize the materials). Another reason was that the materials were too inorganic, even though they represented organic objects such

as the brain and nature. This created a distance between the audience and the work. If the materials were familiar, like Ann Hamilton's early work, the audiences would have connected better. In Ann Hamilton's early works, like *Privation and excesses* (1989), she used everyday materials, such as honey and pennies. 750,000 pennies were laid on a honey-coated floor, and a human figure was sitting in front of the pennies and wringing its hands over a honey-filled felt hat. There was an isolated room next to the penny-floor, and three sheep were caged in it. In this installation, the familiarity of the objects engaged the audience, yet she cleverly used the materials in unfamiliar ways to create unusual and strange atmospheres. Both the pennies and the sheep represent our devaluing morals. I did not give the materials any meaning in my installation, but rather chose them for their form and color (art:21). My installation showed the shallowness of the materials' existences.



Ann Hamilton, *Privation and Excesses* (1987)

## **Installation 3**

Figure 4, *Untitled*

### **(Materials)**

Photo emulsion

Wooden balls

Acrylic pigments

### **(Visual Description)**

About 200 balls are pinned to the wall. Various photographic images, such as forests, sea, plants, trees, sky, stones, animals, and human photo images are printed using Gelatin-Silver print on their surfaces. The human and natural images are divided by color; metallic color, such as gold and silver for humans, and non-metallic colors, such as blue and green for natural images. The balls form a flowing stream from right to left starting with a few and as their flow progresses, their numbers increase. Gradually other entities such as plants, forests and animals appear and then a few human images join it. Slowly the number and size of the human images increase while the natural images decrease. Eventually, there is not enough space for the natural balls in the main stream, and the ones that are close to the human images become partially brownish and distorted. The human balls swirl around each other and jostle with each other. The images on the balls at the end of the stream become out of focus and they change in color turning to yellow, red, orange and black.



Figure 4-1 View of Installation 3

## (Conceptual Description)

### Balls

Each ball represents a different life form. The sphere shape implies lives that are born in this world but soon die just like water bubbles that momentarily appear and then are absorbed on the surface of water.

### Color

The blue and green represent nature such as water, sky and trees. The metallic colors symbolize human's ability to convert natural resources to man-made materials, such as steel and iron.



Figure 4-2 *Installation 3* (detail)



Figure 4-3 *Installation 3* (detail)

### **Flow of the Balls**

The flow of the balls represents the flow of time and the history of the earth. The arrangement of the balls (changing the density of the balls from few to many, and the shape of the stream of the balls from the wavy lines to swirling shape), gives the stream a sense of movement and speed.

At the beginning, as the black balls show, it was dark. The earth began to take shape slowly with basic natural elements, lava cooled and became rocks and stones, and water formed into rivers and seas. Then, living creatures started to appear, primeval creatures found their homes in this environment, plants started to grow, forests were shaped, animals began to emerge. The earth had changed its appearance slowly with these living creatures.

The movement of the balls represents this flow of time. As the flow of the blue and green balls go upwards and the size and the numbers increase; it implies the prosperity of living creatures. On the other hand, the increase in size and the amount of the metallic balls suggests human's prosperity. And as the human prosperity increases, there is less room for nature to flourish. The crowded human balls and the flow of the balls have no exit that suggests the overpopulation of humans and the unbalance between the humans and other living creatures.

Humans are everywhere and they are rapidly increasing in inverse proportion to natural resources, as reflected in the number of the human balls and the nature balls. Our dramatic growth has caused living creatures and even human beings themselves to suffocate from the lack of natural resources.



Figure 4-4 *Installation 3* (detail)

We try to correct our behavior and our ways of living by preserving the healthy environment. We legislate the Kyoto treaty to regulate the amount of CO2 production, and, at home, we try not use to petrol-based materials and we try to recycle.

Unfortunately our selfish special interests often trumps what we believe should be the right course of action. This is portrayed by the human balls arranged in a swirling fashion without an exit.

The future of our planet is unclear just like the images of the balls at the end of the swirl that are out of focus.

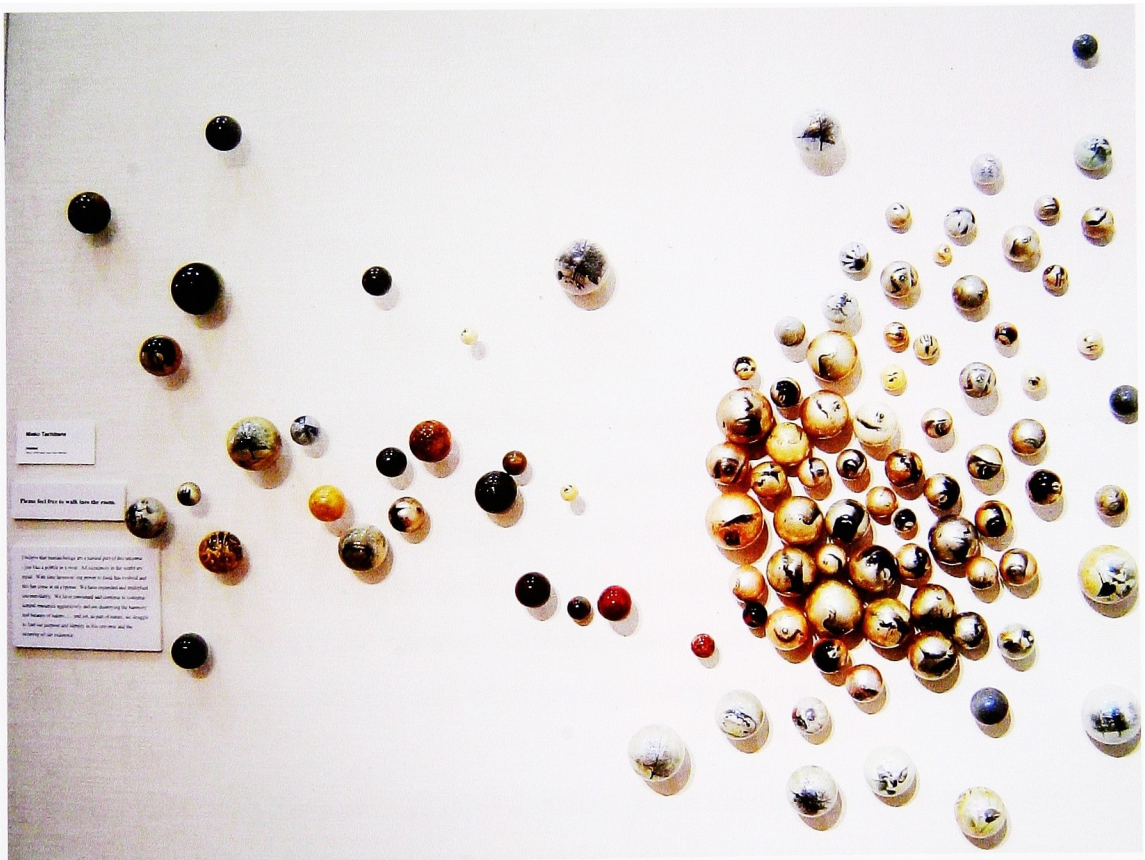


Figure 4-5 *Installation 3 (detail)*



Figure 4-6 *Installation 3* (detail)

### **(Reflections)**

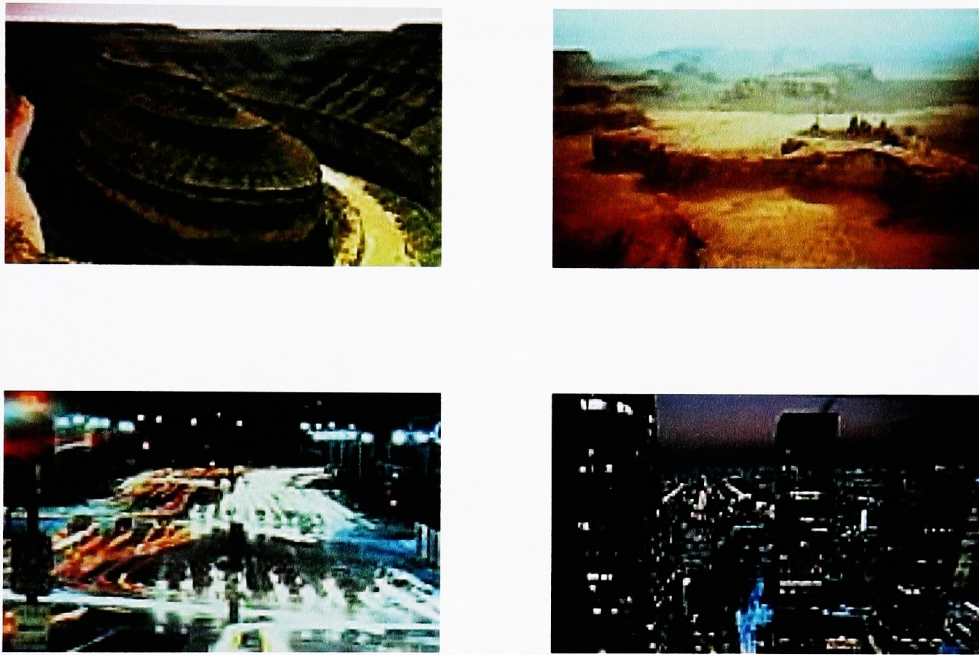
When I revisited the installation and looked at it objectively, I see weak areas that need to be improved. This is especially true when compared with artworks that deal with similar theme, like Godfrey Reggio's (Director) film, *Koyaanisqatsi*. The meaning of "Koyaanisqatsi" is "Life without balance" in Hopi Indian language. It is a 87 minute documentary that depicts the contrast between nature and human beings. The media is different but the theme and the way of expression are similar to my *Installation 3*.

The film starts with the scenes of cave paintings and a desolate, deserted landscape, followed by various natural environmental phenomena in slow motion, such as rocks, water, cloud formations and trees. Then the scenes of human society appear.

Technology represented by factories and busy traffics are depicted with fast motion.

Scenes of nature and human society appear alternately. The composition of this film is

simple. There is no narration or story. There are only the contrasted scenes of nature and human society. The result of this simplistic comparison is a human society that looks crazy, insane, abnormal and unnatural. The simple contrast addresses the purpose of the artwork which is to make the viewer think about the relationship between nature and human beings.



Scenes from *Koyaanisqatsi* (1975)

*Installation 3* also is about the relationship and contrast between nature and human beings. But the contrast was not visually clear. I tried to make a contrast between nature and human beings by using different colors, but the colors were not of enough contrast. Also, there were not enough images and balls to tell that the flow represented the history of the earth. Furthermore, I failed to create within the installation any kind of atmosphere for the viewers and so the work became more of a decoration. On the contrary, there is a certain atmosphere that is created by the Reggio's film that engages the viewer to the artwork (such as the explosion of the spaceship which implied a dark future for the human race).

For *Installation 3*, many viewers seem to be attracted to the decorative beauty of the balls and the relatively new photo technique of printing images on a three-dimensional materials (this technique had been introduced a while ago, but it seemed that people still had the concept that photo images were only printed on flat paper). During my stay at RIT, we discussed how the beauty of an artwork might distract from its concept. The argument was that if the work is beautiful, the viewer's minds could easily be drawn to the beauty, therefore, they do not question or think about what the art work is about. They don't notice the issues or concepts that the artist is trying to convey. I don't think beauty always distracts and in fact I believe that it can sometimes be used to actually convey the concept quite effectively. However, in the case of this installation, the beauty and the newness of the photo technique overshadowed the work.



Figure 4-7 *Installation 3* (detail)

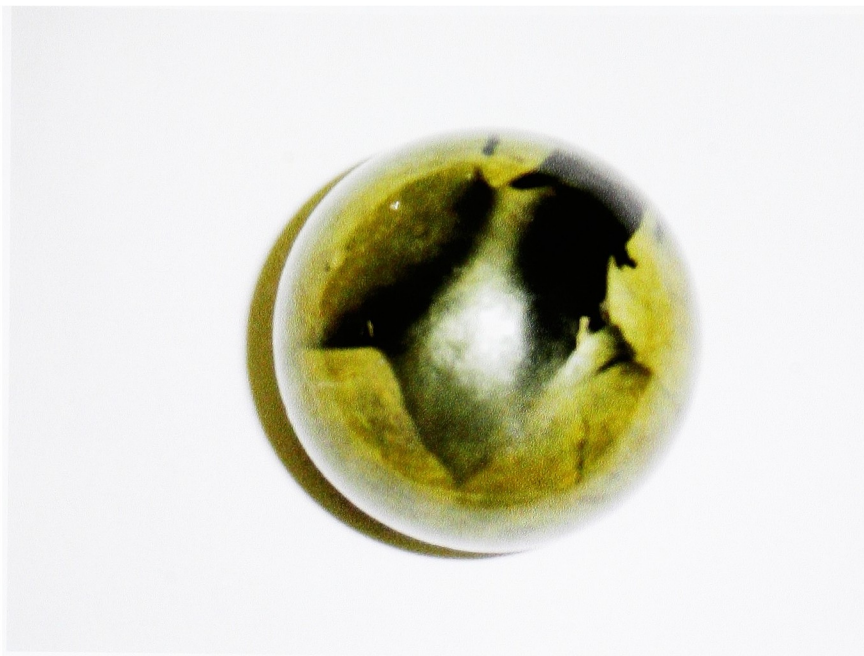


Figure 4-8 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)

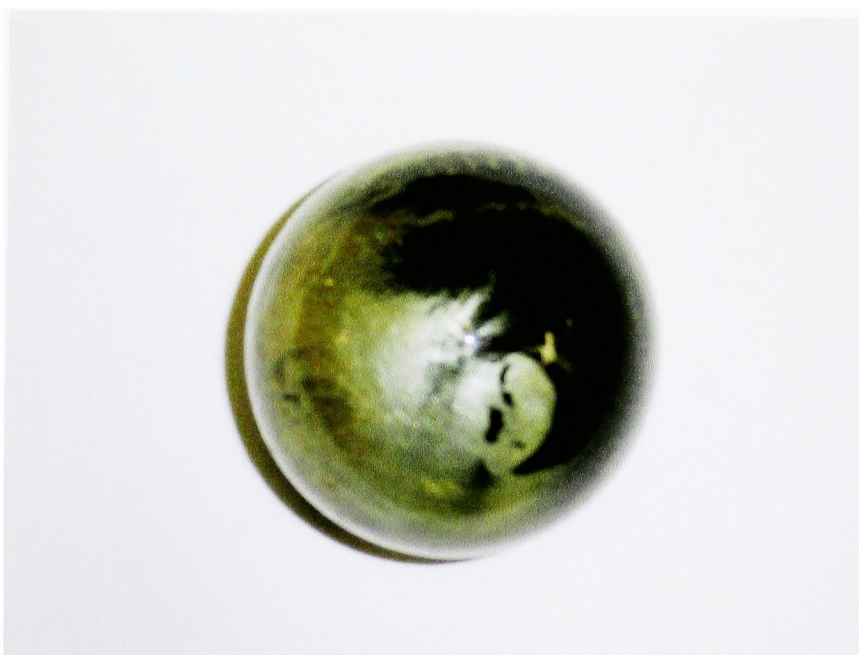


Figure 4-9 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)



Figure 4-10 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)

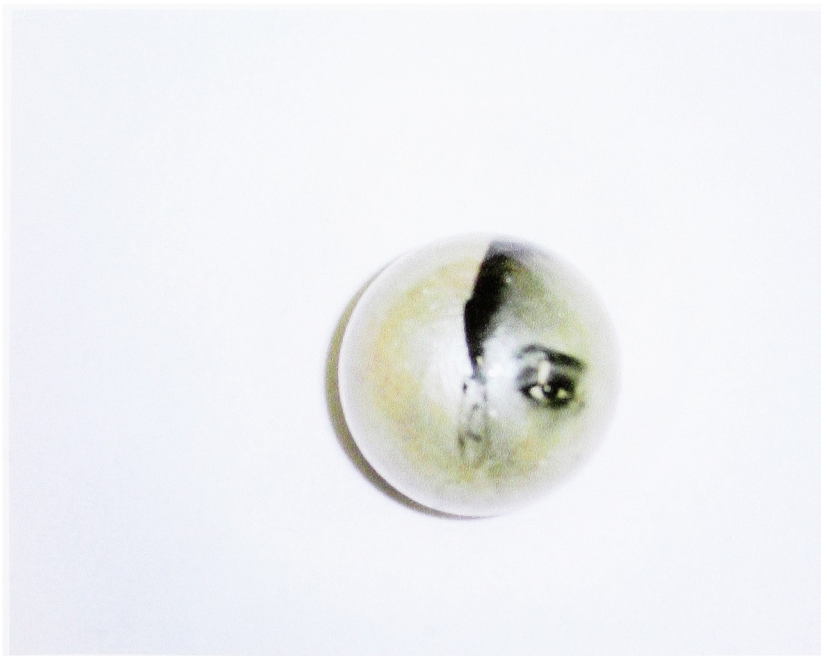


Figure 4-11 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)



Figure 4-12 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)

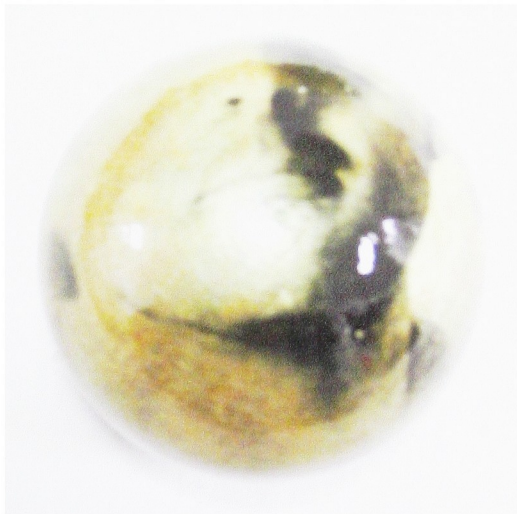


Figure 4-13 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)



Figure 4-14 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)

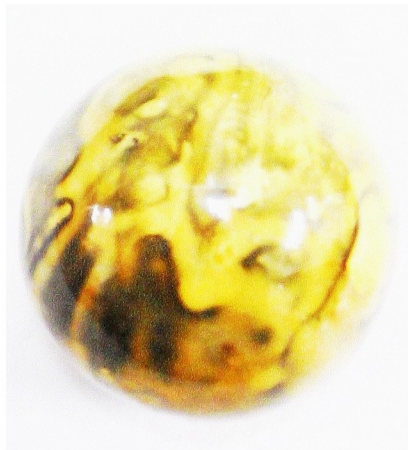


Figure 4-15 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)



Figure 4-16 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)



Figure 4-17 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)



Figure 4-18 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)



Figure 4-19 Wooden Ball, *Installation 3* (detail)

## **CONCLUSION**

In this thesis, I have tried to broaden my thoughts on human existence through structured visual expressions. It has also allowed me to gage my artistic, technical and conceptual views relative to the rest of the artistic world.

In the past, I thought I knew what I wanted to convey through my artwork, but as I researched western philosophy and the cognitive sciences, I realized that my own concepts were not clear. The research not only broadened my thoughts but also gave me the insight to reorganize and clarify my thoughts and ways to express them.

In the four installations, I have explored different ways to convey my thoughts through language, video, audience participation and photo-print techniques. Through the thesis exhibition, I have learned which expressions worked and which did not work by watching viewers' reactions.

Overall, I have realized that my art works are a little too theoretical and my ways of expressing them to the viewers needs to be further refined. In my view, art is the communicative media through which thoughts and feeling are conveyed to the audience. However, no matter how narrative the artwork is, it is impossible to convey an artist's exact thoughts and feeling to an audience, and it is ultimately the audience's own experience that gives the artwork its full meaning. I believe that an artist's intention should be to make the audience think, move and feel.

As Heidegger pointed out, we all have desires and the act of searching and fulfilling our desires is what gives meaning to our existence. In this same way, I desire to explore human existence and I use my artwork as a vehicle to understand it and this fulfills (within me) the purpose to exist.

Creating artwork makes me look within and challenges me to organize and develop my thoughts and this in turn creates a sense of calm and peace within me. As each of us

searches for their purpose in life, I find solace in knowing that mine is to create works of art that move me and others.

Even though, through this work, I have tried to explore my childhood curiosities, there remain many unanswered questions. Our brains have evolved to a great degree but the universe is enormous and we will never understand it completely. In the future I will continue to create artwork that questions and explores the relationship between human existence and nature. My challenge will be to create artworks that are meaningful to me and at the same time stimulating and thought provoking to my audience.

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