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Literary Excavations: The Text-based Art of Brigitte Radecki

Patricia Killoran-Quill

A Thesis

in

the Department

of

Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

March 2009

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Your file *Votre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-63183-6
Our file *Notre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-63183-6

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Abstract

Literary Excavations: The Text-based Art of Brigitte Radecki

Patricia Killoran-Quill

Brigitte Radecki (1940-) is a German-born Montréal artist whose installations explore the interface between text and visual art by juxtaposing abstract paintings with citations from classic, but largely forgotten, twentieth-century literature. As an artist and a feminist, Radecki takes an archeological approach to exploring the human condition – excavating the past and incorporating references to mythology, literature, painting and historical events that have shaped today's culture. I study Radecki's oeuvre through an analysis of two installations: *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1998) based on the eponymous 1933 ironic novel by American writer Nathanael West (1903-1940), and *The Black Notebooks* based on *By Grand Central I Sat Down and Wept* (1945), Canadian writer Elizabeth Smart's (1913-1986) lightly-veiled autobiographical novel.

Stylistically Radecki is an abstractionist. She has a personal affinity for abstract expressionism; however she labels herself a postmodernist, and seeks to rupture the insularity of abstract expressionism and open it up to context and wider social concerns – the most important of which, to Radecki, is the status of women in contemporary society.

Methodologically, Radecki's discourse combines difficult-to-interpret literary citations and iconography. Her philosophy is to create synergies redolent of myriad subtleties questioning human interconnectedness and complexity – to study the past in order to understand the present.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the richly talented Brigitte Radecki, whose art is the subject of this thesis, for her generosity of time and her enthusiasm for this project. It was a privilege to write about her work. I especially wish to thank my erudite and unfailingly helpful thesis advisor, Dr. Martha Langford who believes in a “carrot” and not a “stick” approach to advising post-graduate students. I admire your breadth of knowledge, your keenness for my work, and your uncanny ability to infuse me with a soupçon of your own enthusiasm when I need it most. The Department of Art History at Concordia University has guided my research with excellent teaching and support. I’d like to especially acknowledge Dr. Catherine MacKenzie and Dr. Loren Lerner. I am grateful to my dear friend and colleague Kim Robert for her always honest and trustworthy advice, but mostly for her support and kindness, and her willingness to discuss this project at every step along the way. As a confessed computer “luddite,” I also owe Kim a debt of gratitude for helping me with her technological expertise.

I dedicate this thesis to my late husband Berkeley, whose skills as a writer so far outstripped mine, but mostly in memory of his quiet courage, subtlety of intellect and generosity of spirit.

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Introduction

When the Belgian surrealist René Magritte (1898-1967), added the words “ceci n’est pas une pipe” to his curvilinear, magic realist painting of a brier pipe (*The Treachery of Images*, 1928-29), he induced viewers to reassess their understanding of the work’s sexually-suggestive Freudian iconography – thereby opening the painting to myriad interpretations in addition to the obvious. Clearly the melding of two separate and distinct disciplines, painting and text, is an undertaking fraught with pitfalls. That being said, what intrigues me is the potential for text-and-graphics combined to enhance a work by adding context and a multiplicity of sub-texts (as Magritte did), in short to enrich a work’s inherent discourse without impinging upon or marring its graphic integrity. This thesis is animated by the challenge of exploring this idea; of either proving or disproving the viability of a *soi-disant* hypothetical symbiosis between these disparate forms of human expression. I hope to shed light on this intriguing question, and stimulate discourse by analyzing two art installations that integrate literary citations with iconography: *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1998) and *The Black Notebooks* (2004-2005). Both are the work of German-born Canadian artist Brigitte Radecki (1940-); both are based on largely forgotten twentieth-century novels that were critically acclaimed at the time of their publication.

This is not a quixotic search for the Holy Grail that will allow artists to override all disparities between disciplines. Rather it is a narrowly focused exploration of two installations by the same artist. In *Literary Excavations*,

Radecki mines the literature of the past to unearth ideas, concepts, even wisdom that speaks to parallel issues bedeviling us today. Taking to heart George Santayana's (1863-1952) familiar aphorism warning that those who cannot learn from the past are condemned to repeat it, Radecki excavates the literary past to illuminate the zeitgeist.

In *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Black Notebooks* she interprets literature from the mid-twentieth-century in terms of early twenty-first century issues. *Miss Lonelyhearts* by American author Nathanael West (1903-1940) was published in 1933, and *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, by Canadian writer Elizabeth Smart (1913-1986), first appeared in 1945. Both twentieth-century novels were published over sixty years ago, and are not likely to resonate with many twenty-first-century readers. Thus, it could be said that Radecki is creating art from a contemporary optic, but tempered by the rich wisdom of the past. This approach can stimulate myriad complexities and a rich spiderweb of discourse, which combination suits Radecki well. She is a postmodern artist, an “on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand” critical thinker who likes to study contemporary issues from many angles, both from an historical perspective as well as from the context of immediacy.

There is an element of serendipity in my choice of Radecki as the subject of this thesis. I have long been interested in text-based artists; particularly those who are drawn to literature for the textual component of their work. Another fortunate circumstance is propinquity. Radecki and I both live and work in Montréal, and I have been fortunate enough to interview her on several

occasions, usually in her studio where I could study her unique painting technique at first hand (discussed at length in this thesis). Well aware of the risks presented by the personal interview, I have made a conscious effort to evaluate whatever information I have gleaned through a critical lens. Thus I believe I have avoided either slavish fidelity to authorial intent or its uncritical rejection. That being said, face-to-face conversation with the artist has given me valuable and otherwise unavailable insight into her philosophy vis-à-vis painting and the socio-political climate which nurtured her work. I have also juxtaposed the artist's words against the critical record. These include the writings of Lynn Beavis, William Francis Garrett-Petts, Rachel Nash, Henry Lehman, Joyce Miller, Liz Wylie and Christine Ross.

Radecki and I also share temporal history. We both belong to a generation that can remember World War II; we were both raised in a pre-digital world without television, computers, e-mail, cell phones or the internet (not to mention their multiple spin-offs), and although today we are both feminists, we were raised in a pre-feminist society – one in which the art world was still somewhat in thrall to the cult of the male genius. Radecki calls herself a postmodernist and a feminist, yet she has a visceral fondness for the action painters of the abstract expressionist movement. This appreciation is clearly visible in the dynamic interpretations of New York School modernist works she painted for *Miss Lonelyhearts* – interpretations in which she vacillates between satire, irony and homage to the very artists she admires (discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis).

Understandably, Radecki resents the modernists' exalted status in the art establishment pantheon. Having studied art in New York City at the height of the New York School modernist movement, I can attest that in the nineteen-fifties the art world was a phalocentric society; one in which women artists were not thought to have the "balls," the competitive spirit or the intellectual gravitas to be creative initiators. In essence women artists were considered dilettantes putting in time until they became mothers and homemakers. However arcane and irrational this may seem two generations later, it was the reality of the time. Society evolves slowly, and despite the emergence of feminism, this inequality persisted, albeit to a lesser degree into the nineteen-seventies when Radecki became a committed art student. Thus her feelings of resentment were genuine and quite justified. Because of my first-hand experience of the New York art world, I feel I am uniquely well positioned to understand and to empathize with Radecki's ambivalent emotions toward these revered male high modernists.

This thesis is as simple in structure as Radecki's installations are conceptually complex. In Chapter 1, I discuss the influences that shaped Radecki's philosophy of art, and her unique painting technique. Chapter 2 is an analysis of *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and Chapter 3 is a discussion of *The Black Notebooks*. What could be termed a "meta" primary source informs each chapter. The five personal interviews Radecki granted me are "meta" primary sources for all three chapters, but they are particularly relevant to Chapter 1. In Chapters 2 and 3 the "key" primary source is the literary work that forms an integral part of each installation. Thus, in Chapter 2, I focus on the eponymous Nathanael West

novel animating *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Chapter 3 is based on Radecki's inspiration for *The Black Notebooks*: Elizabeth Smart's novel *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. Smart's protagonist is a woman writing in the first person; West tells his anti-hero's story in the third person – both novels, however, are brief, concentrated narratives propelled by intensely driven protagonists. Both leave the reader emotionally drained and require later re-reading.

When her work is stripped of confusing verbiage and obfuscating jargon, Radecki as an artist can be understood as striving for a delicate balance between communication and self-expression. This statement, of course, can be dismissed as “motherhood,” as it could be attributed to most, if not all artists. That being said, I found it personally grounding to keep these fundamental motivations in mind as I analyzed her work. Chapter 1 focuses on how Radecki satisfies her goals to communicate and to express her emotions; stated alternatively, how does her personal belief system, together with the influence of existing social conditions, inform her philosophy of art. In Chapter 1, I also address her strategies for melding literature and graphics to create an integrated and seamless whole; as well, I will discuss her unique approach to technology.

As mentioned above, my personal interviews with Radecki are a cogent primary source for Chapter 1. Radecki granted my five interviews: two each to discuss *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Black Notebook* – and one to discuss her background, career and attitude toward art and the role of the artist in society. By visiting her studio I was able to examine her paintings at close quarters, and to gain an appreciation for the exquisite attention to detail she lavishes on each

canvas. Her demanding painting technique is a counter-intuitive aspect of her feminist rationale; by merely studying transparencies, I would never have grasped its political and emotional importance to the artist. Her technique is also integral to her ruminative temperament; a factor in her approach to problem-solving, and an outgrowth of her need for quiet reflection in order to paint. It is not difficult to imagine Radecki escaping to a monastery or an ashram, provided she would be permitted to paint while she meditated.

Our last discussion, held outside her studio, helped me inform Chapter 1. She did this by giving me insight into her creative processes and life story. This necessarily included material on her experiences as a displaced person in war-torn Germany after World War II, and her life and education in Canada. I have excluded this biographical material and did not take it into account when writing this thesis, except where her experiences clearly influenced her approach to her artwork – such as her introduction to feminist scholarship when she was a mature university student, and concurrently a suburban homemaker with three children. This dual life experience tempered her personal feminist ethic, and narrowed her focus to the issues critical to women in the “long haul,” particularly in the field of fine arts.¹

At the core of Radecki’s decision to create art melding literature and iconography is her search for an elegant method to introduce postmodern context, and concern for contemporary issues, into self-contained modernism, and to do so without destroying modernism’s formal integrity. This dichotomy has vexed her throughout her career, and as it is fundamental to the structure of her

installations, I felt it was necessary to thoroughly understand the ramifications of this dualistic discourse. Unwillingly or not, by the very act of creating her text-and-graphic duos she is establishing a dialogue – a dialogue in which she is asking the viewer to engage.

I approached the modernism versus postmodernism debate by consulting two theorists who disagree with each other, but who both write convincingly in support of their opinions. In *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, despite propounding a formalist-modernist aesthetic, Michael Fried takes issue with the “Hegelian assumptions behind [Clement] Greenberg’s avowedly Kantian reading of modernism as self-criticism.”² Fried thus gives support to Radecki’s struggles with the modernist concept of art as introspective and self-referential. Taking further issue with Greenberg, Fried writes:

[w]hat the modernist painter can be said to discover in his work – what can be said to be revealed to him in it – is not the irreducible essence of all painting but rather that which, at the present moment in painting’s history, is capable of convincing him that it can stand comparison with the painting of both the modernist and the premodernist past whose quality seems to him beyond question.³

Here, despite his modernist credentials, Fried is giving support to Radecki’s instinct that painting should be more than a formal object following irreducible norms delineated by established conventions.

Interestingly, Henry Sayre in *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*, argues that in the case of postmodern art “the question of the work’s contingency, multiplicity, and polyvocality [is located] in the audience rather than in the work itself.”⁴ By incorporating literature as an integral

element of her art, Radecki is embracing a postmodern aesthetic, and thereby overcoming the limitations of the rectangular canvas and moving toward the multiplicity, polyvocality and audience discourse she seeks.

Radecki has read and is in basic agreement with art historian and critic Barbara Rose's opinions on modern art. Coincidentally, so is Michael Fried. Rose's *American Art since 1900: a Critical History* is among the general works on modernism I consulted in order to refine my understanding of Radecki's perception of art. When reading on feminism, I selected scholarship that addresses issues important to contemporary women's concerns: professional acknowledgment, motherhood, female empowerment and recognition in society and the world of fine arts. Counted among these feminist writers are: Phyllis Rosser and Laura Cottingham, both writing in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*; Alise Vogel published in *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology* and Jo Anna Isaak's *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*.

Miss Lonelyhearts informs Chapter 2. The novel's American author, Nathanael West published only four works in his tragically short life, of which *Miss Lonelyhearts* is considered his masterpiece. The novel is a morality tale excoriating contemporary American society of the nineteen-thirties, and, in the three-quarter century since its publication, it has attracted a large amount of scholarly discourse. Structured around a modern-day odyssey, *Miss Lonelyhearts* sets out to save mankind from a world suffused with despair in all its forms, a world populated, not with men and women, but with symbols –

symbols in the form of straw men and women who act out ineluctably interrelated events that inexorably lead to disaster. “Consequently, the book seems unusually multifaceted and susceptible to differing interpretations, all suggestive, and all at least partly valid.”⁵

The novel has been critiqued by Victor Comerchero, Stanley Edgar Hyman, F. Light, Josephine Herbst, Robert I Edenbaum, and Randall Reid – each of whom saw West’s anti-hero differently. Radecki was intrigued by art historian Stephen Bann’s *The True Vine: On Visual Representation and the Western Tradition*, and – through one of those mysterious leaps of insight that are the essence of the creative artist – she made a connection between the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus, *Miss Lonelyhearts*, feminism, and her desire to broaden and re-interpret high modernism. While fully recognizing Radecki’s esoteric mythological inspiration (discussed in Chapter 2), in my analysis of *Miss Lonelyhearts* for this thesis, I focus my attention on the Westian novel and Radecki’s paintings, and concentrate on her feminist-tinged versions of New York School modernist art.

The artists Radecki interprets – Franz Kline (1910-62), Donald Judd (1928-94), Kasimir Malevich (1876-1935), Robert Mangold (1937-), and Cy Twombly (1928-) – are canonical in their own right and much has been written about each. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Radecki is not analyzing or critiquing their work, rather she is using their creative styles and exalted reputations to advance her own ideas. Accordingly, I am not analyzing these artists’ actual paintings, but positioning their oeuvre vis-à-vis each other, and establishing their chronological position in

the modernist era. Most importantly, however, I am situating Radecki's painted interpretations in relation to the Westian citations, and to Radecki's creative aspirations. In order to achieve consistency in my discussions, I am using a "standard" source, H. H. Arnason's *History of Modern Art*, as a recognized canonical force on the subject of modernism.

In *The Black Notebooks*, the subject of Chapter 3, Radecki creates a unique and sympathetic portrait of a unique woman – a fellow artist and a single mother who loved too much and not wisely (with apologies to William Shakespeare). Elizabeth Smart's autobiographical novel is a lyrical and poignantly-emotional (one could label it "tear-drenched") recounting of an ultimately disastrous love affair between a Canadian woman and a British poet. Smart's novel is in striking contrast to *Miss Lonelyhearts* which, like George Orwell's (1903-1950) dystopian novel *Nineteen-eighty-four* (1949), is a socio-political work whose protagonists are caught in a degenerate world run morally amuck. Smart's world was equally chaotic, and she was as unable to control her life as West's characters were to control theirs. That being said, there are both contrasts and similarities between the two visions. *Miss Lonelyhearts* is "macro" in scale, a fist-shaking yell of frustration denouncing an entire social and political system. Whereas *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* is "micro" in scale, an utterly personal cry of anguish from one woman over her ill-fated passion for one man. Both novels, however, have a "coiled-spring" intensity that, like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's (1772-84) *Ancient Mariner* (1787-98), holds the

reader in thrall; both are also dense with similes, metaphors, classical allusions and literary references.

In addition to her landmark novel, I explore some of Elizabeth Smart's other published works: *Elizabeth Smart: Autobiographies*, edited by Christine Burridge and *Necessary Secrets: The Journals of Elizabeth Smart*, edited by Alice Van Wart. The most interesting critique of Smart's writing is to be found in works by female scholars who analyze her prose through the lens of her life. This makes sense, as much of Smart's writing is in the form of diaries and journals. Kim Echlin's *Elizabeth Smart: a Fugue Essay on Women and Creativity* and Rosemary Sullivan's *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart, a Life*, prove to be particularly insightful. Much of Smart's literary output was almost stream-of-conscious writing informed by her passionate personality and quotidian concerns; these were "jottings" enriched by Smart's broad knowledge of literature, the classics and her love of nature and her children. Thus another fruitful source is Elizabeth Podniek's critical study on four modern women diarists: *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart and Anaïs Nin*.

Miss Lonelyhearts is the more complex work, with a multiplicity of divergent elements to disentangle and, once analyzed, the more difficult to put into words (metaphorically akin to "herding cats"). *The Black Notebooks* is almost painfully poignant.

In paragraph one of this Introduction I wrote that my aim was to explore the potential for text and graphics combined to enrich a work's inherent discourse without impinging upon or marring its modernist-formalist integrity. My proposed

modus operandi was to analyze two installations combining literature and iconography by Canadian artist Brigitte Radecki. A dozen or so pages later, I find that this project, like Radecki's installations has become complex, multivalent, and inordinately fascinating. Besides querying the viability of the initial premise, I now find that I am drawn into multiple discourses as I begin to explore the scope of Radecki's artwork. I decode each painting, parse each citation, and tease out the liaisons between citation and painting – only to discover metaphors and hidden undercurrents. The following three chapters are a record and an analysis of a voyage of discovery, not of the physical world, but of the world of art and ideas – which is exactly what Radecki is seeking to accomplish.

Chapter 1 Brigitte Radecki: Text-based Abstract Artist

Inspired by two canonical but little now known twentieth-century novels, Brigitte Radecki has created separate art installations, each incorporating a symbiotic synthesis of text and iconography: *Miss Lonelyhearts* based on the eponymous 1933 satiric novel by American writer Nathanael West, and *The Black Notebooks*, inspired by the lyrical poetics of Canadian writer Elizabeth Smart's lightly-veiled autobiographical novel *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*. Although very different, these literary works share certain key commonalities: both are short in length, intensely passionate in tone, erudite and dense with classical and literary allusions. Each also represents the epitome of its creator's literary oeuvre.

The novels, however, are not the subject of Radecki's installations; rather they are the catalysts or "launching pads" from which she spins soaring allegories in text and imagery – allegories that concurrently interweave with more pedestrian, but no less critical, contextual discourse. All Radecki's work is complex, discursive and visually idiosyncratic. In *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Black Notebooks*, she combines contemplative, reverberating inquiries on two main topics: what it is to be a woman and a feminist, particularly a woman artist, at the turn of the new millennium, and secondly, a critique of modernism versus postmodernism within the context of Radecki's concepts of art itself. This is an oscillating, non-binary discourse in which she hopes the viewer will participate.

As an artist, Radecki labels herself a postmodernist, whose paintings explore the interface between postmodernism and high modernism – in Radecki’s case principally post-World-War-II New York School abstract expressionism – although she also expresses an interest in minimalism and Suprematism. She admires the work of abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock (1919-56), Franz Kline, Cy Twombly and the early Jasper Johns (1930-); however she has little interest in Pop art.¹ Radecki is aware that abstract expressionist painting takes inspiration from André Breton’s (1896-1966) Surrealist “psychic automatism,” in which “the element of intuition or the accidental plays a large and deliberate part.”² She is also aware of high modernism’s “insistence on form over content, on white male artists over anybody else,” in essence a bow to established precedent that accepts the male as “normative and dominant” – a precedent that has been “a central component of twentieth-century American art.”³ However, she is interested in enlarging the scope of abstract expressionism’s “hermetically-sealed” devotion only to itself, its political and social “neutrality,” and self-reflexive insularity.⁴ In *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Black Notebooks*, Radecki manipulates word and image in an intricate minuet bridging the fault line between abstract expressionism’s characteristic “spontaneous assertions of the individual”⁵ and postmodernism’s wider-ranging aesthetic. As suggested by the following citation from one of Radecki’s artist’s statements, her strategy is to create a symbiotic relationship between self-reflexive, self-contained high modernist abstraction and context-driven art:

What is of interest to me is to contaminate the silence and purity of Modernist abstract painting and to re-introduce narrative, history, and references to life outside the painting while maintaining the sensuousness and primary experience of abstraction.⁶

Clearly Radecki's work is not based solely on the self-expressive gesture, the search for a personal voice or an original signature style; nor is she overly preoccupied with resolving formal problems (however she does not discount formal considerations such as colour, balance, and line). Rather her aim is to use the existing "vocabulary of abstraction" to establish a dialogue between modernist and postmodernist aesthetics.⁷

Radecki is aware that to maintain artistic equilibrium while exploring what are arguably inimical concepts – what's more concepts in constant flux — entails unending examination, re-examination, analysis and adjustment. This modernism-versus-postmodernism discourse is a pervasive enquiry underlying *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Black Notebooks*; it forms a Gordian knot which Radecki struggles to untangle through a judicious balancing of literary citation and iconography, while simultaneously and separately, arguing each work's (text and imagery conjoined) philosophical position and advancing its principal narrative. "Radecki...examine[s] the modernist canon...by posturing the formal aspects of colour-field painting. Yet [her] melding of the notion of text and imagery subverts modernist ideology and places [her] work within contemporary practice."⁸ For Radecki, a stable status quo is a chimera – to her it is imperative to constantly re-balance the emotional and visceral appeal of abstract

expressionism while, within a postmodernist idiom, expanding a work's "context" and exploring its wider intellectual ramifications.⁹

To understand Radecki's determination to open abstract art to narrative and context, one has to be aware of her dedication to feminism and her desire to give her work a feminist edge. When she was a neophyte in the 1970s, Radecki realized that despite the rise of feminism, women artists continued to be categorized as subordinate to men in creative talent and intellectual gravitas. In her estimation, Eurocentric attitudes based on history, tradition and unquestioned precedent cast women artists, at best, in the role of muse or help-mate to male artists, and, at worse, as mere diversions or appendages – but rarely as creative entities in their own right. Radecki became conscious of this secondary status, and of the powerlessness prevailing attitudes engendered, when, as an art student, she was introduced to feminist scholarship and literature on feminist issues. She was also aware that her assumed creative inferiority did not bode well for achieving success as a professional artist. She saw the art establishment as biased against women – a bias sanctioned by entrenched tradition. Harsh as it may appear today, as perceived by Radecki in the nineteen-seventies, this ingrained and prejudicial anti-feminism meant that to the art establishment she would be seen as an intrinsically second-rate artist, thus doomed to a second-rate career.¹⁰

Radecki earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1976 from Concordia University in Montréal, and a Masters of Fine Arts from the same institution in 1982. She entered the art world just as the women's art movement was beginning to gain

momentum,¹¹ and more than a generation after the post-World-War-II abstract expressionists (whom she admired), had burst onto the New York art scene. Despite this temporal gap and the waning of the abstract expressionist movement (Jackson Pollock died in 1956, and Franz Kline in 1962), Radecki, a dedicated abstractionist with a penchant for abstract expressionism, felt overwhelmed by what she perceived as the phalocentrism and muscular masculine creativity of these New York School modernists. She felt that the “larger-than-life” presence of the movement’s iconic male action painters had left an indelible mark on every creative avenue extant. Consequently, there was little left for artists of her generation and gender to explore.¹²

While studying for her Masters degree, Radecki became more sharply aware of her status as “a woman, ergo not a serious artist.” Despite her insecurities and feelings of powerlessness, she determined to challenge the status quo and explore her less rigid vision of high modernism in an era of socially-aware, context-driven postmodernism – a determination propelled in part by the feminist convictions shaped and incubated by her university experiences. At the time she was a suburban mother of three children and the only woman in her class majoring in sculpture. A field dominated by men, sculpture was considered a bastion of male creativity, and a demanding discipline requiring expansive vision and masculine muscular superiority.¹³

During Radecki’s student years, however, women artists in the United States were part of a major shift that was reorienting the art world; principal among which was a multi-sided attack on the art-historical canon as being

Eurocentric, sexist and elitist. The attack came from many areas including from within the universities, which found themselves pressured by their own faculty and students to put social art history and feminism high on their agendas.

Activist artists attacked the mass media and popular culture for codifying what they believe to be a language of discrimination.¹⁴ And they sought alternative ways of ascribing dignity to their own experience:

*In a significant break with art-historical tradition...most of the strongest art of this generation was made by women. This preponderance of women artists underscores the important part that feminism played in shaping the terms of Postmodernist debates, determining the skepticism and the sophistication with which artists approached dominant forms of representation and making clear precisely what was at stake in such an engagement.*¹⁵

Writing on the same subject at the end of the nineteen-eighties, Arthur Danto, somewhat to his own surprise, concurs with this evaluation, agreeing that “the most innovative artists” of the time were likely to be women and – in a debatable conclusion – speculatively attributes this phenomenon to a mainstream zeitgeist favourable to women. In reality, it was engaged postmodern feminists themselves who, by relentless critique, engendered change. They attacked and ultimately dislodged entrenched “assumptions about art, art history, and the role of the artist...[thus] level[ing] the playing field for women.”¹⁶

This feminist foment was also rippling through Canadian universities, and left Radecki exhilarated, impatient and characteristically, thoughtful. She was exhilarated by what she construed to be feminism’s potential for change: equal opportunity with men for access and respect in the art world, particularly in

academia, and of importance to Radecki, the opportunity to be judged on a par with her male peers, both intellectually and creatively. As a mature student, however, she was anxious to embark on her career and was impatient with academia's smug paternalism and resistance to change. Nonetheless, she did not launch a frontal attack on the status quo. Rather than embracing the notion of aggressive protest art, Radecki chose to research women's historic position in the arts and society through literature "about" and "by" women.

She was enamored, and still is, of the written word, the expressive meta "language-within-a-language" of typography and the emotional arcs, arabesques and pirouettes of calligraphic script. Her literary research, combined with her fascination with the graphic line – "physical gestures, actions that imply human touch and emotion"¹⁷ – forms the genesis of Radecki's contemplative interactive installations. Her binary modus operandi (text and iconography) allows her to reflect human experience both emotionally and intellectually. In addition, Radecki makes a consistent feminist statement through a unique painting process, an idiosyncratic but barely perceptible "reverse" technique, to be discussed in more detail below. Laborious in the extreme, Radecki's painting system is double-edged: it establishes a subtle (questionably passive) form of feminist protest, yet remains empathetic to women in traditional roles and circumspectly praises their virtues. Like a steady drumbeat, this reverse technique is a technical *leitmotif* common to all Radecki's text-and-iconography installations.

In the United States emerging feminist artists, such as Barbara Kruger (1945-) and Jenny Holzer (1950-) also made extensive use of text in their work.

That being said, their approach to feminism, both philosophically and technologically, was dramatically unlike Radecki's. Both Kruger and Holzer were highly politicized and, separately, adopted a strident social activist stance in works about power and its manifestations within a capitalist mass culture – a culture which they both wanted to radically change. Text provided Kruger and Holzer with elegant, easily-comprehended shorthand. Taking an uncompromisingly postmodern position in their graphics and technologies, they both made bold, “in your face” text, with its potential for instant communication, the principal operating paradigm of their feminist art.¹⁸

Though not a political activist, Radecki is nonetheless sympathetic to Kruger and Holzer's feminist goals in private and public (professional) arenas. Her aims, although also feminist are more circumspect; they are reflective of a philosophical and political middle ground, and consequently her methodologies are less aggressive and categorical. Radecki seeks to shine a critical light on past history, particularly as it pertains to women, as well as on contemporary social conditions as they affect the lives of women. She also yearns to pay homage to women's unrecognized creativity and their unsung accomplishments of the past – hence her penchant for referencing the literary canon and citing works that speak to women's pain, power and pleasure through the prism of history. In effect, Radecki excavates the lessons of the past, and asks the viewer to consider the future of women in general – and that of women artists in particular.¹⁹

Kruger and Holzer, however, look at women through a prism of contemporary beliefs, and although equally text-based and equally feminist, their work is firmly anchored in the here and now. Using “image-appropriation” or “image-scavenging” as a tactic, their art resembles that of pop artists with a conscience, or disciplined graffiti artists whose work is no longer naïve, unfocused or repetitious. In an effort to escape traditionally elitist museum confines (a goal that Radecki applauds), Kruger and Holzer appropriate mass media, where they make political use of text and ready-made images, and endow pertinent shards of rhetoric with critical edge.²⁰

Conversely, Radecki took another tack to destabilize the status quo. She countervailed by proposing not a one-sided screed, but a discourse in which she hoped all the “stake-holders” would participate. Radecki combined text with a unique and barely perceptible painting technique, a technique that in terms of boldness, aggressiveness and clarity of message, represents the opposite end of the pendulum swing from that of the pop culture-inspired, postmodern feminists of the activist school – and also unlike that of the overawing abstract expressionists masters of the New York Modernist School.

An analysis of Radecki’s idiosyncratic and contrarian painting technique is elemental to understanding her philosophy of art. Counter-intuitively, Radecki paints the foreground subject matter first; next, using a miniscule #4 watercolour brush she fills in the background with delicate, all-but-invisible paint-strokes. She then repeats this painstaking, labour-intensive process several times; the result is a polished patina on which what is usually assumed to be the work’s less

important supporting element (the background) is represented by a thicker layer of paint.²¹ Thanks to the visual phenomena of foreshortening, the work's principal theme is thus entrenched or engulfed by the encroaching background. The main iconography loses "pride of place," becoming either subordinated to, or of the same value as its setting or background. Time-consuming as it may seem, this painting technique is not a chore for Radecki. She describes it as:

very, very slow and tedious...which is my process, I feel it gives me something like a bridge or some kind of rooting. To me the way that I'm literally repeating the writing, the handwriting, [or the imagery] is a way of getting closer, because it's such a personal thing, and the labour-intensive aspect of it is important as well, as all the while I am thinking about her [Elizabeth Smart or him, Miss Lonelyhearts].²²

This unique methodology requires that she focus intently and paint undisturbed, well away from the interruptions and "hurly-burly" of the quotidian world, thus allowing Radecki to move into a mental zone of contemplative Zen-like meditation. It is while in this meditative state that many of her most creative ideas are generated. As suggested by the citation above, Radecki is strongly process oriented; she paints with her canvas flat (not propped on an easel or tacked to the wall) and genuinely enjoys the tactile pleasure of mixing and applying paint to canvas. She considers these hours of undisturbed painting a welcome respite, one that is essential to her creative renewal. In order to guarantee their availability, she has established a studio apart from her family home and teaching responsibilities (complete with bed and kitchenette), thus allowing herself, not a luxury, but one of the crucial elements of her creativity – long periods of undisturbed concentration.²³

Radecki's reversal of the usual subject/background balance (recessive background/dominant subject) is an indirect expression of solidarity with women as homemakers and breadwinners, and as the intellectual and creative equals of men. More cogently, in addition to making an understated (but nonetheless biting) allusion to women's secondary status in the art world, Radecki is reflecting an attitude grounded in deeply-felt personal experience as a juggler of multiple responsibilities. Ironically, her incised iconography deliberately downgrades the "authority" of her painting's principal imagery – imagery created by a woman:

[I]n all my paintings, the silhouettes of images, the writing, and all the gestural lines and scribblings, come through negatively from underneath several coats of paint and so the large and expressive gestures of modernist abstraction have been turned into a slow and meticulous activity which carries its own and different meaning from the past.²⁴

As described above, Radecki's technique provides her with the time necessary to "think through" her complex ideas, while serving two purposes. Her perverse and laborious reversal of emphasis acts as a protest against the disrespect traditionally accorded women by the art establishment. Equally important, the technique's meticulousness and tortoise-like slowness of execution – the technical and psychological opposite of "executed-in-white-heat" action painting – disavows the self-reflexive bravura of iconic masculine high modernism, particularly abstract expressionism. If Radecki had chosen to be a research scientist rather than an artist, she would not likely have been drawn to the expansive enormity of astronomy or the globe-spanning probes of geology, but to the minute and inter-woven complexity of micro-biology or the infinite tedium of archaeology, where one unearths the past, not with a power-shovel and a back-

hoe, but with a dental drill and a toothbrush. This penchant for working meticulously and focusing “narrow and deep” is reflected in her idiosyncratic technique.

By consciously creating a tedious and unendingly repetitive painting technique, Radecki is reenacting the tedium and unending repetitiveness of homemaking, and thus elevating and celebrating the routine and the mundane rather than the exceptional. Just as housework is sadly unseen and unsung, no sooner done than needing to be redone, Radecki’s brushwork (so fine it requires a magnifying loop to be seen and appreciated) remains invisible to the casual observer, and might “be characterized as...traditional women’s labour”²⁵ – labour entailing responsibilities which deny women artists what they have long desired: “a vital artistic practice, one framed and defined by the artist herself.”²⁶

She is also challenging opinions expressed by many women from all walks of life, particularly artists and intellectuals – opinions propounded in feminist literature like Betty Friedan’s (1921-2006) landmark book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Inspired by Friedan, Phyllis Rosser, in her 1976 essay for *Ms. Magazine*, “A Housewife’s Log: What She Really Does All Day,” expresses the frustrations common to many women – frustrations engendered “by the pressure to conform to the bland, non-threatening ideal of wife/motherhood that pervaded suburbia...[while] maintaining the myth of paradise.”²⁷ At the time a suburban housewife with young children herself, Radecki chose to present another facet of the ubiquitous discourse on suburban (or urban) homemaker’s angst (all homemakers were presumed to be women). She preferred to elevate and honour

homemakers' dedication and accomplishments, while deploring the limitations imposed on them by convention and societal phallo-centrism, thereby praising the very suburban women whose lives Rosser deplures.

That being said, Radecki makes her feminist argument via a methodology as discreet as Holzer and Kruger's is blatant. Ironically, the traditional feminine accomplishments Radecki seeks to herald risk languishing unacknowledged, except by the gallery and museum-going cognoscenti. Holzer and Kruger, conversely, are philosophical activists and their works are tied to the immediacy of current events and political movements. Like explosive and timely news, their works have considerable potential to shock. Being tied to the moment, however, is risky; their "cutting-edge" impact may be diminished as militancy cools and pop culture evolves. Radecki's work is critiquing fundamental and long-standing power imbalances between men and women; however, it is doing so without recourse to militancy or the *crise du jour*. Despite deploring injustice to women, and celebrating feminine accomplishments, Radecki does not demonize men. Thus her work will tend to remain cogent as long as these inequities continue to bedevil society.

Justifiably or not, in keeping with many of her peers, Radecki is resentful of the art establishment's historic prejudice favouring male creativity over female. That being said, rather than counteracting in kind with bombast and loud protests, Radecki, as described above, has mounted a *sotto voce* campaign of awareness based on a painting technique so recessive as to almost guarantee

invisibility. Lynn Beavis describes Radecki's working of what would normally be considered a painting's secondary areas (background) as obsessive:

in a manner which is often characterized as feminine...[t]he female voice is found echoing beneath the text in the areas that have traditionally been left unvalued and discarded... [B]y placing value in the negative spaces [Radecki] manages to redefine the text of an art history that left little space for women artists.²⁸

Through this destabilizing “reversal” of the norm, Radecki does more than protest the illogic of the art establishment's fossilized attitudes toward women, she also expresses frustration with its glacial rate of change. As a personal imperative, but with the lightest of touches – and with a methodology as protracted as the art establishment's embrace of feminism – she has turned the act of painting into a contemplative, process-driven paean to women and their complex creative conventions. These are the feminine creative conventions she identifies and threads throughout the installations discussed in this thesis.

Radecki's reverse painting technique is a creative strategy common to many of her series; it is “micro” in scale, and to be appreciated paintings must be viewed at close quarters – thus influencing the distance (or distances as the viewer shifts from a panoramic to a close-up view) at which the observer contemplates an artwork. In the two series under study, *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Black Notebooks*, Radecki also uses a “macro” device, the literary wall label, to influence the speed at which, and the distance from which, a work is observed.

In principle Radecki dislikes wall labels, considering them to be largely superfluous, too categorical and too authoritative. She sees these introductory explanations not as helpful orientation devices, but as distracting competition for

the viewer's attention, absorbing, to cite Radecki, "more of the spectator's time than [they devote to] looking at the work," thus becoming "almost a substitute for seeing."²⁹ She further explains that to keep the gallery visitor's experience from taking on a didactic form – that is, having to read wall labels or panels introducing and explaining the work, "I include as part of the installation, those excerpts of text from my readings that are for me, the clearest place where the paintings originated."³⁰

Other than the fact that they are mounted on a gallery or museum wall, Radecki's citations bear no relation to traditional wall labels. The latter, customarily written by the show's curator, are placed at the beginning and between sections of a presentation; they frequently contain biographical material, chronological data, established scholarly opinion, and are designed to orient the viewer and put the works in historical perspective. Radecki's literary citations, however, contain no didactic or extraneous material and are not mounted in an introductory position at the start of an exhibition, but are placed adjacent to each canvas. It is the sum total of these text-cum-painting pairings combined that comprises the actual art installations. Radecki hopes that the viewer will experience each work as a symbiotic entity, and not as two separate elements of a larger installation. To this end, she purposely makes the lettering hard to read hoping that the text will be internalized at the same rate as the more-difficult-to-absorb abstract iconography.³¹

To explain Radecki's unorthodox format, it is constructive to explore Radecki's early development as an artist. Radecki's father was a ceramicist and

she felt comfortable with clay; she enjoyed its sensuous earthiness and three-dimensional physicality, sensing a direct thread to antiquity and to the essence of human nature. She responded viscerally to pottery's visual and tactile appeal, and to the ubiquitousness of clay artifacts unearthed by archeologists in the buried remains of past societies. Pottery, for Radecki, formed a nexus between art and culture, the ancient and the contemporary.³²

As a student Radecki was intrigued by environment art, particularly the work of contemporary American sculptors Alice Aycock (1946-) and Mary Miss (1944-), both women who create large-scale outdoor works. She saw sculpture as sharing pottery's three-dimensionality and fundamental earthiness, only on a vastly larger scale. Radecki observed that sculpture "got rid of the picture frame," allowing art to be "interactive, as it should be;" it encouraged the viewer to "move around, and to physically explore perspective, light and distance." Radecki used the term "body-related" to describe the viewer experiencing such a work – not as a static object seen from one angle, but as an interactive experience demanding that the observer circle the object and become physically involved in the creative process.³³

Radecki's penchant for sculpture was strengthened by the *zeitgeist* of the 1970s. The university *avant garde* dismissed traditional easel painting as *passé*. Radecki, hearing the "cloakroom buzz" and reading scholarly journals affirming the "death of painting" feared that she might be about to study an obsolete discipline. This, combined with her feeling that the high modernists had exploited painting to its ultimate finality, strengthened her resolve to study sculpture.

Essayist Christine Ross, referencing Radecki's sculpture installation *Circuit* (1989), describes her approach to the discipline:

Circuit reintroduces the problematics of interpretation – this is where it operates as citation, the process whereby it becomes a reiterated journey into a previous work – to situate perception (and consequently artistic practice)... Radecki's... work always entangled the created object with the activity of interpretation and the effect of this entanglement was to be felt afterwards, once the whole piece had been seen and the illusion identified.³⁴

As a sculptural installation, *Circuit* weaves visual enticements, luring the viewer to circle and prowl the perimeter, surrender to optical illusions, recapture and collude with the past. Another work in this vein, *Sand Columns* (1980-82) takes an archaeological approach to the past, bringing “back to life primitive and archaic architecture . . . inspired by the dwellings of New Mexico,”³⁵ or the pre-historic monoliths of Stonehenge. Although technically different, Radecki's sculpture, like her later painting, is interactive visual discourse.

Radecki likes to work quietly, slowly and alone; the logistics of sculpture made this difficult. That being said, she believes in abstraction as a conduit to thought itself, and not a concept “in conflict with the ‘real.’”³⁶ In accord with feminist theorist Mary Ann Doane, Radecki senses vicerally that “our abstractions are our realities. We live them every day.”³⁷ Thus, despite changing medium, her dedication to abstraction has remained steadfast. And although claiming to be a modernist, postmodernism's more flexible parameters altered her notions of painting's future. Freed from the restrictive “art-imprisoned-within-its-frame” purity of formalism, and bolstered by her affinity for literature and calligraphy, she realizes that painting, when combined with text, had the potential to be a soul-

satisfying conduit for her feminist expression, and, concurrently, a questioning, reflexive discourse on painting itself. Whether her decision to abandon sculpture and adopt painting was instigated by an artistic epiphany or the logistics of quotidian life, by the late 1980's and early 1990's she had largely changed medium. Radecki perceived a unique synergy in this literature-and-iconography combination – a synergy which she felt was intensely “mind” as well as “body” related; thus an evolution of the interactive visual discourse that she had sought through sculpture.

Given that Radecki's goal is to disrupt modernist abstraction and imbue abstract expressionism with context and postmodern conceptuality – and to do so without losing abstract expressionism's self-reflexive spontaneity – it is clear that, metaphorically, she is straddling a fault line between tectonic plates. Radecki's conundrum is to find an artistically satisfying and intellectually honest balance between the conceptual potential and shifting tensions of postmodernism, while satisfying her deeply-felt modernist imperative. This set of parameters she estimates to be innately unstable and in constant need of re-appraisal. Theoretically she could resolve the tension between these dualistic art philosophies by assigning the dualism's iconographic element to abstract expressionism, the more painterly of the two art movements, and the literary component to contextual postmodernism, the more conceptual philosophy. Characteristically, as Radecki herself pointed out, she did not follow this elegantly simple binary tactic:

Radecki chose the title *Reading between the Lines* for one of her works because, in her own words, '[I] like to not be strictly legible – not strictly forward but always in between. I appreciate ambiguity, the contradiction of two media at the same time, so the title seemed fitting.' The title of the piece also refers to the artist's mistrust of simple binary reading.³⁸

The title *Reading Between the Lines* is typical of Radecki's ambivalent, oblique, consistently indirect and challenging approach to art. She is neither a proselytizer nor a propagandist. She has no desire to politicize – rather her strategy is to challenge the viewer's analytical, interpretative and critical thinking skills. Her synergistic tangles of literature-and-painting present no clear answers, but a spiderweb of "ifs," "ands" and "buts," – an enticingly diaphanous maze of hints, veiled clues and enigmatic Sphinxian queries. Although she was born and spent her childhood in Germany, this inscrutability is a predictable result of Radecki's exposure to a Canadian mix of divergent viewpoints. Paradoxically, despite the interpretive challenges Radecki poses, she also displays a satisfyingly ironic sense of humour: in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Radecki casts the nymph Echo as her wickedly mischievous alter ego; she also parodied Kasimir Malevich's masculine constructivism with a "tarty" and clearly feminine gold-studded velvet cushion worthy of a femme fatale's boudoir. Her strategy in *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Black Notebooks* is not to state, but to suggest the interconnectedness, complexity, and myriad subtleties implied in life and art in the twenty-first century – subtleties Radecki has excavated but not explained. These are for the viewer to discover.

Chapter 2

Miss Lonelyhearts

Radecki's *Miss Lonelyhearts* is an art installation encompassing two distinct dialogues: citations from Nathanael West's novel of the same name, and abstract paintings referencing the work of five iconic modernist artists: Donald Judd, Franz Kline, Kasimir Malevich, Robert Mangold and Cy Twombly. Her paintings are interpretations, not pastiches or copies (nor are they lampoons or parodies) and, together with the citations from West's novel, they are part of her on-going discourse on self-reflexive New York School modernism versus context-driven postmodernism – an issue which she explores from a highly personal feminist perspective.¹

West's Depression-era novel is a cruel screed, an unrelenting jeremiad suffused with a pervasive sense of civilization's falsity. In the nineteen-sixties it was judged "one of the three finest American novels of our century. The other two are F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1896-1940) *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Ernest Hemingway's (1899-1961) *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). It shares with them a lost...[and] victimized hero."² Darker, harsher and more garish than these, *Miss Lonelyhearts* distils the *zeitgeist* of the thirties as Fitzgerald and Hemmingway did that of the twenties.³

The main protagonist is a newspaper man, who, as part of a circulation building scheme, is hired to write an advice column in answer to heartrending letters from mainly female readers. He is a jaded depressive, assigned by a misogynistic and hyper-critical editor to masquerade as a woman, and to offer

solace to benighted, often suicidal correspondents. “Hoodwinking” his readers, he signs his “agony column” with a female by-line, and initially sees no way to rescue the pathetic denizens who populate his bleak world. As dark as a Dostoevsky novel, to which it is frequently compared, the work suggests an existential despair at the heart of American society. It is a latter-day odyssey recounting Miss Lonelyhearts’s ill-fated search for salvation for himself, his desperate correspondents and, by extension, American civilization.⁴

The novel’s structure is complex and multi-faceted. It touches on universal themes — “despair, alienation, violence, fragmentation, dehumanization, victimization, and sterility”⁵ — that are inextricably interrelated and, in West’s opinion, at the root of social dysfunction. This social dysfunction, as viewed by West and interpreted by Radecki in a postmodern context, is the subject of this chapter. *Miss Lonelyhearts* suggests a multitude of possible readings, making it suspect to try to establish the primacy of any one hypothesis, a characteristic which resonates with Radecki who has a penchant for creating works with multiple subtexts.⁶ The installations discussed in this thesis, are typical of Radecki’s predilection for complexity. (As discussed in Chapter 1, both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Black Notebooks* combine painting [*Miss Lonelyhearts* also includes a multi-media work], with text referencing well regarded literary works — works that, sadly, have become somewhat obscure in the twenty-first century.)

On first reading *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Radecki was fascinated by the conceit at its core: a male authority figure with no valid credentials, magnanimously and gratuitously offers counsel to self-admitted dysfunctional females. As a feminist,

an abstract painter and an admirer of the modernist canon, Radecki was struck by the power imbalance between West's male columnist vis-à-vis his pathetic correspondents, and that of male abstract expressionist painters vis-à-vis their relatively powerless female counterparts.⁷

Although not the subject of Radecki's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, the classical Greek myth of Narcissus and Echo was an initial catalyst which inspired the artist to structure her discourse around West's narrative and modernist painters.

Initially Radecki interpreted West's tale as a metaphor for the events recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Echo, a mischievous talker condemned to repeat endlessly only the last words uttered by others, pined for Narcissus, a beautiful youth so in love with himself that he could love no other. The author of his own demise, Narcissus drowned in a woodland pool whilst admiring his own reflection.⁸ This was a metaphor, in Radecki's mind, for the self-obsessed male artist, who, while concentrating on his own interiority, assumed the mantle of the "male genius."⁹

Now a sad mimic, Echo is equally doomed. She fades away, her words becoming ever fainter and more distorted. Radecki equates the powerless Echo with the novelistic *Miss Lonelyhearts's* correspondents, and more cogently with herself and other female artists — artists whose voices, in Radecki's opinion, are muted and distorted by the prejudice innate in being a woman in a phalocentric art establishment.¹⁰

In the world of Greek mythology, the moral is clear: both overweening hubris and insouciant challenges to authority result in self destruction. Obviously

twentieth and twenty-first-century artists are not liable to such stark retribution. Nonetheless the myth's denouement is worth noting: Narcissus perishes, whereas Echo, although handicapped, lives on.¹¹ That being said, Radecki is asking the viewer to consider the analogies between the "Narcissus-like" self-reflexivity and self-obsession of iconic New York School male abstractionists, and the "Echo-like" powerlessness of their female equivalents, with the consequent loss of diversity to the art canon — and more important in Radecki's estimation, the loss of a uniquely feminine viewpoint. Radecki is intrigued by the notion that "we form, inform and transform ourselves through the reflexive capacity to develop complex symbol systems about symbol systems."¹² Thus the Narcissus myth "has become an intellectual and affective complex that is indicative of the role of self and self-reflection at various stages in our culture. As our conceptions of self-love and self-knowledge change, so do our readings of the myth."¹³ Radecki approaches this consideration from the perspective of a dedicated feminist, as well as from that of an abstract painter. Using the lightest of touches, she subtly interweaves twenty-first century feminist issues throughout *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

Expanding this germ of an idea, Radecki has created an installation series consisting of two parallel, but individually self-contained discourses: paintings and multi-media works interpreting the modernist artists mentioned above, and citations from West's novel. Radecki wanted the viewer to resist the instinct to immediately search for liaisons or hidden cross-currents between citations and paintings. Like railroad tracks, the series were not intended to converge into one

message, but rather to engender separate self-contained narratives. By first analyzing the internal dialogic dynamics of each individually, she hoped that on later contemplation the viewer would spontaneously construe unforced connections between the two. Thus the viewer would discover subtler — deeper synergies that spanned both text and iconography, synergies which Radecki saw as nuanced, almost unconscious in nature, and possibly more revelatory than those produced by a process of conscious analytical logic.¹⁴

Comparing the process to the firing of a synapse, Radecki uses the word “spark” to describe the unconscious connections she envisions. In this manner she seeks to enrich the viewer’s experience through spontaneous, unmediated cross-fertilization between separate dialogues, one strictly textual, the other solely visual. This difficult-to-comprehend, bifurcated process is characteristic of Radecki’s oft-stated desire to concurrently excavate art historical mythology, while – as discussed in Chapter 1 – bridging the gap between post-World-War-II New York School abstract art and postmodernism. She thus hoped to bring context and relevance to contemporary art without destroying the integrity of abstraction.¹⁵

Radecki’s *Miss Lonelyhearts* installation is structured around ten citations from West’s novel, ten interpretive art works (nine paintings and one sculpture), and two non-referential or “original” works by Radecki. These last two, one textual and one iconographic, comprise Radecki’s leitmotif for the series. All the paintings are square, a format rarely favoured for either landscape (traditionally horizontal), or portraiture (usually vertical), and thus one which tends

to be inherently neutral. Because a square does not connote any genre, either subliminally or overtly, in Radecki's estimation it is eminently suitable for abstract painting. Canvas sizes include: 45 x 45 cm., 56 x 56 cm., 90 x 90 cm., and 180 x 180 cm. Some of the paintings consist of one square, others are assemblages including two or four squares joined to create a single work and, with two exceptions (the leitmotifs), they reference iconic figures of the Modernist canon.¹⁶

The citations are mounted in silver colour between the paintings creating a poor tonal contrast with the wall. Consequently the text is almost invisible, forcing the viewer to make a concentrated effort to bring the lettering into focus.¹⁷ This is a conscious decision by the artist who considers that viewers absorb and comprehend text more readily than they do abstract iconography which, in her opinion, is more complex to decipher and requires more time to internalize. By making the lettering, in effect, difficult to read, Radecki wished to slow down the viewer's rate of textual absorption, and thus equalize the time required for comprehension between the two art forms. This tactic, she hoped, would remedy the problem inherent in combining different creative media, presented separately but in tandem, as part of the same work.¹⁸

With her penchant for combining iconography and text, Radecki's work has always been complex, but never more so than in *Miss Lonelyhearts*. She challenges the viewer with panoply of unrestricted ideas: arcane, meticulously-crafted iconography which, with no apparent logic, is juxtaposed with citations from an obscure depression-era novel. There is cunning, however, in Radecki's methodology. By creating an intellectual as well as a visual conundrum, the artist

subtly urges the harried, contemporary viewer to slow down, think, and rethink an installation that, if viewed quickly and un-analytically, could be deemed a discourse on a “hodgepodge” of unrelated concepts. The discussion below is an attempt to analyze these disparate, unresolved, and frequently contradictory elements. In it we follow the chronological progression of West’s protagonist, Miss Lonelyhearts, as his doomed odyssey moves inexorably toward its Westian *Götterdämmerung*.¹⁹

The global textual leitmotif of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is not a citation from West’s novel, but the work’s only text written by the Radecki herself, and when studied in tandem with her iconography, could be considered a Rosetta stone to decoding this work’s kaleidoscopic variability. It is a phrase which like a musical refrain is repeated several times, as if to guide the viewer’s thoughts through the process of navigating the work’s labyrinthine paths: “She wrote for many years without making a sound. A square of anger is left under the tongue.”²⁰ (Text 1)

Henry Lehman speculates that these short, poetic sentences may be “evidence of some personal tragedy, a silent scream.”²¹ Conversely, Lynn Beavis sees Radecki “subtly insert[ing] her own voice, which sotto voce reveals that the ‘copyist function’ she takes up is both a strategy and a deceit.”²² However, when the installation is studied in its entirety, we realize that Radecki’s leitmotif represents her personal feelings. With that realization, the graceful turn of phrase assumes an aura of emotional intensity and vulnerability beyond that conveyed by the installation’s other elements — be they the interpretive paintings, the Westian citations, or the coy analogies to Greek mythology. When considered in

context, the text appears more forceful. It becomes a direct, personal and relatively unsubtle thematic statement — one penned by Radecki as a pithy yet ironic expression of her frustration and impatience with an art and a socio-political establishment, which despite years of effort, has failed to structure an “even playing field” for women, particularly female artists. Her resentment is palpable; at the time she wrote her leitmotif (1998), Radecki saw women as still largely mute, insufficiently represented in the corridors of power, their message frequently as distorted and fugitive as that of Echo.

Feminist issues dominate the textual leitmotif; whereas although the iconographic leitmotif, *Untitled I* (Figure 1), also touches on feminism, it is principally about another of Radecki’s career-long goals: to expand and bring context to self-reflexive modernism, particularly abstract expressionism, in an era dominated by context-driven postmodernism. Emotionally, Radecki is a modernist, an abstractionist and, at heart, an abstract expressionist. Intellectually, she chafes under the strictures of a *passé*, if not discredited, movement that she now finds limiting. Typically, in *Untitled I*, as in all the installation’s paintings, Radecki explores the viability of a contemporary modernism expanded to straddle the gulf between abstract expressionism and postmodernist concerns.

Untitled I appears to be a square cut from a distressed plaster wall with a ragged hole punched through the middle. The background is cinder-block grey, daubed with off-white slashes. The paint slashes are short and all-over as if hurriedly executed, however unlike Jackson Pollock’s (1912-56) long, sinuous

skeins of paint, these give a staccato effect. To the close observer, hints of darker shades show through the veil of slashes, as if the wall had been distressed by age, and re-painted repeatedly in varying pastels.

Because it is highly contrasting, the dark hole suggests concavity, bringing to mind unfathomable depths: a deep well, even Plato's cave where reality is but a flicking shadow, or maybe the hole is merely evidence of uncontrolled anger or an act of willful property destruction on the part of the hole puncher, or a broken heart. Although the work appears to be a symmetrical abstraction, executed in a painterly manner, reality is otherwise. As one approaches the painting, the illusion of a black depression at the center dissipates. The viewer realizes that the black hole does not consist of paint on canvas - actually it is a photograph affixed on top of an abstract image. Thus the hole is not concave but level. It is an intrusive component produced by a mechanical device (a camera) and not the singular spontaneously-executed self-expression of an abstract painter.

By incorporating the photograph, a representational element, into what otherwise appears to be a spontaneous and painterly abstract expressionist painting, Radecki is challenging abstract expressionist notions of originality and perception. She is implying that the concept of originality could be a delusion built on false myths of self-reflexive, spontaneous creative uniqueness. In effect, Radecki is proselytizing for a theory of painting that is inclusive, one that is unabashedly abstract and true to its modernist roots, yet embraces notions of environment, context and perception beyond the borders of the canvas, a notion she argues for repeatedly in *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

Adjacent to *Untitled I*, Radecki has also mounted key phrases from letters to the novelistic Miss Lonelyhearts, all are very personal and plaintive, and all are dominated by the pronoun “I” (Text 2):

Dear Miss Lonelyhearts –

I am in such pain I don't know what to do.
I sit and look at myself all day and cry.
I have a big hole in the middle of my face.
I am writing to you for my little sister Gracie
because something awful happened to her.

Broken-hearted. Desperate. Disillusioned. Sick-of-it-all.²³

By conflating several letters into one poignant, if disjointed, outpouring, Radecki uses poetic license to succinctly pinpoint the genesis of the columnist's dilemma: his mounting empathy for his correspondents and his inability to offer them any meaningful help. Miss Lonelyhearts cannot remain aloof; he allows a miasma of hopelessness to gradually infiltrate his thoughts, and to solidify into the conviction that American society has a black hole at its heart – a void Radecki symbolized by the black spot vaguely resembling a shriveled black heart at the centre of the work (Figure 1). Rather than symbolize the pit into which society is collapsing with the painted representation of a theoretically cavernous black hole, Radecki fills in the void with a photograph, a visual metaphor representing the victims of society's collapse.

Despite his lack of solutions for society's victims (his correspondents being amongst the most downtrodden), Miss Lonelyhearts is determined to discover the cure to America's malaise and launches into his quixotic odyssey, the subject of

the remainder of the novel. West's work is satiric, redolent with irony and populated with uni-dimensional individuals representing human virtues and faults. The author draws vivid larger-than-life caricatures of these Westian denizens, such as the "girl with a hole in her face," which can strike the viewer like an imagistic punch to the solar plexus — or, like "little Gracie" whose plight is left hanging in the air, leading the reader to imagine every sort of dreadful scenario.

Radecki's *Untitled I* is obviously not an abstract portrait of the disfigured girl but, considering its positioning in the installation – juxtaposed to the pathetic pleas for help – the painting with its purposefully marred iconography is an empathetic statement of protest on behalf of Miss Lonelyhearts's downtrodden female correspondents. That being said, Radecki adds complexity to the issue. She subverts West's pathos (and creates her own Echo-like distortion) by having the illusionistic photograph masquerade as a black spot – which may symbolize nothing more than the void in Miss Lonelyhearts's heart, and represent graphically his oppressive weight of guilt at failing to succor the needy. Ultimately, by playing the mischievous Echo, Radecki's black spot adds context and discourse to what initially appears to be an apriori self-reflexive abstract expressionist painting.

Untitled I may also be reflected in the next citation (Text 3). Here West shows us a deeply concerned Miss Lonelyhearts who is as unable to help his correspondents as they are to help themselves. His sense of powerlessness has gradually turned to despair. The citation reads: "The letters were no longer

funny.”²⁴ “He had given his readers many stones; so many in fact that he had only one left – the stone that was left in his gut.”²⁵

Radecki interprets Cy Twombly in four paintings, more than any other artist she references. This is not surprising. Twombly is an action painter, an artist Radecki admires who also has credible bona fides as a New York School abstract expressionist. Twombly is reputed to be heir to:

Abstract expressionism and to its fundamental contributions to pictorial creation: total freedom of content and composition; emphasis on the spontaneous gesture, straight from the artist’s psyche ...opening up of pictorial space; and acceptance of the matter of paint as the essence of painting.²⁶

Twombly’s work, like Radecki’s, is frequently enigmatic, complex and multi-layered. She recognizes in him a kindred spirit, whose painting, beyond its appearance of spontaneity and its pictorial qualities, can also be described as “lyric and romantically personal, like a well-kept diary that is as beautiful and intriguing to read as it is enigmatic and ambiguous in meaning.”²⁷

Radecki follows the scarred *Untitled I* with the subtle, almost ethereal *Untitled II*, (Figure 2) an abstract expressionist canvas in the Twombly manner. Obscure and diaphanous, *Untitled II* is lyrically romantic, in actuality the only painting in the series that can be described as such. Over a background of typical Twombly-esque classical ruins and hearts (reminiscent of Jim Dine’s (1935-) ubiquitous “heart” motif) Radecki has limned a chromatically-subdued spiderweb of delicate misty-grey scribbles, punctuated with randomly-placed decorative “splotches” (an oxymoronic concept, and an injection of iconographic complexity characteristic of Radecki). These “splotches”, as red as crushed rose petals,

counterbalance the voluptuously-curved hearts, thus offering visual contrast to the ephemeral spidery lines. By pairing the chromatically-strong red motifs and the delicately-limned hearts, Radecki creates a feminine aura of heart-felt emotion, perhaps signifying a broken heart or a crushed romance. More cogently, she creates a visual metaphor referencing an iconic painter (Twombly) whose abstract expressionist paintings, as interpreted by Radecki, meld graphics and context. In effect, she is showing her appreciation for an artist she admires, whilst advancing her discourse.

Untitled II is paired with Miss Lonelyhearts's exhortation to his correspondent to embrace art as a solution to life's problems, a solution which, as it is executed in the novel, proves to be misguided and unfeasible. Radecki cites the columnist's explanation (Text 4): "Art is a way out. Do not let life overwhelm you. When the old paths are choked with the debris of failure, look for newer and fresher paths. Art is just such a path. Art is distilled from suffering."²⁸ Miss Lonelyhearts's misplaced faith in the permanence of art's transformative powers suggests another interpretation of *Untitled II's* diaphanous iconography. The splotches, hearts, classical ruins and scribbles appear to be in motion, blown aloft and easterly by a stiff breeze or a soft zephyr. This fugitive quality could be Radecki's sardonic comment on the novelistic *Miss Lonelyhearts's* naïve faith in art — faith which is quickly dashed by the reality of his and his correspondents' life experiences. Radecki's life experience as a female artist also suggests that art's bounty is unequally distributed.

In *Untitled II* she eschews Miss Lonelyhearts's simplistic all-encompassing philosophy, and narrows her critical focus to art of the New York School abstract expressionism movement. "By the early fifties the leading abstract expressionists had achieved a highly individualized style, a kind of personal imprimatur that was...clearly identified with the painter's ego."²⁹ Through her Twombly-esque "blowing-in- the-wind" iconography, Radecki suggests that these inward-directed, self-reflexive artists, who drew inspiration largely from the unfettered expression of their sub-conscious, represent historic figures from the past, and are not relevant exemplars to many contemporary postmodern artists.

These wind-blown motifs may represent a sad iconographic commentary (ironically painted in the expressionist style Radecki is memorializing) on an art establishment that is no longer infatuated with abstract expressionism. Like the self-destructive Narcissus who left a beautiful flower as his legacy, the abstract expressionist painters have left the legacy of their masterworks. *Untitled II* is a bittersweet eulogy for an art movement that was Radecki's early artistic template — one that, as a feminist and a contemporary artist, she both admires and resents. That being said, despite her apparent narrow focus on abstract expressionism, in *Untitled II* Radecki is making a wider-ranging critique. This broader discourse reflects a phenomenon common to all art movements. They tend to reflect the *zeitgeist* of an era and participate in its construction, and as an era's passes and ideas change, art movements lose their currency, literary styles fall out of favour. Radecki is reminding us that, by their very nature, art movements are transitory, and like the critically praised but little read novels

referenced in this thesis, the renown of even the canon's most celebrated works tends to be fugitive.

The citation praising the redemptive power of art is followed by a seemingly innocuous one about quotidian banalities: work, weather, sleep and dreams (Text 5). "When Miss Lonelyhearts quit work he found that the weather had turned warm and that the air smelt as though it had been artificially heated... With Sleep, a dream came. In the spring when the sky cracked, the serpent left the cave and sang I the dust."³⁰ The key word for West is "dream" – a dream of hope, of redemption, one that masks mankind's suffering and makes life bearable. The search for such a dream runs like a thread through the novel, becoming Miss Lonelyhearts's Holy Grail and an obsession, the only hope of salvation for him, his correspondents and America. In the novelist's view mankind's "one potential universal palliative – dreaming – has been discredited by deceitful, grasping, cynical, and powerful men who [dismiss] the less powerful. With no way to turn...these people find themselves trapped in a world of...limited possibility."³¹ As echoed by American dramatist, Eugene O'Neil (1888-1953), the pervasive mood of the period was one of despair:

West's tragic vision of human life is the same vision Eugene O'Neil dramatized in *The Iceman Cometh* [1939], probably the most despairing play of our time. Both writers see man's ideals and ideas as nothing but pipe dreams. These empty dreams, as man's only defense against the brutality of reality, are essential if he is to go on living.³²

As a young girl during World War II, Radecki with her mother and siblings had to flee her ancestral home in Eastern Germany; she became a displaced person, eventually immigrating to Canada. At an impressionable age, she lost her

secure home and became a refugee, suffering the psychic damage of having to face adult challenges in war-torn Europe while still young. In such circumstances, dreams help keep hope alive. Thus, it is not surprising Radecki chose Text 5; she clearly understands West's conviction that mankind has always fought its misery by resorting to dreams. Nonetheless, despite her empathy for Miss Lonelyhearts and his correspondents, Radecki's vision of humanity is fundamentally positive, and no way as bleak as that of the depression-era author and his protagonist. A painting does not accompany the Westian citation about dreams. This is possibly because Radecki does not share West's vitriolic despair and the darkness of his vision.

Radecki shares with Twombly an interest in exploring the interface between drawing and painting (which explains her penchant for repeatedly interpreting his cursive style). As a painter she wants to blur, and possibly erase the distinction between the two disciplines, and even more radically, to blur the lines between drawing, painting and text — a challenge which she explored several times in subsequent years: *Reading Between the Lines* (2000), *The Burnt Poems* (2002) and *The Black Notebooks* (the subject of Chapter 3). With this in mind, it is difficult for the viewer to disassociate the next Radecki interpretation, *Untitled III* (Figure 3), from the accompanying Westian citation (Text 6). "But now let us consider the holes in our own bodies and into what these congenital wounds open. Under the skin of man is a wondrous jungle where veins like lush tropical growths hang along over-ripe organs and weed-like entrails writhe in squirming tangles of red and yellow."³³

West's grotesque and slightly macabre rhetoric inspired *Untitled III*, a Twombly-esque graffiti painting in the artist's early cursive style, in which an explosion of interlacing loops and curves, dodge and slalom to fill every inch of the canvas with a riotous tangle of red. The effect is reminiscent of a body, skinned to expose West's "wondrous jungle where veins" etc. An all-over abstract expressionist painting with distinct colour-field leanings, Radecki was inspired to create *Untitled III* by the power and passion of West's poetic and visually graphic prose – and by her admiration (touched with nostalgia) for Twombly's graphic exuberance, an exuberant freedom which has its genesis in Pollock's iconic all-over abstract expressionist masterpieces.

In *Untitled III*, Radecki deliberately evokes West's over-heated prose with intensely coloured abstract iconography resembling human internal organs, organs never meant to be exposed to view. This use of what could be labeled "visual onomatopoeia", or echoing, is a foray into melding, yet retaining the individual cohesiveness of traditionally separate self-contained forms of artistic expression; and doing so without degrading or compromising either. That being said, Text 6 and *Untitled III*, when considered in unison, could be thought of as igniting imaginative cross-currents that reach beyond the literal interpretation above. The tangled iconography, in light of the citation's organic earthiness, could symbolize a passionate tango, wherein a couple, sweaty bodies entwined, dance in perfect unison, each inspiring the other to ever more extravagant twists, turns and impulsive dips. Radecki's aim is to engender this type of response in

the viewer – a response incorporating multiple and highly personal context-driven synergies between text and graphics.

Following her Twombly-esque adaptations, Radecki does a *volt face* and chooses Robert Mangold as her inspiration for *Untitled IV* (Figure 4). Mangold is a minimalist painter interested in primary structure, whose philosophy of art is based on a “reaction to the perceived excesses of abstract expressionism.”³⁴ True to the Mangold approach, figure 4 is cool and controlled, with a geometric purity of shape - exhibiting the reverse of the Twombly-esque arabesques and rococo exuberance of *Untitled III* – although both share a common red-and-black palette.

In *Untitled IV*, Radecki has created a rectangular work by butting together two square paintings of the same design, but in mirror-image – mirror images which, except for their colour balance, are identical. In keeping with Mangold’s minimalist aesthetic, Radecki has starkly limned basic geometric shapes: square, rectangle, triangle, and a rounded lozenge-shape resembling an elongated semi-circle. She has also restricted the work to two colours: dark anthracite grey, unadulterated red, and a mottled effect, created by applying successive layers of the same red and anthracite colours without mixing or blending. Each square depicts an elongated, notched quarter circle occupying two-thirds of the area. When butted together the two squares create a rectangular work depicting an elongated semi circle (or truncated lozenge). This is bisected by a long narrow isosceles triangle starting at mid-point of the upper edge and thrusting down two-thirds of the painting’s length. The quarter-circles occupy approximately one-half

of each square painting, and when butted together, the resultant half-circle occupies approximately one half of the rectangular work. The effect of this Euclidian gamesmanship is a satisfyingly simple graphic interplay balancing geometric shapes, carefully calculated mathematical proportions, and rich, unadulterated colour.

Radecki has created an elegant minimalist painting by adhering to Mangold's principles – *Untitled IV* is mathematically precise, symmetrical and based on primary structure. And, although the colour balance is the same, the design is the polar opposite of the organically exuberant Twombly-esque *Untitled III*, which appears to have its genesis more in emotion than in cerebration. By choosing to interpret Twombly and Mangold of all the abstractionists of the era, Radecki is referencing the wide scope of New York School modernism, and commenting on the “pendulum swing” of styles and theories it generated. That being said, she is also demonstrating, as she does repeatedly throughout *Miss Lonelyhearts*, that as an artist and a feminist, she both admires and envies the painters she painstakingly interprets. Having lived through the post World War II era, she remembers a *zeitgeist* which favoured male artists and tended to cast women as “handmaidens” to the reputedly more cerebral, talented and creative male artists.

The citation (Text 7) accompanying *Untitled IV* resonates with idealized sentimentality, masking a shameful deed. On first reading it appears very un-Westian, certainly out of character with the novel's thematic message, and that of the *Untitled IV* hard-edged iconography and mathematical logic. The citation

reads: "Between the market and the hill on which they intended to perform the sacrifice was a meadow. While going through it, they picked daisies and buttercups. Half way up the hill, they found a rock and covered it with flowers. They laid the lamb among the flowers."³⁵ Purposefully benign, the citation creates an idealized picture that makes subsequent events, analyzed below, doubly sickening and senseless.

The "stone" in Text 3 remains in Miss Lonelyhearts's gut and on his conscience, a knowing reminder of his impotence as a healer of broken spirits. In Text 7, the "stone" has morphed into a "rock", and has become a flower-strewn symbol of a sacrificial altar. An altar in *Untitled IV* which Radecki denudes of daisies, buttercups and lamb (a Judeo-Christian symbol of sacrifice from the Biblical Abraham to the Roman Catholic Mass), reducing the "rock" to a stark graphic icon representing a sacred site of sacrifice. In the Mangold-inspired work (Figure 4), Radecki recreates the altar symbolically – the semi-circle represents a smooth round rock with the isosceles triangle representing a groove at mid-point to channel and collect the victim's blood. When studied within the context of Text 8 (below), and in light of Radecki's feminist perspective, the minimalist painting is a graphic metaphor for an altar on which creatures lacking power (animals, women, enemy captives), symbolically and historically, have been sacrificed to the demands of a masculine hierarchy.

A less elegant, but dramatically feminist interpretation suggests that *Untitled IV* depicts a stylized representation of the female sexual organ. The focal point is the bright red triangle which symbolizes the vagina, the semi-circle which

symbolizes the female buttocks, and the shapes framing either side of the buttocks which represent darkness and day-light (the mysterious and earthy darkness of the female element, as opposed to the light-of-reason logic characteristic of the male element). This reductive rationalization is extreme, perhaps fanciful (or Echo-inspired naughtiness). But the interpretation could be insightful when considered within the context of the dual themes on which Radecki based *Miss Lonelyhearts*: to expand the debate on feminism, and to revive interest in abstract painting by opening art to context and issues of contemporary relevance. By representing the most organically and unmistakably sexual aspect of the female anatomy in terms of the most mathematical and precise manifestations of non-objective art, Radecki is making a targeted statement. In this counter-intuitive juxtaposition, a female artist symbolizes the fundamental essence of femininity – more to the point, she does this in what apparently is a self-contained non-objective abstraction pared to minimalist geometry.

The next citation (Text 8) continues West's narrative of sacrifice symbolized by the stone altar, a narrative hinted at above in Text 7. Text 8 reads: "Their hands were covered with slimy blood and the lamb slipped free. It crawled off into underbrush. As the bright sun outlined the altar rock with narrow shadows, the scene appeared to gather itself for some new violence."³⁶ In West's novel, this scene is from one of Miss Lonelyhearts's overwrought dreams, actually a nightmare in which he dreamt he was back in college with his drunken dorm mates. As a lark they killed a lamb in a mock religious ritual, horribly

bungling the sacrificial act. To expiate his guilt, Miss Lonelyhearts, later and alone, searched out the wounded creature and gave it the *coup de grâce*. The sequence starkly illustrates the insensitivity and false bravado society, or perhaps nature itself, inculcates in young males. This episode is one of many in which West condemns barbaric beliefs that are cloaked in ritual (e.g.: the innate hypocrisy of flowers, a metaphor for women, decorating a sacrificial altar), beliefs that by convention go unquestioned by society.³⁷

In Miss Lonelyhearts's dream, the drunken young men run amok through the town, farmers' market and the countryside, generally tormenting whomever they meet. They are not chastised, but looked upon tolerantly as privileged young men (college students during the Depression) behaving as young men have since time immemorial. To Radecki, West's male college students' innate sense of masculine exceptionalism, although different in kind, is parallel in degree to the privileged position male artists have enjoyed throughout art history.³⁸

To interpret this senseless, bungled violence, Radecki turns to abstract expressionist Franz Kline, whose bold black-and-white paintings inspire *Untitled V* (Figure 5). "Among [Kline's] qualities are the big...but controlled brushstrokes; the powerful, architectural structure; and in the paint texture as well as in the shaping of forms, an insistence on the equivalence of the whites that prevents the work from becoming...blown-up black drawing on a white ground."³⁹

In *Untitled V*, Radecki has again butted together square canvases (in this case four) to create the longest unbroken horizontal of the installation, also the

boldest and most intensely painterly work. Radecki abandons caution and slashes thick black streaks across the canvas in all directions; the result resembles an Italian renaissance architectural capriccio or a fanciful Giovanni Piranesi (1720-1776) ruin – or more aptly, a drunken superstructure teetering on the verge of collapse. These emotionally explosive heirs of Japanese calligraphy dominate eighty percent of the canvas. Appearing to be an afterthought, two small bicolour squares are stacked on the work's left side (one predominantly black, the other predominantly red). The black and white abstract expressionist architecture is Radecki's visceral, and intensely personal portrayal of the cruel and senseless violence described in Text 8; The small black and the red square, portray respectively the sacrificial altar and the blood of the wounded lamb.

There is an element of synergy between Radecki's time-consuming painting technique of foreground/background reversal (discussed in Chapter 1), and Kline's obsession with balancing black and white motifs "such that concentrated study transforms the painting into a structure of white solids or black voids."⁴⁰ *Untitled V* may appear to portray ricocheting black brushstrokes caroming off the edges on a white ground, whereas, in actuality, Radecki carefully painted white shapes (trapezoids, triangles and rectangles) on a black background, thus allowing the bold black "brushstrokes" to show through. With her unique, time-consuming technique, Radecki has painstakingly painted an illusion of swashbuckling spontaneity, an homage to Kline's genuinely bold brushwork, and to the balance implicit in his optically shifting foregrounds and backgrounds.

In *Untitled VI* (Figure 6), inspired by the Primary Structure or minimalist sculpture of Donald Judd, Radecki once more vacillates between two distinctly different philosophies of art: “the objective attitude, taken to the point of mathematical precision”⁴¹ of Judd, and fellow minimalist Mangold, as opposed to the subjective and emotional abstract expressionism of Twombly and Kline. In a search for absolute unity of wholeness, Judd espouses “principles of balanced symmetry and repetition [basing his sculpture on] repeated identical units, normally quadrangular, recur[ing] at identical intervals.”⁴²

Radecki’s interpretation of Judd’s ideas consists of four square paintings mounted one above the other to create a columnar effect. Unlike most of the *Miss Lonelyhearts* paintings, these are not butted together, but are mounted in characteristic Judd manner – stacked squares with an identical interval between each. The squares are painted red with a black band on the right-hand edge – each band gradually tapering from bottom to top. In turn, the stacked squares are hung with the narrowest band at the top, and the widest at the bottom. Because the black bands are not identical from canvas to canvas, they constitute a break with Judd-like rigid symmetry and identity. By straying from Judd’s dictate and adding this asymmetrical element, Radecki has ruptured the notion that the minimalist work’s sole *raison d’être* is its objective physicality and self-contained insularity. Thus she questions whether an “absolutely mechanical arrangement of identical solids at identical intervals constitutes a work of art.”⁴³ This challenge to Judd’s minimalist premise continues her discourse on the relevance of context as an integral element in contemporary abstract painting – and does so, not in

verbal constructs, but in the manner most meaningful to an artist, paint on canvas.

By adding an asymmetrical element — the gently curved black bands — Radecki's *Untitled VI* becomes more than a discourse on the nature of space and sculptural form. The stacked paintings take on the aura of a red pillar or industrial chimney about to be eclipsed and fade into darkness as a heavenly body passes between it and the sun. Nonetheless, the effect is serene and organized, with a clean-lined essentiality that dovetails with Judd's devotion to a "thesis of Primary Structures, [which] raise fundamental questions concerning the nature and even the validity of the work of art, the nature of the aesthetic experience, the nature of space, and the nature of sculptural form."⁴⁴ Radecki expands and redirects the discourse through her choice of accompanying citation (Text 9):

He decided to take a brisk walk...
The stone shaft cast a long rigid shadow...in front of him. He sat staring at it without knowing why until he noticed that it was lengthening in rapid jerks, not as shadows usually lengthen. He grew frightened and looked up quickly at the monument. It seemed red and swollen in the dying sun, as though it was about to spout a load of granite seed.⁴⁵

When viewed through the filter of the Westian citation, *Untitled VI* portrays, not a red pillar or an industrial chimney on the cusp of a solar eclipse, but a much more organic erection, an erect penis coloured red by the setting sun, whereas the curving black band is but the lengthening twilight shadows.

In the novel, Miss Lonelyhearts's stone shaft-into-penis metamorphosis occurred when he was hung-over; the illusion reflects his subconscious belief (learnt as an undergraduate) that sex was the best cure for his condition. An ugly

scene follows in which Miss Lonelyhearts pursues a woman in order to cure his hangover, and she in turn toys with him in order to spite her husband. Their motives are equally ignoble and self-serving. Discouragingly it is one of the novel's many repellent episodes of inter-gender hostility. In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, West exposes a nightmarish (but very familiar) world in which women are relatively powerless and manipulative, and men, resenting their masculine inability to do without sex, are controlling, demeaning and, at times, brutal. "All the women in the book are alike in sharing a common torment – all are seduced, raped, deceived or otherwise abused"⁴⁶ In fact the "obsessive theme of *Miss Lonelyhearts* is human pain and suffering, but it is represented almost entirely as female suffering."⁴⁷ In West's estimation a multitude of problems plague nineteen-thirty's American society; nonetheless he has chosen to empathize with the plight of women, an attitude which could characterize him as an early feminist – and which inspired Radecki, if only subliminally, to make West's largely forgotten novel the subject of her art installation.

The next citation (Text 10) is a sarcastic skewering of Miss Lonelyhearts's embrace of art as the salvation of mankind's malaise. It is spoken by the corrosively bitter Shrike, Miss Lonelyhearts's editor, nemesis and alter ego. Editor and columnist share a relationship based on a clash of opposites, one on a par with that of Doctor Jekyll (Miss Lonelyhearts) and Mister Hyde (Shrike). Shrike's sarcasm is aimed at what he considers Miss Lonelyhearts's vainglorious and self-centered efforts to promote art as the solution to the world's problems. Conversely, the newspaper columnist naively sees art as an aesthetic conduit to

fill the void within his own and his correspondents' souls, and by extension the souls of all mankind. In Text 10 Shrike mockingly says: "You fornicate under pictures by Matisse and Picasso, you drink from Renaissance glassware, and often you spend an evening beside the fireplace with Proust and an apple."⁴⁸ Uttered by his editor to torment and belittle Miss Lonelyhearts, these lines represent a fantasy having no resemblance to the columnist's sordid life. The irony of the citation did not escape Radecki, whose response to Shrike's cynical remark also involves a touch of irony.

Referencing Genesis, Radecki chose the apple - with its round "female" shape and its importance to Adam's downfall – as a metaphor for Text 10. With a *soupçon* of the irrepressible Echo, Radecki juxtaposed Shrike's ironic remark with *Untitled VII*, a three-dimensional work affixed to the wall (in essence, a sculpture), comprised of a glass shelf supporting eight artificial green apples. Radecki's decorative apples, light-hearted symbols of the creation myth, are a change of pace from the interpretive paintings. As an object, the wall-mounted apples are also a bow to the still life genre; to three-dimensionality and to sculpture (originally Radecki was a sculptor).

The apples acquire a richer sub-text when juxtaposed to Shrike's sarcastic banter, becoming an expression of Radecki's feminist theme. They are a rotund green critique aimed at the gender inequality rampant in post World War II New York School abstract expressionism — an era of iconic male painters whose reputations are as hallowed as those of the male artists sanctified in Text 10 — Henri Matisse (1869-1954), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) and Marcel Proust (1871-

1922). Radecki made her apples obviously artificial to demolish the construct of “phoneyess” surrounding the “male genius” myth, thereby skewering the insincere obsequiousness that the art establishment bestows on its male icons. If the apple is code for “woman,” and green is the colour of envy, the green apples are visual metaphors for the understandable envy experienced by talented but consistently overshadowed female artists of the period. Under the circumstances, envy is an excusable emotion.

The Russian painter Kasimir Malevich, a pioneer of suprematism inspired *Untitled XIII* (Figure 7). In 1915, as a theorist of non-objective abstraction, Malevich wrote:

Painters should abandon subject and object if they wish to be pure painters ... This demand for the dynamic of plastic painting indicates the need for the mass of painting to emerge from the object and arrive at the domination of form as an end in itself over content ... at non-objective suprematism, at the new realism in art, at absolute creation.⁴⁹

In his determination to rid art of content, including even the most vestigial suggestions of an object or subject matter, Malevich pared his work to the absolute essence of geometric simplicity. In 1913 he drew an elemental abstraction consisting of a single basic shape: a black square on a white background. He later tilted the motif and removed the contrasting black, leaving only a square outline on the white canvas. In Malevich’s estimation, this “pure abstraction,” devoid of references, allowed the artist to express “pure feeling.”⁵⁰

Radecki’s Malevitch-esque interpretation consists of two separate paintings, a black square and a half-size red square, with the red canvas hung off-centre and a-tilt, below the black canvas, whilst using the wall as the

compositional background. Although obviously inspired by Malevich's theories, *Untitled XIII* is not an unabashed accolade to his reductionist concepts. Radecki, again playing the sly Echo, corrupts the work's geometric purity by padding the smaller square in red velvet quilted with miniature gold upholstery pins, thus creating a pincushion effect. This perversion of Malevitch's ideas is a light-hearted critique of the masculine ethic under-girding suprematism. Radecki's pincushion joke is also a bow to mundane, feminine skills of a fundamentally utilitarian and decorative nature, skills that are not normally considered high art. By skewing the master of geometric suprematism's ponderous theories with something as inappropriate as the upholstery pin, Radecki is making a tongue-in-cheek "call to arms" to feminist artists who object to male domination of the art establishment.

The novelistic citation (Text 11) juxtaposed to *Untitled XI*, like Text 5, has an oneiric quality: "Miss Lonelyhearts welcomed the arrival of fever... The Christ that hung on the wall... became a bright fly spinning with quick grace on a background of blood velvet sprinkled with tiny nerve stars. Everything else in the room was dead."⁵¹ By selecting this nightmarish dream sequence, redolent of feverish religiosity, Radecki brings new and conflicting context to her perversely lighthearted feminist interpretation of suprematism. When studied in conjunction with the Westian text, the coy pincushion motif with its garish gold studs, takes on darker implications.

In the novel, following the dream sequence Miss Lonelyhearts experiences a "road-to-Damascus" epiphany and is cleansed of his doubts and self-loathing.

He embraces Christ and the Christian imperative to love and save mankind. He then rushes forth, full of noble intentions, only to become entangled in the novel's tragic-comic denouement. This is a sordid little *Götterdämmerung* in which Miss Lonelyhearts is shot and killed. In the debacle, his assassin, who is a pathetic "cripple" the columnist was trying to save, is also shot and killed.⁵²

When studied concurrently, a synergy is apparent between West's depressing nihilistic drama and Radecki's variation on Suprematist modernism. The gold-studded red velvet square represents Miss Lonelyhearts's fevered vision: a "spinning fly" as "nerve stars" on "blood velvet." The dream blood is a prophetic omen of the real blood that was soon to be spilled — spilled senselessly in a farcical brouhaha in which Miss Lonelyhearts and "the cripple" (a metaphor for crippled mankind), die locked in each other's arms. One survivor is left unscathed, Miss Lonelyhearts's fiancée Betty who unwittingly abetted the tragedy. That being said, it is interesting that in a novel populated with downtrodden women, in the end it is a woman who is left standing. Despite a cast of dimwits, harridans, succubuses and ninnies, West's sympathy for women is apparent, an attitude that makes the novel an appealing subject to Radecki. *Untitled VIII's* largest iconographic element, the black square, replicates the "deadness" in Miss Lonelyhearts's bedroom — a "deadness" permeating the world he inhabits, a world he is helpless to save.

By juxtaposing Westian text and Malevichian iconography, Radecki has also introduced a second and quite different sub-text, one as melodramatic as the feminist analysis, but considerably darker. Nonetheless both the feminist and

the Westian sub-texts are manifestations of Radecki's discourse challenging the Russian master's notions that pure geometric abstraction is the path to an art of pure feeling.

Two paintings, *Untitled IX* and *X* (Figures 8 & 9), combined with *Untitled III* and Radecki's textual leitmotif provide a refrain that brackets the installation and reiterates its basic theme: "She wrote for many years without making a sound. A square of anger is left under the tongue." The accompanying Twombly-esque iconography consists of variations on a theme of penmanship exercises. Sometimes painted in light on dark, sometimes in dark on light, the square canvasses, completely covered with loops, whorls and arabesques have the cursive graffiti-like energy of calligraphy gone wild, and are a reminder of Radecki's dedication to the melding of text and image.

Chapter 3 *The Black Notebooks*

While visiting Berlin in 1999, German-born Radecki had an epiphany. In 2005 she wrote:

I was suddenly confronted with all the windows and doors of the public library plastered with posters listing the hundreds of names of writers who had been banned during the Nazi era. This was the day in 1933 when huge stacks of books were burned. The posters were a call to memory. Being of German heritage, I was affected deeply by this event and I began a series of paintings called *The Burnt Poems*. Although using the vocabulary of abstract painting, these were, for me, portraits of some of these German women writers of the 30's and 40's.¹

Radecki continued to develop this theme. In *Reading Between the Lines* (2000), an exhibition which included the actual poster as a document of historical significance, Radecki memorialized German poet Else Lasker-Schüler (whose name appears on the anti-Nazi poster) by reproducing a published version of one of her poems in both the original German and English translation. However, in the series' major painting, *Sanatorium Agra* (1999-2000), Radecki bypassed published poems, and enlarged, excerpted and illusionistically over-painted a letter in the poet's own handwriting. The over-painting resembles cuts or slashes and the handwriting is illegible – however, Radecki's symbolic slashes of censorship on Lasker-Schüler's letter dramatize the poignancy of the poet's plight. Radecki's message is clear – a poet's voice is muted, rendered illegible by a repressive regime.²

This interest in lost “voices,” led her to the discovery of Canadian writer Elizabeth Smart, whose diaries, journals and autobiographical poetic-prose novel Radecki used to further develop this theme. This was the genesis of Radecki’s series, *The Black Notebooks*, the subject of this chapter.

As in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Radecki’s approach to modern art, shaped by a penchant for literature and calligraphy, and informed by her feminist ethic, is at the heart of her homage to Smart. *The Black Notebooks* is Radecki’s most self-effacing installation. By concentrating on Smart’s handwritten text, Radecki purposefully shifts the viewer’s focus from herself as creator to Smart’s writing as the nexus of the viewer’s interest and scrutiny. The texts selected by Radecki as subjects of individual paintings mark pivotal events in Smart’s life, and provide the basis for an analysis within the context of Radecki’s empathetic view of Smart’s character and difficult life. In other words, I will attempt to establish that, when viewed in its totality as a series, *The Black Notebooks* provides a unique portrait of Smart the woman and the writer as seen through the eyes of a contemporary feminist artist.

Initially the painter was fascinated by Smart’s 1945 novel, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, a lightly-veiled autobiographical account of Smart’s tumultuous, passionate, guilt-ridden love affair with British poet George Barker (1913-1991). Written in the first person, the work is described as “a rhapsody, an ecstasy, a triumph,”³ about which Brigit Brophy opined “I doubt if there are more than half a dozen masterpieces of poetic prose in the world. One

of them, I am convinced is Elizabeth Smart's *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*.”⁴

Despite encouraging reviews in England, Smart's novel was poorly received by the public in England and America. Smart's mother, embarrassed by the novel, burnt the few copies that reached her hometown, Ottawa, and used her political influence to have it banned in Canada. *By Grand Central Station* quickly disappeared on both sides of the Atlantic.⁵ Radecki was galvanized by the parallel to the Nazi book burning. As a mother herself, Radecki was acutely aware of the protective imperative of maternal love, and to her the specter of a mother destroying her daughter's work and dashing her offspring's ambitions seemed cruel and unnatural. By comparison, it appeared to Radecki to be a rejection more brutal than the Nazi's impersonal book burning in the name of state control.⁶

Radecki became intrigued with Smart's personality, her emotionally intense and very difficult life, and the stresses – some innate, some cultural – that hindered Smart's ability to write: her gender, her at times abysmal poverty, her role as a mother, and late in life, her alcoholism and, despite her success as a magazine and an advertising copywriter, her confidence-sapping writer's block. The daughter of a prominent Ottawa family, Smart did not fit the cultural self-image of mid twentieth-century Canada. She had four children with Barker but they never married. Barker, a celebrated poet was a philanderer who never divorced his first wife, failed to support his family, and never provided a home for Smart and their children. Smart raised her offspring in wartime England, alone

and without financial support, all the while struggling to become a writer. Alice Van Wart, official editor of Smart's journals, tells us that the writer's journals reveal a remarkable woman, "passionate, vibrant, extravagant, sensitive, yet subject to lethargy and self-doubt. Her diaries and journals were accounts of events, sights, sensations and feelings."⁷ Smart rejected the restrictive, privileged society into which she was born. Eschewing materialism and rigid abstract ideologies, she instead searched "for the vital connections she believes could be found only in love, art, and the natural world."⁸ Van Wart sees the writer's defiant behaviour less as a "rebellion against social convention [than] as the imperative of a highly romantic sensibility."⁹

Radecki's self-imposed task is to, metaphorically, "square the circle": create an art work that gives Smart her due as a writer, without losing the panache, the individuality, "the immediacy and visual clarity of abstraction."¹⁰ To accomplish this Radecki controls painterly pyrotechnics and shines a spotlight on her subject, Elizabeth Smart, who despite her status as an educated and privileged North American woman, was clearly scarred by women's limited cultural and socio-economic power during the pre-feminist World War II era. Radecki concentrates on Smart's handwritten drafts – rapidly penned, difficult to interpret, and redolent of frustration and angst. She solves the problem by making Smart's idiosyncratic handwriting the sole graphic element in her paintings. Radecki thus directs attention away from her own artistic expression, and shifts the viewer's focus to Smart's literary output. This handwriting-as-graphics format also allows Radecki to subvert what she terms the "large,

expansive gestures of historical [mid twentieth century] abstract [expressionist] painting.”¹¹ She thereby transmutes the risk of self-aggrandizing bombast “into the intimacy of handwritten letters and personal journals.”¹² In this way she remains true to her goal for this series, and to her ethic: to short-circuit the temptation to pontificate, and avoid the risk of indulging in originality for originality’s sake.¹³

The Black Notebooks consists of a series of (5) 152 by 152 cm., acrylic-on-canvas paintings. Similar to a medieval altar piece or Stations of the Cross, their full impact can be experienced only if studied in chronological order as Smart lived the events memorialized. (I will discuss painting and viewing sequence later in this chapter.) Thus Radecki ruptures the self-containment of the individual painting. In its place she creates a series of interlocking narratives that, like most effective narratives, draw the viewer into the mind-set, the temporal context, and the life-experience of the subject. In the case of *The Black Notebooks*, Radecki accomplishes this by letting Smart tell her own story, in her own words, and in her own handwriting.

Radecki discovered *By Grand Central Station* while wintering in Kamloops in 2002. Intrigued by Smart’s landmark poetic-prose novel, she read other works by the author: *The Assumption of Rogues and Rascals* (1982), *Necessary Secrets* (1987), *In the Meantime* (1984) *Autobiographies: Transcriptions of Her Letters and Diaries* (1987), *On the Side of the Angels* (1997),¹⁴ as well as Rosemary Sullivan’s biography, *By Heart; Elizabeth Smart, a Life* (1991). Intrigued, Radecki researched the Smart archives at the National Library,

Ottawa. Here she found a treasure trove; box after box of handwritten diaries, notebooks, daily reminders, lists, odd jottings, ruminations, ideas for future books, letters and journals recording events, and opinions – in actuality, the handwritten record of a life. Many items were impressions and immediate reactions, just as Smart had jotted them down, unmediated by second thought or political correctness; while others were heavily edited, with multiple deletions, additions and crossings-out.¹⁵ Radecki describes her reactions:

The handwriting is vivid and emotional. I feel even closer to her than when reading her books. Those passages that are crossed out or corrected seem especially personal and poignant. At first I feel embarrassed and hesitant about reading, and even more about...making them public. However, it seems clear...that she had written these for an audience.¹⁶

Radecki's opinion is shared by Elizabeth Podnieks who writes: "for a professional writer there are no private writings."¹⁷ For women (particularly those of the pre-feminism era who may have had difficulty getting published), the diary or journal could function as a subversive space, where a writer could maintain pretence of privacy, while intending to publish later, possibly when social or financial conditions become more favourable.¹⁸ Despite initially feeling like a voyeur, Radecki sensed that these notes and musings were the primary outlet for Smart's writing, and were never meant to be archived and buried. Radecki wanted the viewer to share her insights into Smart's life.¹⁹

Radecki does not believe that Smart's character can be revealed through an analysis of her handwriting. That being said, the artist does argue persuasively that Smart's raw, un-edited script does provide clues to her frame of mind at the

time of writing. In addition, Smart's editing (insertions, deletions and crossings-out) may hint at her intended meaning and her thought processes. It would be tempting to call on graphology to help "decode" Smart's character. However, Barry Beystein, in the *Encyclopedia of the Paranormal*, warns that "graphology, despite its scientific pretensions, remains mired in its occult past,"²⁰ and is considered by many to be at best a parlour game, and at worst little more than charlatanism. Beystein's caveat is in order – which is a pity. Our 26-letter phonetic alphabet allows considerable personal latitude in handwriting style. That said, as Beystein advises, one should be wary of depending on graphology as a basis for drawing psychoanalytic conclusions about a person's character. Radecki would agree with Beystein, and has never suggested that aspects of Smart's penmanship (such as angle and connection of letters, line direction and slope of letters) indicate significant personality traits. Nonetheless, in the artist's estimation, typography alone could not convey the full poignancy of what Radecki perceived as the emotional angst and brilliance of Smart's dense, metaphor-laden text. Radecki felt that Smart's handwriting (independent of graphological analysis), and its exact placement on the written page ('layout' in commercial parlance) added insight into the emotions of a woman Radecki saw as an obsessive and perfectionistic writer – and, to considerable extent, an unfulfilled artist.²¹ Wanting the viewer see exactly what she saw in terms of the emotional and physical impact of Smart's archival papers, Radecki enlarged photocopies of Smart's handwriting, which she mechanically traced onto canvas.

Like a medieval monk laboriously copying a sacred text, Radecki worked obsessively for six months, seven days a week, to produce *The Black Notebooks*.²² (Figure 10)

Once she had captured Smart's enlarged handwriting onto canvas, Radecki then painted all around the words, with a tiny #4 watercolour brush, filling the [negative or surrounding] space with minute strokes that are so small, she hesitates even to call them 'brushwork.' She did this twice, achieving a thickness to the paint that makes the words appear in relief.²³

Through this repetition (discussed in Chapter 1), the painter creates a subtle three-dimensional effect which skews the usual subject/background balance (recessive background, dominant subject). The background brushwork is thicker and higher, and gives the illusion of obliterating or engulfing Smart's vastly enlarged handwriting, just as the pressures of managing a home, family, career and a toxic personal relationship tended to engulf Smart. In this bas-relief format, Smart's words seem discarded, buried; they appear defused, fugitive - resembling a palimpsest. The viewer, of course, realizes that the work's focal point is the text, and instinctively moves toward the canvas to "visually excavate" and read the "entrenched" wording. Radecki designed *The Black Notebooks* for intimate viewing, consciously luring the viewer into slowing down, approaching the work and studying the calligraphy at a leisurely pace and at close range.

As she did in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Radecki also uses her reverse painting technique as a political strategy to express her solidarity with feminist ideals, particularly her sympathy with feminist goals in the domestic arena. Radecki visually downgrades Smart's script and minimizes its "authority" to symbolize the writer's difficulties in overcoming the avalanche of domestic responsibilities that

impeded her writing, and as a deliberate reference to the powerlessness of women's socio-economic position in mid twentieth-century.

To some degree Radecki's empathy with Smart was fueled by parallel attitudes and life experiences: the joys of motherhood, the difficulty of carving out time to write or paint, and the very real satisfactions of homemaking. Both artists found pleasure in the minutiae of daily living, the tasks traditionally considered the core of a woman's responsibilities and lot in life, the tasks for which women were traditionally considered innately qualified: sewing, embroidery, cooking, child care. As a homemaker and mother herself, Radecki could empathize with Smart's pleasures, frustrations and ambivalences. She spent hours in her studio intently focused on consciously shaping *The Black Notebooks*, as a respectful labour of devotion – one requiring infinite time and patience, a skill comparable to stitching the finest petite point or lace.²⁴

Thus Radecki allows herself to empathize with the loneliness, frustrations and repetitive drudgery of Smart's life,²⁵ a life which vacillated between the tumultuous and the banal. Smart devotedly embroidered dresses for her children, struggled with wartime austerity, and deprived herself in order to afford private schools, all the while trying to find time to write. In empathy with Smart, Radecki, in *The Black Notebooks*, focused scrupulously on each tiny brushstroke, one at a time - as Smart had dedicated herself to smocking a child's dress, one stitch at a time. (One thinks of the unsung women who stitched the Bayeux Tapestry, (c.1088-92) one stitch at a time, all 70 meters of it.) Through her painstaking

labour-intensive work, Radecki reenacts the tedium and unending repetitiveness of homemaking.

With *The Black Notebooks* size matters, as does medium - by enlarging Smart's script from pocket notebook size to 152 x 152 cm. (5ft. x 5ft.), and rendering the words in acrylic paint instead of pen-and-ink or pencil, Radecki attempts to focus (or even alter) the viewer's perception. Loops, curlicues and dashes that appear benign and a trifle slapdash on paper and in miniature, when enlarged on canvas and over-painted, become meaningful shapes: listless loops acquire dynamic energy, undistinguished curlicues become graceful arabesques, and mundane dashes evidence firmness. This perceptual phenomenon is surprising considering that the text is not easy to decipher thanks to its "entrenched" position (incised into the raised background). We, of course, are viewing Smart's words as processed by Radecki's artist's hand, and doubtless her skill as a calligrapher contributed to the elegance of the completed paintings. If circumstances had been different and Smart's life less chaotic and time-restrained, it is fair to speculate that many of these texts would in due course have been incorporated in published literary works. (*By Grand Central Station*, for example, contains many excerpts from Smart's journals.) That said, as is frequently the case with artists, rough, preliminary studies and early drafts, are ultimately fresher, more original and closer to the artist's unmediated intention than the finished work. By restricting *The Black Notebooks* exclusively to Smart's handwritten text without any other form of iconography, Radecki risks producing a work with narrative content, but lacking visual dynamism - a danger she

counters through textual proportion and scale (oversized), meticulously painted surface finish (flawlessly silken), and balance between textual and background colour. A risk worth taking in the painter's estimation, as it allows her to lay bare the essential Elizabeth Smart, the woman and the writer.

The Black Notebooks series will not be discussed in numerical order as painted by Radecki, but in chronological order as events quoted were lived and recorded by Smart. This will allow the reader to better grasp the arc of Smart's life, starting from the earliest excerpt written in 1938 when the author was twenty-six years old and ending with the fifth written in 1986 at the end of her life.

* * *

In 1938 Smart visited the South of France for the first time, and while there she had her first sexual experience. Her suitor was her host, forty-four year old collagist Jean Varda (1893-1971), "a flamboyant and innovative painter with a reputation of a bohemian-philosopher,"²⁶ mythomaniac and womanizer. Smart wrote a short account of her trip titled *For the Little Cassis Book*, which Radecki excerpted for *The Black Notebooks*, #1:²⁷ (Figure 11):

From far below, beneath the mountainous clothes I wear, great coats like continents weighing me down, I hear the tickling sound of the nightingales – not sad. Do they sing for me? Do I think they sing for me? I waver. Bit now. Let us go home. The hour and its enchanted instruments all point one way but bared (the unassailable) I cannot feel. I know the radiant night with pangs.²⁸ (Text 1).

Smart was well aware of Varda's intentions but felt ambivalent about her own emotions. In the encounter referred to above, the soon-to-be-lovers were testing each other's mettle like boxers circling wearily before a bout. However

immediately after their sparring, the sybaritic and confident Varda whispered “on the thirteenth you will be mine.”²⁹ True to his word he did pounce, “Smart bit and fought like a wild animal and they scuffled on the dirt floor”³⁰ in what - in contemporary parlance - might be described as rape. Smart treats the event as sacrificial and writes “face fear. I faced fear. Ah well. Flowers must fruit.”³¹ Actually Smart had fair warning of Varda’s predilections. He was described by his then girlfriend, Simonetta, as “difficult, coarser than us.”³² Shortly after they met, Varda called Smart a vamp, backed her “against a wall and said: Take Care! Take Care! I am Oriental. I will not be played with!”³³

Selecting this citation allows Radecki to shine a spotlight on a pivotal experience in Smart’s life thus far, and the key event recounted in *For the Little Cassis Book* – Smart’s seduction by Varda. He was a ‘force of nature’ possessed of “all the arrogance and presumptions Elizabeth [Smart] found most seductive in artists, since she lacked it herself,”³⁴ and a harbinger of what she would seek in her future life-altering relationship with Barker. By painting *The Black Notebooks # 1* on a flat, blackboard-grey background, Radecki signals that Smart is not writing about a frivolous vacation romance; but rather an ego-shattering and disturbing encounter. In Smart’s ambivalent wording, time, events and emotions are conflated and condensed. The “mountainous clothes” probably refers to a heavy black outfit Smart was wearing when she joined her friends for their French junket, an outfit she discards for less somber and constraining frocks, just as she hoped to discard her inhibitions and achieve the freedom to write. In “Do they sing for me? Do I think they sing for me?” Smart is asking if she is fooling

herself. “I waver” expresses her ambivalence toward Varda as the instrument of her deflowering. She knows that he is using her, but she realizes that she is using him as well. “Bit” is exactly what she did do, both symbolically and in reality.

As a double-page spread, the text of *The Black Notebooks #1* is longer than most in the series, thus Radecki allows the viewer to judge how Smart became more ambivalent and conflicted as she penned her words. Quite neat and controlled at the start, with relatively even margins both left and right, the penmanship becomes disjointed and uncertain toward the bottom of the right-hand column, and ends with what appear to be deletions scribbled with emotion and bravado, as if she were questioning her own judgment.

The Black Notebooks #4 (Figure 12), an excerpt from Smart’s novel *By Grand Central Station*, is the most guilt ridden, regretful and penitent of the series. It expresses the female protagonist’s (Smart’s alter ego) overwhelming guilt at having seduced another woman’s husband. Shortly after the male protagonist (Barker’s alter ego) became her lover, Smart’s novelistic alter ego writes:

...will have any pride in the wedding red, seeping between the thighs of love which rise like a colossus, but whose issue is only the cold semen of grief?

Not God, but bats and a spider who is weaving my guilt, keep the rendezvous with me, and shame copulates with every September housefly. My room echoes with the screams she never uttered, and under my floor the vines of remorse get ready to push up through the damp. The cricket drips remembrance [unceasingly] into my [ear].³⁵
(Text 4).

In reality Smart had carefully planned, financed and executed the seduction of Barker, sight unseen, on the strength of his published poetry. Smart's justification is based on her personal creative imperative: her determination to become a great writer and poet herself. However she had convinced herself that to succeed she had to live the life of a poet in all its ramifications and without restraint. Barker's status as a married man was a negative ramification for Smart, but a convenience for Barker, as it protected him from paternity obligations to this brilliant and spirited Canadian woman. Barker mistakenly thought that Smart's wealthy family would finance her and perhaps help him out monetarily as well. On her part, Smart was aware that a liaison with Barker implied painful personal sacrifices, the most difficult of which was unwed motherhood – a status which at the time automatically made her a pariah to her own socially prominent family, and left her without prospects or money (except for a small clothing allowance). Smart, however, had a mystical, but not esoteric reverence for nature, and could not imagine forgoing "the mystery of the child." She was "as passionate [about becoming] a mother as she was [to become] a writer."³⁶

When she wrote the passage excerpted above, Smart's campaign to seduce Barker had already been successful, yet, her text expresses no hint of triumph or joy - rather the writer is suffused with regret and guilt at her own treachery toward Barker's innocent wife, Jessica. Through her choice of quotation, Radecki makes the viewer aware of Smart's capacity for compassion, and of the conflict between her feelings as a woman and her drive to be a writer,

a conflict that Smart never did resolve and that caused her suffering throughout her life.

Radecki wanted to increase the overwhelming sense of suffocation and helplessness implied by the “colossus thighs.” To create the illusion of menace, of looking up at a powerful presence looming threateningly, she chose a flesh coloured background, and “photograph[ed] the photocopy [of the text] at an upward angle to distort the perspective of the writing.”³⁷ The resultant foreshortening visually exacerbates the sense of threat, and intensifies the emotional distress expressed by the words themselves and by the chaotic handwriting – erratic, with uneven lines, a ragged right-hand margin, and multiple changes (additions, deletions and overwritten words). The adverb “aggressively” on the citation’s penultimate line appears aggressive. The spelling is skewed and individual letters are larger, heavier and appear to be more deeply incised than their neighbors, as if the writer was emotionally vested in what she was writing. Coming at the end of the passage, the foreshortening effect makes the word “aggressively” appear graphically grotesque, exacerbating the effect of mirroring or mimicking its very meaning – particularly with the sexually-suggestive word, “push” inserted next to it via a wedge-shaped caret to indicate a textual addition. Radecki’s subtle and respectful manipulation of Smart’s original manuscript can be read as an insistently murmured comment on the writer’s suffering.

Smart had a penchant for expressing intense emotion through classical allusions and references to nature, thus giving her writing a dense, multi-layered textuality more akin to poetry than to prose. This multiplicity of sub-text

influenced Radecki's decision to use Smart's actual manuscripts as the basis of her paintings, and doubtlessly was a factor in her choice of citation for *The Black Notebooks #4*. By highlighting the "colossus thighs" Radecki is drawing the viewer's attention to one-or-both of two allusions: The Colossus of Rhodes (circa 280-224 BC), a giant statue of the God Helios marking the entrance to the harbour of Rhodes and one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, and/or Percy Bysshe Shelley's (1792-1822) sonnet *Ozymandias* (1817). Both these works refer to gigantic male statues that symbolize strength, dominance and arrogance. Interestingly, the Colossus of Rhodes no longer stands and the message of *Ozymandias* is *sic transit gloria mundi*, signifying the ultimate futility of earthly power and masculine dominance – messages not lost on either Smart or Radecki.

Smart mingles classical and poetic allusions like the Colossus of Rhodes and *Ozymandias*, with metaphors that are startling in their raw sexuality or mundane ordinariness. A lover of nature, Smart often intertwines the prosaic with the poetic, the earthy with the ethereal: a September housefly, an unattractive pest often associated with dirt and slovenliness (of both habit and moral fortitude?) could symbolize the shame of her sexual betrayal of another man's wife, while a cricket, a pervasive, noisy and (in mythology) fickle insect, could symbolize her inability to escape her own nagging conscience.

The Black Notebooks #3, the most plaintive of the series, is excerpted from a letter Smart sent Barker the same year as she wrote the above passage, the year she immortalized their love affair in *By Grand Central Station*. It comes at

the end of a disjointed missive in which the writer, having returned to her family in Ottawa, is starting to show her pregnancy. Through a series of immigration problems, due to legal complications, morality issues, visas, wartime restrictions and, of course, financial constraints, Barker, still married to Jessica, was unable to join her. In a plea for sympathy Smart writes: "Don't think I'm not bleeding from every pore. I'm only lucky to be able to hypodermic myself & cover over every gape so that I can feel nothing cold or hot or pleasant or excruciating."³⁸ (Text 3).

With these few words Radecki gives us a sense of the pain, confusion and loneliness suffusing Smart's spirit as she prepares for the birth of her first child. Most of the letter is unfocused speculation on the logistics of her predicament: how to give birth without bringing shame to her family, how to assuage her guilt about the "Jessica problem." That said, Radecki ignores these "housekeeping" issues and highlights the spot where Smart lets down her guard and hints at, or perhaps threatens to resort to narcotics or worse. Smart ends the letter enigmatically and (sad to say) presciently: "I do love you more than anything else in the world or the world. That's not the trouble or rather perhaps that is the trouble."³⁹

For work #2 of *The Black Notebooks* (Figure 13), Radecki chose a 1945 entry from Smart's journal, one that was written at what should have been a period of celebration coinciding with the birth of her third child, and the publication of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, the novel she wrote in 1941, but for which she had been unable to find a publisher until 1945. Surprisingly her journal barely mentions these two happy and momentous

events, rather she was preoccupied with Barker's departure to join his wife in America, leaving an exhausted and poverty-stricken Smart in England to care for two toddlers and a newborn. She writes: "It is unbearable loving George. I always knew he (wouldn't) couldn't come and yet I always expect him and sit in that insane fever of anticipation no matter how I keep telling myself his coming is out of the question."⁴⁰ Radecki chose the citation's culminating sentence as her text, it reads: "Suddenly one day I will crack, snap, break in two and BE GONE"⁴¹ (Text 2).

Ironically, Radecki painted the background in what she accurately describes as Pepto-Bismol pink, juxtaposing the chalky, artificial colour against crossings-out and slashes that eradicate Smart's text – a text Smart had excised, figuratively, as brutally as Barker had excised her from his life. Smart's scratched-out sentence is centered as a horizontal slash slightly above mid-point of the large square canvas, suggesting a highly-abstracted landscape with the deleted phrase acting as the horizon line. Other markings reinforce the composition's horizontality: an inward sloping vertical rule (a tree listing to port?), a short crossed-out word centered horizontally above the excised sentence (a notation of time or date?) and two inverted wedge or 'V'-shapes (abstracted shrubbery? birds? or a caret symbols?) – the familiar proof-reader's mark indicating the locus of a textual insertion, and a symbol familiar to Smart (see Figure 12, *The Black Notebooks #4* above). Lastly, an aggressive scribble renders illegible a notation or an initial in the lower left-hand corner.

The Black Notebooks #2 is the starkest, angriest and most inarticulate of the series. By enlarging Smart's scratched-out text from note-book size to wall size, Radecki makes the viewer aware of Smart's intense frustration and anger (at herself and at Barker), and at her apparent inability to extricate herself financially or emotionally from an imbroglio considerably of her own making. By making Smart's contentious deletion reminiscent of an unbroken horizon, Radecki creates an illusion of serenity, of a calm, peaceful landscape, surrounded by an expanse of rosy artificial sky, a pharmaceutical pink rendering of an idyllic sunset – thus forming a dramatic contrast with the poignant and turbulent explosiveness (note the capitalization of 'BE GONE') of Smart's text.

For *The Black Notebooks #3*, Radecki chose the last entry in Smart's diary, penned when the writer was seventy-three years old. Smart knew her health was precarious and that she was near death when she wrote:⁴²

It's getting desperate. Time gallops. Rivers run dry, etc.,
etc. Old Age and death – Old Age and Death.
OK. That's OK. The fading away – not pretty, but natural.
Only I've left my duties so LATE. A thing not done⁴³ (Text 5).

The most elegiac of the series, *The Black Notebooks #5* is a memorial to Smart's unfulfilled potential. By painting this cry of desperation on a dark background, Radecki creates a twilight mood, one of fading light and fading life. The words are barely legible, engulfed in a suffocating grey gloom; they presage Smart's fate - that of a woman writer largely lost to posterity, a fate she shares with the women writers banned by the Nazis. Smart's message, however, is clear: she remained conflicted and feisty until the end (notice her capitalization of the word LATE). In her youth Smart felt she had little choice, nature decided – her duties

to the womb were imperative, thus sidelining until too late her duties to the word.⁴⁴ Smart's career path did not serve her or her career well and was no doubt influenced by her belief in the paradoxical idea of sacrifice, the giving up in order to be transformed. She wrote in a late poem:

Her Muse screamed
But the children louder.
Then which strength
Made her prouder?⁴⁵

Radecki is well aware that writing is thinking; she is in agreement with Barbara A. Babcock who writes that journal-keeping, an inherently "liminal and self-reflexive" exercise "is also a rite of passage, a process in which the self may be constructed, scrutinized, reconstructed, transformed and led into new regions of awareness."⁴⁶ As a lifelong journal-keeper, Smart would naturally tend to sort out her emotions through words on paper – using writing to interpret, analyze, criticize, excoriate and deconstruct her life and her feelings. Radecki, with ultimate empathy for a fellow artist, memorializes Smart through the medium of Smart's own words. Radecki's Smart is a hyper-sensitive, self-reflexive woman whose every nerve is exposed and who possessed little in the way of a protective shell – a woman whose writing is the product of (often painful) lived experience.

Communicating with the viewer is paramount for Radecki. Characteristically her aim is to do so without being pedestrian, belabouring the obvious, or indulging in crude oversimplification. In *The Black Notebooks* she sets herself the difficult task of focusing the viewer's attention on the significant detail (the intimate, fugitive aspects of a text) as well as on a work's deeper ramifications. She focuses on Smart's thwarted writing career, and by extension,

calls attention to the thwarted careers and unsung talents of myriad women writers of the past - writers who are unknown for any number of reasons: political expediency, social convention, lack of economic or educational opportunity, or simply because they were inextricably enmeshed in a male-dominated socio-economic hierarchy.

As a student of the history and theory of art, Radecki's analysis of culture is informed by "the feminist psychoanalytic critique, which, though based on Modernism, moves to disrupt [modernism's defining] hierarchies."⁴⁷ Consequently, her interpretation of Smart's life and work through *The Black Notebooks*, in addition to historical and contextual considerations, is part of Radecki's ongoing, career-spanning dialogue with the viewer on the nature of contemporary art, as well as on the value of the creative work in its own right.

Conclusion

West's novel has been described as a modern-day odyssey. Metaphorically speaking, Radecki's installations, when considered globally, can also be seen as an odyssey – not a voyage of discovery, either in the classic sense or in the Westian sense, but a search nonetheless; a voyage of ideas to explore ideologies critical the world of art and society in general, particularly ideologies inimical to women. Radecki does not avoid complications and, during the decade-long arc she devoted to *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Black Notebooks*, she was engaging in on-going discourse questioning contemporary thinking and practice in two principal areas. Both areas are concerned with dilemmas facing the art world – as Radecki construes it, a world in which contemporary art is a bellwether of intellectual and societal evolution. These contentious issues are the dichotomy between modernist versus postmodernist philosophy, and the need to advance feminist issues.

Radecki's goals remain constant with those iterated in the Introduction and discussed throughout this thesis: how to bridge the gap between modernism's self-contained formalism and postmodernism's openness to context, a gap which, in light of her attraction to modernism, can appear to be a gaping chasm. In essence, *Miss Lonelyhearts* is a long, very drawn-out discourse to resolve this dichotomy – a subtle and complicated dialogue between Radecki and the iconic modernists she dares to morph into a viable postmodern idiom – a feat which she accomplishes by tampering with their artistic templates, thereby rupturing their individual, self-reflective artistic integrity.

In *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Radecki, the critic and aficionado of high modernism, frequently hides in a thicket of unrelated, but pertinent citations from the Westian novel, sometimes making satiric comments disguised as the Greek nymph Echo. Visually *Miss Loneyhearts* – a more complex work than *The Black Notebooks* – is concentrated on Radecki's modernism versus postmodernism discourse; nonetheless the artist also manages to weave her feminist ideas throughout the installation. Historical perspective is important to Radecki, and although many of the ideas put forth in *Miss Lonerlyhearts* can be viewed as a critique of the past, she does not seek to dismiss or bury history. Rather she concentrates on a contentious, multi-layered discourse seeking a viable philosophy of art for the twenty-first century – one that retains and refines the essential qualities of modernism, including, dare one use the phrase, visual beauty.

In *The Black Notebooks*, Radecki reverses the balance and makes feminism the installation's principle theme. Unlike *Miss Lonelyhearts* which looks at art globally from the perspective of a movement, post-World-War-II modernism, *The Black Notebooks* examines one woman's life, Elizabeth Smart's, through her own words and in her own handwriting. Thus the liaison between the writer, her written word, and the artist and her paintings is direct, and without intervening layers of interpretation. The result is an installation of elegant pared-to-the-essence simplicity, one in which all the paintings are identical in size and iconography: Smart's enormously enlarged handwriting. The overall effect is to rivet the viewer's attention on the citations from Smart's novel. The result is startling and the message is clear; we are in the presence of an unusual woman,

one of strong emotion, and as we quickly learn, possessed of a driving lust for life. Radecki's empathy for Smart, and her outrage over Smart's inability to realize her ambition to become a writer in a pre-feminist era certainly motivated her to create *The Black Notebooks*. That being said, however, I contend that Radecki was also motivated by desire to pay homage to women like herself – women who enjoyed and valued homemaking, child-rearing and the homely skills decried by activists dominating feminist discourse.

Whereas *Miss Lonelyhearts* shines klieg lights on an era, and bombards the viewer with varied ocular stimulation and a plethora of intertwined ideas, *The Black Notebooks* aims a spotlight at one writer, whose great work of literature, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (as well as her memoirs, diaries and autobiography) are rescued by Radecki through her art. As in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, Radecki hides in the background and makes Smart the entire focus of attention. In *The Black Notebooks*, Radecki also continues her modernism versus postmodernism debate, however in a lower key.

Thanks to their rich literary inclusions, both installations are multi-layered and rich with sub-text – nonetheless, whereas *Miss Lonelyhearts* is dynamic and visually opulent, by comparison *The Black Notebooks* is elegantly serene. It would appear that in the six-year interval between series, Radecki refined her approach, and produced a dramatically simple installation based on one iconographic idea: the enormously enlarged handwriting of Smart's original manuscripts. Although not as dynamic as *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *The Black*

Notebooks is more graphically unified as a series, but less riveting and instantaneously gratifying to the viewer.

One aspect of Radecki's art that has remained constant, and is common to both installations, is her idiosyncratic painting technique. To Radecki, the act of slowly, meticulously applying paint to canvas is a labour of love. This unique reverse methodology is tantamount to time-consuming, self-enforced meditation, and is key to understanding her temperament and her desire to explore a subject or a concept to its very essence. As discussed above, despite certain differences in approach between series, this technique is common to both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *The Black Notebooks*. Her latest installation, *Fractured Landscapes* (2008), addresses neither modernist painters nor a woman novelist. Rather, in this series, Radecki abandons any direct reference to human beings and concentrates on landscape. Her painting technique, however, remains unchanged – as exquisitely counter-intuitive as in the installations analyzed for this thesis. A prognosis for the future is that Radecki will continue to paint postmodern abstraction that harkens back to her modernist roots. And she will do so in the same slow demanding manner, ensuring that whatever philosophical or iconographic concepts inspire her work, they will be deeply felt and thoroughly considered.

Introduction

- ¹ Excellent biographical material on Brigitte Radecki can be found in Katja Kessin MacLeod, *To Lend the Dead A Voice: Second Generation German Visual Art* (Montréal, Concordia University, 2003).
- ² Michael Fried, "An Introduction to my Art Criticism," *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 18.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ⁴ Henry M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1989) xiv.
- ⁵ Thomas H. Jackson, introduction, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Miss Lonelyhearts*, ed. Thomas H. Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall 1941) 1.

Chapter 1

- ¹ Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, September 26, 2006.
- ² H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, 3rd ed, revised by Daniel Wheeler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986) 390-391.
- ³ Laura Cottingham, "The Masculine Imperative: High Modern, Postmodern," *The New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven (New York: Icon Editions, Harper-Collins, 1994) 133-134.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.
- ⁵ H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, 3rd ed, revised by Daniel Wheeler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986) 387.
- ⁶ William Francis Garrett-Petts and Rachel Nash, eds., *Proximities: Artists' Statements & Their Works* (Kamloops, B.C.: Kamloops Art Gallery, 2005) 35.
- ⁷ Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, September 26, 2006.
- ⁸ Joyce Millar, "Text and Image: A Reciprocal Alliance," *Alphabets: Thérèse Bollinger, Robert Racine, Brigitte Radecki, John A. Schweitzer* by Joyce Millar and Liz Wylie (Pointe Claire, Québec: La galerie d'art Stewart Hall 2003) 4.
- ⁹ Brigitte Radecki, personal interviews, September 26, 2006, February 13, 2007, September 21, 2007 and September 27, 2008. On all four occasions Radecki discussed her issues as an artist with modernism, particularly abstract expressionism, and postmodernism.
- ¹⁰ Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, 22 September 2007.
- ¹¹ Lise Vogel, "Fine Arts and Feminism: The Awakening Consciousness," *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, eds, Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer and Joanna Frueh (New York: Icon Editions, 1988) 24.
- ¹² Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, 21 September 2007. In all four interviews I had with Radecki, she gave her dedication to feminism as the rationale for her unique, time-consuming painting technique, a technique that she has continued to exercise in her recent series, *Fractured Landscapes*, exhibited at the Galerie McClure of the Visual Arts Centre, Montréal, September 12 to October 4, 2008.
- ¹³ Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, February 13, 2009.

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- ¹⁴ Michael Kimmelman, "Feminist Artists," *New York Times*, 21 October 1990.
- ¹⁵ David Deitcher, "When Worlds Collide," *Art in America* 78 (1990): 123..
- ¹⁶ Jo Anna Isaak, introduction, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 2.
- ¹⁷ Joyce Millar, preface, *Alphabets: Thérèse Bollinger, Robert Racine, Brigitte Radecki, John A. Schweitzer* by Joyce Millar and Liz Wylie (Pointe Claire, Québec: La galerie d'art Stewart Hall 2003) 4.
- ¹⁸ For general discussion on 1970's feminism, see Carter Ratcliff, "Private, Symbol: Social Metaphor," *Art Gallery of New South Wales & Ivan Dougherty Gallery* (Sydney: Fifth Biennale of Sydney, 1984). 1-2; David Deitcher, "When Worlds Collide," *Art in America* 78 (1990).
- ¹⁹ From Brigitte Radecki, personal interviews, September 21, 2007 and September 27, 2008.
- ²⁰ Carter Ratcliff, "Private, Symbol: Social Metaphor," *Art Gallery of New South Wales & Ivan Dougherty Gallery* (Sydney: Fifth Biennale of Sydney, 1984) 1-2.
- ²¹ William Francis Garrett-Petts and Rachel Nash, eds., *Proximities: Artists' Statements & Their Works* (Kamloops, B.C.: Kamloops Art Gallery, 2005) 12.
- ²² Katja Kessin-MacLeod, "Brigitte Radecki: Between the Lines," *To Lend the Dead a Voice: Second Generation German Visual Art* (Montréal: Concordia University, 2003) 42.
- ²³ Brigitte Radecki, personal interviews. I conducted in-depth interviews with Radecki on four occasions: September 26, 2006, February 13, 2007, September 21, 2007 and September 27, 2008. The first two interviews were to discuss *The Black Notebooks*; on the last two occasions, our discussions were concentrated on *Miss Lonelyhearts*. She discussed the implication and importance of her painting technique on each occasion.
- ²⁴ Brigitte Radecki, letter to William Francis Garrett-Petts, 2005, in conjunction with exhibition of *Proximities: Artists' Statement & Their Works*, Kamloops B. C.: Kamloops Art Gallery, October 16 to December 31, 2005.
- ²⁵ William Francis Garrett-Petts and Rachel Nash, eds., *Proximities: Artists' Statements & Their Works* (Kamloops, B.C.: Kamloops Art Gallery, 2005) 12-13.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ²⁷ Phyllis Rosser, "There's No Place Like Home," *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven (New York: Icon Editions, Harper-Collins, 1994) 62.
- ²⁸ Lynn Beavis, *Brigitte Radecki: Miss Lonelyhearts*, (Montréal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University, 1998) 8.
- ²⁹ Brigitte Radecki, letter to William Francis Garrett-Petts, 2005, in conjunction with exhibition of *Proximities: Artists' Statement & Their Works*, Kamloops B. C.: Kamloops Art Gallery, October 16 to December 31, 2005.
- ³⁰ Brigitte Radecki, "Artist Statement," *The Black Notebooks*, ed. Judith Miller (Waterloo, Ontario: University of Waterloo Press, 2005) 7.
- ³¹ Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, September 21, 2007.
- ³² Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, February 12, 2009.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Christine Ross, *Circuit*, trans. Lise-Helene Larin (Montréal: Galerie Christiane Chassy, 1989) 16-17.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ³⁶ Mary Ann Doane, introduction, "Deadly Women, Epistemology, and Film Theory," *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1991) 10.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ³⁸ Katja Kessin-MacLeod, "Brigitte Radecki: Between the Lines," *To Lend the Dead a Voice: Second Generation German Visual Art* (Montréal: Concordia University, 2003) 47.

Chapter 2

¹ Brigitte Radecki, personal interviews, September 26, 2006, February 13, 2007, September 21,

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- 2008, and September 27, 2008.
- ² Stanley Edgar Hyman, *Nathanael West* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1962) 27-28.
- ³ *Ibid.* 28.
- ⁴ Henry Lehman, "The Words of Art and Art of Words," *The Gazette*, [Montréal] 22 August 1998: J5.
- ⁵ Thomas H. Jackson, introduction, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Miss Lonelyhearts*, ed. Thomas H. Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 1.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ⁷ Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, September 21, 2008.
- ⁸ Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology* (New York: The Modern Library, no date) 84-86.
- ⁹ Lynn Beavis, *Brigitte Radecki: Miss Lonelyhearts* (Montréal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, 1998) 9.
- ¹⁰ Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology* (New York, The Modern Library, no date) 84-86.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84-86.
- ¹² Barbara A. Babcock, "Reflexivity: Definitions and Discriminations," *Semiotica* 30 1/2 (1980) 4.
- ¹³ Barbara A. Babcock, "Reflexivity: Definitions and Discriminations," *Semiotica* 30 1/2 (1980) 7.
- ¹⁴ Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, September 27, 2008.
- ¹⁵ Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, September 21, 2008.
- ¹⁶ Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, September 27, 2008.
- ¹⁷ Henry Lehman, "The Words of Art and Art of Words," *The Gazette*, [Montréal] 22 August 1998: J5.
- ¹⁸ Brigitte Radecki, personal interview, September 27, 2008
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Brigitte Radecki, Text #1, general theme of *Miss Lonelyhearts* installation.
- ²¹ Henry Lehman, "The Words of Art and Words of Art," *The Gazette*, [Montréal] 22 August 1998: J5.
- ²² Lynn Beavis, *Brigitte Radecki: Miss Lonelyhearts* (Montréal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, 1998) 7.
- ²³ Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts," *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1957) 66-68.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.
- ²⁶ Harald Szeemann, *Cy Twombly: Paintings, Works on Paper, Sculpture* (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1987) 13.
- ²⁷ H.H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, revised by David Wheeler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986) 492.
- ²⁸ Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts," *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1957) 69.
- ²⁹ Barbara Rose, "The New American Painting," *American Art Since 1900: A Critical History* (New York: Frederic A. Praeger, 1967) 189.
- ³⁰ Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts," *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1957) 70, 76.
- ³¹ Thomas H. Jackson, introduction, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Miss Lonelyhearts*, ed. Thomas H. Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 8.
- ³² Edmund L. Volpe, "The Wasteland of Nathanael West," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Miss Lonelyhearts*, ed. Thomas H. Jackson (Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 83.
- ³³ Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts," *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1957) 74.
- ³⁴ H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, revised by David Wheeler, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986) 520.
- ³⁵ Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts," *The Complete Works of Nathanael West*

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- (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1957) 77.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 77.
- ³⁷ Ibid. 76, 77.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 76, 77.
- ³⁹ H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, revised by Daniel Wheeler (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986) 392.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 392.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 529.
- ⁴² Ibid., 529.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 530.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 530.
- ⁴⁵ Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts," *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1957) 89.
- ⁴⁶ Thomas H. Jackson, "Introduction," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Miss Lonelyhearts* ed. Thomas H. Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, H. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 8.
- ⁴⁷ Stanley Edgar Hyman, *Nathanael West*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota. 1971) 19.
- ⁴⁸ Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts," *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1957) 108.
- ⁴⁹ Kasimir Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting," *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden Massachusetts: Blackwell, Inc., 1992) 173.
- ⁵⁰ H. H. Arnason, *History of Modern Art*, revised by Daniel Wheeler (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957) 187-188.
- ⁵¹ Nathanael West, "Miss Lonelyhearts," *The Complete Works of Nathanael West* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1957) 138, 139.
- ⁵² Ibid., 138-140.
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- ¹ William Francis Garrett-Petts and Rachel Nash, eds., *Proximities: Artists' Statements and Their Work* (Kamloops Art Gallery, 2005) 33.
- ² Brigitte Radecki, personal interviews, September 26, 2006; also see pamphlet, *Brigitte Radecki: Reading Between the Lines* (Montréal, Galerie Christiane Chassy, 2000) 1.
- ³ Judith Millar, "Elizabeth Smart: Censorships," *The Black Notebooks: Brigitte Radecki* (Waterloo, Ont.: University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2005) 27.
- ⁴ Brigit Brophy, forward, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, by Elizabeth Smart (London: Panther Books, Granada Publishing, 1966) 7.
- ⁵ Rosemary Sullivan, *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart A Life* (Toronto: Viking, Penguin Books, 1991) 228-229.
- ⁶ Judith Millar, "A Place for Writing: Brigitte Radecki and Elizabeth Smart," *The Black Notebooks: Brigitte Radecki* (Waterloo, Ont.: University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2005) 11.
- ⁷ Elizabeth Smart, introduction, *Necessary Secrets: The Journals of Elizabeth Smart*, ed. Alice Van Wart (Toronto: Deneau, 1986) 4.
- ⁸ Ibid., 4.
- ⁹ Ibid., 2.
- ¹⁰ Brigitte Radecki, "Artist Statement," *The Black Notebooks: Brigitte Radecki*, Judith Millar, ed. (Waterloo, Ont.: University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2005) 7.
- ¹¹ Personal interviews, September 26, 2006.
- ¹² Brigitte Radecki, "Artist Statement," *The Black Notebooks: Brigitte Radecki*, Judith Millar, ed. (Waterloo, Ont: University of Waterloo Art Gallery, 2005) 7.
- ¹³ Ibid., 7.
- ¹⁴ Published posthumously.
- ¹⁵ William Francis Garrett-Petts and Rachel Nash, eds., *Proximities: Artists' Statements and Their Work* (Kamloops Art Gallery, 2005) 60.

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- ¹⁶ Ibid, 61.
- ¹⁷ Elizabeth Podnieks, *Daily Modernism: The Literary Diaries of Virginia Woolf, Antonia White, Elizabeth Smart, and Anais Nin* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2000) 5.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 7.
- ¹⁹ William Francis Garrett-Petts and Rachel Nash, eds., *Proximities: Artists' Statements and Their Work* (Kamloops Art Gallery, 2005) 61.
- ²⁰ Barry L. Beystein, Ph.D., "How Graphology Fools People," *Quackwatch.org*, 2002, Boulder Information Services, 30 March 2009, <http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/Tests/grapho.html>.
- ²¹ Brigitte Radecki, personal interviews, February 13, 2007.
- ²² William Francis Garrett-Petts and Rachel Nash, eds., *Proximities: Artists' Statements and Their Work* (Kamloops Art Gallery, 2005) 12.
- ²³ Ibid., 12.
- ²⁴ Brigitte Radecki, personal interviews, September 26, 2006 and February 13, 2007.
- ²⁵ Brigitte Radecki, personal interviews, February 13, 2007.
- ²⁶ Rosemary Sullivan, *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart A Life* (Toronto: Viking, Penguin Books, 1991) 107.
- ²⁷ To avoid confusion between the numbering of the illustrations and the order in which I will discuss the painting, I am following Smart's numbering system using the number symbol (#) and a digit.
- ²⁸ Elizabeth Smart, *Necessary Secrets: The Journals of Elizabeth Smart*, ed. Alice Van Wart (Toronto: Deneau, 1986) 190.
- ²⁹ Rosemary Sullivan, *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart A Life* (Toronto: Viking, Penguin Books, 1991) 113.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 113.
- ³¹ Ibid, 113.
- ³² Rosemary Sullivan, *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart A Life* (Toronto: Viking, Penguin Books, 1991) 112.
- ³³ Ibid., 110.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 107.
- ³⁵ Elizabeth Smart, *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (London: Panther Books, Granada Publishing, 1966) 36.
- ³⁶ Rosemary Sullivan, *By Heart, Elizabeth Smart A Life* (Toronto: Viking, Penguin Books, 1991) 279.
- ³⁷ Brigitte Radecki, *The Black Notebooks* (Waterloo, Ontario: University of Waterloo, 2005) 23.
- ³⁸ Rosemary Sullivan, *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart A Life* (Toronto: Viking, Penguin Books, 1991) 172; Elizabeth Smart, *Autobiographies*, ed. Christine Burrige (Vancouver: William Hoffer/Tanks, 1987) 34.
- ³⁹ Elizabeth Smart, *Autobiographies*, ed. Christina Burrige (Vancouver: William Hoffer/Tanks, 1987) 34; Rosemary Sullivan, *By Heart: Elizabeth Smart A Life* (Toronto: Viking, Penguin Books, 1991) 172.
- ⁴⁰ Kim Echlin, *Elizabeth Smart*, (Toronto: Women's Press, Canadian Scholars Press, Inc, 2004) 111.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 111.
- ⁴² Ibid., 227.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 229.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 229.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 7.
- ⁴⁶ Barbara A. Babcock, "Reflexivity: Definitions and Discriminations," *Semiotica* 30: 1/2 (1980) 8.
- ⁴⁷ Lynn Beavis, *Brigitte Radecki: Miss Lonelyhearts* (Montréal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University, 1998) 9.

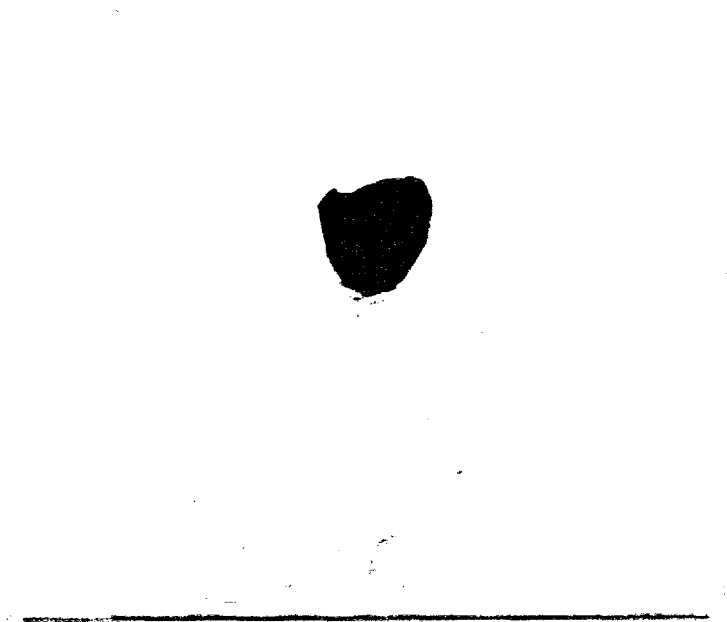


Figure 1. Brigitte Radecki. *Untitled*, 1993. Oil on canvas.
45 X 45 cm. Collection of the artist.

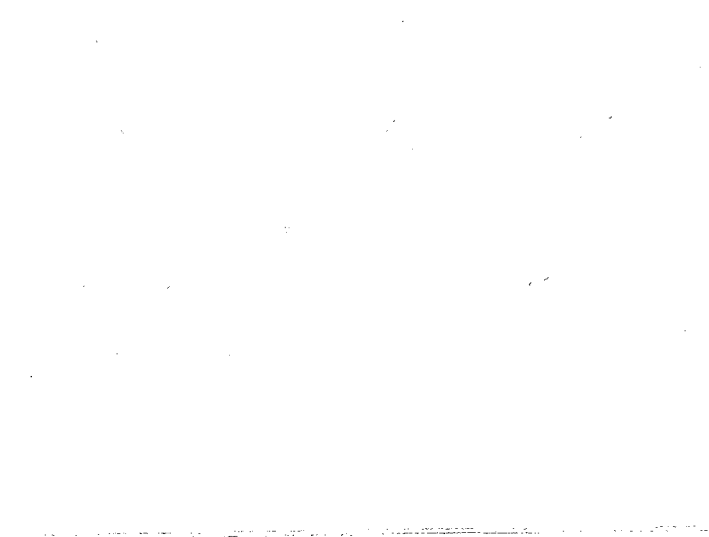


Figure 2. Brigitte Radecki. *Untitled*. 1994. Oil, graphite and oil stick on canvas. 90 X 90 cm. Collection of Sigrun Zibara, Halifax , N. S.

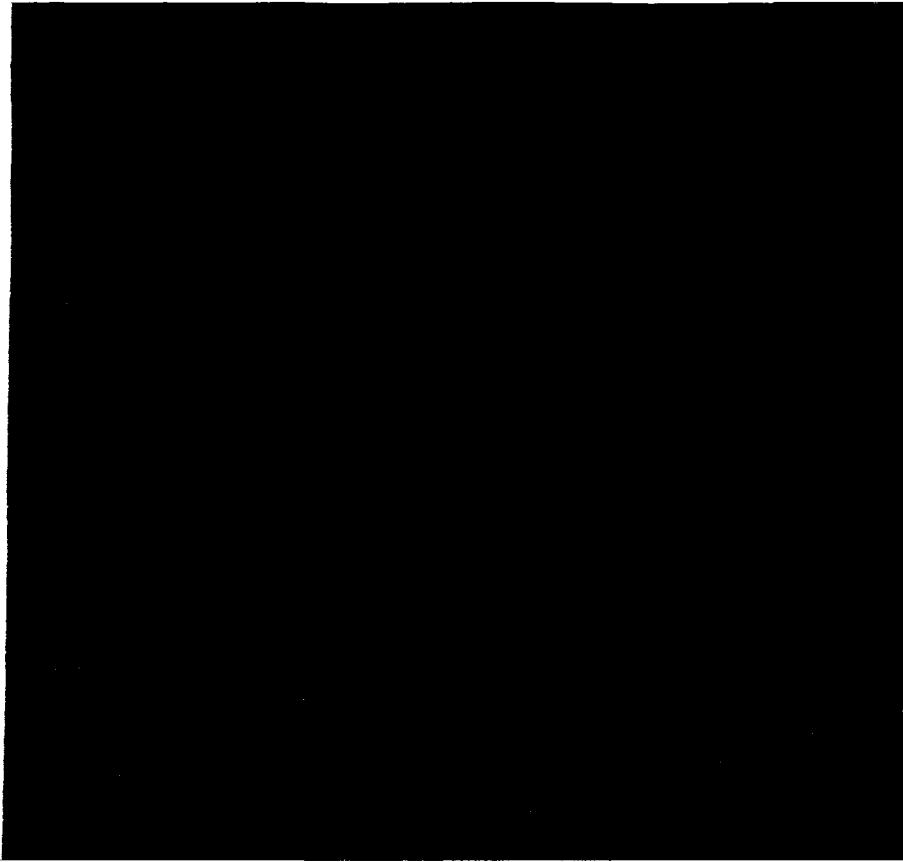


Figure 3. Brigitte Radecki. *Untitled*. 1995. 90 X 90 cm. Oil on canvas.
Collection of the artist.



Figure 4. Brigitte Radecki, *Untitled*. 1994. Acrylic and graphite on canvas. 180 X 90 cm. Collection of the artist.



Figure 5. Brigitte Radecki. *Untitled*. 1996. Alkyd on canvas. 225 X 90 cm. Collection of the artist.



Figure 6. Brigitte Radecki. *Untitled*. 1995. Oil and graphite on canvas. 45 X 180 cm. (4) 45 X 45 cm. canvases. Kenderine Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Sask.



Figure 7. Brigitte Radecki. Untitled. 1994.
Acrylic on canvas; velvet and pins on canvas.
90 X 90 cm. and 30 X 30 cm.
Kenderine Art Gallery, Saskatoon, Sask.

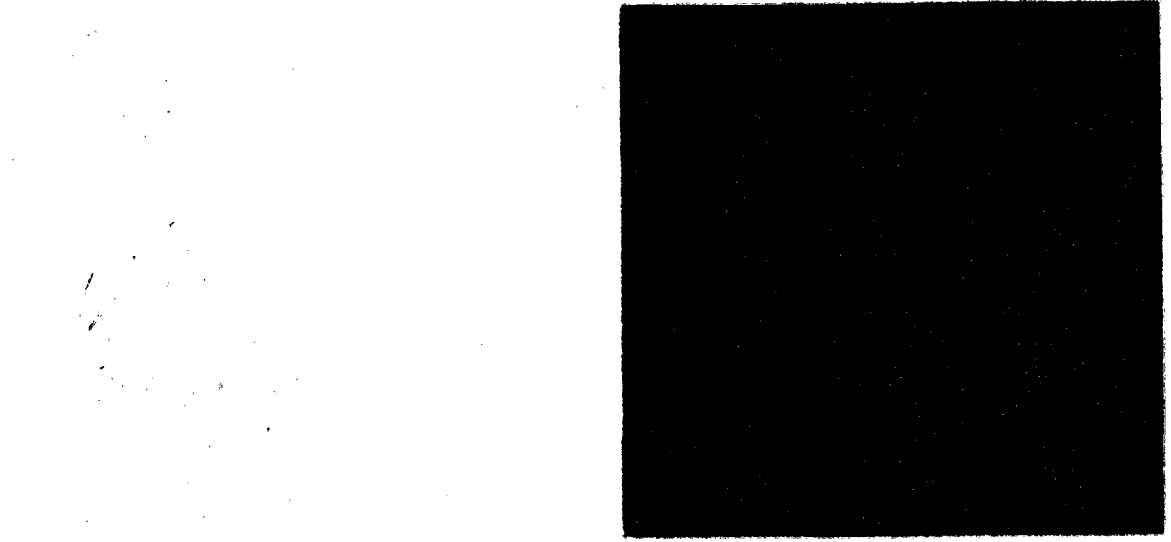


Figure 8. Brigitte Radecki. *Untitled*. 1996. Oil on canvas.
90 X 90 cm. and 90 x 90 cm. Collection of the artist.

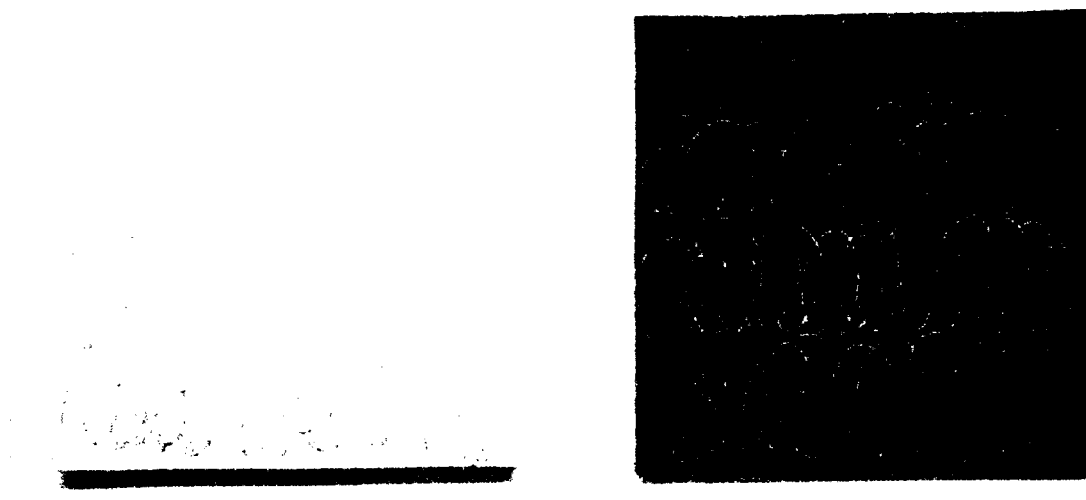


Figure 9. Brigitte Radecki. *Untitled*. 1996. Oil on canvas.
90 X 90 cm. and 90 X 90 cm. Musée de Québec, Ville de Québec.

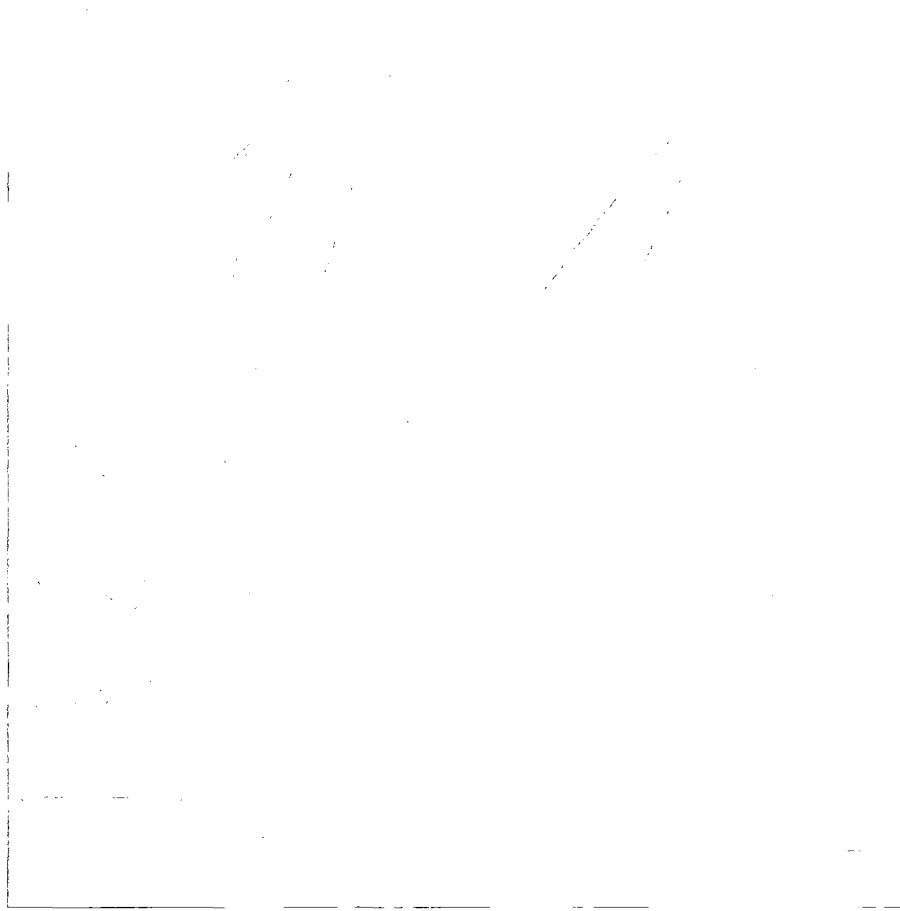


Figure 10. Brigitte Radecki. (detail). *The Black Notebooks*. 2004-05. Acrylic on canvas.

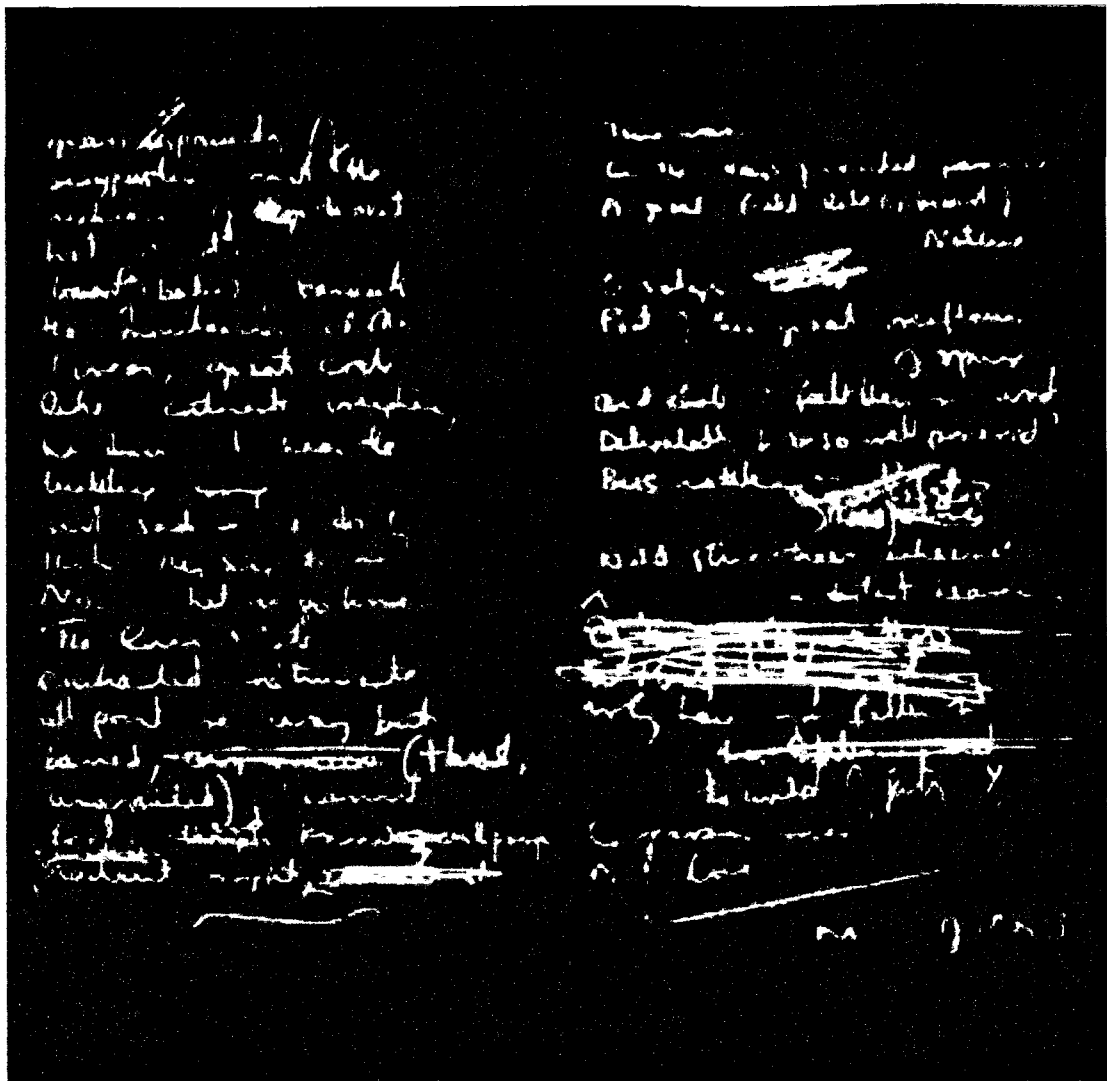


Figure 11. Brigitte Radecki. *The Black Notebooks #1*. 2004-05. Acrylic on canvas. 152 X 152 cm. Collection of the artist.

will have my hands on
 the notebook and, writing
 up between the columns
 light blue ~~pages~~ ^{pages} in red, the
 old ~~pages~~ ^{pages} in red
 Not sure what to do
 but just the ~~pages~~ ^{pages} in red
 keep the ~~pages~~ ^{pages} in red
 show ~~pages~~ ^{pages} in red
 mostly ~~pages~~ ^{pages} in red
 My name above with the
 cream ~~pages~~ ^{pages} in red
 under my floor the veins
 remain ~~pages~~ ^{pages} in red
 my . The ~~pages~~ ^{pages} in red
~~pages~~ ^{pages} in red

Figure 12. Brigitte Radecki. *The Black Notebooks #4*.
 2004-05. Acrylic on canvas. 152 X152 cm.
 Collection of the artist.

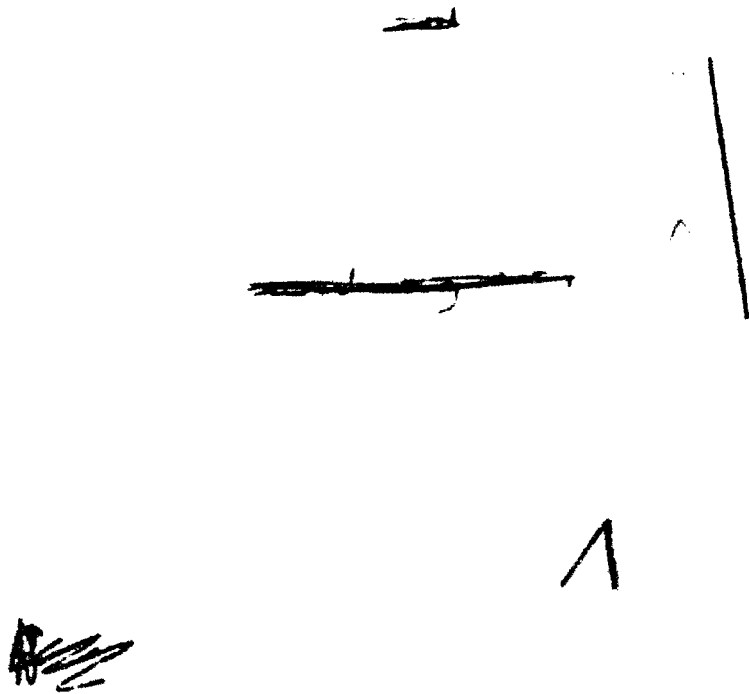


Figure 13. Brigitte Radecki. *The Black Notebooks #2*. 2004-05. Acrylic on canvas. 152 X 152 cm. Collection of the artist.

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