Women’s Silence: In the Space of Words and Images

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in the Visual Arts

Deakin University, March, 2002
Abstract

My thesis is made up of words and images. This study investigates the way in which silence operates productively within and between the two modes of communication. I suggest that in the process of changing words into images or scripto-visual art-practice, the silence in women’s lives can be articulated. I argue that women draw on the generative qualities of silence to create forms of speech that override the cultural constructions of gender which have placed them within the space of “mute” silence.

To gain an historical perspective of this practice by women, I consider the lives of medieval nuns within religious enclosure and their work with words and images in the illuminated manuscript. I make a comparative study of original illuminated manuscripts, focussing mainly on visual language and locating aspects of the work closest to my own art-practice: the visual treatment of the space and inter-textual components of the page or folio. This project does not include an examination of miniatures or historiated initials. Rather, its aim is to identify and compare the use of other aesthetic devices available to the medieval scribe/artist through which they might have interacted with the text. I suggest links between verbal and visual performances of language and the repetition, or copying of texts by medieval nuns, as a means of female embodiment of words and their spaces.

From the outcomes of my studio investigations and my consideration of other contemporary feminist art practices, I demonstrate how women artists may “re-write” the text and “speak” their silence through visual language and the acts of writing, drawing and painting the words of others. Through my engagement with feminist critical theory, the work of medieval scholars, original illuminated manuscripts and my studio research, I propose that scripto-visual practice remains particularly significant for women despite the differences between the medieval period and our own. As a generative practice, it negotiates some of the societal constraints on women’s speech and visibility, because its language is “silent and disembodied” from the image of woman constructed by male discourse. It is a form of speech that acknowledges as it defies the social and cultural conditions that shaped its necessity, articulating an alternative voice of women in the space of words and images.
Acknowledgements

The generosity of many people and institutions has made this thesis possible. When this project was in its infancy as a Masters proposal Deborah Walker and Louise Johnson bravely took on the task of supervising my candidature. After transferring to a doctoral program, Estelle Barrett brought her intellectual vigour, constructive criticism, enthusiasm and guidance to this research as my Principal Supervisor, which has been of inestimable value. I am also indebted to Mark Rashleigh who kindly gave up many hours of his valuable time and expertise to assist in the reproduction of the images for this exegesis. The Deakin University 2000 Postgraduate Travel Grant enabled me to attend the exhibition, “Wachten op de prins ... Negen eeuwen adellijk damesstift Munsterbilzen” in Belgium, and to meet with medieval scholars in Leuven and Oxford. This generosity was extended through Caroline Field and the Deakin University Stonington Stables Museum of Art in making the gallery available for the exhibition of my thesis. My thanks also to the Exhibitions Officer Phillip Cooper who expertly advised and organised the hanging of the work.

As first and foremost a visual artist, I have had to draw on the expert knowledge of others outside my own discipline. My sincere gratitude goes to those medieval scholars who viewed my first foray into this area with such kindness and enthusiasm: Brigitte Meijns (Belgium), Jane Taylor (Oxford), Constant Mews (Melbourne), and in particular, Lesley Smith (Oxford). I am also grateful to the libraries that have made their collections of manuscripts available to me. My special thanks go to the staff of the Bodleian Library Oxford and to B. C. Barker-Benfield, for his invaluable assistance in pointing me in the direction of the latest research on medieval nuns.
I cannot thank enough, Mathieu Wijnen (independent researcher, archivist and local historian, Munsterbilsen, Belgium), for sharing with me his extensive historical knowledge of the Abbey of Saint Amor, which once existed in his own hometown. I greatly value the mass of correspondence and the many hours spent in discussion across the table, when Mathieu tirelessly translated texts and answered my endless questions. I am also extremely indebted to the three Sisters (who must remain unnamed) and the small St Augustine contemplative community in England, who took me under their wing, provided me with privileged insight into their silent lives within religious enclosure, and unwittingly gave me a place of solace during my time of grief. This stay was made possible through the consideration of my friend and keen student, Jane Fitzherbert. Her kindness and that of her daughter Sarah and family in accommodating me during the Vienna stint of my research, is also genuinely appreciated.

It goes without saying that I owe a great deal to many people that remain unnamed. The encouragement of artists, poets, friends and colleagues: Aven Hodgess, Adele Green, Dora McPhee, Tim Craker, Barbara McClean, Jennifer Harrison, Angela Powles and Rod McLeish, was mingled with their thought provoking criticism of individual chapters. A very special reader, my daughter Michele Willson, who on the completion of own PhD read the exegesis, typifies the generous spirit and wonderful support that I have had from my children Nicole, Aaron and Michael (before his death), and my extended family; my heart-felt thanks to all.
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Introduction

Body and voice does lend to silent thought,
Borne down the centuries’ speaking page.

(Schiller cited in Jensen, 1970: 16)

Today the suggestion that a woman must be silent could be seen as a source of great amusement, disbelief, anger or sorrow. However, for women who have internalised the belief that this is the only acceptable position for them in society, the basic human right of free speech appears inaccessible. This exegesis looks at those women who despite this sense of exclusion, have sought out or created a space from which they could speak with some degree of freedom. To gain access to this space however, they may have had to modify or create alternative forms of language, which has placed their words outside, or on the borderline of intelligibility and ambiguity. It seems to me that at certain times throughout Western history, visual art has provided both the space and the language for these voices. This research has been motivated by a desire to see if this has indeed been the case and to seek out what ramifications this history might have for my own and other contemporary artists’ practice. This has induced me to identify this alternative mode of communication, to investigate how it might have operated in the lives and work of medieval nuns and to compare it to my own practices.

Born in England and growing up in Australia in the 1950s, my experience of the Christian home and of society in general was that “Little girls should be seen and not heard”. To use the spoken word came at a huge price; a fear of crushing censure and
a distrust of the meaning of words. Silence became a safe place to inhabit. In this study I shall attempt to show how the speech and silence of women are intricately entwined with and shaped by attitudes borne from various visual and verbal discourses about their bodies. This became startlingly evident to me about one year into the making of the work for my exhibition entitled *A Fair and Virtuous Woman* (Judith Pugh Gallery, Melbourne, 1991). I believed that silence and passivity held great strengths as contemplative states and forms of non-violent protest. However, these paintings were a response to my anger and distress at the painful realisation that the internalisation of constructs that had naturalised silence and passivity as feminine virtues had left women profoundly vulnerable to the exercise of male power and control. I began looking at images such as *Susannah and the Elders* and *The Rape of Lucretia*, represented over the centuries in painting, literature, poetry and drama. With very few exceptions, these visual and verbal narratives fused the view of women as fair and virtuous to passive sexual objects and silent victims. Susannah and Lucretia were portrayed as highly literate and articulate women, yet their protesting voices were effectively silenced because they were judged socially as body without voice: the cultural image of “woman”.

At that time I could see no way out of the impasse created by this positioning. I felt myself trapped as had my mother and other women before her, within a circularity of “givens” that shaped not only the way I saw myself, but also how I was seen by others. I found myself damned as a woman if I spoke and damned as a human being if I didn’t. I was both amazed and sobered to find that by simply changing the titles of my paintings to incorporate the names of these women of the past, my contemporary concerns resounded with those found in the stories of these “silent”
and “passive” women. This made me acutely aware of the historical interconnectedness of women’s lives to their cultural representation and the perpetuation of political agendas that lay behind the public telling and re-telling of their stories. Equally apparent was how the power of visual and verbal language, words and images, to either perpetuate or change the status-quo, rested in the hands of the artist as much as the author of the original text and its various interpretations.

In this study I will refer to the “disembodied voice”. My definition of a disembodied voice is one where the physical presence of the speaker is not necessary to facilitate a seeing and a hearing of that voice by another, or, where the physical presence is sensed by other means. In this study, as in my art-practice, the voice is evoked through the act of writing as a form of drawing or inscription within the visual field. This act renders the voice as a visible image, an imprint on a surface in a space to be both seen and “heard” by another. Its visual trace provides evidence of the existence of the speaker without the need for representing their body.

The representation of the body of woman in art carries the risk of misrepresentation, objectification, and of being subjected to the intrusion or mastery of the gaze (Berger: 1972, Jay, 1994: 288-290). These issues, which can be enormous problems in the lives of women, play an important role in the desire of women artists to find alternative forms for their speech and ways of “imaging” the body (Kelly, 1996). The participation of mind and body in the act of writing is a subject covered at length by Roland Barthes (1985a and 1985b) and the artist Mary Kelly (1996). Barthes describes the journey of the subject’s voice from speaking to writing (which absents the body), to what is created in its place: ‘a new image repertoire ... [where] body,
returns, but, along a path which is indirect’ (Barthes, 1985a: 7). The voice is re-embodied in a new form. This description applies to the process of writing in the field of painting or drawing where, ‘The play of presence and absence within the pictorial space turns on gesture’ (Kelly, 1996: 83).

Laura Kendrick observed that the desire of human beings to perpetuate ‘the myth of a living presence in alphabetic writing’ through animating or embodying the letter has been evident since Late Antiquity (Kendrick, 1999: 21-25). For me to return once again to the alphabet proved to be surprisingly difficult. I was forced to re-think its significance to me, now, as a woman and as an artist. On one hand, to reproduce the letters was to represent the foundations and visible evidence of my equal rights with men to language and to participation in the symbolic order. On the other, to create an image that symbolised the “Letter of the Law”, meant my dealing with a system that excluded women from its use. How could I, from this perspective, take up this artistic tradition of embodiment of the letter?

Feminist and post-modernist critical enquiry has heightened our awareness of the way that language, gender and representations of the body of women in art, as in life, are implicated in issues of vision and power (Bal, 1991, Berger, 1972, Jay, 1994). Caught in a space as both ‘subject of the look’ as artists and ‘object of the look’ as women, has prompted many women artists to seek out or create a space that encourages a self-reflexive attitude to looking (Kelly, 1996: 69, 97, Bal, 1991: 140-149). Women artists like myself, have explored ways of expressing their own feminine desire, by deflecting the objectifying male gaze and attempting to remove the limits that fix the identity of woman and her expression. Scripto-visual art
practice is one such strategy (Meskinmon, 1996: 100, Betterton, 1996: 103). The term “scripto-visual” in contemporary art was introduced through feminist art discourse in the late 1960s. It refers broadly to women’s use of words and images within the visual field as a means of feminist enquiry and critique into the function of language and sign systems that affect the image we have of ourselves and of others (Parker and Pollock, 1987: 5, 81, 310).

For example, the artists Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger have used words and images as a conceptual means to subvert the language of patriarchy and to reveal the impact of mass-media representations on the formation of gender identity within capitalist societies. More recently they have extended this work to investigate the mutually interactive relationship of words and images with the body (Weir: 1998). Words and images are also used in the paintings and mixed-media work of Nancy Spero to draw attention to the historical silencing that violence against women has sustained (Wally: 1995). Another artist, Mary Kelly, juxtaposes words and images in her investigations into the relationship of language, gender and psychoanalytic theory to her own life as a mother and a woman within patriarchal society (Kelly: 1996). I share her interest in the act of writing as a means of directing the viewer’s eye away from the body of woman. This is not a rejection of the female body, but rather creates ‘significance out of its absence’ (Kelly, 1996: 125). I am indebted to the work of these women for provoking an awareness of the role that words and images play in the cultural constructions of gender. Their work has raised questions about my own objectives and has prompted me to identify the differences between their work and mine. These artists present words so that they can be read as texts. My writing is “illegible”. The writing or scripts in much of the work of Hanne Darboven and Susan
Hiller are also “illegible”. However, both the visual image and the intent behind our writing differ. Darboven writes to engage with the notions of duty and absurdity, whilst Hiller’s automatic writing seeks to evoke otherworldly voices. The differences will become apparent in my discussion in chapter four, as I make particular comparisons between these artists’ work and my own representations of words as images.

Traditionally, artists refer to their predecessors to see how their practices relate to the genre in which they work. I am interested in the production of an alternatively audible code through scripto-visual practice that embodies words with the female voice and articulates its silence. This interest made me turn to the art of medieval nuns and their work with words and images in illuminated manuscripts: firstly, because of the scripto-visual developments in my own work, and secondly, because these women “spoke” from within an enclosure of silence.

My thesis, consisting of an exhibition and a written exegesis, is the result of an intense enquiry and on-going dialogue between both written and visual resources, between studio-practice and scholarly research. Within the studio I use paint and drawing materials to reveal the nature of process and explore how material practice advances and challenges theory. I see the interplay of these two systems of language in my practice as providing an opportunity to articulate silent spaces that lie between and within the written word and the visual image. My principal consideration is the act of copying texts and processes involved in the transition of words into images. My studio investigations go hand in hand with the contents of each chapter and will be fully explicated in the last. Words come out of silence. The thesis investigates
what happens when one breaks that silence with the materiality of words. It demonstrates what happens when colour, gesture, form, and an awareness of spaces in and around words, are brought to bear on a system of language meant to reflect clarity of ideas, order and sense.

The theoretical component of this project has been taken from a wide range of sources and disciplines. To speak about silence and its expression in visual art I refer to the work of Bernard P. Dauenhauer (1980), George Steiner (1967, 1989) and Susan Sontag (1969). A feminist perspective of this reading is drawn from the work of Michelle Boulouse Walker (1998), Dale Spender (1980) and Griselda Pollock (1994). I base my discussion of the historical relationship of word to images in art on the writings of Mieke Bal (1991, 1994), Norman Bryson (1981, 1983) and W. J. T. Mitchell (1980, 1986, 1994). I explore what this relationship may have meant in the lives and art of medieval nuns by accessing the writings of several medieval scholars, including those of Carolyn Walker Bynum (1991) and Judith Oliver (1997). Finally, the theories on art by Susanne Langer (1953) and Anton Ehrenzweig (1971) provide a theoretical overview of particular creative practices that enable me to link aspects of the scripto-visual work by medieval nuns to the work of other contemporary artists, including my own. My aim is to show how the silence in women’s lives can be expressed through their work with words and images, or scripto-visual art practice.

To take an historical perspective and look for evidence of what might have been, is to assume that women of the past may have shared similar experiences to my own and responded to them as I might do myself. However, I acknowledge that the
suggestions I will make are borne from my own experience and thus not necessarily representative of the women whose situation appears to me to have been similar to my own. I also recognise that I am interpreting this material from the position of my lived experience as a white Anglo-Saxon female of Judeo-Christian descent and my background as an educated (therefore privileged) woman artist; my means of enquiry as a painter of the twenty-first century. I believe my understanding of visual language will bring a different perspective to that offered by scholars whose primary tool is the written language. I apply three orders of comparison to this study: theory to practice; verbal to visual means in my studio work; and, the relationship of these two to the lives of medieval nuns and their work with words and images in the illuminated manuscript. The inspiration of their work and my practical engagement with scripto-visual processes in the studio has provided a context within which to articulate my feminist concerns about the historical silencing of women.

Issues of gender underlie this research. Whilst I acknowledge that the experience of silence/absence is not exclusive to women, the material I examine is specifically directed towards women and to how this experience may have affected their work as artists. Through elaboration of my painting practice, I hope to show how women have responded differentially to the constraints of an environment that advocates silence and passivity as feminine virtues.

In the first chapter I show how silence, whether chosen or imposed, affects the way we operate in the world and can significantly influence the form of discourse we choose to use. I draw on feminist theory to argue that the incorporation of silence into Western concepts of woman and her place in society has created a sense of
psychological and behavioural enclosure for women, which can profoundly affect their access to language and their forms of speech. I build my discussion on definitions of silence by Bernard P. Dauenhauer (1980) who sees silence as an active performance which is essentially intertwined with discourse as utterance: signs, sounds, gestures or marks, that convey human experience (Dauenhauer, 1980: 3-4). I demonstrate how the characteristics of silence and its performance can provide a paradigm for creative practice and an alternatively audible language; overriding the cultural constructions of gender positioning women within the space of mute silence.

In chapter two, I situate my discussion of silence and the historical prohibition of women’s speech, in the culture and context of medieval nuns within religious enclosure. These women took a vow of silence on entering an enclosed order to become nuns, accepting the Christian system of belief that words would attain their greatest value placed at the service of God. I attempt to envisage the relationship between silence, speech and the body for medieval nuns. Drawing on the research of medieval scholars, Anton Ehrenzweig’s investigations into the psychology of the artistic imagination (1971) and my studio research, I demonstrate how the nuns’ creative performance of given male language transcended attitudes that separated the body of woman from her voice. I argue that in order to be heard women’s voices had to be “silent” or alternatively audible and “disembodied” from the image of the body of woman constructed by male discourse. I suggest that despite our differences, it is possible to see a continuity of these performances by woman artists today who struggle to speak their silence. I link medieval nuns’ linguistic strategies and performative recitation of the words of others to my visual dialogue with patriarchal texts within the studio.
The fact that some of these medieval nuns were artists is central to my enquiry, both in terms of theory and practice. This has provided me with an opportunity to relate the silence of their lives to their scripto-visual art-practice. To refer to medieval nuns as artists begs the question of whether either the nuns or others saw their role as that of a crafts-person or an artist. I would suggest that although the purpose behind the production of art has changed many times since the medieval period, the creativity needed for the work of illuminating manuscripts was not so very different to that required by the artist of today. When I refer to medieval nuns as artists, I am not referring to the modern notion of artist as individual author, but rather, artist as a creative subject. Writing of women in the Medieval period, John Coakley explains:

> By “creativity” I mean, broadly, people’s use of the materials available to them - the circumstances and opportunities of their lives and their culture’s repository of ideas, assumptions, conflicts, and images - to express themselves in some new way. (Coakley, 1994: 1)

There is ample evidence to suggest that the work of an illuminator in the Middle Ages could be expected to reflect the hand or distinctive expressiveness of that individual, as well as complying to the required format set out in the pattern books or exemplars (Swarzenski, 1951: 8, Bologna, 1988: 36). I believe that we can use the term artist in this study without dishonouring the differing cultures and contexts from which the work was produced, or those who produced it. To put aside this kind of labelling means that we are then free to read the work through the relationship of
visual language and its context to the circumstances of its production, which are inseparable from its meaning.

One of the earliest appearances in Western history of words and images within the same visual field was in the illuminated manuscript. Few contemporary artists have had the opportunity to examine the original work of medieval nuns, or to consider the relevance of the illuminated manuscripts for themselves as part of their artistic tradition. I sought it out so that I could see for myself if this work might have provided an alternative avenue for these women’s voices. These issues are pivotal to the concerns of my own art practice. I have no desire to perpetuate the medieval style of illumination, but rather to propose possible connections between medieval nuns’ scripto-visual practice and the female embodiment of words and their spaces by women in contemporary art.

Alongside a growing awareness of the place of the illuminated manuscript in art history is a steadily expanding body of research into the lives of the artists who made them (Gaze: 1997, Smith and Taylor: 1995, 1997). The role of women artists in the production of this history is slowly becoming apparent. Its relevance to Western art is still being evaluated and the importance of these women as role models from the past remains largely undocumented. This thesis goes some way in contributing to the closure of that gap.

In the third chapter I consider the work of the medieval scribal/artist in illuminated manuscripts. I travelled overseas to undertake three month’s research of original illuminated manuscripts to see how visual language contained in them might operate
as a form of speech\textsuperscript{1}. I take as my exemplar the manuscript of Isidore of Seville, which was completed in 1134 by a group of eight nuns (Watson, 1979: 132) and described by Germaine Greer as ‘probably fairly typical of the vast mass of calligraphic labour done by women’ (Greer, 1979: 156). I compare this particular manuscript with others of the same title and content. Alongside this investigation, I consider other manuscripts believed to have been illuminated by nuns. I focus mainly on visual language and locate aspects of the work closest to my own art-practice: the treatment of the visual space and inter-textual components of the page or folio. My analysis does not include an examination of miniatures or historiated initials. Rather, my aim is to identify and compare the use of other aesthetic devices available to the medieval scribal/artist through which they might have consciously or otherwise interacted in a visual dialogue with the text. I explore their use of visual language further in my experiments within the studio.

Rather than an attempt to uncover absolute answers or truths, I have read their work with certain questions in mind. Did the illuminated manuscript provide a space for the expression of an individual artist’s voice? If so, did the nun as artist, consciously or otherwise, make use of that space? Is it possible for a contemporary eye to differentiate between the personal and prescribed components that make up the page or folio of the manuscript? Finally, what significance might this have for women artists who use the word and image in their art today? I conclude that there were spaces available (no matter how limited they may appear to us today), for the “caprice” of the artist, a personal response to the text and an expression of her voice.

\textsuperscript{1} This was undertaken in the collections of: The British Library, London; the Bodleian Library, Oxford; the Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial, the Biblioteca Nacional, the Real Academia de la Historia in Madrid; and the Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek.
I support this conclusion by my consideration of the research of medieval scholars, the evidence of my empirical examination of manuscripts, and the outcomes of my studio investigations into the capacity of the artist to prioritise either visual or verbal language in their work of transforming words into images.

In the fourth chapter I speak more particularly about my artwork and the outcomes of my research within the studio. I explain the particular significance that this practice has for me as a woman artist. I investigate the acts of writing within the visual space of painting, copying the words of others, changing written texts into visual images, and “imaging” the letters of the alphabet. I show that the space in which words dwell reflect as much of what I am trying to say, as the words themselves. This space is articulated in ways that depend on both languages for its existence, yet is not strictly reducible to either. The form this writing takes does not allow for linear reading by the audience (as in a text). Rather, it is to be seen and read as an image. This situates the work in the realm of non-verbal or otherwise intelligible language. I demonstrate how the artist may consciously or not, “speak” their silence through their re-writing of the text, expressing both personal and political concerns. I compare it to the work of medieval nuns and that of other contemporary women artists whose work is referred to as scripto-visual.

Women artists today are re-evaluating the role of words in their lives and their art. This re-evaluation was the subject of my exhibitions: *What Was That You Said?* and *A Weft of Words* (1996, 1998, Temple Studios, Melbourne). Differentially positioned in silence and speech by our gender, it follows that how we speak and what we have to say may require a different aesthetics of expression (Florence and Foster: 2000).
As a generative process, scripto-visual practice holds particular significance for women. It negotiates some of the societal constraints on women’s speech and visibility because its visual form is “silent” and removed from the passive image of woman constructed by male discourse. The act of transforming words into images enables women to articulate their silence in a visible form so that they can be both seen and heard. This process acknowledges as it defies the social and cultural conditions that shaped its necessity. The cultural form of this work constitutes a “re-writing” of women’s visibility and speech, allowing them to exceed the boundaries of symbolic language by expressing their unspoken voices in the space of words and images.
Chapter One

Silence: An ever-changing dialogue

Language can only deal meaningfully with a special, restricted segment of reality. The rest, and it is presumably the much larger part, is silence.

(Steiner, 1967: 40)

What is the relevance of this silence, this ‘larger part’ of reality to which George Steiner in his book Language and Silence, (1967) refers? How does it function in our lives and does it really matter? In this chapter I will argue that it does matter. Furthermore our understanding of its relationship to creative practice allows us to “hear” this greater part. I argue that it is particularly significant in the lives of women because of what could be called the gendering of silence. However, because of its very nature and co-dependency with discourse, silence provides a paradigm that is compatible with, but not the same as, the language of visual art. Whilst silence refuses the dominance of words, its performance provides a means to create generative spaces within verbal and visual language. I suggest that it is through this performance that women can speak and breach the codes of symbolic language, with language of and from the body.

My interest in silence relates to the experience of it in my life as a woman and an artist. These experiences have proven to be both liberating and debilitating in nature. They have created my desire to grasp something of the complexity of silence, its inherent qualities, its relationship to speech, and the role it has played over the centuries in the lives and art of women. In this chapter I consider the specificity of
women’s silence expressed in the theories of Michelle Bouselouse Walker (1998) and Dale Spender (1980). I limit my investigations to a small but indicative sample of how the imposition of silence can profoundly inhibit the ways women speak and behave. It can act as an invisible wall that prevents them from being seen and heard. It is essential that these fundamental issues be addressed if we are to understand the significance of silence in the lives of women and its expression by women artists through visual art-practice.

Although there are some overlaps, this chapter is roughly divided into two distinct parts. The first deals with silence in relation to institutional and disciplinary discourse and is seen as a repressive imposition. The second considers silence as a creative structure and condition. Whilst the conscious or unconscious imposition of silence is a vital part of this enquiry, it is not the sum total of its significance for women, for silence also provides a nurturing and energetic environment for creativity.

By providing the time and space for thoughts and feelings, silence is capable of stirring up powerful emotions that might otherwise remain suppressed or denied. As a consequence it may be held responsible for the feelings themselves, rather than viewed as an opportunity for their recall. The space, form, and practice of silence as we shall discover, refuses to be packaged into tidy boxes or classifications. Nonetheless, our particular perceptions of its nature can profoundly influence how it functions in our lives. Broadly speaking, these perceptions fall into three categories: the malign or negative, which I shall argue bears close comparison to Western
theories of the female subject; the neutral, where silence is used only periodically as a practical tool; and, the benign which opens up a positive space for productivity.

I draw heavily on the writings of Bernard Dauenhauer (1980). Dauenhauer explains how the very nature of silence is active and performative, therefore always of and from the body. Dependent on the discipline or space in which it is practised, the constantly shifting co-dependency of silence with discourse, or utterance, contains qualities that both define and move beyond words. I compare religious and artistic worlds to see how the artist has been able to move between silence and utterance. I suggest that when embraced as a generative, creative condition, silence can be articulated, or given a voice through art practice. Visual art offers the same space and language to artists regardless of their gender. However, the circumstances of our lives and the position from which we speak as men and women differ and affect our interaction with that space and language.

*The fabric of Speech and Silence*

Dauenhauer quotes Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

“We should consider speech before it has been pronounced against the ground of the silence which precedes it, which never ceases to accompany it, and without which it would say nothing. Moreover, we should be sensitive to the thread of silence from which the tissue of speech is woven.” (Dauenhauer, 1980: 116)
It is nigh impossible and certainly not the intention of this study, to pin down precisely what the words silence and speech mean. Rather, my intention is to broaden commonly held concepts of them both. I wish to evoke a set of ideas that will allow for a more receptive and vigilant attention to ways of speaking and a greater awareness of women’s compromised relationship to speech and silence.

Dictionary definitions of silence range from the idea of an absence of all sound or noise to notions of stillness or absence of activity (World Book Dictionary: 1974: 1923). However, it is also defined as a means of repressing speech and action or reducing to silence by restraint or prohibition (World Book Dictionary: 1974: 1923). These definitions do little to enlighten us to the profundity of silence and how it impacts on our lives.

Bernard P. Dauenhauer devotes the entirety of his book to this subject and I have tried to glean from it a sense of the complexity of silence, and also its capacity to interact with and enable other modes of communication. Dauenhauer states at the outset that his book ‘rests upon the thesis that silence is a phenomenon which is at least equiprimordial with utterance’ (Dauenhauer, 1980: 5). I shall use the word “utterance” as a synonym for speech or as an act of speaking, which will include the following description by Dauenhauer:

   An utterance is any performance employing systematically related signs, sounds, gestures or marks having recognizable meanings to express thoughts, feelings, states of affairs, etc. In short, every self-initiated deployment of any sort of language is counted here as an utterance.
   (Dauenhauer, 1980: 4)
Dauenhauer explains that the utterance that accompanies the performance of silence can be recognised in art-practices such as painting and sculpture (Dauenhauer, 1980: 3). However these forms ‘require some sensuous embodiment if they are to come to presence, either in perception or memory’ (Dauenhauer, 1980: 46). Whilst these forms will be influenced by the particular discipline to which the art belongs, each piece will contain its own specific utterance and silence. Dauenhauer’s elaboration of utterance provides an entrée into the later discussion of the integral nature of silence to art practice.

When I refer to Dauenhauer’s scholarly work, I am not implying that selected passages necessarily encompass his larger views on the subject, but instead, hope to use his words to clarify my meaning. I start with Dauenhauer’s definitions of the major characteristics of silence. He writes:

(1) Silence is an active human performance which always occurs with an utterance, (2) silence is never an act of unmitigated autonomy. Rather, (3) silence involves a yielding following upon an awareness of finitude and awe. The yielding involved in silence is peculiar inasmuch as (4) it is a yielding which binds and joins. (Dauenhauer, 1980: 24)

_Silence as necessity?_

I take Dauenhauer’s first characteristic that ‘silence is an active human performance which always occurs in connection with an utterance,’ as my first point of departure.
At first this statement appears quite clear in its meaning, however, important questions arise as he continues to explain that:

Even when a man performs silence out of habit or routine, just as when he utters something habitually or routinely, he is still performing it in a culturally rather than a biologically established way. The silence he performs is not reducible to reflex behavior. Nor is silence simply a phase of passive receptivity. However habitual the performance is, all performances are in some measure active. (Dauenhauer, 1980: 24)

I agree with Dauenhauer’s broader claim that one’s silence and utterance are active and culturally determined. However, I would argue that in the light of contemporary theory on the interaction of the body with texts and their inscription on the individual and collective psyche, it is no longer possible to make such clear distinctions between culturally or ‘biologically established ways’.¹ I am not suggesting in any way, that these performances are genetically encoded into our bodies (which may be Dauenhauer’s point), but rather ask whether we can afford to exclude the possibility that the scripting, which is now believed to start in utero, does not have a biological dimension. Just when does experience and the forming of the social subject begin? We now have to consider the possibility that our performances are all of a piece in this regard, and that whilst not fixed, are nonetheless, inseparable from the variable combinations of experience and knowledge which make up who we are and how we act. If then, human performance is so intertwined with biological and cultural factors,

¹For the constant material interaction between text and body, see Vicky Kirkby (1997) and Elizabeth Grosz (1994). For a historical Judeo-Christian perspective of the interaction of religious texts with bodily transformation in the individual, see Caroline Walker Bynum (1991) and Elaine Scarry (1985).
they can always-and-already be imbedded in the reflexive performance of silence and utterance.

Whilst I agree that silence is ‘not reducible to reflexive behavior’ (Dauenhauer, 1980: 24), I would argue that the performance of silence is often exactly that. At the risk of over-simplification: in situations when an utterance offends an individual or culture and incurs a physical and/or psychological punishment to deter its repetition, the speaker learns very quickly that it is wiser to remain silent than to repeat that utterance. Depending on how well these lessons are learnt by the offender, their internalisation produces behaviours that can be called reflexive; a hesitation or halt to performing in the same way again. The most pertinent example for this study can be seen in the establishment and re-enforcement in early childhood of Judeo-Christian models of speech and behaviour for women; or, of what Dale Spender calls, ‘The theory of good conduct’ (Spender, 1980: xi). Spender describes how the lessons learnt from this prescriptive model not only establish the pre-conditions for women’s speech in patriarchal society, but also contributes to women’s silence and invisibility. She argues that girls have had to learn to speak in a particular ‘lady-like way’, the consequences of which has been effectively to silence women. She quotes Robin Lakoff:

“If the little girl learns her lessons well, she is not rewarded with unquestioned acceptance on the part of society: rather the acquisition of this special style of speech will later be an excuse others use to keep her in a demeaning position, to refuse to take her seriously as a human being. Because of the way she speaks, the little girl - now grown to womanhood
- will be accused of being unable to speak precisely or to express herself forcefully.” (Spender, 1980: 86)

Compliance with these modes of good speech and behaviour places women in an alienated position as active speaking subjects in society. The continued dismissal and obstruction to their speech maintains their silence. Spender concludes: ‘there is little doubt in my mind that females have traditionally reacted to this by retreating into silence. One of human being’s … protective strategies [which] reinforces their own muted position’ (Spender, 1980: 87).

Teresa de Lauretis (1984) questions the terms we use to describe what lies behind the repetition of our actions: logic, reason, habit, instinct, and sees no clear distinction between them. She asks, ‘for what is instinct but a kind of knowledge internalized from daily, secular repetition of actions, impressions, and meanings, whose cause-and-effect or otherwise binding relation has been accepted as certain and even necessary?’ (De Lauretis, 1984: 158).

To move beyond this oppressive “necessity” of silence into the creative and productive space that silence offers, requires that we recognise the different forms that the imposition of silence can take.

**The subtle and not so subtle imposition of silence**

There are those that feel indifferent towards silence, yet recognise it as a versatile tool for realising a larger project. This conscious or tactical enactment of silence can
have both positive and negative implications. George Steiner expresses his horror at the form of silence that is manifest as inaction in the face of crimes of humanity (Steiner, 1967: 15). Yet he and Susan Sontag acknowledge the legitimate choice of silence to protest at an overuse or abuse of words, or to renounce words as an adequate form of communication (Steiner, 1967: 30-74, Sontag, 1969: 5-7).

The tactical, thus political, imposition of silence on the individual or group, however, is determined to a major degree by the historical circumstances into which one is born. It is grounded in issues of power and control and exercised through discriminatory classifications of race, class and sex. The lines between imposition and choice are not so clearly drawn if we consider that these impositions were not always part of any conscious “master-plan” to oppress others. Although this ambiguity frequently has been and continues to be the case, it also results from the human endeavour to understand the nature of existence and of sexual difference. Nonetheless, regardless of whether these impositions of silence have been conscious or unconscious, of malign or benign intent, the outcomes and effect of the differential cultural constructions of gender throughout Western History, has been to promote women’s silence and passivity over their speech and action.

As historical subjects, our speech and our silence are reinforced by our experience of them in our personal and collective histories and reflected in how we relate to the world and to others. Ramifications of silence for men and women differ because of a fundamental difference in our experience of silence in society. Men can be silenced, or choose to be silent, but I believe they do not have it embedded in their history as a condition of their sex. The evidence of what I call the gendering of silence can be
found in dominant discourses as various as the religious, philosophical and psychoanalytical to those of scientific and medical texts. These have been incorporated into the cultural (fictional) constructions of gender and sexual difference (De Lauretis: 1987). Their neutralisation as “natural” has assured their perpetuation over the centuries and their practice within society has resulted in their inscription or “scripturing” as “texts” on the psyche of both male and female social subjects.

Definitions of subjectivity in Western patriarchal society and culture have cast man as the human subject, placing woman as the opposite or the “other” of the male. Binary oppositions that privilege man as positive, active and representative of culture, mind and rationality have reinforced this. On the other hand, where this takes place, woman is viewed as negative, passive and representative of nature, body and emotion. Patterns of thinking and behaving have developed around “masculinity” as being active and assertive, and “femininity” as passive and silent. I am suggesting that this situation is further compounded by the saturation in institutional discourse of woman as silence; images which also echo negative perceptions of silence.

**Woman as silence**

Michelle Boulouse Walker (1998) locates her discussion of women and silence in relation to philosophical discourse and the maternal body. It is through her feminist and psychoanalytic critiques that I will demonstrate how negative associations with silence cross over into Western thought and are implicit in differential constructions of gender. This will indicate how women’s relation to silence differs to that of men,
and is therefore reflected in the specificity of its articulation through their creative practices.

In considering the French feminist philosopher Michele Le Doeuff’s analyses of philosophical and scientific texts, Walker writes:

Here (socio-biological) references abound, attesting to the activity and exteriority of the male (even in utero) as against the passivity and interiority of the self-enclosed female. “From the beginnings in foetal life, ‘masculinity’ is a thing of drama, conflict, struggle, danger, openness to influence, relation to an Other, while ‘femininity’ is tranquil, immobile, unfolding of the inherent, self-enclosure in the same” 
(Walker, 1998:19)

This equation of the feminine with passive interiority, inaction and non-communicability is taken further in Walker’s argument that the maternal body in particular, ‘occupies the site of radical silence in the texts of Western philosophy, psychoanalytic theory and literature’ (Walker, 1998: 1). She uses the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray’s re-reading of Plato’s parable of the cave as a metaphor for the womb to show how in this refiguration of woman, Plato, ‘ disfigures her as mute matrix ‘(Walker, 1998:12). The crucial importance of this is apparent in Walker’s summation:

In Plato’s world woman is not a subject that speaks. (Or at least one who speaks for herself.) She remains mute, reduced to the mute passivity of
her reproductive role. She is the unacknowledged place or grounding substance from which the masculine subject draws his reserves and resources. Woman as (hysteria) is paradoxically the silence that guarantees (masculine/philosophical) speech. She is the receptacle for speech, its possibility, though not its articulation. (Walker, 1998: 12)

Walker points out that Plato refers to the mother as a receptacle and an invisible, formless being who “in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible” (Walker, 1998:13). Woman as body, with references to the womb in particular, carry associations in myth and literature of containers or receptacles that can be empty or full of blood and fluids of unknown, sometimes sinister matter (Warner, 1970: 29-34). Likewise, those who fear silence view it as an unknown and mysterious space, inaudible and inarticulate, containing the hidden and concealed (Dauenhauer, 1980: 22-23, 86-106). When perceived as empty, the womb is symbolic of caves and burial chambers. Barbara G. Walker explains, the words ‘womb and tomb are linguistically related’ (Walker, 1983:102). Similarly, malign silence is perceived as an empty or dark space, a void or semantic vacuum, an abyss or tomb holding the potential for the annulment of being (Dauenhauer, 1980: 136, 86 - 106, Sontag: 1969, 27, 32).

Links between silence, the womb, tomb and women’s creativity are clearly apparent in the hypothesis put forward by George Steiner that women might be silent in art because they are able to procreate, or, because they possess wombs (Steiner, 1989: 207-208). He includes the words of Robert Frost with his own to ask: ‘Do women their “ripe thoughts” in “their brain inhearse,/Making their tomb the womb wherein
they grew”?’ (Steiner, 1989: 208). This convoluted sentence and its meaning is made explicit in Steiner’s question that immediately precedes it:

Can we honestly think further about creation and genesis, about the bringing into being of life forms which relate the poem or the painting to existentiality itself, if we do not consider the essence of form-giving that is childbirth and the abstinence [of the voices of women] from poiesis which this act may entail? (Steiner, 1989: 207-208)

It is a testimony to women’s ingenuity and strength that they have continued producing vibrant and challenging art, despite these deep-seated and long held beliefs. However, the history of Western painting has not been immune to the effect of these notions of woman. It has played its part through visual representations of women that have perpetuated these same views (Parker and Pollock, 1981: 115-116).

Negative perceptions of silence as a lack of human activity, closure of communication, inaudible, unintelligible and a sinister void to be avoided, are aligned to woman as negative other: self-enclosed, inactive, irrational, inarticulate and feared as the suspicious unknown. These perceptions combine to position the nature and body of woman as silence.

**Silence as “other”**

Michelle Boulouse Walker argues that prohibitions on women’s speech that have constituted them as mute also include the refusal of philosophy to listen to their
voices. She explains that; ‘woman is most effectively silenced through her
collection as silent foundation or mute interiority of philosophy. She is the silent,
unacknowledged place of philosophy, its empty/subjectless interiority’ (Walker,

Walker demonstrates how the strategies of exclusion, repression, denial and
foreclosures have been active in discourse that places women as ‘philosophical
subjects’ at the same time as it positions them outside as other (Walker, 1998: 11).
She stresses that women are not naturally predisposed to any of these spatial
placements, but rather, ‘They are socially positioned as outsiders within a discursive
system that constructs its own politically motivated spatial and logical arrangements
between in and out’ (Walker, 1998: 179). Similarly Dale Spender speaks of sociological structures that have also effectively placed women within silence by
situating them outside language; a place, she argues, that has been determined and
maintained by the exclusion of women from ‘codified knowledge’ (Spender, 1980:
66). Likewise, the tradition of Western art has effectively silenced women by
positioning them inside art as the object of painting, while periodically placing them
Women artists, like myself, continue to challenge and attempt to change this

The many layers that make up women’s experience of silence have compromised
their relationship to silence itself. Silence has been “scriptured” into the body of
woman. These layers exist because of structures that have reinforced modes of
speaking and behaving which deny women free access to language and its use. They
have prevented women from being active producers of language as a cultural form and have institutionalised the body and nature of woman as passive and silent receptacles of speech. Some women have accommodated or accepted these structures and the assigned space from which they might speak, but many have not. Women over the centuries have challenged or circumnavigated these determinants on their speech and behaviour. At times they have put their own lives at risk in attempting to break these patterns of silence (Dronke, 1984: 228). Spender maintains that when women have ‘perceived their own silence - and to the extent that it had been “self-imposed” - consciously changed certain aspects of their language behaviour’ (Spender, 1980: 105).

**The voice out of silence**

The case for women having been silenced in art and its practice has been strongly argued by Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock, (1981) Germaine Greer, (1979) and Linda Nochlin (1988), along with many others. The artist Marcia Hoff calls this a ‘secret silence since no one says to her, no, you cannot be a (great) painter’ (Jaworski, 1997: 345). Tillie Olsen (1978) distinguishes between the silence which is an integral part of creativity, and the silence of women who fear to speak because of oppression or other restraints on their speech. She writes:

> These are not natural silences - what Keats calls *agonie enuyeuse* (the tedious agony), that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation. The silences I speak of ... are unnatural;
the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot.

(Olsen, 1978: 8)

Olsen explains that the internalisation by women of this unnatural silence can leave them bereft of speech, feeling that they have neither the right to speak, nor have anything of value to say. Within patriarchy, women have traditionally been positioned in an untenable space that effects their day to day lives and their perceptions of themselves within society. Defined by the discourse of others and thus dispossessed of the expectation of speech and action, many are driven to get past the negative or empty space of their imposed silence. Teresa de Lauretis refers to Julia Kristeva to ask the question: ‘how to be “that which is unspoken” and at the same time to speak “that which is repressed in discourse”; how at once to be and to speak, to be and to represent difference, otherness, the elsewhere of language?’ (De Lauretis, 1984:76).

My art practice is borne out of this silence. The psychological and behavioural enclosures that these debilitating effects create have prompted many women, including myself, to change the everyday language used in patriarchal society, or to seek out other forms of speech through their creative practice. Painting provides me with a “silent”, non-verbal mode of communication that “speaks” through its visual, alternatively audible form.

When perceived as benign, silence is welcomed as a space and an experience of palpable presence, both positive and renewing. Silence can be seen as a psychological space for relief of tension and a safe haven or refuge which is free
from both internal and external censure. It can be a space for respite and rejuvenation away from distractions, for contemplation, focus, and the pursuit of meaningful concepts and activities. Some consider it a spiritual space for the suspension of thought altogether; to move beyond words into an experience of the ineffable or unsayable, described as the fullness or full emptiness of silence (Dauenhauer, 1980:16-22). Others such as George Steiner (1967) and Susan Sontag (1969) associate it with the spiritual dimension experienced in the production and the reception of art. I am suggesting that once within silence, either by choice or circumstance, silence has much to offer as a condition that engenders an alternative mode of communication through creative practice.

A conscious commitment to using the positive qualities of silence as a ground for the production of meaningful speech precludes any complicity with those that would impose it. The co-dependence of silence with utterance makes it clear that the objective of its practice is not a withdrawal from communication, but its opposite. Dauenhauer explains that to perform silence that is not engaged with something or someone else would undervalue, or undermine the complex emotional engagement that the performance of silence requires (Dauenhauer, 1980: 23-24). He states categorically that:

Without the conjunction of discourse and silence, discourse would collapse into mere untemporalized language and silence would collapse into mere muteness or non-signitive vision. (Dauenhauer, 1980: 77)
Not all philosophers take this view. Dauenhauer points out that both Hegel and Marx prioritised the significance of speech or discourse over silence (Dauenhauer, 1980: 86-87). However, Dauenhauer goes on to support his claim of the co-dependency of silence and discourse, with interpretations of silence by Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty and Picard (Dauenhauer, 1980:109-139). Likewise, Steiner, (1967) and Sontag (1969) believe that silence cannot operate on its own and is at its best when it inspires action and a way for the human spirit to move beyond the limitation of verbal language. Dauenhauer explains how Eastern traditions link silence with desire, thought and action, and that whilst these traditions perform silence with mystical intent, all performances of silence require both discourse and action (Dauenhauer, 1980: 111).

Interpretations of the performance of silence are determined by the tradition of the discipline in which it takes place and to which it refers. The last two characteristics of silence outlined by Dauenhaeur are particularly relevant to religious and artistic practice. He claims that ‘silence involves a yielding following upon an awareness of finitude and awe’ (Dauenhauer, 1980: 24). This yielding comes with the knowledge that we do not have all the answers and that we must listen to something or someone other than ourselves (who may, or may not be visible). To do this the artist has to yield or surrender those aspects of their artistic tradition that have been neutralised, or have become redundant through over-use. The yielding required for religious discourse however, does not challenge religious tradition which is founded and contained by the word of God, but rather it opens up a space for an experience of God (Dauenhauer, 1980: 33-52).
However, despite the different expectations of artistic and religious worlds, this yielding is demonstrable through the incorporation of artistic utterance into religious practice and vice-versa. This is because creativity itself requires a yielding for its performance and its reception. The artist has to let go of rigidly held ideas to allow for reciprocity between self and materials. The audience has to give up pre-conceptions that might block their reception and dialogue with the work (Dauenhauer: 1980, Ehrenzweig: 1971). Dauenhauer continues: ‘The yielding involved in silence is peculiar inasmuch as it is a yielding that binds and joins’ (Dauenhauer, 1980: 24). Here, the function of silence is to integrate and give meaning to the space before, within, between, and after the utterances, as well as the space between the practitioner and the other. This can be seen to operate the same way in the visual space of painting, integrating and giving meaning to the marks, lines, or utterances to the ground on which they reside. Likewise, the artist needs to ‘bind and join’ or integrate the different utterances within the structure of a work. This also applies to the audience in its reading, if the final form is to become meaningful (Dauenhauer: 1980, Ehrenzweig: 1971).

Dauenhauer’s description of the characteristics of silence has shown that it requires the active participation of the mind and body for its performance; is co-dependent on some form of utterance to be fruitful; is a vital component of creativity; and accommodates forms of alternatively audible language. Dauenhauer states that his analyses of silence, ‘makes it clear that each level and shape of discourse acquires and retains its identity only by virtue of the specific sorts of silence with which it is conjoined’ (Dauenhauer, 1980: 89).
Therefore, we must give equal consideration to the utterance with which silence co-exists and with which it is articulated in visual art. The pictorial space of a painting contains its own specific components of silence and utterance. However, it would appear that silence cannot ‘exist as the property of an artwork’ (Sontag, 1969: 9-11). Visual art “speaks” through its formal qualities of line, colour, form and space. It can never be silent because art always articulates. Nonetheless, artists can paint about the experience of silence. To provide a contemplative visual space of respite from the hyperactivity of the world, artists such as Agnes Martin use reduced colour and quiet or restrained geometric structures in their paintings (Chadwick, 1990:331-334). The absence of energetic marks or sensual colour (aligned with strong passions of and from the body) combined with a “still” compositional structure, can suggest an underlying spiritual or philosophical order and an experience of timelessness akin to the full emptiness of silence. Because of its association with light, purity and transcendence, others use white as the predominant colour in their work to convey a sense of silence (Beckett: 1995, Jaworski: 1997).

There are no words within the visual space of these paintings, for words or letters are understood as symbols of sound. I use words to speak, yet silence resides within the uninterrupted flow of words and their illegibility. My utterance is shaped by my particular experience of silence. Through my studio practice, I have found a process and a form for my voice that articulates my silence at the same time as it addresses my concerns about the silencing of women. They are reflected in the silence held within the “unintelligibility” of the word’s image and the colour, lines and spaces within and around the words (Plates 1 and 2, pages 35, 36). The act of writing
Plate 1. Iggulden, Annette. from the series
“Silence” ... In the Space of Words and Images (detail) 2001.
Plate 2. Iggulden, Annette. from the series
Enunciation: ‘A Feather on the Breath …’
(after Hildegard of Bingen, 1098 - 1179)
liberates my voice as words. Through this material evidence of my voice, I am made visible. Painting frees me from the constraints of imposed silence at the same time as it expresses the richness of silence and “silent” speech.

In the following chapters I will argue that scripto-visual work offers new ways of seeing and “hearing” women’s silence. In the next chapter I will discuss how medieval nuns negotiated their way through the psychological and behavioural enclosure of imposed silence to re-embody the word with their own voices through the creative performance of male language.
Chapter Two

The lives of medieval nuns: The re-embodied voice

Without the daring and sacrifice of these nuns, it is impossible to imagine the feminist movements of modern times finding any purchase in the public world. They created the image and reality of the autonomous woman. (McNamara, 1996: 6)

I have argued that women tend to be compromised in regard to speech and silence by the cultural constructions of gender that have positioned them within silence. I now argue the same for women in regard to the body and voice. Whilst they share with men the philosophical, moral and ethical implications of the body in relationship to soul, they also carry the burden of traditional Judaeo-Christian thought and practice that has sustained a distancing of the image of woman from a subject who speaks. I maintain that these constructs and their reinforcement have created the need for women to reclaim (no matter how transient), a unity of being and a re-embodiment of their voices through their creative practice. Elaine Scarry (1987) has cogently articulated the history of the “split” between the body and voice (for both men and women) within this religious framework. She places its greatest impact within the inexpressibility of pain, suggesting that whilst pain shatters or unmakes the unity of the subject and their world, so creative practice can express and remake that world. I would like to suggest that just as women have found a creative practice from within imposed silence, so they have drawn on its creative structure to move beyond the pain of the imposed cleavage of their body from their voice in society.
The practice of silence and its articulation can be seen side by side, with the historical prohibition on women’s speech, in the lives of medieval nuns within the physical confines of religious enclosure. Turning back the pages of history anew to look for traces of women’s voices from within this silent space, might help us to recognise women’s voices that struggle to speak from within the psychological enclosure of imposed silence today. If we can identify a continuity of circumstances between the silence in women’s lives and its expression in their creative practice we may understand the significance of this otherwise inaudible language. In re-visualising the scaffolding on which Western attitudes toward the body and voice of women have been built, I hope to show how these “relics” of the past are still potent influences in women’s lives and their art.

I believe it is possible to suggest such continuities, despite the distance in time and space that separates our lives from medieval nuns, and the fact that medieval thought differed in many ways to our own. I acknowledge, however, that my findings are a reflection of my thoughts and experience as a woman of the twenty-first century. As such, my words will be a re-writing of their stories and my paintings a new text on women’s silence (Bal, 1991: 34-35). By taking a position of ‘Passionate detachment’ (Haraway, 1991: 192), I hope to create an open-ended yet meaningful dialogue with what we have learnt of these women of the past. Donna J. Haraway argues for objective research within, ‘partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology’ (Haraway, 1991: 191). I cannot, nor do I wish to speak for any other woman, but rather participate in a shared concern that I believe transverses time and space: the need to understand and express the lived-reality of
our gendered position in society. Speaking of women in medieval society, Margaret Ker writes that:

… they speak to us of the same range of basic concerns that we experience in modern industrialised society, and that we can, and indeed must, learn from their victories, often surprising, and from their defeats, often familiar, if we want to understand, let alone alter, the situation in which we find ourselves in the late twentieth century. (Crawford, 1983:7)

In this chapter, I introduce the notion that women have accessed or created “silent” or alternatively audible languages that are disembodied from the image on which the prohibition of their speech was based: the image of woman constructed by male discourse. I suggest that, paradoxically, this act allowed women a unity of body and voice disallowed in male theorisations of woman, contradicting as it recognised the constraints that shaped its form. I will attempt to develop links between the silence in medieval nuns’ lives to its performative articulation. These links only became apparent to me during my studio investigations into the act of copying a text. Sounding the words of others enabled me to hear my own voice re-embodifying the words with my meaning, through its pitch, rhythm and intonation (Plate 3, page 41). I propose that through their creative performances of saying, repeating, and writing male language, medieval nuns re-embodied the word with their voices and articulated their silence. All performances of language have the potential to re-embody the voice. However, when the speaker is traditionally positioned on the margins or outside the language of those who control its use, the significance of their
Plate 3. Iggulden, Annette. from the series Psalmody:
‘Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven? Did I sing – too loud?’
utterance lies in its potential to challenge what constitutes acceptable speech and its capacity to express the concerns of those who have been silenced.

Women’s lives within the cloister differed significantly over the medieval period. These differences depended on the changing religious, political and intellectual climate that prevailed at the time, the emphasis of the sect and variant of each religious order, and the particular wealth or status of the convents themselves. Therefore, I will move from the general principles of female monasticism and its relationship to the body and voice of woman, to particular examples of women’s voices from the twelfth to the thirteenth century. I include an example from the sixteenth century (because of its extraordinary pertinence to my topic), and examples of my own and others’ contemporary work, to indicate the on-going relevance of this practice to women.

**The Body defined and defiled, disclaimed and reclaimed**

On entering the cloister medieval women became part of an institution that controlled every aspect of their body and voice. Although the body was perceived as a powerful symbol of spirituality and means of redemption, the words that structured their lives and beliefs often condemned that very body and its voice. Women’s mystical speech manifested through the body was accepted by and large in religious practice (Bynum: 1991, McNamara: 1996). However, the prohibition on women’s speech permeated monastic culture. This was of quite a different nature to issues inherent in the practice of silence shared by their male counterparts. It was made
explicit in that women were not permitted to approach the altar, preach or teach; it was implicit that as inferior beings women were to be the silent helpmate of man.

Kim E. Power writes that ‘The Fathers wove together the nature of sexual difference and its causes as an aspect of God-given natural law’ (Power, 1995: 46). She explains that although the two major stereotypes for medieval women evolved from categorisations of gender formed in Late Antiquity, the Judaeo-Christian incorporation of the personages Eve and Mary effectively, ‘tied the stereotype more closely to flesh and blood’ (Power, 1995: 41). The body of woman was envisaged as a double-sided image of Vice and Virtue. Vice was attributed to the disruptive uncontrollable body of Eve, and Virtue to the contained and silent body of Mary and the Holy Virgin. Whilst far more complex that my description suggests, it nonetheless provides a basic picture of the image of woman promoted and sustained by Christian teachings in the medieval period.

In a twelfth - century reform document the German Cistercian monk Idung of Prüfenning wrote that:

… the feminine sex … has four formidable enemies. Two are within the sex itself: lust of the flesh and frivolous feminine inquisitiveness. Two are without: the casual lechery of the masculine sex and the wicked envy of the devil. To these are added … that a woman can lose her virginity by violence – a thing which in the masculine sex nature itself prevents … it is not expedient for that sex [female] to enjoy the freedom of having its own governance – because of its natural fickleness and also because of
Based on the body, medieval religious and patristic explications of woman were overwhelmingly idealising or debasing. However, medieval women’s writing on this subject was usually from their “felt” reality and differed vastly from what men had to say. Male perceptions of woman as womb and tomb for their creativity, discussed in the last chapter, contrast vividly with Hildegard of Bingen’s (1098-1179) appreciation of its relationship to pleasure and its generative and regenerative potential. Hildegard writes, “Pleasure in a woman is comparable to the sun, which gently, calmly, and continuously spreads the earth with its fruit so it may bring forth fruit” (Holsinger, 1993: 117-118). Medieval women acknowledged the sinful dangers of the flesh, but they also enhanced their spirituality by including their sexual, sensual and gendered specificity into its practice. This enfolding of body and spirit gave ‘voice to the flesh’ (Holsinger, 1993:92-125), and a language that celebrated their oneness with the Divine. Caroline Walker Bynum explains that by identifying with Christ’s body and suffering, women were included within the greater concept of *humanitas* (Bynum, 1991:17-18). However, it would seem that before the voice could become flesh or the ‘eroticized voice’ could be articulated, the body had in some way to be by-passed or manipulated (Bynum, 1991: 186-190); a point to which I shall return.

Amando Maggi tells the story of the Florentine mystic Saint Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi (1566 - 1607) who, through her performances of spoken language, gestures, exclamations, whisperings, trembling, screams and silences, attempted at once to...
evoke then erase or ‘annihilate’ the Word, by re-enacting the death of God (Maggi, 1997: 110-126). Maggi draws on the thoughts of Hélène Cixous to clarify that when Maria speaks in a male voice to perform his resurrection: ‘The mystic “lends” her female body, her mouth, her tongue, to the Father who states His Law’, symbolically representing her own death or silence as the Father’s daughter (Maggi, 1997: 120-121). Maggi explains that in the nun’s attempt to ‘give the Word a body/voice’ she speaks in many different voices, but ‘She acts herself exclusively as a body in pain’ (Maggi, 1997: 113, 115). Maria was aware of the utter futility of written language to communicate the Mysteries and of her voice to speak as a woman, but she was still compelled to enact bodily and sound the Word. In this way, she did, painfully, articulate her silence and challenge the linear reading of the male Law, by the spontaneous and unpredictable nature of her improvisations (Maggi, 1997: 121-122).

Maggi compares the non-didactic intent of Maria’s monologues to that of the contemporary artist Linda Montano in her video performance, *Mitchell’s Death* (1978). Although separated by the centuries, Maggi suggests that:

> Both Maria Maddalena de’ Pazzi and Linda Montano perform a death…and are performed in their “silencing” voices. Both of them speak in order to originate silence. Silence does have a “story”, a plot which is secondary to the act of “giving life” to silence itself. … A Litany is a speech with no silences that only articulates silence. (Maggi, 1997: 117)

The image of woman - defined and defiled in patriarchal discourse - had to be subjugated or disclaimed before Maria could reclaim it. Through her bodily
The complexity of this struggle with the word as Law became particularly evident to me during my studio investigations into “imaging” the letters of the alphabet. Whilst posing no physical threat, the internalisation of the prohibitions on my speech and the oppressive associations this held for me as a woman, nonetheless became a barrier to my voice. This was only overcome when fraught with anxiety and a multitude of other emotions, I finally physically obliterated the legibility of the letters (Plate 4, page 47). As I immersed myself in the creative process, I heard my voice sounding the letters and saw my hand reshaping or re-writing the imaged letters and their spaces. My silence was articulated through the letters’ illegibility. The material re-embodiment of the alphabet with my voice became a visual re-writing of the letters of the Law.

*The Language: sounded and performed, written and re-written*

The repetition of male, patriarchal language was the basis of the nun’s religious practice. Many of the words medieval nuns read, repeated out-loud and internally digested daily, incriminated them as women: body as dangerous sexual temptation, with a voice containing equally dangerous, corrupting potential. Whilst there could be little doubt that the repetitious chanting and recitation of words fed their spiritual life and their religious imagination, it also reinforced the teachings of the church which justified the prohibition on their speech. However, as a devotional performance, the act of reciting, chanting or singing words was a creative and
Plate 4. Iggulden, Annette. from the series
“Silence”... In the Space of Words and Images (detail) 2001.
synchronistic phenomenon that could transcend the limitation of those words. The nuns sought exactitude in their articulation of the text (Oliver, 1997: 114). Judith Oliver tells of Gertude of Helfta’s horror and the devil’s admonishment for ‘hastily slurring over and suppressing words and syllables’ in her recitation, which she feared might ‘be held against her at her death’ (Oliver, 1997: 114). The likelihood of wilful errors therefore, would have been unlikely, but the possibility of unconscious “errors” cannot be excluded. In Chapter Four I explain how, to my own amazement, these “errors” unwittingly crept into my transcription or repetition of texts. I wish to foreground the creative aspect of this performance, which I suggest, held the potential to integrate unconscious or repressed material into its practice.

As a form of active meditation, the nun’s recitation involved the religious and creative imagination. Anton Ehrenzweig (1971) explains how creative processes blur the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious intent of its performer. They also blur the boundaries between two types of attention or hearing: ‘vertical’ hearing which is of normal focus and ‘horizontal’ hearing that is an empty or unfocussed state of listening (Ehrenzweig, 1971: 27). Unconscious scanning integrates spontaneous or accidental ‘micro-elements’ that emerge between the gaps of conscious control, providing a unity and order to that which would otherwise be chaotic (Ehrenweig, 1971: 26-31). Importantly, the performer is aware of these “errors” or extraneous material on secondary revision or re-play, and will be perturbed only if the need for adherence to rigid formulas is exacted (Ehrenzweig, 1979:27-28). Nonetheless, whether noticed or not, the creative experience of momentary reintegration of unacceptable into acceptable material has done its work.
This experience was heightened for me in the making of the work entitled *Shhh* (Plate 26, page 118) as I “talked-back” to the text I was copying.

The intense commitment of body and soul to this performance provided an opportunity for the nuns’ voice to respond to the word and resonate it with her deepest emotions. Is it not possible that the space of time needed for its performance allowed for inclusion of her bodily reverberations (outside the given written text) to reside in the spaces within and between the words themselves? Open daily to what would of necessity have been minute changes, nun’s vocal emphasis and repetition of pitch, intonations and rhythms may have provided an opportunity for women to *hear* their own voices sound the word, and, perhaps unwittingly, introduce their felt meanings into the institutionalised text.

During my studio investigations into the processes of repeating and copying the words of others, the corporeal and the auditory were evoked in my inscription and painting of the text. As I said the words I heard the sound of my voice repeating them. This sound was effected by my emotional and conceptual response to the meaning of the text, as well as to the visual image of the words and their spaces. This was sustained by the formal qualities of visual language: the somatic dimension of the gesture as line; the expressiveness of colour; and the resonance of pictorial form (Plate 5. Page 50).
Plate 5. Iggulden, Annette. from the series
Enunciation: ‘A Feather on the Breath …’
(after Hildegard of Bingen, 1098 - 1179)
In his discussion of repetitive and fixed traditional formulas in the performance of music and art (Ehrenzweig, 1971:113-116), Ehrenzweig writes:

In the right aesthetic climate, even unimaginative repetition, imitation and rigid clichés need not act as straightjackets inhibiting the play of the imagination …. Because we come to know the common schema of the composition, the slightest deviation will be all the more telling and expressive. (Ehrenzweig, 1971: 116)

It seems to me, that the evidence of what I have called soundings or individual emphasis of words and their spaces is reflected in the personal nature of the nuns’ writings, poetry, drama (Dronke, 1984), music, (Holsinger, 1993: 103-113, Thornton, 1995: 10), and their illumination of manuscripts (Oliver, 1997: 106-122).

The silenced voice: spoken and re-embodied through writing

Caroline Walker Bynum remarks that:

For all her charismatic empowerment, woman was inferior to man in the Middle Ages; her voice was often silenced, more frequently ignored. Not every use of the phrase “weak woman” by a female writer was ironic; women clearly internalized the negative value placed on them by the culture in which they lived. (Bynum 1991: 235-236)
The body as the site of conflict and resolution was common to medieval women who attempted to communicate through writing (McNamara, 1996: 339). Hildegard of Bingen wrote in a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux, “meanwhile, I am laid on my bed by great infirmity because of my silence” (Flanagan, 1996: 155). Bynum argues that the self-infliction of bodily pain by female mystics from the Late Middle ages was not necessarily a rejection of the body as evil or corrupt, or a form of masochistic or hysterical behaviour (Bynum, 1991: 72-75). Rather, she sees it as a method of ascetic ‘body-discipline’ that would allow women to identify actively with Christ’s sufferings, and provide an example that would assist others (Bynum, 1991: 69, 72-74). This link with empowerment that Bynum’s interpretation brings to this practice makes us aware of women’s conscious intent and ‘means of access to the divine’ (Bynum, 1991: 82). However, I would stress that it does not minimalise the powerful effect that the internalisation of institutional constraints - scripted and scriptured - on the body of these women might have had in informing their conscious decisions or actions; rather, it could emphasise its necessity. Certainly, we have to acknowledge that as process, the poetic utterance of mystical or visionary performance commonly followed bodily subjugation (Bynum, 1991: 186-190, McNamara, 1996: 338-339).

Bynum advises that we should ‘wipe away assumptions’ that medieval religious experience and self-manipulation of bodies had anything to do with ‘the rejection of sex or of woman’ (Bynum, 1991: 182). However, she does with some caution acknowledge that the ‘fleshly and bodily’ nature of women’s piety and mysticism in the Late Middle Ages could have been directly or indirectly affected by the fact that they were women without speech. For she writes that they may have ‘had to stress the experience of Christ and manifest it outwardly in their flesh, because they did not
have clerical office as an authorization for speaking’ (Bynum, 1991: 195). Rosalynn Voaden takes this point further by linking the relinquishing of the *image* of the body of woman, to the acquisition of an acceptable form for their speech. She claims that:

> Writing disembodied the word, freeing the prophetic message from its association with woman in all her corporeality and corruption. Rather than an emotional, vernacular flow of words issuing from an orifice in the ‘grotesque’ body of a woman, the Word of God was transmitted through the written *corpus*, which was, undoubtedly, masculine sealed, rational and Latinate. (Voaden, 1995: 56)

Women must have been driven by a great sense of urgency and conviction to write at all, for the problems of poor or inadequate education and exclusion from scholastic centres of debate were compounded by physical risk and attendant psychological struggle. Voaden cites the story of the loss of speech experienced by the twelfth-century Benedictine nun Elizabeth of Schönau after physically wrestling with the angel who compelled her to reveal her visions. Voaden sees this as Elizabeth’s acknowledgement that as a woman both her physical body and voice had to be subjugated, ‘in favour of the written word’ (Voaden, 1995: 58). Before they could be written into the archives of history and discourse, women’s voices had to be non-vocal or silent and disembodied from the image of woman.

As with male authors, this writing was rarely carried out by the women themselves but dictated or written on wax tablets before passing it onto a scribe. I would maintain that, despite, or in spite of, the filter of men’s voices, writing *re-embodied*
the word with the voices of these women. Furthermore, this female embodiment of
male language provided an avenue to challenge the social code that ironically,
shaped its visual form. Through the “silent” visual image of the written word,
medieval women questioned clerical and ecclesiastical positions and generally
expressed themselves in a more personal way than men (Dronke, 1984: 138-139,
Bynum, 1991: 190). By inserting their hitherto marginalised knowledge into the body
of the written text, women could unsettle the unity and boundaries of patriarchal
texts about woman and knowledge in general. McNamara remarks that in their
writings, ‘when nuns spoke for themselves, they recalled visions of one another
transmuted into gold, crystal, pure light. They saw themselves singing, dancing,
lying into the glory of the heavenly choir’ (McNamara, 1996: 326). Rather than
portraying themselves as victims, or as Vice or Virtue, women wrote of themselves
as sexual, spiritual and imaginary bodies.

Medieval nuns played with language, strategically and poetically, as do women
today. Hildegard used different linguistic strategies so that she could incorporate her
female knowledge into her writings (Mews, 1995: 68-69). She selectively chose
different forms of language depending on the audience to whom her writing was
directed. Her lingua ignota and litterae ignotae are thought to consist of a secret code
and alternative alphabetic system for use within her community of women, and for

In direct response to my need to find alternative avenues for my speech, I have
developed two forms of “illegible” script through my art-practice (Plate 23, page
112). Derived from alphabetic writing, these scripts can be seen as effectively
producing a form of crypto-language in that they are only legible to those who understand the code. Although using different strategic measures to the manipulation of language in Anti-language they retain its intention and that of its verbal play. J E. Hurtgen refers to Roger Fowler’s comments to remind us that this play ‘does not exist for its own sake; anti-language arises as “provoked by, and a creative critique of, the norm [ideology]”’ (Hurtgen, 1993:143-144). Likewise, I would argue that crypto-language changes its shape according to the constraints from which it seeks its freedom. As with Anti-language, it functions as both a network and support for groups with similar concerns, and as the means to react or ‘back talk’ to the forces that attempt to contain it (Hurtgen, 1993: 100, 144).

Enclosure: prison or paradise? Mute silence or embodied utterance?

Ehrenzweig claims that mystical and creative practice share common borders (Ehrenzweig, 1971: 294-295). Both require a fragmentation of the self which must be tolerated so that the liberating and self-validating space of the ‘oceanic’ can be experienced; a space where ‘all differentiation ceases’ and ‘all fragmentation is resolved’ (Ehrenzweig, 1971: 103). He stresses that before this can take place, one must by-pass the surface sensibilities of the ego and the attacking of the superego (formed by deep-seated internal and external forces that determine, amongst other things, moral, ethical and social rules, or codes of conduct). This enables the participant to move beyond constraints that block their access to deep levels of the unconscious, and to actively integrate repressed material into a new, poetic image (Ehrenzweig, 1971: 205-206). Whether male or female, one has in effect to subjugate or leave the baggage of the inscribed body behind before creative utterance can
occur. I would suggest that religious and creative practice within enclosure provided the means for both men and women to overcome the disabling effects of their categorisations. However, the particular significance of this creative process for women was that it provided an avenue for their voices in a culture that prohibited their speech.

The obstacles to women’s speech and its expression through cultural channels have been enormous. Not the least of these has been women’s internalisation of patriarchal discourse on their bodies that has placed them in a space of mute silence and melancholic inactivity. At times, medieval men chose to speak like a woman through visionary and mystical practice (Bynum, 1991: 166, 191). However, as Martin Jay suggests, speaking as a woman and speaking like a woman are quite different propositions, for, ‘speaking or writing as a woman depends on deep-seated social, historical, and arguably biological factors that have created gendered subject positions that are far less open to choice’ (Jay, 1994: 494). Our biological and social specificity produces different lived experiences, which affects our access and use of language. Haraway writes of ‘situated difference’ where: ‘Difference is theorized biologically as situational, not intrinsic, at every level from gene to foraging pattern’ (Haraway, 1991: 199-200). The interactive nature of the situated body as receptor and producer of meaning is now thought to begin before birth (Grosz: 1994, Kirby: 1997). The male image of the body of woman as either mute silence or fleshy excess dominated all medieval institutional discourse and as such was integral to medieval women’s ‘situated knowledge’. This is not to say that it necessarily dominated other positive images to which they were exposed, but it should be considered as an important factor in how they saw themselves and were seen by others. Historically,
to speak as a woman in Western society has meant forging a space and language from within a model of psychological and behavioural enclosure produced by a culture that devalued women’s bodies and excluded their voices.

In my chapter on silence, I suggested that the gendering of silence has existed at least from the time of Plato and has been perpetuated over the centuries through male discourse. This positioning of women within silence could either crush or empower women to use the space of silence to create alternatively audible languages. In this chapter, I have proposed that medieval nuns drew on the regenerative and creative qualities of their silence to find alternative channels and forms for their speech. I have argued that to gain any degree of autonomy as active speaking subjects, women have had to move beyond the deeply inscribed cultural image of woman on their psyches that isolate her body from her voice. I have suggested that by embodying the word with their female voices, medieval nuns creatively moved beyond the pain of the distancing of body from voice imposed by male discourse. By performing, adapting and strategically playing with the given male language, they used words to “speak” their silence. They extended the boundaries of language by bringing their meaning to the written text, defying (as they acknowledged) the prohibitions on their speech.

Whilst perhaps not as overt as in the medieval period, one only needs to scratch the surface or veneer of “political correctness” to recognise similar attitudes towards the bodies and voices of women in Western society today. From my studio research and my engagement with the work of medieval scholars, I proffer the possibility, however tenuous, that the utterance that accompanied the active performance of
silence by medieval nuns within enclosure resonates with my creative practice and with that of other contemporary artists who struggle to find a space and language for their voices.

Contemporary women artists use complex strategies and practices to confront, analyse, address and challenge the constraints on their bodies and voices. Audio-visual technology has been utilised by women artists such as Susan Hiller to “sound” words as ‘She builds a wall against silence’ (Zegher, 1994: 260). Whilst ‘Bad Girl’ art (Falkenstein, 1999) would not have been tolerated in the medieval period, its very existence today testifies to the continued need for women to address stereotypical images that identify the image of woman as representative of vice or virtue. In their performance art (which sometimes involves the self-infliction of bodily pain), women artists attempt to reclaim autonomy for their body’s representation, to break through the internal and external controls that would contain it (Kelly, 1996: 91-95). Others, like myself, have fragmented, re-formed or removed the image of the body of woman from their art to create a different kind of visibility and space from which to speak freely. Away from the censuring and intrusive male gaze, women can explore new ways of seeing and expressing their own desire and knowledge (Parker and Pollock: 1987). Likewise, I would argue we cannot exclude the possibility that hidden from this gaze by the Habit and the physical walls of enclosure, medieval nuns ‘created the image and reality of the autonomous woman’ (McNamara, 1996:6).

In the next chapter, I look at what it might have meant for these silent medieval nuns to hold the pen and brush to write, draw, paint and illuminate the words of others.
with their own hands. By looking at their work as artists transforming words into images in the illuminated manuscript, my argument will be extended into the arena of art history and visual language. I will examine the visual evidence of medieval scribal art-practice to see if it may have offered an alternative avenue for the voices of medieval nuns. This will lay the groundwork for discussion in the last chapter of the continuing significance to women of scripto-visual art-practice, as a means of expressing their silence.
Chapter Three

In the Space of Words and Images

In theory, any form of artistic or scribal activity in convents was subject to control, if only because virtually all supplies and artistic exemplars had to enter from outside. Like the writing of books, however, the making of images offered opportunities for independence and individual expression that clerics did their best to curtail. (Hamburger, 1997: 181)

Throughout the last two chapters I have argued that the gendered place from which we speak is not natural or neutral, but culturally constructed. And, that the specificity of our lives informs and shapes our relationship to language. I have demonstrated how some women have had to adapt or develop a silent and disembodied language to negotiate the constraints on their body and voice; a language that acknowledges as it defies the constraints from which it was produced. I now suggest that the work by medieval nuns with words and images in illuminated manuscripts offered a further avenue for this alternative mode of speech and the expression of their voices. Once again, the words they used were not theirs, but they were the ones who gave the words their visual form: copying, drawing and painting words and letters. I will suggest that a potential for transgression of the symbolic order lay in these acts. I consider what this scripto-visual practice may have meant for women without a voice.

My desire to seek out when and where this creative practice had begun in Western art, came from my growing need to bring words and images together in my own art-
work. I was profoundly moved when I realised that medieval women were amongst 
the earliest practitioners of this artistic tradition. The emotion I felt is difficult to 
explain, but it made me realise how deep was my unrecognised need for women role 
modes as a touchstone of my gendered reality that went beyond my time and place. 
When they suddenly became present in my life there was an acute consciousness of 
their absence, and the sobering realisation that they had been there, unacknowledged, 
all along. One question rapidly followed another. How did these women of the past 
respond to this work, when their job was to copy a language that condemned and 
celebrated their sex at the same time? What independence might they have had in 
this work? What meaning did it hold for them when they watched the line unravel 
from their fingertips to carry sound and word meanings to someone else? What 
happened when they brought the colour and gesture of the silence in their lives to 
words, transforming letters into something other than the “black and white” law and 
order, of the dominant language of their culture? What impact might this have had 
on the “reading” and interpretation of the work, by themselves and others?

This chapter is my response to these questions and is written with the awareness that 
it represents only a minute glimpse of an area that still waits to be revealed. If 
illuminated manuscripts can be shown to have provided a potential space for 
women’s speech, it then becomes a valid place to look further for visual traces of 
their “silent” voices. New ways might be opened up for seeing, hearing and 
understanding the silent and disembodied voice of women in art, through identifying 
similar processes to those used today in transforming words into images.
I base my arguments on my comparative analyses of the manuscript of Isidore of Seville (*Etymologiae*) to thirty-one other manuscripts with the same content, six manuscripts believed to have been the work of nuns, and a further fourteen miscellaneous manuscripts relevant to this study. The range of artistic means or devices used for this work was fairly consistent during the medieval period. However, their appearance was influenced by the availability of materials, artistic innovations and the prevailing attitudes of the clergy towards illumination at the time; whether it was seen as decoration to glorify God's word or as an evil or unnecessary excess (De Hamel, 1986: 96). I focus mainly on visual language and locate aspects of the work closest to my own art practice. I examine the artists’ treatment of the inter-textual components of each page or folio to see if this provided an opportunity for them to interact with the text. I do not consider the miniatures or historiated initials. Rather, my aim is to identify and compare:

1. The visual dynamic created by the composition or layout of the page or folio.

2. The pictorial means of enhancing or subverting the dominance of image or word.

3. The application of colour as emphatic or expressive markers in the spaces of letters.

4. The visual treatment of marginal glosses and the appearance of informal or personal sketches in the margins.
I explored these means further within the studio, and investigated the processes involved in copying the words of others: the acts of writing, drawing and painting words and their spaces. These outcomes will be more fully discussed through words and images in the next chapter. My approach has required that I move back and forth from words to images, from medieval work to my own, from my findings to those of medieval scholars and contemporary art theorists. All mutually challenged and extended my dialogue with verbal and visual language and its significance to women without speech.

As mentioned previously, contemporary women artists have investigated the role of words and images in their art. Others have joined Cindy Sherman in revisiting medieval images as a source for contemporary reflection on feminist issues in their own work (Smith and Taylor, 1997: 77 - 78). The artist Deborah Rosenthal has compared the use of abstract pictorial means in the *Morgan Beatus* to contemporary Abstract art (Rosenthal: 1992). However, I am unaware of any contemporary artist who has taken a studio-based approach (rather than that of theoretical speculation), to research the relationship of women’s silence to medieval scripto-visual practice. I hope to provide enough evidence from my empirical examination of these illuminated manuscripts, the research of others in this field and my experiments within the studio to show how the silence of women can be articulated in the transformation of words into images.
The dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself. What varies is the precise nature of the weave, the relation of warp and woof. (Mitchell 1986: 43)

The illuminated manuscript is one of the earliest examples in Western history of the presence of the word and image within the same visual field. It is also an important source of knowledge in the history and development of European painting (Backhouse, 1979: 7, Bologna, 1988: 31). With the naming and categorisation of “difference” during the Renaissance period, the illuminated manuscript and the artists who made them were effectively excluded from serious consideration in art history (Hamburger, 1998: 14). From this time on, the fine fissure between the role of words and those of images in art gradually widened (Curnow, 1988: 42-43, Foucault, 1983: 32). Distinctions between “high and low art”, the individual artist as (male) “genius” and the craftsman as a “menial”, had a long-lasting and detrimental effect on the reception of women artist’s work (Battersby: 1989, Nochlin: 1989, Parker and Pollock: 1981).

Today we enjoy the juxtaposition and contributions of both visual and verbal language in art and society. The comfortable co-existence of these two languages and their combination within the visual field also existed for a large part of the medieval period. Whilst this state may appear similar to our own, we cannot assume that the function and rationale behind its use was the same; the medieval experience of reading words and images differed in many ways to ours. It employed processes of
seeing, saying and “inwardly digesting” both words and images. Susan Lewis explains how this involved vertical and horizontal processes of reading, scanning or ‘criss-crossing’ the page to absorb many intertextual components at the same time; heightening the ability to understand what was, ‘within the work and beyond it’ (Lewis 1995: 12-13). This synchronistic process of reading however, is familiar to the visual artist and is an essential part of the creative process (Ehrenzweig: 1971: 4-6, 23). With our contemporary re-discovery of the advantages of reading images and imaging texts (Lewis, 1995: 2, Bal: 1991, 1994) we must still remember that the medieval system for doing this was deeply rooted in their religious beliefs. Nonetheless, I believe we can learn much from this rich tradition. By paying close attention to how medieval artists used both words and images in the production of their meaning, we might better understand its complexities and extend its practice to create and accommodate new meanings.

Within the confines of religious enclosure the production of words and images in manuscripts was considered a devotional act, no matter how tedious or demanding it might have been (Hamburger, 1997: 120, Swarzenski, 1951:6). Where possible an original text would be copied, but more often than not the scribe’s exemplar would be a copy already in the library, or one lent or bought from different scriptoria for this purpose. Whilst in large scriptoriums the scribal and artistic work was designated to different people, in smaller scriptoriums it was not uncommon for the same person to be responsible for both copying and illuminating the manuscript (Alexander, 1978b: 87-116, Robinson, 1997: 76). When I use the term “artist” in this context, I will be referring to the scribe/illuminator as one and the same person. To some degree this has to be a somewhat hypothetical figure, for whilst there is no doubt that
these individuals existed, I cannot claim it was the case in all my examples. The propensity for conscious and unconscious “scribal error” of words is well-documented (Bishop, 1978: 72-78). A scrutiny into similar transgression with the images in manuscripts is now well underway (Smith and Taylor: 1997). But, what of the scribal-artist who was responsible for the space of both words and images?

**The Scribe/illuminator: The hand that wrote, drew and painted**

Literacy was not a criterion for copying and illuminating manuscripts, nor did it exclude the potential for intuitive subversion of the text through contemplative and artistic processes. In fact, as the chapter unfolds, it will become apparent how creative work blurs the distinction between intellectual and intuitive priorities. As already alluded to in examples of my studio research, to copy a text never produces a pure copy, rather, it is a bodily performance involving the recitation and sounding of words and their meaning. However, the knowledge that nuns may have been able to understand and interact with the words they inscribed, must influence our interpretation of their work. For whilst it is true that some nuns were illiterate, many were not (Bell, 1995: 60-64). Some came from the highly educated sector of society. Aristocratic women were often the ones who produced monastic art, which included the illumination of manuscripts (Eckenstein, 1896: 222-255). Once within the cloister, nun’s education continued through the compulsory reading of books; a practice instigated in the sixth-century by Saint Benedict (Bell, 1995: 41-42). David Bell describes how a chain of learning that extended from senior to junior nuns was established and maintained by the women themselves. He suggests that the daily
repetition and memorisation of Latin repeated in the Offices, could also ‘provide basic Latin and a general idea of how language worked’ (Bell, 1995: 60).

The view that the medieval artist was purely a copyist or a follower of formulae is still commonly held. However, as Bernhard Bischoff notes, ‘a scribe’s whim and fancy could be given full vent’, on the occasion of space being left over from the text (Bischoff, 1990: 30). Free expression, as we understand it, would have been regarded, if considered at all by the medieval artist, to be inappropriate. Nonetheless, Jeffrey Hamburger asserts that:

> Between artistic expression, conceived in modern terms, and selfless anonymity, however, lies a wide array of possibilities for creating and communicating reading, few of them envisaged - or disallowed - by monastic legislation. (Hamburger, 1997: 184)

**The Manuscript of Isidore of Seville**

The manuscript of Isidore of Seville is held in the collection of the British Library (Harley MS 3099). It is an encyclopaedic work, with topics covering what was deemed essential for acquiring a unity of knowledge of the physical world and of the spiritual and moral responsibilities in a Christian society. The view that this manuscript was written and illuminated in a small scriptorium in the Abbey of St. Amor in Munsterbilsen (Belgium) is generally held (Watson, 1979: 132, Robinson, 131). Completed in 1134 (Watson, 1979: 132), it is a copy of the Etymologies by Isidorus Hispalensis, or Isidorus of Seville (560-636 A D) and contains twenty books totalling one hundred and sixty-eight folios (averaging 34 x 23 cm each).
1997: 88). The claim that this was a double Benedictine monastery (males and females) consisting of twenty-four nuns and four monks and an enclosed order until the second half of the twelfth century, is currently under debate (Van der Eycken, 2000: 13-15). How vital this small convent may have been as a centre of artistic production is not clear. However, the oldest piece of spiritual drama in the low countries was held at this abbey (Gessler, 1928, 14-15), the use of ‘improvisational techniques’ in musical composition (Schreurs, 1995: 9-10), and the production of other illuminated manuscripts (Van der Eyeken, 2000: 172), have been associated with its name. I viewed a commemorative exhibition covering nine centuries in the lives of the women from this abbey (Mertens: 2000). Judging by the quality and range of exhibits, I think it likely that these educated aristocratic women, dedicated to religious practice, would have been well equipped for the creative work of illuminating manuscripts. A touching Verse of Praise: ‘This congregation was gentle/noble and beautiful’ accompanies the list of names in an 1130 addition to a manuscript kept at this abbey (Ms nr 299, fol. 71, Bollandist Library, Brussels). Five of these names are thought to be of the same women who produced the Manuscript of Isidore of Seville: Sibilia, Vierwic, Gerdrut, Walderat, Hadewic, Imgart, Uota and Cunegunt (Watson, 1979: 132).

The layout or composition of the page: sensibility and gesture

W. J. T. Mitchell poses the question:

2 Hildegard of Bingen knew of the abbey where this manuscript was produced (Führkötter, 1990: 64-65). However, the Manuscript of Isidore of Seville was completed before Hildegard finished her compilation of secular, sacred and cosmological knowledge and Herrad of Hohenburg wrote her illustrated encyclopaedia, The Hortus Deliciarum (Chadwick, 1990: 55-61)
How do the physical details of publication (style of type, size of page, location of glosses, presence or absence of illustrations, even texture of paper) reflect the cultural status of the text, and how do they affect the readers’ experience? (Mitchell, 1980: 550)

I would add, how might the artist have responded when her task was to organise these physical details? What significance might it have held for the one who inscribed words and images laden with meaning onto a fresh surface: a sheet of parchment or vellum, ivory or warm mellowed-yellow in colour, smooth to the touch (the skin of a once-living creature), resting under her hands - a blank page - or a handful of memories and associations?

The scribe/artist was responsible for the layout or composition of the space defined or framed by the edges of the page or folio; providing the visual stage upon which the drama between words and images would take place. She had to consider the requirements of the particular type or classification of manuscript, the needs of those who commissioned the work and those who would read it. In accommodating the set material allocated to its space, she had to organise the text and hypertext, or visual clues to guide the reader’s vision and memory (Brown, 1998: 88-90). To assist her in this complex undertaking, the artist had guidelines to follow and usually the help of a supervisor more experienced than she. How much independence she had in this work would have depended on many factors: the size of the scriptorium; the attitude or interest of the supervisor and benefactor; and the experience and desire of the artist. As a devotional act, her emotions would be absorbed into the creative processes required for this work.
The artists’ individual sensibilities quickly became apparent as I moved from folio to folio and from manuscript to manuscript. The visual readings presented to the viewer’s eye differed significantly. The energy conveyed by the vigour of the artist’s gesture and the placement of the (red) initials in the manuscript of Isidore of Seville (Plate 6, page 71) contrasts with the work of ‘A Twelfth-Century Scriptrix from Nunnaminster’ (Robinson, 1997), (Plate 7, page 72). In this book of moral treatises and sermons, the nun has created a quieter reading of the page, containing the energy within her overall composition and the size, placement, style and colour of the initials. Whereas, in the twelfth-century copy of the Etymologiae (Plate 8, page 73), the artist has played with various forms of the same letter and the colours that structured them to produce quite a different expressive quality or rhythm. The individuality of each artist was reflected in their handling of the visual space and its components: the gesture of their handwriting, their treatment and colouring of the initials.

The colours used for this work appear to have been less prescriptive than that for the painting of miniatures (Bologna, 1988: 31-36). Whilst red was traditionally coded to introduce particular passages of the text, all colours carry an emotive power. In my studio-practice I adjust all the pictorial elements until they feel right. It is not just a matter of applying the red, blue or yellow I have at hand. Rather, I push or extend all the colours until I find the particular depth of red, clarity of blue, radiance of yellow that will satisfy my sensibility, my feelings. This is a very subjective process. In the next chapter I attempt to describe it by discussing the developments in my work, Enunciation: ‘A Feather on the Breath ...’ (after Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179).

3 None of my reproductions of this manuscript are in colour, as they are taken from the microfilm.
Plate 6. Isidore’s *Etymologiae*
London, The British Library, Harley MS 3099, fol. 34r.
Plate 7. Copy of Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel’s *Diadema monachorum*
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodl., MS 451, fols. 88r, 89r.
Plate 8. Isidore’s *Etymologiae*
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodl., MS 239, fol. 24v.
The subjective response of the medieval artist to the colours and their application add to the visual dynamic of the page, which might emotively predispose the viewer’s reception to the experience of seeing, reading and interpreting the text.

Elizabeth Bryan suggests that the use of visual ‘triggers’ for recognising and memorising texts, could also **emphasise** different aspects of the text through ‘rubrications’ (red markings), the placement and size of the initials, or, their **omission** from where they were expected to be found (Bryan, 1999:64).

**Words into images: Transformations**

Writing about early Medieval illumination, H. Swarzenski remarks:

> We hear much of the setting forth of doctrinal truth in the miniatures. Yet the elaboration of new meaning given to the initial as a sacred symbol - an independent artistic expression without representational aim or content - is enough to show us that manuscript illumination was not exclusively concerned with religious teaching. (Swarzenski, 1951: 8)

The practical role of the decorated letter was to herald the beginning and end of passages of text, assisting the reader visually to memorise their position and importance (Bryan, 1999:78). As well as protecting the book from evil, the letter, decorated or illuminated, also functioned to symbolically honour the Word of God (De Hamel, 1986: 40). The medieval belief in the initial as a sacred symbol that embodied the Word of God, meant that the artist brought a level of affective and
intellectual expectations and responses to this work (Kendrick, 1999). Their job was to use visual language to enliven and embody these letters with meaning.

Having suggested that the calligraphic work in the manuscript of Isidore of Seville probably represented the majority of such work by women, Germaine Greer goes on to say:

It is written only partly on vellum, in inferior ink and a tolerably correct text; the occasional diagrams are beautifully drawn. A sketch for the miniature of the Crucifixion has not been miniated, although Book VII has some rather rudimentary illuminated capitals. The whole adds up to a picture of hard work, underdeveloped skill and paucity of means. (Greer, 1979: 156)

There is no doubt that nuns (and monks) were often disadvantaged in their work as artists. However, my impression of this particular copy of the Etymologiae was that for this type of manuscript its execution and calligraphy were consistent with others of this period. However, I am not concerned with making qualitative or aesthetic judgements of the work, but to look at two important issues brought into focus by Greer’s observations. Firstly, the possibility that expressive work can easily be misunderstood to be the result of poor skills, rather than the product of a style that comes from an urgency and intensity to express. In resolving the image of words that emerges from my intense engagement with the text and its meaning, lines, colour form and space are intuitively attuned to my emotions. The creative process required for transforming words into images involves mind, body and spirit and can result in
unintentional, expressive “distortions”. Secondly, that when this misapprehension is coupled with the common assumption that nuns were allocated scripto-visual work primarily to keep them occupied (Van der Eycken, 2000: 172), it can lead to a gross misunderstanding of the devotional meaning this work held for the nuns themselves.

According to Judith Oliver, manuscripts made by nuns were only classified during the Gothic period as “nuns’ books” which was ‘a term of distinctly pejorative connotation’ (Oliver, 1997: 107). To provide an alternative reading of this work, Oliver describes how nuns redecorated a manuscript by adding colours, decorative borders and gold leaf so that the clarity of some words was lost. She points out that: ‘On aesthetic grounds, one might argue that such ‘gussying up’ of a high-quality book with additions of folk-art naïveté has simply spoiled the manuscript. But the additions are not mindless vandalism’ (Oliver, 1997: 111). Oliver explains that the redecorated phrases in gold leaf were selectively chosen and demonstrates a ‘liturgical consciousness’ on the part of the artist (Oliver, 1997: 111-112). She relates the ‘liturgically based embellishment of individual words’ in three manuscripts by nuns to their practice of ‘pious reading’, devotional recitations and the meditative sounding of words (Oliver, 1997:114-115).

Contemporary artists have explored the relationship of visual language to sound, particularly since the days of early Modernism. Wassily Kandinsky drew attention to how personal, spiritual and cultural meanings could be expressed through colour, line and form, precisely because of their integral relationship to music (Kandinsky, 1914). More recently Jasper Johns (Rosenthal: 1988) and Colin McCahon (McCahon: 1988) have used words in their paintings because of its association with
the voice and sound. My work diverges from these two contemporary artists’ practice as it is in the process of saying, writing or painting the words that my voice is re-embodied, rather than in their recognition. In Chapter Four, I explain how my voice was inseparable from the act of copying and painting words or letters. My visual and emotional response to the written text was heightened by the significance that this particular form of speaking held for me as the artist who transposed the words and their sounds into visual language. I experienced a sense of freedom to speak that I do not have as a woman in patriarchal society. I found that the nature of the text I was copying impacted in quite different ways on my composition of the work, my choice of colours, their application and the unconscious changes that took place in the gesture of my writing. My embodiment of the word through visual language carried the expression of my voice, which “illuminated” the meaning of the letters.

The intensity of focus and passionate devotional commitment by the nuns to their ritual performance of verbal language involved them in the act of seeing, reading and the sounding of words. The letters they embellished in the manuscripts resound visually with their voices, their meanings. Oliver goes on to compare the nuns’ understanding and treatment of the Word as ‘precious object’ to that reflected in the Book of Kells and the Lindisfarne Gospels, where particular pages are ‘embellished with cascading hierarchies of script, scarcely legible, demanding close meditative attention from their readers’ (Oliver, 1997: 115-116). In these examples, the letter’s legibility appears to have been sacrificed to the artists’ aesthetic means of expression. Linear reading had been compromised during the creative process of illuminating or transforming words into images. This ambiguity or unintelligibility of the letters requires a different type of reception or “reading” by its audience.
However, because ambiguity was tolerated and anticipated in the medieval method of reading (Lewis, 1995: 14-15), it cannot be seen as inherently transgressive. J. J. G. Alexander explains that:

Thus, from the start the decorated letter was an illogical combination of opposed requirements in so far as it might render the expected form of the letter unrecognizable by distorting or altering it … on the one hand – regularity and legibility … on the other, variation and decoration as opposing poles. (Alexander, 1978a: 8)

I would suggest that it was in this very problem of bringing verbal and visual language together and its exacerbation by the artist’s engagement with the meaning of both languages, that created a situation perfectly conducive for transgression through creative practice. Anton Ehrenzweig argues that creativity occurs when intellectual and intuitive faculties are set at odds to each other; requiring the artist ‘casting aside sharply crystallized modes of rational thought and image making’ (Ehrenzweig, 1971: xiii). This process brings into play the less conscious levels of subjective experience and can unconsciously contribute to the creation of something other than that of commonplace language. A temporary resolution of this struggle is created in the final image: an amalgamation of both words and images. This transformation of verbal and visual language will be shown to have a further advantage for women. In the next chapter I discuss how it gave me an integrated form for my re-embodied voice which negotiated the constraints on my visibility and speech as a woman in Western society.
The resolved image of word and image shifts the viewer’s reading from word to
image and back again. Whether the verbal or the visual mode predominates depends
on the artist. Through intricately entwining anthropomorphic, zoological, foliate or
abstract images with the letter, the artist can visually dominate the linguistic sign
(Plates 9, 10 and 11, pages 80 - 82). This is irrespective of the fact that the image
itself carries an iconographical narrative. Norman Bryson explains that visual images
move between two polarities: from discursive imagery to the figural, or ‘painterly
trace’ (Bryson, 1981: Note 31, p. 255). He defines the figural as, ‘those features
which belong to the image as a visual experience independent of language - its
‘being-as-image’’ (Bryson, 1981: 6).

The emotional imperative to express deep feelings through visual language is
reflected in the touch of the artist’s hand and recorded in the materiality of their
work. This creative act provides the ground for reciprocity between verbal and visual
language and the gendered subject, who may change the form and thus the meaning
of those languages (Plate 3, page 41). These pictorial resolutions by the artist have
the effect of creating a momentary stasis in the process of linear reading. By denying
the audience the possibility of a rational or intellectual grasp of the words, the
opportunity is provided (in the gaps and silences of non-comprehension), for
intuitive knowledge and individual interpretation of the artist’s and their culture’s
meaning.
Plate 10. *Book of Kells*
Dublin, Trinity College. MS 58 fol. 250v. (enlarged detail).
Plate 11. Iggulden, Annette. from the series

Enunciation: ‘A Feather on the Breath...’

(after Hildegard of Bingen, 1098 - 1179) (detail) 2001
Colour in the spaces of letters: The negative or silent spaces that speak as loudly as words

For this part of my examination of manuscripts, I looked at where colour alone was used to fill the spaces of letters, rather than at images within word spaces or the vertical and horizontal coloured bars drawn through letters. I now put forward for consideration the idea that the use of colour in the spaces between or within letters might have allowed the artist to visually complement, compromise or emphasise the letter. This practice can be said to extend, through its visual form, aspects of Jacques Derrida’s notion that subversive potential resides in the spaces of theoretical, literary and philosophic texts, explored in feminist readings against the grain of dominant discourse.  

The visual space of the manuscript’s page was defined by its edges and further subdivided by scored or ruled internal borders. At times letters would be left as free-floating images, whilst at others they were “anchored” or framed within drawn or painted formats. In visual terms, the letters within these formats are recognised as the active, positive forms or figures, and the spaces within and around them are called the passive, negative spaces or grounds. However, the role of the figure and ground can be reversed. The artist can determine whether the figure (the letter) will be read as visually active or passive and/or whether the ground (spaces within and around the letters) will be read as negative or positive.

A simple example of how this dynamic works within the form of an individual letter and its space, can be seen in the black and white image from the manuscript of Isidore of Seville (Plate 12, page 85). The artist’s treatment has created a visual ambiguity of what should predominate: the letter or its space. The Book of Kells contains many examples of the use of this visual device. It is used within singular letters and throughout the ornamental text (Plate 13, page 86). Together, the lines and colours that make up each word frame the letters’ spaces. It was from this medieval method of framing letters that I developed my “spatial script” (Plate 2, page 36). However, in the manuscript, the artist has “played” with colour, creating a visual competition between the dominance and legibility of the words or their spaces. This visual rivalry between the words and the image of their spaces creates a visual conflict and an indeterminacy of interpretation quite different to that expected of linear, logical reading.

To the capacity of different colours to express cultural, symbolic and subjective meaning, should be added the affect of its decorative function. Susan Langer describes how ‘decorative forms’ are innately tied to the expression of emotional states (Langer, 1953: 62). She explains:

The principles of vision which become apparent in the structure of decorative forms are principles of artistic vision, whereby visual elements are carved out of the amorphous sensory chaos to conform not with names and predications, like the data of practical cognition, but with biological feeling and its emotional efflorescence, “life” on the human level. (Langer, 1953: 62)
Plate 12. Isidore’s *Etymologiae*
Plate 13. Book of Kells
Dublin, Trinity College, MS 58, fol. 188v.
An example from my own work (Plate 14, page 88) shows how I intuitively filled-in some spaces of letters in the process of watching the overall image emerge. In a prayer book from the eighth to ninth century, the artist’s treatment of the letter’s spaces provides an opportunity for aesthetic enjoyment and contemplation of the whole page (Plate 15, page 89). Here, the artist uses visual language to complement rather than compete with the words. However, whilst somewhat conjectural, in this ninth-century copy of the *Etymologies* (with twelfth-century additions) the artist’s application of colour could be seen as the purposeful obliteration of letters (Plate 16, page 90). We can only guess at the reason behind this treatment. Was it the result of poor light or the artist’s eyesight; the use of inappropriate materials that have not stood the test of time; the carelessness or inexperience of the artist; or the purposeful obliteration of the word? Although I do not have the answers to any of these fascinating questions, I see no reason why they are not valid questions to ask. I have explained how I felt compelled to obliterate the legibility of the letters in my “writing” of the alphabet, because of the overwhelming oppressive impact they had on me as a woman. If scribal error can be accredited to the scribe’s inexperience, conscious or unconscious adaptations, or, additions of their particular ideological beliefs to the text (Niccum, 1997: 254-5), why not the “error” of the one who applied this colour to the spaces of the letters.

The type of coloured treatment of the spaces of letters I have been describing was used either extensively or not at all in the majority of manuscripts I examined. Whilst my next example diverges slightly in its visual appearance, I was surprised to find that in all of its 121 pages, the *scriptix* had applied red to the spaces of just two words: *virginitas* and *virgines* (Plate 17, page 91).
Plate 15. Nunnaminster Codex
London, The British Library, Harley MS 2965, fol. 64v.
Plate 17. Copy of Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel’s *Diadema monachorum*
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodl., MS 451, fol. 73v.
Therefore, could one be justified in asking, why these two words? Was it meant to
decorate or draw attention to particular words that the artist wished to emphasise?
Or, might this specific use of colour, (even if applied by a later hand) be in
celebration or acknowledgement of her and her sisters’ status?

We can only wonder. I have certainly used the spaces within letters to highlight
particular passages of text in my copying of text (Plate 27, page 121).

*Imaged glosses in the margins: spaces of reverie and reply.*

The margins were officially a site for written *and* imaged glosses that were
secondary to the text, for critique and debate on the substance of the text and for
scribal directives or notations. However, it was also used for verbal and visual play
Camille claims that whilst open to periodic censure, the margins of the page in
medieval manuscripts ‘was one area where artists could “do their own thing” ’
(Camille, 1992: 43).

The most common “imaged” glosses that I observed in the manuscripts were hands
with fingers pointing to emphasise passages of text, and various decorative frames
around a written gloss. The importance of these decorative markings (in red or other
coloured inks) was that they effectively drew attention to a particular gloss or
commentary. In her comparative study of two copies of the same manuscript,
Elizabeth Bryan (1999) looked at the influence that scribal choice of ‘marginal nota’
and red or ‘rubricated marks’ in the margins had in emphasising different aspects of
the text. She concluded that they had the capacity to ‘slightly reshape the presentation of history’ (Bryan, 1999: 106). Camille remarks:

The medieval illuminator ... followed earlier copies or models; but on the edge he was free to read the words for himself and make what he wanted of them. In this respect, marginal images are conscious usurpations, perhaps even political statements about diffusing the power of the text through its unravelling (the word ‘text’ is derived from textus, meaning weaving and interlacing) rather than repressed meanings that suddenly flash back onto the surface of things. (Camille, 1992: 42)

But equally, just as students of today might draw or doodle in the margins when pausing to reflect on the text or to pass the time, so might the medieval artist as they wrote the text (Camille, 1992: 36). Perhaps these informal and less conscious, humorous and serious freehand sketches in the margins are equally significant (Plates 18 and 19, pages 94, 95). Viewed in the light of visual glosses, these images, “spoken” as the work was underway, extend the possibilities of the margins as a space for the artist’s reverie as reply.

**In conclusion**

Medieval scribal-artists were readers as well as writers: “reading” the visual space and “writing” with visual language. The potential for transgression lay in their re-reading and re-writing of the text as a visual image; animating both words and their spaces. Intellectual and affective languages merge and have their being in the artist’s
Plate 18. Isidore’s *Etymologiae*
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodl., MS 239, fol. 80v. (detail).
Plate 19. Isidore’s *Etymologiae*
transformation of words into images. Its particular significance to women was in providing a space and language that was free from the prohibitions on their speech. They had an opportunity to reveal and exceed the “colour” and energy restrained in the letter of the dominant patriarchal language. As such, this scripto-visual practice by women offered an alternative avenue for the silent and disembodied voice in the space of words and images. In the transition from verbal to visual language they could re-emboby the word with their voices, in a way that would be seen and “heard” by others.

We can never say precisely how much of their conscious and unconscious “error” or emphasis contributed to different interpretations of the text. Nor can we measure the extent of these women’s contribution to knowledge. Nonetheless, we can acknowledge that as these artists wrote, drew and painted they did contribute. As this image played its part to constitute the codes of words and images in the cultural form of the illuminated manuscript, so it could reconstitute their form and meaning. For most, I suspect, this was not a contrivance but a contemplative response to meaning, conveyed through visual language and the creative process of transforming words into images.

An erased portrait remains as the trace of someone in the very first initial of the manuscript of Isidore of Seville. It lies at the uppermost reaches of the visual space within the three-sided structure of the letter. Appearing to be contained by the non-existent or invisible fourth side of this frame or enclosure, the space actually remains open. In this chapter I have suggested that the opportunity for moving from within the silent enclosure of the letter of the Law, lay within the embodiment and
articulation of the “silent” spaces within words and images. This historical encyclopaedic and artistic work could be described as a metaphorical mirror or reflective window, for the women who produced it and for we who reproduce it in our imaginations. It framed the known limits of knowledge of the world outside enclosure, at the same time as it provided a framework for self-reflection and the means to produce what Haraway would call ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway: 1991). Such knowledges, which are constantly in flux, provide the ground for fruitful discussion in the next chapter, where I discuss the similarities and differences between medieval scripto-visual work to my own and other contemporary artist’s practice. I describe my studio investigations into the acts of writing, copying the words of others and “imaging” the letters of the alphabet. I demonstrate how this creative practice continues to offer women a space, process and language that can articulate their silence, in the space of words and images.
Chapter Four

From Word to Image

Throughout each chapter I have attempted to make historical, social and cultural connections between the silence in women’s lives and its expression in and through their art-practice. I have shown how medieval women embodied the word with their voices through their creative performances of language. By sounding, writing, drawing and painting words, they “spoke” from within the enclosure of silence that prohibited their speech. I have stressed that, although the experience of being silenced is not exclusive to women, the position from which we speak and our experience of silence is specific to the ‘situated knowledge’ of our gender (Haraway: 1991). It follows therefore, that this specificity of experience may require a different means and aesthetics for its expression.

In this chapter I will suggest that contemporary women artists have continued in the footsteps of their medieval counterparts to use visual and verbal strategies so that they can speak their silence, challenge the stereotypical images of women and bring their own experience to accepted knowledge. In the discussion of my own practice and that of other women artists, the similarities and differences that have already been alluded to between contemporary and medieval scripto-visual practice, will be clarified. I am hopeful that my exploration of processes involved in the transition of words into images will provide further insight into how the silence in women’s lives today can be articulated. To identify the continuing significance of this practice to women I have investigated the acts of:
a. writing as a form of drawing and speaking;
b. copying the words of others;
c. changing written texts into visual images;
d. “imaging” the letters of the alphabet.

I will explain how the physical and psychological processes involved in these acts have affected the development and final form of my paintings, which are the mainstay of this exegesis. In producing these works I have moved back and forth from words to images, and from images to words. I have questioned and extended my understanding of the data collected from scholarly research, through my studio investigations. Likewise, my scholarly investigations have challenged and enlightened me, fed my imagination and as a consequence, my paintings. This combined approach to research has exposed the gaps in my knowledge as well as revealing the gaps in others’ understanding of artistic processes. The words and images in this chapter continue to support my hypothesis that in the process of changing words into images, the silence of women can be articulated and challenge the differential, oppositional constructions of gender that bind women to silence and passivity.

Griselda Pollock suggests when viewed as metaphorical ‘inscriptions in the feminine’, scripto-visual practice provides one artistic strategy by which to celebrate sexual difference and to challenge oppressive hierarchical constraints that suppress expressions of difference (Pollock, 1994: 67-87). However, to recognise that difference which has been made invisible through ideology and discriminatory
gender politics in art and society, one needs an alternative reading of art practice itself. Pollock writes:

A feminist reading for the inscriptions of the feminine means listening for the traces of a subjectivity formed in the feminine within and in conflict with a phallo-centric system. Beyond that, it implies figuring out what working from that place, however unconsciously, might be producing, as yet unarticulated, unrepresented, unsignified, unrecognized. (Pollock, 1994:74)

**Words as images**

My use of words in paintings was a consequence of the gradual unravelling of events in my life and the development of my studio investigations: the outcome of my emotional and conceptual responses to both. My work is never theory driven, although theory has played its part in my understanding of the issues I address through my art. In fact, no matter how much I might think I have conceptualised the work, the idea is always secondary and often sacrificed to my intuitive response to working with the materials: the “matter” of painting itself. My images of words evolve from alphabetic writing, as did the work of medieval nuns in illuminated manuscripts. However, my writing should not be considered as separate to my choice of materials, colours, and size of the works. For, as a painter I respond to the materiality of paint and all that visual language provides, as well as to the words that I write within its visual space. So that the development of this research within the
Words have always played a substantial part in my studio practice. Writing was for me a means of engaging in personal, philosophical and analytic conversations with myself, the paintings, or, with others’ thoughts and feelings. For years I kept separate the act of painting and the act of writing, seeing them as crucial yet different components to my art practice. However, a strong desire to bring these two languages together persisted, as I felt my singular passion for expression of my silence dispersed between these two activities. Over some years, I moved from introducing letters as painterly marks and fragmented forms to words, painted, collaged, or sewn onto different sensual, “feminine” surfaces.

Progressively, I found myself “speaking” through writing directly onto the surface or skin of the canvas. Initially, this script was written with punctuation and spaces between the words, but positioned vertically as a veil to look through at the images that lay behind. In exhibiting this work (*What was that you said?* 1997 Temple Studios Melbourne) I had hoped to raise questions about how both words and images could reveal or conceal meaning. I was aware that whether we are in the position of the speaker or the listener, the viewer or the viewed, the artist or the audience, we are equally susceptible to manipulate or be manipulated by verbal and visual languages. However, I noticed with some alarm that the viewers positioned themselves askew so that they could read the vertical screen of words as a text. Such is the strong association of writing to linear comprehension. This was at odds with my intention. Prioritised in this way, the appearance of words pre-determined the expectation of a
verbal or didactic statement. Although, I did not fully grasp what I was after at that time, it became increasingly urgent that words had somehow to express my silent or unspoken voice and my “invisible” female body.

I turned to the work of medieval nuns in the manuscripts to see how they had handled this pictorial dilemma. I also hoped to gain some insight into whether their solutions had any relationship to their silence and speech. I found that they had used a technique of framing to delineate both the letters and their spaces. It was from this that I developed my first form of “spatial script” (Plate 2, page 36). The cryptic appearance of this writing gave me a freedom that I had never experienced in my paintings before. The letters illegibility or “silence” allowed me to speak freely with words without fear of censure and to use both verbal and visual languages as a singular channel for my expression. My exhibition: A Weft of Words (1998 Temple Studios Melbourne) was my response to both the oppressive and expressive power of language in my life. I painted, drew and sewed these spaces-between-words onto different cloth or skins as emblematic inscriptions on the female body.

I developed my second form of script in 1999, during my three-month period of empirical research into illuminated manuscripts in England and Europe. It is impossible for me to separate the advent of this writing from three overlapping circumstances. These were my examination of the manuscripts and associated literature, studio investigations into this material, and the impact of a personal experience I had shortly before leaving Australia that weighed like a leaden weight throughout my being during this time. Within a twenty-four hour period, I had lost a child to suicide and my daughter had undergone an emergency Caesarean delivery of
a new grandchild. Each day after examining the manuscripts, I would return to my room to document all the relevant information I had collected and work on small expressive and investigative pieces on paper with coloured-inks. The urgency to express my grief and loss, and the joy of new life and love, brought about a change in the image of my writing. My previous form of “spatial script” did not allow for the speed I needed to bring speech, feeling and thought together; to write without pause using words to move beyond words, to a silent space and image of felt knowledge. A rapid and unbroken outpouring of intimate thoughts and feelings became possible through minute illegible continuous-cursive writing (Plate 5, page 50). At the same time, the communicative potency of the “unintelligible” or non-verbal image of hand-written script was heightened through my daily viewing of manuscripts that were written in languages foreign to me. Not being able to read the words as text had prioritised my seeing the writing as a visual image: a record of cultural and individual traces that re-embodied the invisible body and “silent” voice of the scribe/artist.

On my return home I started for the first time to copy texts. Using both methods of writing as investigative and expressive means, I explored the processes involved in the act of writing within the visual field of painting and drawing. I began by experimenting with different mediums – cloth, glass, wax, oil paint and mixed media to see which would best suit this undertaking on practical, emotional and conceptual levels. I found that the tightly stretched fabric of the canvas (like a taut skin) painted with acrylic provided a surface and form on which I was happy to inscribe. When I was travelling, I had worked with inks, gouache and collage in notebooks (Plate 14, page 88). I continued to use inks and a variety of papers: tracing paper for its
fragility, transparency and smoothness (Plate 20, page 106) and Finnish newsprint for its colour and softness (Plate 21, page 107). However, in the final series on the alphabet, none of these materials could adequately express my concerns. Because of its associations with my acquisition of language as a child, I instinctively returned to materials that were representative to me of the Maternal (fabric) and the Paternal (wood). This search for, and experimentation with, materials was finally determined by my inner dictates. The relationship between sight, touch and the mobility of materials to language, the maternal body and the embodiment of the self is an interest of many women artists who seek to find a different aesthetics using materials that might more closely express their concerns as women (Florence and Foster: 2000).

The act of writing: a way of speaking and drawing

When I draw, the line carries a gesture that embodies and activates the visual space that it inhabits, causing the eye to follow its movements throughout that space. When my gesture is taken into the act of writing, it crosses over the boundary of visual language as line, to share its space with a verbal code of language-as-word. This merging produces a different meaning or narrative to that contained in their separated states. When the written word co-inhabits the space of painting, it enters a dialogue with all other visual components that share its space. This interaction with pictorial language effects both its image and its interpretation. Words can evoke similar imagery to visual representations. However, the visual image of words differs vastly from other forms of representation in painting because of its oral history. It is at once
spatial and temporal, discursive and figural. It is drawing and linguistic sign: an image particularly associated with the voice (Plate 20, page 106).

Despite the differences in words and images as codes of communication, the image of writing contains many of the rhetorical and mimetic functions of drawing and painting. The shared physical and visual qualities of flow and movement are reflected in the historical origins of these words and those of writing and drawing (Mitchell, 1980: 548). Laura Kendrick notes that ‘In Greek, the word *graphein* signified writing, drawing, and painting’ (Kendrick 1999: 235, ftn 22). As an artist I bring “visual thinking” and lateral and sensual pathways of expression to a code or system of communication that prioritises rational and logical thought. As I draw the image of words, I traverse the space between and within words and images: verbal and non-verbal articulation (Plate 21, page 107).

The artist Susan Hiller (USA) and I would seem to share many concerns, evidenced particularly in *Élan* (Plate 22, page 108) where Hiller refers to the collective historical silence of women and deflects the gaze from the body of women to her vocalisations. However, our differences lie in the source and visual image of our scripts. Hiller’s writing (sometimes accompanied by translations) is the consequence of “automatic writing” and has been described in terms of mystical, ecstatic,

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1 In 1999 I had the privilege of spending nine days as a guest of nuns of a silent religious order, in a thirteenth-century abbey in England. This community of women, committed to lives of silence within religious enclosure, left small folded notes in specifically appointed places so that they could communicate informally with each other and myself. The nuns called this silent and disembodied form of speech their “Talking Notes”. My series with this title, is a reflection on that memory.
Plate 21. Iggulden, Annette. from the series *If I spoke to you ...* 2000.
unsolicited speech and that of collective or multiple voices (Fisher, 1994: 49-50, 261, Betterton, 2000: 293). Whilst acknowledging the highly significant role that the unconscious plays in the creative process, I do not see my writing as the direct manifestation of the unconscious nor to be speaking the voices of others. Rather, it travels between unconscious processes, the less conscious nature of “stream-of-consciousness” writing, to the highly conscious awareness of my need as a woman to find an alternative avenue for the expression of my voice. It is the sum of these pressures that has brought about the visual changes to the alphabetic writing I have incorporated into my art-practice.

Situated within the context of painting, the image of writing is subject to the interpretative practice of visual art. It could be argued that its interpretation is solely determined by the genre that predisposes its space and its reading, that is, verbal communication in a book, or, visual image in a painting. However, I would argue that whilst these settings may pre-empt the expectations of the reader/viewer, it depends primarily on the intention of the artist, who uses strategies of disjunction and displacement precisely to challenge these preconceptions and to unsettle its reading (Plate 14, page 88). Therefore, the act of writing as drawing carries the potential to critique both verbal and visual systems of representation.

As a woman artist, this act has further significance to me. It engages me with the didactic nature of written language, the oppressive aspects of symbolic law that excludes women’s voices, at the same time as it provides me with an alternative means of speaking and of being seen and heard. My body is totally involved in processes of seeing, saying, hearing and touching. I see my “silent” voice
re-embodied as a texture of speaking within a visual field. As a personal and expressive means of imaging the feminine body and voice, I see this act of writing as an act of “becoming” and an agent for psychic and social change.

The act of copying a text: re-reading and re-writing

In the footsteps of the medieval scriptrix, I set about to copy texts: the words of Law given to, not chosen, by the scribe who spoke the words of others with her pen. In the last chapter, I have argued that the tools of her trade became the means for her to leave the evidence of her presence and the image of words, the resonance of her voice. Because the daily ritual of singing or reciting the psalms was an important part of medieval nun’s lives, I decided to copy the one hundred and fifty psalms that make up ‘The Book of Psalms’ in the Bible. I hoped to see what it might have been like for these women as they repeated these words of praise and supplication, joy and despair. I included the words of Emily Dickinson (Johnson, 1970: 302) in the title of this series of paintings named Psalmody: ‘Why – do they shut Me out of heaven? Did I sing – too loud?’ (after Emily Dickinson, 1861).

I painted the cloth of the canvas black, reminiscent of the black habit that hid the nun’s physical body and provided a space free from the censure of the male gaze. This also enabled me to reverse the traditional page of writing from black on white to white on black and to use silver ink to illuminate the meaning of the act of re-inscription. I employed my technique of continuous cursive writing, not so dissimilar to early medieval practice of continuous script and cognisant of their ritual recitation of texts. This method permitted an uninterrupted momentum of body movement,
rhythmic flow of line, less conscious control of the words and evolving overall image, allowing for an intuitive response and slippage of thought, feeling and action. It also rendered the line of the letters as a silvery trace, an image of sound weaving the fabric of the text. However, the words themselves are scarcely legible (Plate 3, page 41). The “unintelligibility” of the words left a “silent”, non-verbal, visual image in its wake. Its visual texture became a barrier that the eye could not penetrate, keeping the viewer’s attention on the two-dimensional surface and the image of words: the image of my voice.

I found that to follow a given script demanded not only a co-ordination of the eye, hand and mind, but also an inevitable emotional reaction to the meaning of the words as I read and wrote them. Some of the time my eyes seemed to float over the surface of the words, scanning and writing them without much engagement. At others, I was brought to an abrupt and involuntary stop and a need to re-read, as something resonated with meaning or struck an emotional chord (Plate 23, page 112). This always caused me to pause in the writing: to smile, be enthralled, moved, astounded, or/and to be horrified - did this passage, or maybe just a combination of words, actually mean what I thought it did? I soon realised how the processes of seeing the words, reading, saying and writing them, also required that I fragment the text. I had to repeat small segments or phrases so as to hold them in my mind and record them accurately. However, as I repeated these clusters of words (with my mouth, tongue, vocal cords and breath), I was also conscious of hearing the sound of my voice, hearing it in my mind or in saying the words out loud. This mixture of emotions and the experience of hearing my enunciation of the words, seeing my hand, my line, recreating the text, feeling the resistance of the surface respond to the pressure of my
Plate 23. Iggulden, Annette. from the series *Psalmody:*
‘Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven? Did I sing – too loud?’
(after Emily Dickinson, 1861) 2000 (detail).
pen, involved my entire being. As the person who had the responsibility of re-inscribing the text, this involvement was mine alone. Although conscious of these sensations during the execution of the work, their effects were not always apparent until its conclusion.

Unintentional errors were an on-going problem. As I noticed them, I had to stop and consider what I had done wrong. Sometimes it was that I had unconsciously missed a word or two, or unwittingly paraphrased what the author had said. The dilemma was then, what to do? I would do my best to erase it. If it was going to be unsightly, I had further choices. I could decide whether I should acknowledge my involuntary contribution with some sort of notation of my error. If I had paraphrased in such a way that the intended meaning had not changed, I could add something along the lines of: “in other words”, or leave it as it was, trusting that the author would not be perturbed by this unintentional error. The act of copying made me very aware of the errors that may have surreptitiously crept into the text, either because I had missed them in the intensity or desire to get the work done, or I had chosen, on some level, not to recognise them. Errors, erasures and interruptions proved to be both inevitable and meaningful, as they changed, no matter how slightly, the visual dynamic, rhythm, intonation and thus the meaning of the original text (Plate 24, page 114).

The contemporary artist Hanne Darboven copies and catalogues the texts of famous men and women of the past: scientists, poets, philosophers and the like (Plate 25, page 115). Her exhibited writings are in black and white, hand-written, and often appear as ‘lines and loops’ (Graw, 1994: 248). She repeatedly states that she does not enjoy reading (Graw, 1994: 255). Rather, it is in the act of writing that she finds her
Plate 24. Iggulden, Annette. from the series *Psalmody:*
‘Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven? Did I sing – too loud?’
(after Emily Dickinson, 1861) 2000 (detail).
pleasure and meaning. Isabelle Graw sees Darboven’s system of daily writing as a reflection of her sense of duty, and a recognition of the absurdity and irony at our dependency on, and participation in, systems by which we organise our lives (Graw, 1994: 249, 253). Whilst her practice of copying the words of others and her capacity to “speak” through the process of transforming verbal into visual language appears to hold some similarities to the work of medieval scribal/artists and to my own efforts, there are distinct differences. Medieval nuns consciously brought their religious meaning to their work of copying texts, whilst Darboven brings her twentieth-century belief in the absurdity of meaning to her re-writings. I work intuitively across the painted space in response to the words I copy and to the interaction of words with the language and “matter” of painting. In this way I hope to create a visual argument that questions the “fixity” of representational systems that leave women in the margins, or the silent spaces of language and society. I wish to draw attention to how women have inserted their own meaning into texts that have played their part in silencing them. I see my act of copying the words of others as a re-reading and re-writing of codified knowledge: a means of social critique and an expressive affirmation of sexual difference.

Mieke Bal suggests that repetitive re-writings offer the opportunity ‘to initiate counter action, or to write back’ (Bal, 1994: 298). As I made the paintings entitled Shhh, (2000) I realised that this was precisely what I was in the process of doing. As a post-script to my work on the Psalms, I was attempting to re-address my past. After my mother’s death, I was sent photocopies of the notes she had used in her pastoral work as a missionary in Pakistan in the 1960s. These included direct quotations from the Bible and her exegesis of the story, ‘The Woman at the Well’ (St John, 4: 1-29).
As I copied the already thrice-copied words (the photocopy of her hand-written copy, from the copy of God’s words in the Bible), the “positive” shapes of these re-writings formed an image suggestive of the female body in the “negative” spaces of the paintings (Plate 26, page 118). I had unconsciously reasserted the memory of my mother into the spaces of the words of Law that had been used to silence her.

**From Written Text to Visual Image: traversing the spaces between and within**

For this investigation, I moved from the words of Law, to transcribe a contemporary text on the discourse of love. On my return from viewing the exhibition: *Nine Centuries of Noblewomen from the Cloister of Munsterbilsen ... Waiting for their Prince* (Mertens: 2000), I read Roland Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (1978). His poetic, self-reflexive dialogue on the agony and ecstasy experienced in the pursuit of love, resonated with the fresh images I had in my mind of the similarities between the erotic language used by medieval women to express their spiritual desire and that used between lovers. The denial of the senses by the “Brides of Christ” who spoke from within religious enclosure, on one level, were replete or exceeded through their performances of ecstatic utterance. However, their passionate female desire for their “Groom” was manifest through alternating states of receptivity and action. Barthes relates these changing states to our repetitious utterances, or writings that affirm both the existences of love and our desire to breach the gap between silence and speech, the self and the other. As Barthes ‘manipulated’ his pain created by the absence of the loved one to ‘make an entrance onto the stage of language’ (Barthes, 1978: 16), I actively manipulate the pain of my silence to sustain my speech through visual language.
In the months before I saw the Belgium exhibition, I had worked on a series of paintings, that I later discarded. I had been trying to identify and somehow express a common ground that I felt that I shared with the women who had produced the Manuscript of Isidore of Seville. I had been attempting to construct a “frame” reminiscent of a window or mirror through which to reflect on the notion of freedom and enclosure. I had overlaid these paintings with wax and inscribed on them as if on the wax tablets of old. However, I felt compelled to cover the paintings with one overall colour, which overwhelmed the images and made them redundant. Having struggled with these works for some months, I was reluctant to put them aside until I understood what they had to teach me. For this I had to be silent and to “listen” to the work itself. I realised that it was the colour alone that was significant and which resonated with meaning. On my return, I reclaimed that colour for I now understood its relevance to the common ground I had been seeking. To the purity of the colour violet (associated with the spirit), I added the density of warm reds, reflecting the earth-bound heaviness of the body. Rare medieval manuscripts were also, at times, stained purple and written on with gold, silver and various coloured pigments, to be presented as gifts of the highest regard. This resonated with my desire to pay homage to these women of the past and to celebrate the jouissance of poetic utterance. I entitled this new series of paintings after the words of Hildegard of Bingen (Flanagan, 1989, Notes 12: 114), Enunciation: ‘A Feather on the Breath ... ‘ (after Hildegard of Bingen, 1098-1179).

I wrote/drew Barthes’ words using my two forms of writing over the painted surface allowing the line and its emerging shape to reveal itself. When starting a work, I do not know myself what images may arise, nor the final image that the painting itself
will take. As the bronze and silver line moved over the surface of the changing hue of the purple ground, so did my response to the shift of colour and light. I rubbed back and reshaped the original text until the form and colour of the fragments sat comfortably within the format of its pictorial space. This intuitive pictorial transformation left residual traces of erasures and a form of calligram in its wake (Plate 27, page 121), which, as Michel Foucault reminds us ‘by its double function guarantees capture, as neither discourse alone nor a pure drawing could do’ (Foucault, 1983: 22). These images retain their tenuous link with both verbal and visual language, for, although illegible as written language, they stem from alphabetic writing and its associations with the spoken word. In the smaller paintings, my “spatial script” became a dialogic overlay of Barthes’ words with my own. Performed in the mood of a medieval pictorial gloss, this semi-transparent veil of script created an image through which to engage and reflect in a double discourse on love (Plate 28, page 122 and Plate 11, page 82).

This part of my research clarified how the particular nature of the text I copied affected my journey back and forth from the printed black text on white paper from a book to the word as visual image in my painting. The series of paintings, Psalmody: ‘Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven? Did I sing – too loud?’ (after Emily Dickinson, 1861) was in response to my feelings about the Word as Law. I felt a strong need to prevent the viewer’s eye from penetrating past the veil of words to the black cloth that “clothed” the “skin” of the canvas, keeping their attention instead on the rhythm and intonation of the voice alone. However, the openness of Barthes’ invitation to use his thoughts ‘to be made free with, to be added to, subtracted from, and passed on to others’ (Barthes, 1978:5) encouraged me to see this as a
Plate 28. Igculden, Annette. from the series
*Enunciation: ‘A Feather on the Breath ...’
a collaborative enterprise, not so dissimilar to medieval manuscript production, but with greater contemporary freedom. My response to this act of copying was affected as much by the fact it was an open text, reflecting the non-fixity of subject positions and of writing as a poetic affirmation of love, as it was to my subjective response to colour and the evolving image. The process of changing written text into a visual image were innately tuned to my emotional and intellectual responses as a woman to the meaning of the words, as well as the evolving field of colour line and form, and the tactility and mobility of the “matter” of painting.

I would suggest that my experience is not unique, but rather the result of my immersion in the creative process that engages with all levels of the artist’s being. If I responded to particular texts in this way, through my use of visual language, why not medieval nuns in their scripto-visual practice? The intensity of focus required for this performance moved me into a space and experience of silence where material practice became the means of unifying mind, body and spirit, in action. In blurring the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious, this creative process allows the silenced utterance to be spoken. The prohibition on women’s speech is deeply inscribed on my psyche. When I speak or utter my “silence”, my voice breaks this Law that I have internalised. The re-embodiment of my female voice into the language that has perpetuated this repression make my acts of transforming words into images subversive of that Law. My intuitive dialogue with visual and verbal languages has changed or added to the meaning of the words. Could not medieval nuns have also intuitively subverted the dominant male language in response to the words they copied, through their use of colour, lines, form and space?
Each of my paintings record the transition from verbal to visual language, and the changes that took place in the history of their making. Far from being an illustration of a text, they are as much a mapping of visual space and of the time required for their production as a tracing of the body and voice of the artist that made the journey from word to image. Just as there is a fine line between laughter and tears, joy and grief; so there is a fine line between the vast array of emotions and bodily sensations evoked by this act of transforming words into images. This engagement left an excess in its wake which was of a less conscious nature, an image produced from, but not the same as, that created by verbal or visual language alone, but by traversing the space between and within words and images.

“Imaging” the letters of the alphabet: an alternative form of speech

When I began thinking about the alphabet for this part of my research, memories of early school years reasserted themselves: seeing and trying to remember the shapes of the image of letters - the “A.B.C”. I remember endeavouring to fit the right sound to the right shape, through repetition, and striving to get the lines of the letters (black on white) to follow what I saw on the blackboard, (white on black). The task before me was to make the letters recognisable, but smaller than I instinctively would draw them, and to keep the letters sitting on the lines drawn horizontally across the paper, rather than dance unrestrainedly as what they were wont to do, seemingly of their own accord. How well I can remember on finishing my work before the set time, letting my line continue its journey into the appearance of a large duck standing astride the page and of then being promptly sent to the “dunces” seat. Learning to harness the hand and imagination’s wilfulness to draw was no easy matter. But how
proud I felt when, because I had “got it right” I was sent to “the top of the class” As if by magic, when copied correctly the black marks on white paper came into existence as letters, legible as sound and image. In retrospect, learning the singular letters of the alphabet and how to fit them together to summon up words and their associated images, was perhaps the first official instance of seeing the material re-embodiment of my voice as an image of words on paper.

Medieval artists constructed the letters of the alphabet from multiple abstract and figurative forms, which included fish, birds, human figures and hybrid fantasy figures to structure each of the letters. Their intention was to honour the Word, to illuminate the meaning of God, who God was and what this meant to them. Today, I cannot speak with such certainty. I could not “name” the presence as God, nor did I have any desire to do so. In fact, it was important for me “to-not-name”. From 1911 to 1968 the artist Erté re-figured the letters of the alphabet into whimsical and seductive images of women (Barthes, 1985a: 104,113). My shift away from representing the literal female body and my difficulty with making the word “flesh” in contemporary terms, returned my focus to the common ground shared historically by artists; the creative process. Creativity, as Coakley reminds us, involves ‘people’s use of the materials available to them – the circumstances and opportunities of their lives and their culture’s repository of ideas, assumptions, conflicts, and images to express themselves in some new way’ (Coakley, 1994: 1).

I wrapped lengths of timber in raw (unprimed) linen as the ground on which to paint or write the letters that symbolised the heaviness or weightiness of the law, softened by the weave, warp and weft of the fabric. I positioned the pieces horizontally so that
the eye might travel along them as in a journey through time and space or a visual equivalent to the act of reading. I began by using colour in the letters and their spaces so that the image hovered on the border between verbal and visual imagery. This approach resulted in a familiar but now inadequate image to express my desire. I experienced such restlessness and anxiety that I took the pieces and drenched them with water. With my brush loaded with ink, I obliterated the recognisable image of letters. In that instant, as I saw my hand holding the brush and the ink spread across the work an image flashed through my mind of the medieval scribe wielding the brush as he or she almost obliterated the letter (Plate 16, page 90). In my attempt to re-write the alphabet, the letters were left as fragments of the alphabet or as painted ciphers (Plate 4, page 47). My overwhelming mixture of emotions, distress, fear, rage mingled with sorrow and loss made me realise once again that this struggle was from my experience of having been silenced because of my sex. The pain of experiencing this “split” of my body from my voice echoes with Maggi’s observation that in Saint Maria Maddalena’s performances of language, ‘She acts herself exclusively as a body in pain’ (Maggi, 1997: 115).

There is a violence that resides within the language of the Law: the language of the Father. I had to overcome or negotiate the oppressive memories and feelings that silenced me, before I could speak with my own voice, as a woman. I had to move to a space of silence and a state of forgetfulness to reclaim my speech. Silence ‘binds and joins’ (Dauenhauer 1980:24). The performance of silence actively integrates the artist’s thoughts and feelings in their interaction with materials and disparate pictorial elements. I could not achieve this integration by symbolic, rational means but through creative practice. The colours I used were driven by an emotive and
aesthetic response of my body: eye, hand, head and heart. As thought appeared, the touch of colour changed the thought. As I continued to lay one colour next to another my attention became totally focussed on “visual thinking”, where rationality plays no part in the problem solving process. My repetition of the alphabet then became a continuous line of “silent” sound (Plate 1, page 35). As Maggi so astutely observed in the monologues of Saint Maria Maddalena de’Pazzi and Linda Montano: ‘Both of them speak to originate silence …. A Litany is a speech with no silences that only articulates silence’ (Maggi, 1997: 117).

In themselves, colour and gesture provide an “embodied” image of the letter, but colour has its own inherent energy and affective power to evoke a multitude of feelings associated with the senses, one of which is sound. Colour was used for letters in the manuscript to announce the beginnings of passages to be recited out loud, which, in a sense, introduced sound to the visual image of words. As I repeatedly recited or chanted the sequence of letters in the alphabet, they became like Mantras. I inscribed the rest of these works with my “spatial script” and placed them vertically to be seen as rods reminiscent of authority, yet transformed to convey a free-fall of sound (Plate. 29, page 128). I named this series: “Silence” ... In the Space of Words and Images

The intensity of this performance returned me to the silent space of felt knowledge that lay beyond words and the meaning of the word “alphabet”. The materials, colours and my act of writing created an embodied pictorial field, as much of the senses as of the mind and spirit. The alphabet, as a visual and verbal system, was
Plate 29. Iggulden, Annette. from the series: “Silence” ... In the Space of Words and Images 2001.
developed over the centuries so that we might communicate thoughts and feelings. The medieval scribal-artist revealed the visual co-dependency of the “positive” letters of the alphabet to their “negative” spaces (Plate 13, page 86). Without this co-dependency, neither the letters nor the spaces that bound them could exist. The structure of language would collapse into glossolalia and meaningless without the support of silence: the evidence of its co-dependency with utterance. Women have been symbolically placed in the space of silence. However, they are not silence. By emphasising the “silent” spaces in the visual structure of the letters of the alphabet and the female embodiment of the word, an alternative way of seeing, reading and hearing women’s voices might be heard.

When acknowledged as the unspoken excess of symbolic language, women’s “silence”, speech and song may be different to that recognised by the Law and linear systems of thinking. However, it can be understood when seen through ‘the glance’ of non-possession and in the act of reciprocal looking (Bal: 1991, Bryson: 1983). Pollock writes that:

It marks the spot where women’s cultures appear unreadable according to the dominant narratives of art, modernity and modernism, while to a different eye that seeks beyond the visible for the index of other meanings, lives, traces of other configurations of the subject and the body, the surface is rich in possibilities for those desiring to decipher inscriptions of the feminine as dissidence, difference, and heterogeneity. (Pollock, 1994: 75)
In summation: my studio investigations have shown how the creative practice of writing, copying the words of others, changing words into images and “imaging” anew the letters of the alphabet, can provide the artist with the means to express both personal and political concerns. The development and form of the paintings was affected as much by my position as a woman in Western patriarchal society, as my response as an artist to visual and verbal language. I believe my studio-research raises the possibility of a deeper understanding of this practice by medieval and other contemporary women artists. By “illuminating” some of the unseen, unspoken spaces within language, women’s silence held between and within words and images, might be articulated.
Conclusion

The exhibited paintings and drawings contain the main substance of my conclusion. They have the final “word”. For myself, however, they exist as a work-in-progress. My description or explanation of the paintings in the previous chapter has, of necessity, been only an approximation. It is the nature of paintings to reveal their full meaning over time. This revelation is as much for myself as for the viewer, who brings to the paintings their own meaning. The exhibited work would not have existed without the questions raised from my brief encounter with, and examination of, traces from the lives and work of a handful of medieval scribal artists. In particular, my engagement with the work of the eight women who wrote the Manuscript of Isidore of Seville: Sibilia, Vierwic, Gerdrut, Walderat, Hadewic, Imgart, Uota and Cunegunt.

I am extremely grateful to these women and for the opportunity to undertake this research. It has opened up my eyes to issues in my own life and work as well as turning around so many of the pre-conceptions I had held about these women. I have been astounded by their tenacity and resolve to forge alternative avenues for their speech, and have been excited by the richness and generosity of their visual utterance. However, the voices that I have seen and heard have been like mine, the privileged few. The remainder may never be heard.

In the explanation of my art practice and my chapter on silence I have attempted to show how women “speak” from within the psychological and behavioural “enclosure” of silence accorded to their gender. Some women have accomplished
this with relative ease. Others, like myself, have found the experience of being silenced an almost insurmountable obstacle. The generative qualities of silence, however, have fed my creative practice and enabled me to develop alternatively audible forms for my voice. The pain of the silencing that “splits” the body from voice, was re-lived and confronted yet again in the process of making the paintings and writing the exegesis. However, the transformations of this experience into a constructive cultural form through creative practice imbued a unity of body and voice to both the work and myself.

My paintings and the discussion of other contemporary artists’ work have revealed that taking up the pen or brush will always break the silence of “enclosure”. Other women artists have used words and images to draw attention to the silencing of women. I was unable to “speak” my silence when visual or verbal language remained in their separated states. I could only articulate or sound it, verbally and visually, when I merged both words and images. In seeing, saying, hearing and writing words, I was able to transform them into a non-verbal image of colours, lines, form and space that expressed my thoughts and feelings, my silence. My utterance from a position within silence became visible through the mediation of “matter” and the illegibility of the word’s image.

In my discussion of the lives of medieval nuns, I posited the idea that historically women have accessed or created “silent” or alternatively audible languages that are disembodied from the image of woman on which the prohibition of their speech was based. I put forward the possibility that those medieval nuns re-embodied words with their voices and articulated their silence through their creative performances of male
language. I supported this idea by describing how words were shaped and sounded by my mouth and resounded with my own meaning, in my practice of reciting the words of others within the studio. Furthermore, I have established links between verbal and visual performances of language by demonstrating how the artist moves between both in the acts of writing, drawing, painting and copying texts. I have suggested that as artists working with words and images in the illuminated manuscript, medieval nuns had an avenue for this alternative mode of speech.

From my identification of, and experimentation with, the aesthetic means available to medieval scribal/artist in illuminated manuscripts, I have shown how it was possible for the individual artist to engage with the text. I found this outcome of the research exciting, but not surprising. Artists understand the qualities of visual language. If I, through my studio practice, had been able to recognize its power to affect the reading of words, why not the medieval artist? This seems even more likely when we consider how visual and verbal processes were integral components of the medieval practice of reading illuminated manuscripts. On the one hand, I was frustrated by my inability to understand the language of the text in the manuscripts. On the other, I appreciated that this limitation heightened my awareness of the subtle innuendoes of visual language in the manuscripts. From my studio investigations of copying the words of others, I have demonstrated how my responses as a woman to particular texts affected the development and final form of the paintings. By extension, I have suggested that medieval nuns could have done the same in the manuscripts. In providing different examples of how they used visual language, new ways of seeing and “hearing” the voices of these silent women of the past might be possible. I am
hopeful that my findings provide a stimulus for further research by others into this little explored area.

I also argued that scripto-visual practice remains particularly significant for women today, despite the differences between the medieval period and our own. I have supported this claim by demonstrating its importance in my own work and the work of other women artists. It might appear that contemporary women artists in Western society, speak, shout, scream and behave as “badly” as they wish with seemingly no barriers to their expression. At this point in time, contemporary arts are encouraged to embrace the “marginal” which includes women and their “excesses”. Yet when one looks closely at the reasons behind these performances of language by women artists, we see that they are often protests that attempt to re-write the conditions of women’s visibility and speech. Women’s scripto-visual practice takes its place amongst these protests.

In disclosing how internalisation of the cultural prohibition on my speech has compelled me to find or create alternate forms of language for my voice, I have provided a self-reflexive model to compare with other women’s experience. There are vast differences between medieval nuns’ lives and my own. However, my historical research suggests that other women have also developed alternative forms of speech which have negotiated the cultural constructions of gender that have placed them within the space of mute silence. Paradoxically, this speech acknowledges the constraints that shaped its necessity, at the same time as it defies them. I intuitively “re-wrote” the text during the psychological, physical and material processes that occurred in the act of copying texts and writing, drawing and painting words. These
acts of “rewriting” by women embodies the word with a female voice, transgressing the prohibition on their speech and disturbing the rational linear reading of words through their changed materiality and their “unintelligibility”. It is through this performance of language in scripto-visual practice that the silence in women’s lives can be broken and their voices articulated.

My thesis has been made up of words and images. I have drawn on both modes of communication to write of and to paint my experience of silence, and to compare it to the historical silencing of women and its expression through visual language. The combination of studio research with theory has advanced and challenged both forms of inquiry: the paintings have developed from my dialogue between the two. Both words and images have proven to contain strengths and limitations as modes for my communication. The aims and outcomes of my practice can be explained through the words of the exegesis. However, the non-verbal language in the paintings confronts the viewer with a visual experience that expresses the emotional and conceptual impact of its lived-experience. By engaging in both verbal and visual processes I have attempted to reveal the “silent” spaces that lay within and between both languages. The act of changing words into images within the studio has required that I traverse their visual and temporal spaces. These spaces have been articulated through the use of visual language, which recorded my response as a woman to the text. I remain fascinated at the capacity of visual processes and material practice to reveal the unexpected and provide fresh insights into what otherwise might remain only sensed. My practice has raised questions and attempted to provide at least partial answers that have preceded and extended my theoretical speculation on the historical silencing of women and its articulation through scripto-visual practice. The
outcomes of my studio research do not attempt to posit absolute truths, but to re-
question and to raise hitherto unasked questions. As a consequence, I hope to
challenge so-called “truths” and suggest new ways of looking for and hearing the
voices of women who speak from within silence.
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List of Plates

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6 Isidore’s *Etymologiae*
London, British Library, Harley MS 3099, fol. 34r.
Photo: microfilm obtained from The British Library.

7 Copy of Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel’s *Diadema monachorum*
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodl., MS 451, fols. 88v, 89r.
Photo: Bodleian Library.

8 Isidore’s *Etymologiae*
Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodl., MS 239, fol.24v.
Photo: Bodleian Library

9 Isidore’s *Etymologiae*
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10  *Book of Kells*

Dublin, Trinity College, MS 58, fol. 250v.


11  Iggulden, Annette. from the series

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Photo: Bodleian Library.

17 Copy of Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel’s *Diadema monachorum*
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19 Isidore’s *Etymologiae Fragmenta*

20 Iggulden, Annette. from the series
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21 Iggulden, Annette. from the series
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24 Iggulden, Annette. from the series *Psalmody:*
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26 Iggulden, Annette. *Shhh* 2001,
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(after Hildegard of Bingen, 1098 - 1179) 2001,

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