Liz Magor

Liz Magor

by Philip Monk

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Itinerary

Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto	**6 September - 2 November 1986**
Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon	**20 February - 29 March 1987**
49th Parallel, New York	**2-30 May 1987**
The Winnipeg Art Gallery	**15 June - 9 August 1987**
Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal	**10 September - 25 October 1987**
Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax	**27 November - 17 January 1988**

Liz Magor has lent her enthusiastic support to this project, especially in reconsidering the installation of a number of works. This installation has demanded special provisions, and I would like to thank Anthony Jones, Deputy Chief Curator/Administration, and Bernie Oldcorn, Manager of Technical Services, and his staff. For work on the catalogue, thanks are due to Photographic Services; to Alan Terakawa, Acting Head, Promotion; to Robert Stacey for editing; and to Bruce Mau for design. Don Worobey helped in the redesign of some installations, and Ydessa Hendeles and Denise Oleksijczuk of The Ydessa Gallery, Toronto, gave their assistance. Glenda Milrod, Head of Extension Services, and her staff are to be thanked for their coordination of the circulation of the exhibition. Finally, thanks are due to my secretary, Cheryl Izen, and to Barbara Fischer, Assistant Curator, Contemporary Art.

Liz Magor would like to thank Don Worobey for his assistance in installation and Wendy Coburn for her help in production.

The text to *Four Notable Bakers* is a reworked version of what has already appeared in *Vanguard* magazine.

The exhibition *Liz Magor* is a nearly complete survey of the artist's work since she moved to Toronto from Vancouver in 1981. This work differs significantly from that produced and exhibited in Vancouver, although the change was indicated in a work begun there, *Dorothy – A Resemblance*, the earliest piece presented here. The aim of this exhibition is to set out and investigate that difference.

Liz Magor has always used her art as a means of interrogating change in the world. Her sculptures are static objects of common origin that exist in the world, interacting with ordinary things and sometimes disappearing among them. If the process of change registered in Magor's earlier work partly questioned how identity is maintained over time, the work in this exhibition concentrates as well on how an individual identity is established in relation to other things and other people. Of course, both themes to some degree overlap and are present in each period. If the earlier work allowed the viewer to follow the path of metaphorical rumination –traces of decay leading to thoughts on human mortality – in the current series the artist withdraws the evidence of a process and strictly presents literal measures or equivalents.

Dorothy – A Resemblance, 1980-81, initiates this new series and takes as its theme the problem of identification of a person. Weight is given as one of the simplest, and most literal, means of determining that identity. And so a narrative of a change in weight told to the artist by an old woman, the Dorothy of the title, is the constant story that passes through various situations of presentation in four works.

To concentrate on the seemingly excessive attention to weight alone in these pieces would be to disregard the real issue of the problem of identity. In other pieces, notably *I have always weighed 98 lbs.*, 1983-84, human twins serve the purpose of putting identity into question. They assist in the questioning of the notion of identity through the appearance of repetition and resemblance in the orders of mechanical, genetic and societal reproduction that we also pointedly find in *Four Notable Bakers*.

To concentrate on what constitutes personal identity, however, would be to overlook another ambition of this series of works. For the proposition made by *Dorothy – A Resemblance* is one of "resemblance," and the conditions of resemblance in Magor's art have as much to do with the function of communication as they do with the appearance or a representation of an individual "Dorothy." The real question of identity lies within the ability of the artwork to assert its own significance by communicating its difference from the things and activities around it. The intention of the work here is not to tell the Dorothy story, but to use the conditions of it as a cue to understanding the operations involved in a work of art. So that when *Eighteen Books*, 1981-82, deals with another event in the life of Dorothy, which is about the failure of communication, the installation itself embodies that form, or potential failure, of communication. It is thus up to the viewer to follow the cues and to recognize the difference that an artwork makes. In the end, this art is as much about difference as it is about identity, and in that difference the work finds its identity.

Liz Magor: Identity and Difference

In curating an exhibition that includes new and old work, one can never be certain that the new work will continue to demonstrate the same themes as did the old. This is the danger but also the potential of working with contemporary artists. So it is here. Originally this exhibition of Liz Magor's work was to pursue a theme, consistent within her art as a whole, that was articulated in a particular way from 1980-81, commencing with *Dorothy – a Resemblance*. These sculptures and installations traced the question of (in the artist's words) "what might constitute personal identity" by repeatedly using a narrative, which was a simple story of a change in weight of a woman the artist knew named Dorothy.

The most recent installation breaks with this narrative. In *Regal Décor*, 1986, there is neither a narrative text nor a reference to either the Dorothy story or the twins documentation that run through most of the work. In a sense it is a return to some of the earlier issues of *Four Boys and a Girl*, 1979, and *Production*, 1980. But just as the Dorothy work maintained some of the themes of this earlier sculpture, so *Regal Décor* cannot but be inflected in its material, meaning or interpretation by the sculpture, photo-works and installations of the past five years.

The effects of this deflection on the thesis of the exhibition do not aggravate the problem of who has proprietary rights on the interpretation and presentation of a body of work – the curator or artist. One can still continue the discussion of the issue of identity with *Regal Décor*. Rather, the "return" illustrates something of the nature of Magor's art. The disruption made by *Regal Décor* reminds us that the other work exhibited here found its necessity in a break with what came before; and that it found its new orientation in the problems of the earlier work. The exhibition is predicated on this break more than on a theme.

The theme of identity begins to resonate when the different pieces embodying the same story in varying situations are brought together. Once the works are brought together, however, the forms and structures of the art become apparent in the way they function beyond, although initially through, the Dorothy story. In being displayed again, each past work is open to a further reinterpretation by the artist in the light of later production. At the Art Gallery of Ontario, Liz Magor has recreated *Eighteen Books*, 1981-2, and given *Dorothy – A Resemblance* and *The Most*

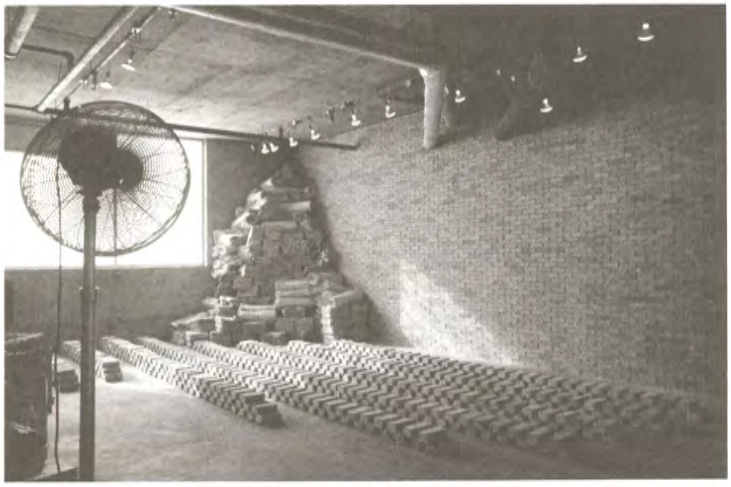


Fig. 1 **Production** 1980
Newspaper, wood, steel
Approx. 2,800 paper bricks, each 5.1 cm x 10.2 cm x 20.3 cm
Machine: 134.6 cm x 81.3 cm x 61 cm
National Gallery of Canada

Fig. 2 **Production** 1980-85
Installation at *Aurora Borealis* exhibition, Montreal, 1985

She Weighed/The Least She Weighed, 1982, special installations. I think an analogous event prompted the return of *Regal Décor* to some of the conditions of earlier work. In 1985, Liz Magor displayed *Production* in the Montreal exhibition *Aurora Borealis*. It was not simply another installation: the work was put back into production, new bricks were made and a new installation created. And of course the artist was physically involved in a process that at one time was conceived as a self-portrait of her activity. If *Regal Décor* pursues some of the same themes and processes with its linoleum press, there is a difference: now we find only the simulation of production, not the traces of a productive activity itself, although the work as a whole is a product. In this way, it aligns itself with the works since *Dorothy – A Resemblance*, which are more concerned with finding difference in what appears the same than with actually reproducing identity.

The catalogue of this exhibition will pursue the main theme of identity in its own way. Magor says her work investigates "personal identity." Her work poses both general and specific questions of identity through different material, conceptual and structural means, and arrangements. This text will not speculate on what might constitute personal identity, as such an investigation would only treat the materials and processes of the work as metaphors for something else – as representations of individuals we might name ("Dorothy," for instance) – and so fall into an outmoded metaphysics. Abandoning metaphor for a literal function, after all, was the break *Dorothy – A Resemblance* made with the earlier work. As a work of *art*, *Dorothy – A Resemblance* resembles certain conditions of the Dorothy story; it does not "represent" her. The catalogue will attend to the problems the work introduced for *itself* – as art. This text will analyse the forms and structures of the work in order to convey the understanding that the issue of identity is not a search for a dictionary definition of identity as "absolute sameness" or "individuality," but rather *difference*: identity as difference.

I am always looking for comfort in a world disturbingly subject to change. Sometimes I find it in work, as a recording of my activity. Sometimes I find it in objects, things that sit still for awhile and slowly gather, then release, their history. I wanted to do work that would objectify some history of a life, or at least the life of a body and the process of change that affects that body.

While I can only parallel the events of a natural history, there is a modest consolation found in effecting a real change in the material of a work; forcing it to form, to repeat, to reorder its appearance. Perhaps, through this manipulation, I am participating in the process of change that continues whether or not I consent or involve myself. Perhaps I am working to be part of the workings of change.

However, in an essential way my insecurity is unrelieved by this small play of power as the irony of my situation is revealed. For while I use this work to make manifest some aspects of a personal history, I find I have simultaneously manufactured my own competition as the pieces themselves take the opportunity to manifest *their* history, their own generation and transformation. The stories I have assigned become accessory, and what is more, my ability to alter form appears in itself merely a parallel of how I, too, am altered.

Liz Magor, in Lorna Farrell-Ward, *Production/Reproduction* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1980), unpaginated.

Sometimes I wonder how a sculpture would be if it had a very reduced physical presence – a work that may be overlooked because it is small or low, obscured or inaccessible. Or, a work that appears to be an object so familiar that it has little claim to uniqueness and attention. Added to this is the understanding that while I initially identify an object by its physical appearance, however faint, a sense of that identity persists even when the object is not present or is physically altered.

Some years ago, a woman told me the history of the weight of her body. Although she had lived a long time her body weight had changed only a few times and on the whole she maintained a weight of 98 lbs.

She identified with the body that weighed 98 lbs.

Of course, she was still herself when she weighed less or more, but not so completely herself. When she weighed 98 lbs. she more closely resembled the person she thought of as herself.

Recently, an event occurred that again affected the weight of this woman. She became ill and lay in her small cabin unnoticed for several days. She put out a distress flag, but because it didn't resemble in placement or in form what had been agreed upon, it didn't communicate as intended to her neighbours and it was only by chance that she was rescued.

This story has qualities in common with my concerns.

In previous work I have wanted to objectify the history of a body and the process of change that affects that body. I have chosen a material way to communicate my understanding of a physical condition. The means I use may communicate by agreement or by chance, or may go unnoticed.

For me, these common qualities constitute a resemblance between my activity and this event, and I anticipate that through a representation of some aspects of the story I can articulate the nature of identity as I understand it.

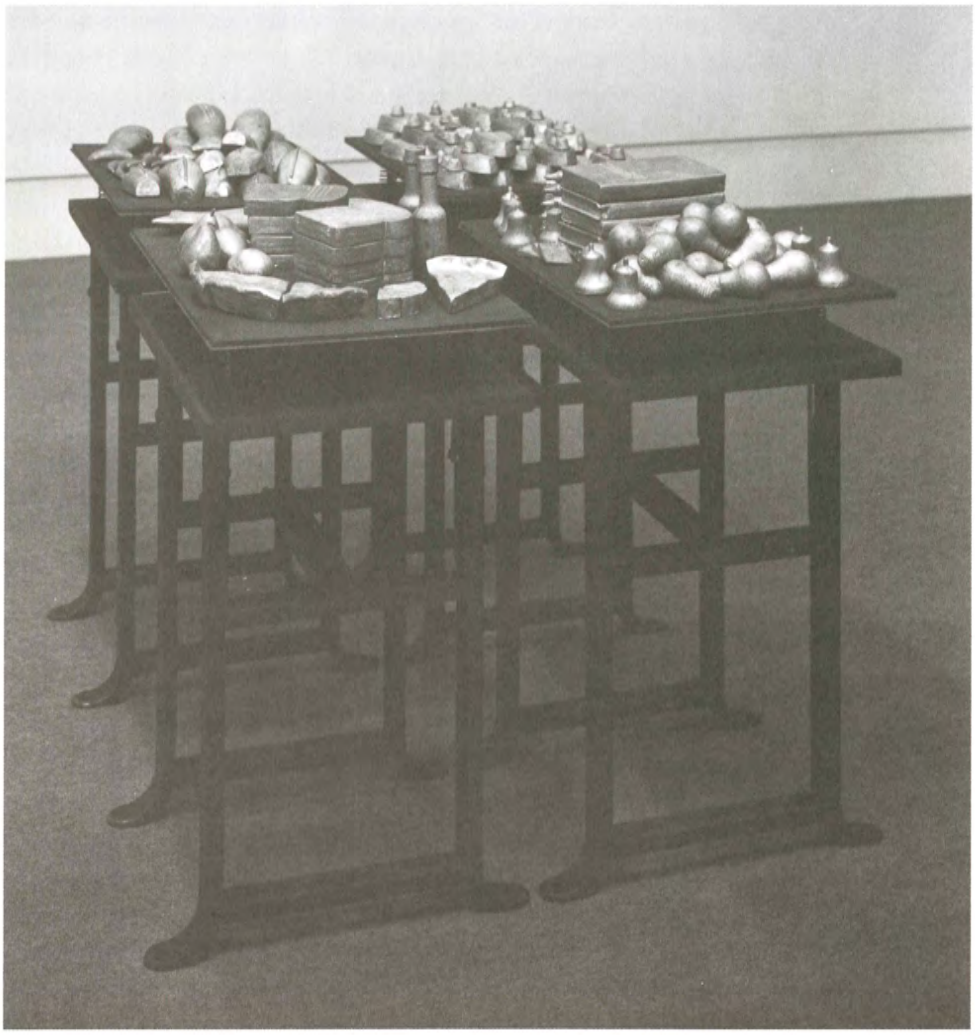
Liz Magor, "The Most She Weighed: A Catalogue of work by Liz Magor", in Mayo Graham, *1 x 2: Liz Magor, John McEwen* (Calgary: Glenbow Museum, 1983), p. 13.

An artist's statements should be the last resort in analyzing his or her art. Instead, the work itself should demonstrate its structure and effects outside of an articulation of an intention and beyond the name of an artist. The statements that Liz Magor makes, however, have a logic that is of consequence. They express a certain detachment, and describe a history of the work that is potentially outside the control or intention of the artist.

Every work of art develops its own narrative and history separately from the artist: this is the part of an interpretative process that people other than the artist produce over time. Not every work of art, however, is allowed its own physical history – a history of decay, for instance. Rather, there is a massively coordinated attempt to maintain its original identity through the principles and procedures of the museum. The possibility of a history for an object was taken into consideration as one of the concerns of such Magor installations as *Four Boys and a Girl* and *Production*. They were produced, but not programmed, to have their own history. They were made of materials acted upon by the artist, constrained in certain ways to change their form in decay. Through this history of decay, they assumed their own identity beyond the artist. But this history was taken as a metaphor for something else, however, as it became a poignant reflection on the human condition. The objects were dependent on a meaning, or a narrative, applied to them. At the same time, though, the work retained its own significance embodied in its form and material, a message that it was communicating.

The problems of this detachment of the work from an artist's intention, insofar as it pointed to conditions of communication, became Magor's focus with *Dorothy – A Resemblance*. What makes a work? What makes it different from other activities? How does it function? How does it communicate an intention? How does it effect its content? These were some of the issues addressed by this work beyond the questions of personal identity. The intention was not to represent or communicate the Dorothy story, but to use the conditions of it as a cue to the operations involved in a work of art. The demonstration of an intention and the communication of an effect, however subtle, rather than the manifest Dorothy story, become the issue of the work on the level of its content. The structure of its own significance *as* a structure of significance is both the object and the means of interpretation of this work. At issue is the identity of its difference, as something that makes meaning.

Part of the stimulus for this change was not only the realization by the artist of the inherent problems of the previous work, but her recognition of a change of situation and identity of the work from studio to exhibition. Work is produced in a studio and exhibited in a gallery. In the former, the relation of the artist to the work is private, intimate and self-communicative; the work is invested with significance over time. In the latter, detachment sets in: the work communicates beyond the control, even the understanding or intention of the artist. In one, the work is present to the artist; in the other, the work represents itself, in presenting itself to the viewer. The identity of the work changes in a shift in attention from the conditions of production to those of reception. *Eighteen Books* was the result of this change of emphasis in Magor's work. *Regal Décor*, meanwhile, is a return to the questions of *Production*, for instance, to the difference of art from other activities. Where it differs in emphasizing the change of situation is in exchanging the opposition studio/museum for another condition of reception which is closer to consumption, that of the commercial gallery, as a place where work is bought and sold. The exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario continues this dialectic of detachment. The installation of *Dorothy – A Resemblance* and *The Most She Weighed/The Least She Weighed* play upon an ambiguity of display that could be in a museum or a boutique.



No. 1 **Dorothy – A Resemblance** 1980-81

III

Dorothy - A Resemblance 1980-81

Dorothy – A Resemblance initiates a new body of work by Liz Magor. It introduces new materials and an explicit narrative, a narrative that will run through a number of pieces in succeeding years. The new materials – particularly lead – are part of industrial manufacture, but of a low level of technology. The principle applied to the work is still the cast form; but now the objects are not subject to decay: they do not take on a history of their own, as did the reworked substances of *Four Boys and a Girl*, for instance, and the material is adaptable to many types of mimicry. Now, a narrative external to their situation is literally stamped on the objects, and rather than embodying a process, they serve as part of a demonstration.

Lead recurs in the two succeeding works, *Eighteen Books* and *The Most She Weighed/The Least She Weighed*. It is a substance that lends itself to casting on an artisanal level, but it also signals reproducibility more readily than do the cast newspaper bricks of *Production*, which still have something of the handmade about them. As the evidence of a product, rather than of a process, the lead objects bear the mark of seriality: they are tokens of mechanical reproduction. With nothing of the organic about them, they readily assume the look of ordinary manufactured objects. As ordinary commodities, cast and stamped with a text (Dorothy's story), they lose their own "life," a history that the earlier objects could assume. The objects are alienated from anything but use. They now serve a narrative, so to speak; they do not have a character of their own, but stand as representations or measures of something else.

The lead is cast in the form of objects that their referents would not normally assume, except for lead sinkers. They are representations of fish, boats, lightbulbs, books, sliced bread, matchbooks, bells, candles, wedges of pie and cheese, pears. Beyond their simple, toylike appearance, as lead they have a function as standards of measure. While weight is part of lead's character, it is an attribute to give value to something else. It relates one thing to another, as part of a process of exchange.

The objects in *Dorothy – A Resemblance* sit on four tables. Each object has an associative relation, a resemblance of look or function, to the other objects on the same table (for instance, the relation of the book to the book of matches, to the candle, to the light bulb, to the bell). A narrative passes through all the tables, with each table carrying a different part stamped on one or more of its objects. (Casting and stamping are two similar processes; the narrative is segmented in the same way as are commodity objects.) And so the first table carries the text: "I have always weighed 98 lbs. Once I weighed more. When I married my first husband I was up to 124 lbs." The second: "But that year we worked so hard taking those darn boats up and down that I lost some of that weight and went down to 98 lbs." The third: "And I stayed there 60 years until this trouble with my eyes. After my operation I was only 82 lbs." And the fourth: "But I thought... this is no good. So I got myself back up to 98 lbs. And that's were I am now."

This is not a narrative of great import: it is a somewhat commonplace, factual account of a sequence of events over a lifetime – a story of a change in weight. The narrative is broken down in a series of statements each of which centres on a weight, and each table thus indicates this weight: 124, 98, 82, 98 pounds. The lead objects then seem to read as an illustration of the story. Two illustrative relations are

possible. The objects can stand in some type of iconic relation to the subject: the proper name that titles the piece, designates the story and provides a unity to the change in weight. Like the story, these objects are ordinary, everyday things. They might be objects of use for the character, Dorothy, relating the story or associated by the artist with her. But this is not necessarily the case. (In fact, they are meant to resemble each other more than to recall Dorothy.) Or, they are simply and literally measures of weight that have been given a decorative value in the things they mimic.

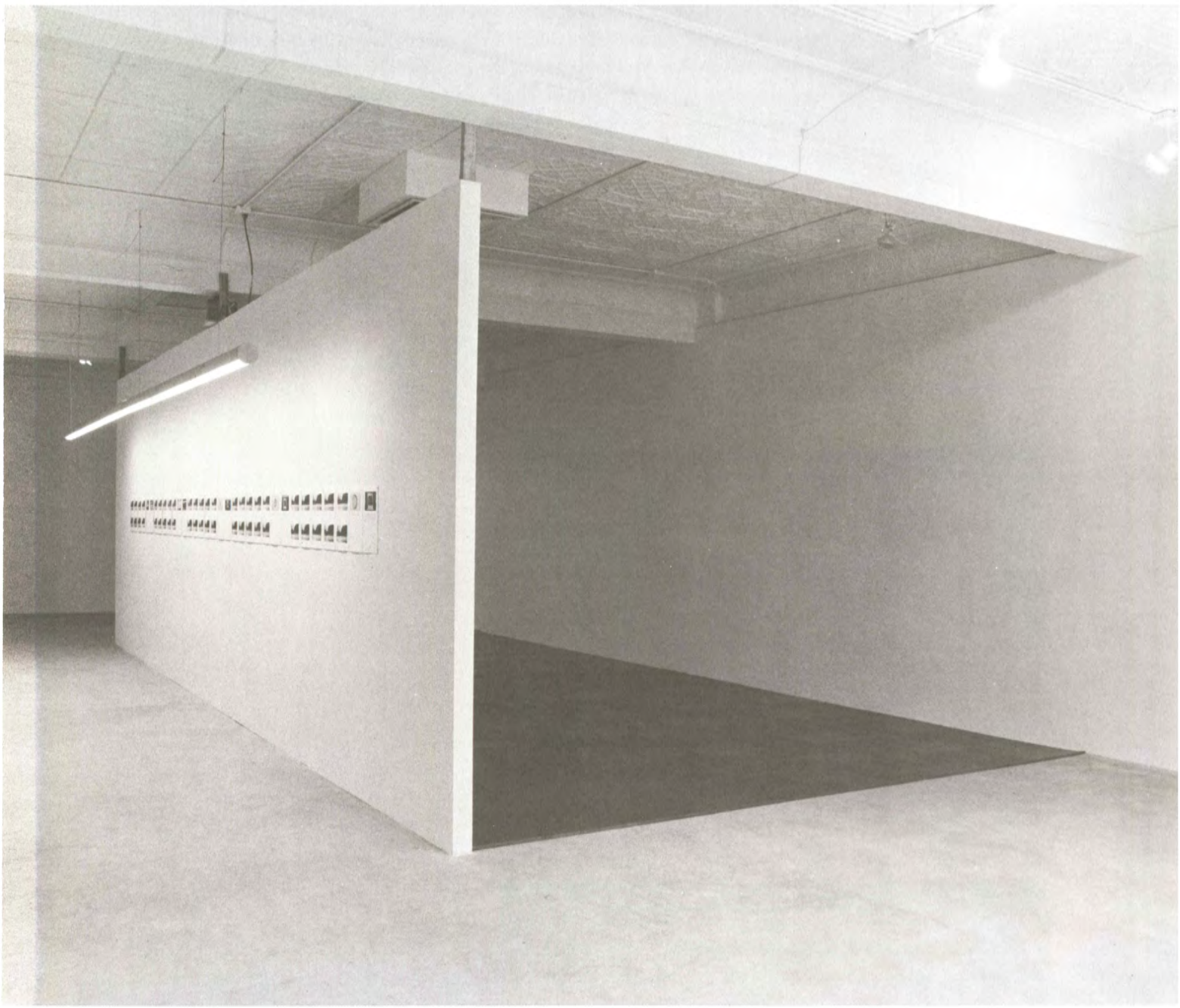
The lead weights, however, might serve a function for the work that is closer to their own identity. They do not just signify weight for the story. The objects on each table actually add up to the particular weight indicated by the text of each respective table – the *real* weight indicated although that reality need not be Dorothy. The tables, moreover, do not just support these objects, as if they were a neutral frame or background. They are part of a demonstration. Each table top is mounted on springs and rests at a level according to the weight of the objects it supports. Here weight is transposed into another scale of measure, that of height.

With *Dorothy – A Resemblance*, the nature of demonstration has changed. In *Four Boys and a Girl* or *Production*, a self-contained process was indicated by a machine and its product. In *Dorothy – A Resemblance* an identity is proposed, and demonstrated, between Dorothy and the weights on the tables, between an entity outside the work and objects within it. This is a literal relationship alone, and seems free from the metaphorical associations that could be given to the process of the earlier works' history of decay. An identity is postulated in the abstract (as a weight) and by exchange (as a measure). While the earlier work had a positive, self-reflexive value, *Dorothy – A Resemblance* now seems to express merely an equivalence. Moreover, while the process and appearance of the earlier work were both direct and generalized enough to maintain the work's separate identity as a productive art activity, what is to be implied here for art in *Dorothy – A Resemblance*'s reference to other things? Given the model of reproduction proposed here, more than producing identity, an identity is reproduced; more than controlling production, one's self is reproduced. In the reference to mass production, every object is the same: which is the original and which the copy? Beyond the work or the identity of its subject, the question has ramifications for both the artist and the viewer as individuals, whether one is a producer or a consumer.

The title of the work, however, mentions "resemblance," not equivalence. What is the "resemblance" of the title *Dorothy – A Resemblance*? If these works are about identity, where does the resemblance lie? Can an identity be established if it is split by resemblance to another thing? An identity is established by both the proper name of the individual "Dorothy" and the narrative by that individual. But by the evidence of the work we are only given a literal equivalent in weight, not a resemblance to any tangible or intangible characteristics of Dorothy. In the story, Dorothy's weight goes up and down, and Magor relates that "She identified with the body that weighed 98 lbs. Of course, she was still herself when she weighed less or more, but not so completely herself. When she weighed 98 lbs. she more closely resembled the person she thought of as herself." Was she not herself at the other weights, for which the piece gives equivalents? In the work, is one any better than the others; is 98

pounds any truer? Then perhaps what the work offers as a measure is inappropriate as a means of identifying the character of an individual and a lifetime of events. Yet Magor never offers us a representation of this woman; the measures she makes us see are the discriminations of difference. The resemblance we seek from the title is merely a resemblance if we do not apply the differences we discover in and through this sculpture to our actual experience of the work.

No. 1 **Dorothy – A Resemblance** 1980-81 (details)



No. 2 **Eighteen Books** 1981-82 (detail)

IV

Eighteen Books 1981-82

Unlike in *Dorothy – A Resemblance*, where an investigation of identity was pursued through the tangibility of objects, in *Eighteen Books* the object is absent. *Dorothy – A Resemblance* partly was a means of questioning how something retained its identity, i.e., remained the "same," through tangible change, demonstrated by difference in weight. *Eighteen Books* considers instead how difference can be made known; how, in the midst of what is taken as the same, in the midst of repetition, a difference can arise, be apparent and communicated. In *Dorothy – A Resemblance*, we were dealing with objects, in *Eighteen Books*, with events: in the former, with the small internal events that constitute the identity of an individual, in the latter, with an external event that can change that identity. And in keeping with this lack of objects, if in *Dorothy – A Resemblance* the object bore the demonstration, in *Eighteen Books* that demonstration, as well, has to be present and absent, as the possibility of the failure of intention.

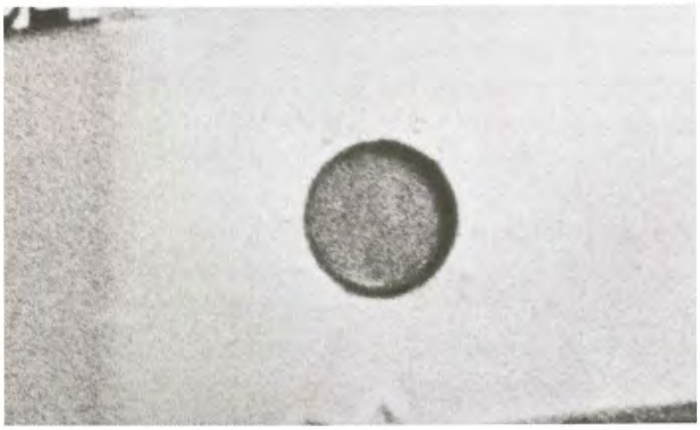
Eighteen Books consists of three elements: a wall of photocopied images, a floor of stamped lead tiles, and two captioned photographs that face each other across this floor. The images on the wall are the open pages of a book by Liz Magor entitled *Seventeen Books*. Seventeen copies of the same book are spread open across the wall; the eighteenth is composed of the imprinted "leaves" of tiles, which are stamped with parts of the text of *Seventeen Books*. The conclusion of the book is the story we know from *Dorothy – A Resemblance*; the rest is the story of another incident in Dorothy's life.

Eighteen Books is the type of installation Liz Magor was referring to when she wrote, "Sometimes I wonder how a sculpture would be if it had a very reduced physical presence – a work that may be overlooked because it is small or low, obscured or inaccessible. Or, a work that appears to be an object so familiar that it has little claim to our attention. Added to this is the understanding that while I initially identify an object by its physical appearance, however faint, a sense of that identity persists even when the object is not present or is physically altered." Magor has not just created a work that could be overlooked because it is inaccesible or is minimally visible. Let us say that the focus of the message has been dispersed. In the first installations of this work, the tiles could only be seen from the side, behind the wall of photographs. In the current installation, they are raised on a platform. The object has been layered across space with the flattening of the lead tiles, but the work has been opened up to space and to a movement across it. This passage is repeated through the photographs, those facing each other across the tiles and those following one another along the wall. But the relations are not immediately apparent between the photographs and tiles, and the photographs in the books seem to present at times a nearly indistinguishable continuum.

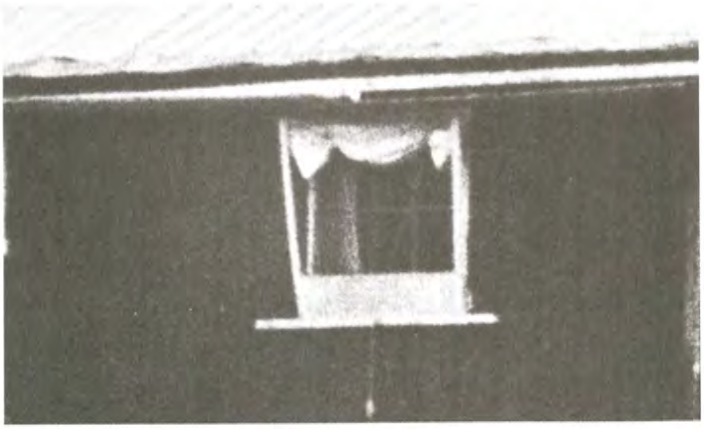
A narrative is composed in *Eighteen Books* from a few repetitive images and a simple text. The books on the wall are open at succeeding pages so that the narrative is not interrupted, and so that the placement on the wall substitutes for the turning of leaves. A double movement is depicted through the images: a movement of the boat back and forth, and a cross-cutting from boat to cabin with a slow zoom to their respective windows. In the type of shots depicted, in the minute alteration of each photograph, and in its frame-by-frame movement, the book resembles a film. The

I go out and back every day, or several times a day if I'm pulling in logs.

Sunday is a day for visitors. But I don't need much company, it's enough just to see the Tom Forge going back and forth. That's my idea of a neighbour.



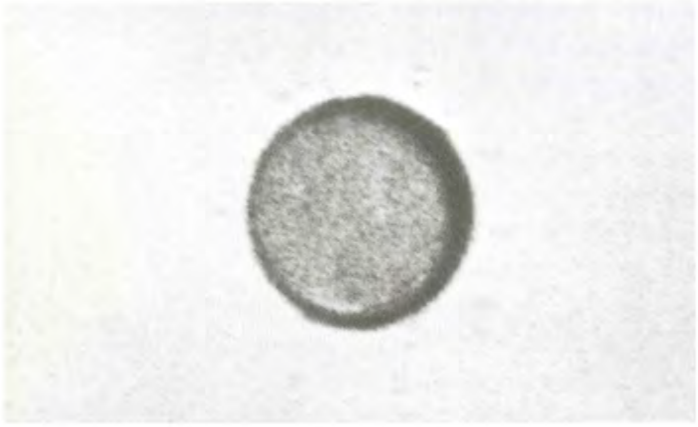
When she came back here after her eye operation I told her that if she ever needed help she should hang a dishcloth out her kitchen window, a white dishcloth.



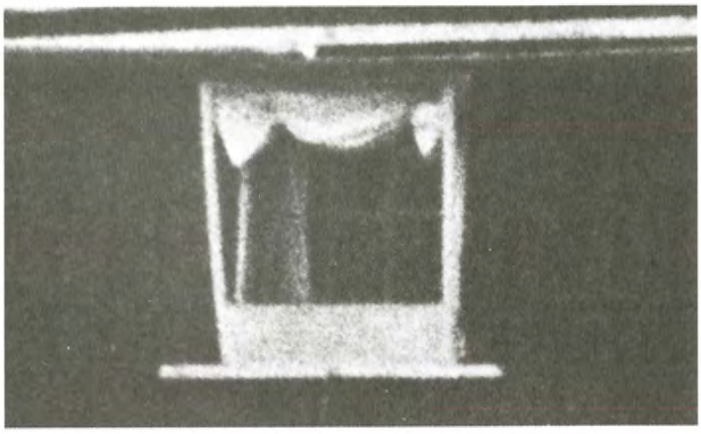
I was worried. I felt so weak. That's why I put the flag out, a signal to the Tom Forge. I put it out on the beach and then just had to go in and lie down.

No. 2 **Eighteen Books** 1981-82 (detail)

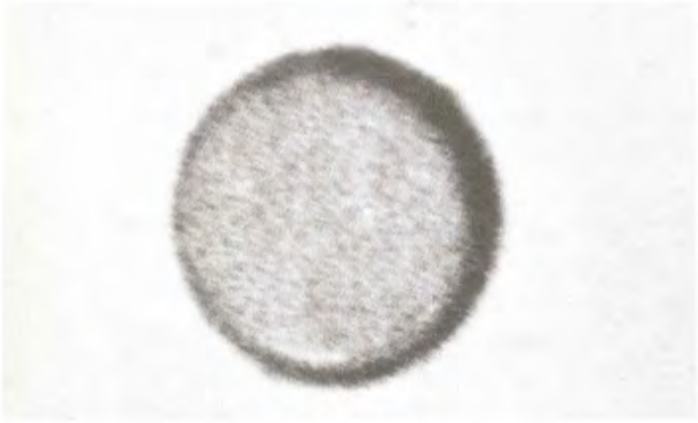
Excerpts from *Seventeen Books* (part of installation).



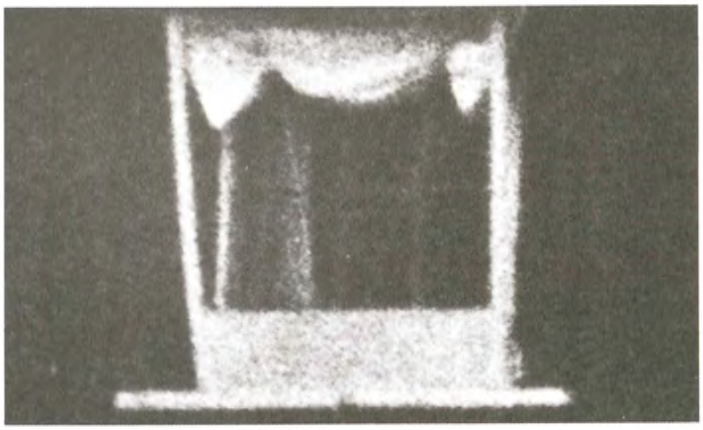
She was sick. She put out a distress flag, but she just put it on the beach, lying flat on the beach. That's okay for planes but not for boats, so I didn't see it for a few days. Besides, I was always looking for a dishcloth in the window, I looked for it every time I went past.



Every day I could hear the Tom Forge going back and forth, but nobody showed up. Looking at something else I guess, staring at the water I suppose.



I went to shore. I saw the flag on the beach and knew right away what it meant. I went into the house and she was lying on the bed. She looked so small and thin.



I have always weighed 98 lbs. Once I weighed more, when I was first married I weighed 124 lbs. But that year we worked so hard taking those darn boats up and down that I lost some of that weight and went down to 98 lbs. And I stayed there, 60 years, until this trouble with my eyes. After my operation I was down to 82 lbs. But I thought to myself "this is no good" and I got myself back up to 98 lbs. again and that's where I am now.

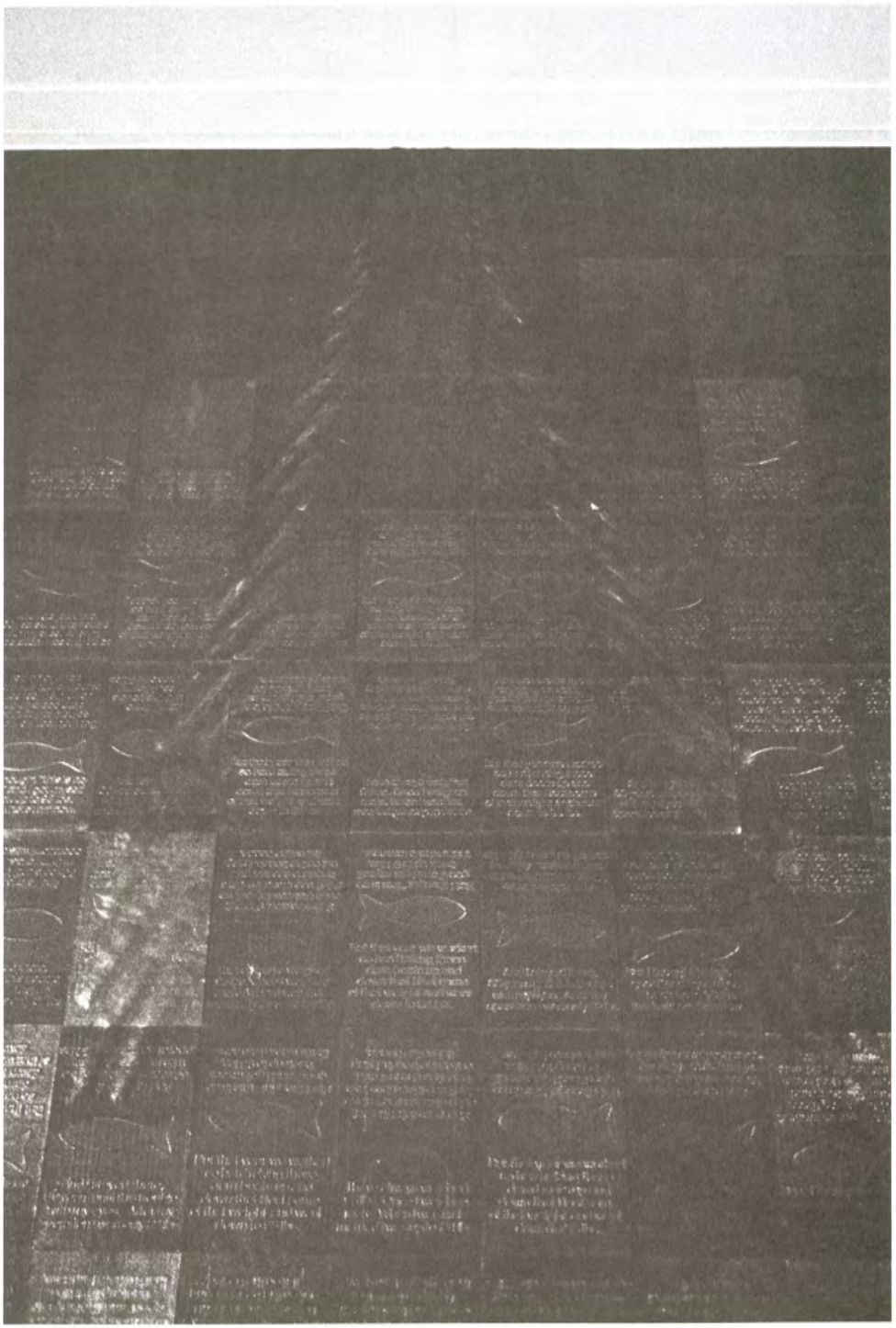
boat's coming and going is depicted on each page, but the continuity of coming and going passes from page to page in slight increments. Interleaved with the boat's passage, the narrative text alternates on pages from boat to cabin, in such a manner that each takes on the voice of a character.

As we read the text and follow the photographs from left to right, our movement along the wall simulates a passage. By crossing the space, we also read the two boat "wakes" in the lead as traces of the boat's coming in or a going out, just as we turn that passage around on each page of the book. Another movement is structured across the tiles from one photograph of the cabin with the accompanying caption, "The boat went out every morning," to the other, with "And every evening it came in again." The punctuation shows that the sentence is completed across the space, suggesting that the space is created by the narrative. But it also suggests that the elements *Eighteen Books* tries to reassemble as a whole are incomplete without the role of the viewer who produces and reproduces the narrative in this space.

The narrative is a simple story, consisting of an event in the life of Dorothy, although she is not mentioned by name. It is a story of mistaken communication and the failure of identification. As Magor commented, "Recently, an event occurred that again affected the weight of this woman. She became ill and lay in her small cabin, unnoticed for several days. She put out a distress flag, but because it didn't resemble in placement or in form what had been agreed upon, it didn't communicate as intended to her neighbours and it was only by chance that she was rescued." This failure to communicate affected her weight, a story we are reminded of at the end of the narration with the repetition of the "I have always weighed 98 lbs." text of *Dorothy – A Resemblance*.

A narrative draws attention to a sequence of events through a certain structuring and ordering. The narrative is not the event. The story here relates an event that had consequences for Dorothy's weight; but the emphasis is not on this change but on a failure to communicate – the failure of an agreed-upon communication. A sign failed to function; a signal was not recognized and acted upon because it was not used according to (an arbitrary) convention that would set up a context for recognition. It communicated by accident. Lying on a beach instead of hanging from the window, the material that was to be invested with significance as a sign failed to raise itself to view from the horizontal plane. (This is similar to the navigational distress signal on the cover of *Seventeen Books*, the circle and rectangle repetitively embedded in the lead tiles overlaid with text and surrounded by the back-and-forth flow of the fish. As a sign, it fails to make a difference within the continuity of what is repeated as the same. The tiles vary in their content, but they are by nature a repetitive element and are intially perceived as such.)

How is this event depicted in *Eighteen Books*? In keeping with a desire by Magor to make sculpture that has a reduced presence, the event is not depicted but narrated; however, the analogous conditions or grounds of its appearance are structured or put in place. That is to say, *Eighteen Books* reproduces a similar situation for both the viewer and the artist. In a sense, the viewer takes on the position of the moving boat, and the work of art takes on the character of the cabin or the signal from the cabin.



No. 2 **Eighteen Books** 1981-82 (detail)

No. 2 **Eighteen Books** 1981-82 (details)

Of this incident, Magor has stated, "This story has qualities in common with my concerns. In previous work I have wanted to objectify the history of a body and the process of change that affects that body. I have chosen a material way to communicate my understanding of a physical condition. The means I use may communicate by agreement or by chance, or may go unnoticed. For me, these common qualities constitute a resemblance between my activity and this event, and I anticipate that through a representation of some aspects of the story I can articulate the nature of identity as I understand it." For the artist, the artwork must set itself apart from the continuity of things by communicating a difference. Liz Magor sets herself the problem here with an installation of "reduced physical appearance," with something that by means of enveloping the space only on its surface "has little claim to our attention." While we are informed through the story, this narrative has little meaning for the construction if we do not ourselves enact the *conditions* of that story in and through the work. The story itself is not the work; that is, the work does not represent the event, it resembles a condition. On the one hand, the artist takes the chance that her intention will not be communicated or another message will be transmitted: she takes this as the subject of her work. On the other hand, the viewer has to take the responsibility for actively receiving the "signal" and interpreting the sign that makes a difference. Identity within this work is difference. To make *Eighteen Books* work is to make that difference.

V

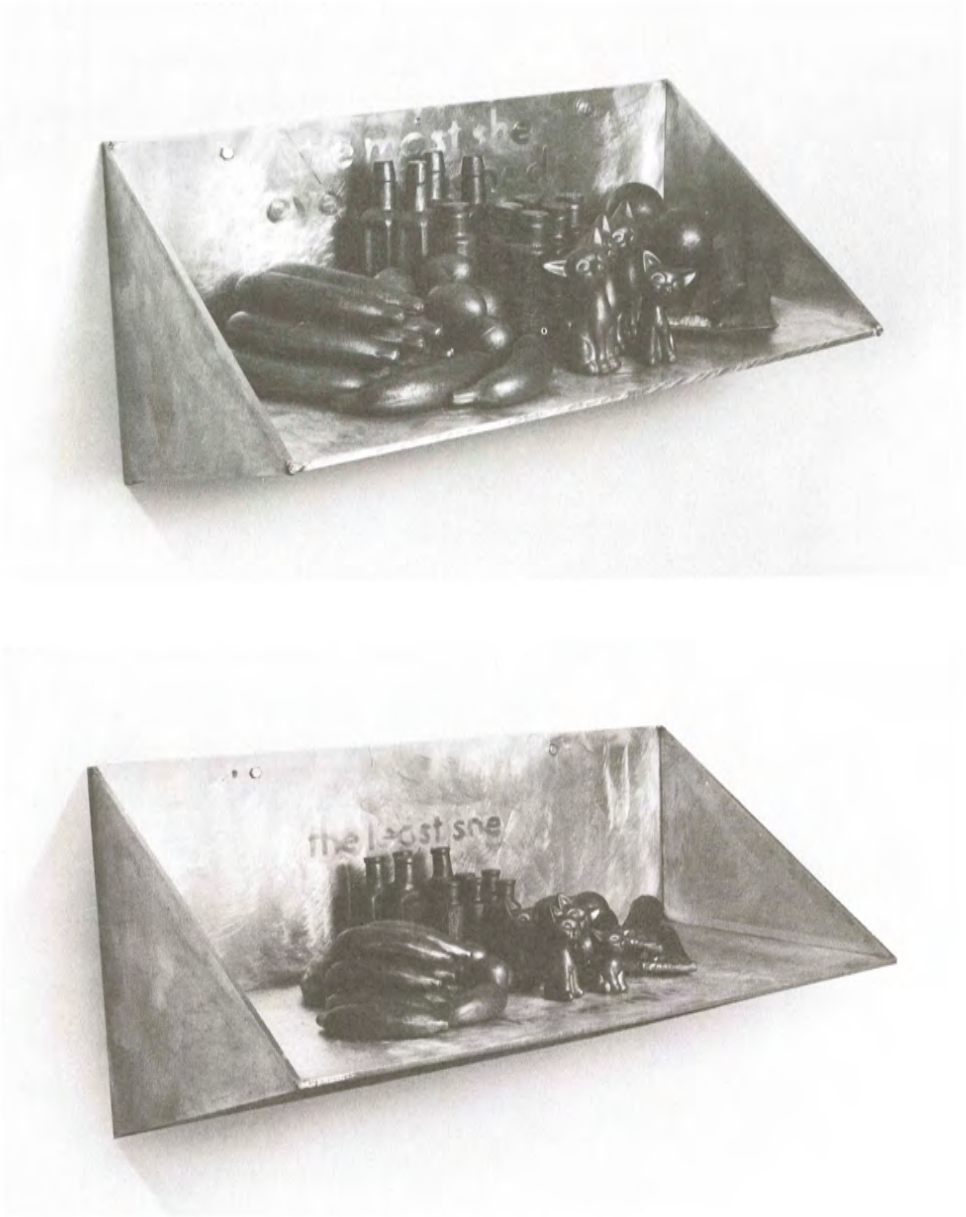
The Most She Weighed/The Least She Weighed 1982

In *The Most She Weighed/The Least She Weighed*, Liz Magor refers once again to the Dorothy story by isolating two extremes of weight. Two aluminum shelves hold nearly identical objects: objects, as in *Dorothy – A Resemblance*, made of lead, this time cast in the form of bananas, eggs, bottles, light bulbs, tubes of paint and a grouping of kitsch ornamental cats. The two shelves are set far enough apart from each other that we cannot compare them at a glance. Passing from one group to the other, we notice that the number, type and placement of the objects seem the same, although we sense that one set is larger and the other smaller. Each group thus refers to the texts burnished in negative on the aluminum of the respective shelves – the larger set standing for the most she weighed, the smaller for the least she weighed.

While the work uses a presentation of objects similar to that of *Dorothy – A Resemblance*, it differs in a number of respects from the earlier piece. For instance, two rather than four states of weight of the narrative are given. Although the objects add up to Dorothy's real weight (124 and 82 pounds), this weight is indicated visually by a change in scale rather than demonstrated actually, as the sprung tables of *Dorothy – A Resemblance* functioned (in another sense of a "scale"). *Dorothy – A Resemblance* encompassed differing objects in one view. In *The Most She Weighed/The Least She Weighed* the objects have to be checked from one shelf to the other, and while they belong to the same "species," they are of different types. Each object was chosen for this possibility: two types of bottles of differing volumes, two varieties of eggs, etc. One is not merely the enlargement or reduction of the other. And as in *Eighteen Books*, the viewer must traverse the work and pass from one element to the other while only retaining a memory-trace of the other part of the work.

These objects are then classified as *different* types of the *same* species. The choice of similar objects, however, does not mean that we are dealing with absolute differences or opposites in the two extremes of weight. (The two share the state of extremes: *the* most, *the* least.) The "most" and the "least" do have a common denominator in the subject "she." We are, then, once again dealing with the issue of the identity of one individual across two states. But, as in succeeding works, we need not refer to the Dorothy story, even if the text is mentioned, for the principles of identity to be queried. After all, the objects were chosen without Dorothy in mind. And the type of objects displayed presents problems of identity that reference to "Dorothy" cannot resolve.

Not all the objects are repeated with a simple variation in size from one shelf to the other. The groupings of cat ornaments differ in this respect. One group comprises three "father" cats and one "mother" cat, and the other three "mother" cats and one "baby" cat. Species remains the same, but gender varies from shelf to shelf. We find replication in either a male or a female series and difference in the change of gender. That difference is signified by the overall principle of the work: the visible difference offered by a change in scale. The odd figure is the baby cat, which is the only object not repeated in the work. Given Magor's methodology, the odds are against any object being unique. The question of its sexual identity remains – is it male or female? – but perhaps this object displays the potential that all Magor's work visibly questions, in that its identity is not yet socialized or secure.



No. 3 **The Most She Weighed/The Least She Weighed** 1982

No. 4 **Four Notable Bakers** 1983 (detail)

VI

Four Notable Bakers 1983

The front cover of Liz Magor's artist's book, *Four Notable Bakers*, is a plate from an open book, itself captioned "Four Notable Bakers." Here, represented with the rectitude belonging to both middle-class British society and late-nineteenth-century photographic poses, are four notable British bakers from Swansea, Cardiff, Sheffield and Bristol. The four are identified by what unites and sets them apart. The caption identifies them as the same, i.e., bakers, and yet different: it distinguishes them within a system, baking, which is socially established.

On the cover of the book, it is language that performs the act of differentiating and classifying by means of the caption and the proper name. But it is what socially unites these differing and yet similar individuals – the process of baking – that becomes the means of pursuing questions of identity within Magor's book. That order or ordering principle is to be discovered through appearance, since there is no text within the book. The process of baking and the look of bread are used as a grid to interpret another order of identity, that of the human species. On a superficial level, this ordering process literally identifies its elements through natural or physical resemblance; but once again this comparison takes place within a system that is socially determined. That is, the "natural" is constructed according to an artificial order that pre-exists it. This is akin to the incessant systematizing out of which individuality seeks to identify and mark its place. In frankly sensual terms, it also shows that this identity, which is an identity of attraction, is also sexual clarification.

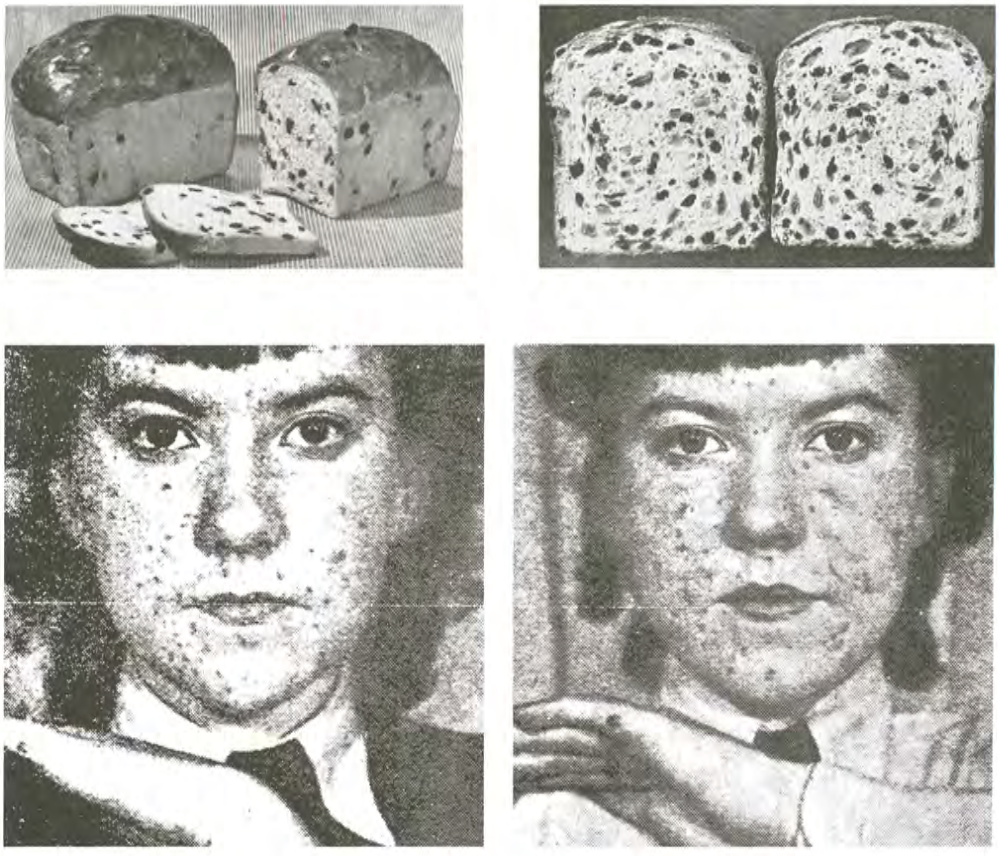
What are these resemblances that begin to compose a system? They are two-fold: a look and a process. And it is this two-foldedness that gives the book's analysis the breadth and complexity of a system, allowing it to be used as a grid of interpretion. Flesh is compared to bread; parts of the body (e.g., sexual organs) are juxtaposed to the dough in different stages of the making of bread; decoration of the body (e.g., braided hair) is conjoined to features that mark speciality breads and buns; diseases and deformations are matched with textures of breads.

Describing a system of classification, simply as what is paired, will not realize the functions of the images. For instance, a page contrasting a photograph of a baby held in the palm of a hand with a photograph of a lump of dough being similarly held is about handling the bulky weight of both, as much as it is about the comparable look of the lumpy texture of baby and dough. They portray a relation of hand to thing, but rather than a relation of hand to predetermined object, it is a sculptural process of making, the unformed brought to formation, that is indicated.

Formation is taken up as a theme within the book from its beginning. On the inside front cover, two hands delicately display a small ball of dough. Following a blank page, the next two facing pages juxtapose a nude young girl, head bowed and arms stretched open, as if in the guise of truth or innocence or the unfolding of individuation, with an illustration of a cloth being gently removed from a bowl in order to display the dough within. Both are gestures of revelation: something is shown; beginning is both a revelation and a creation. But that beginning is undifferentiated still. Making and being are also matters of marking.

At first it seems that these comparisons cannot construct a system because oppositions are lacking in the simple matching of appearances and things. But certain oppositions develop in the course of the book as a passage in the process of

No. 4 **Four Notable Bakers** 1983 (detail)



No. 4 **Four Notable Bakers** 1983 (detail)

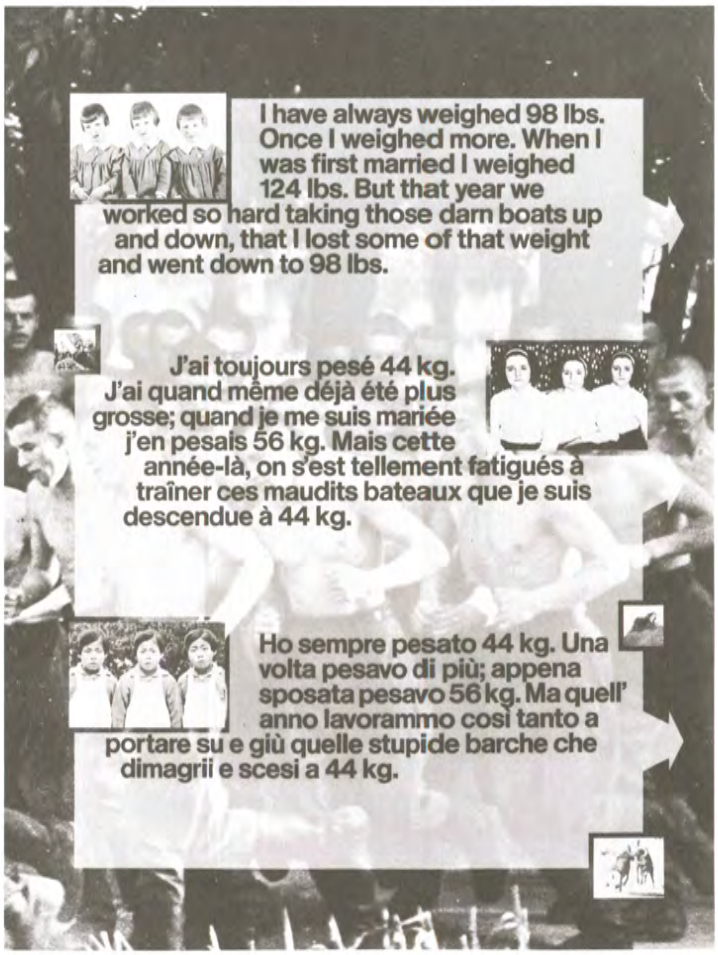
working the dough in its different stages. One is from female to male. The other is from the hand-made to the machine-made, from making to attending. Generally the hand-made function is performed by women while the machine is attended by men in the illustrations. Mechanical procedures are interspersed with manual operations throughout the book, while sex passes from female to male about halfway through. The passage to the male is followed immediately by the introduction of another theme coupling twins and knives: a doubling of the cut, of nature and the machine.

Although appearing the same, in a way the twins are also an amplification of opposition or difference that was previously marked in its "pure" form as male-female. Twinning is not a simple association with mechanical production, although it appears in that nexus of associations in the book. Twins are marked as the monstrous double: they are displayed with some defect, which again finds its analogy in some characteristic of bread. Mass-production is taken as another measure of identity. But this system of classification produces doubles. In a return to the natural through the twins, identity is given as a problem.

Near the end of the book, the imagery returns to that of the beginning, with a similar small ball of dough cupped in the hands. But now, it is juxtaposed to the mass-individual, with its fear of individuation, represented by a group of identically dressed cheerleaders. This is succeeded by the last pairing of images, two undifferentiated masses of machine-kneaded dough, counterpointed on the inside back cover by the reduced image of a bread-slicing machine. By its position, this image recalls its opposite on the inside front cover, that first small round ball of dough. At the end of the book, this initial potential of identity has been reduced to the identicality of the mechanical.

The individual reduced to the social, identified metaphorically in mechanical replication, returns us to the cover. While this reduction of the individual to a conforming sociality, with all its threats of the cut of "castration," can be taken as one of the themes of the book, the book presents a more complex view of identity that has less to do with moralizing about individuality than with setting up conditions for its analysis. The book starts from the simple identity of resemblance, the basic idea of comparison through likeness; moves to the mimetic level where analogies can be drawn through activities of making, moulding and marking; and completes itself only in our reading in a process that incorporates and differentiates the other two levels. The photographic juxtapositions put the notion of identity into jeopardy. But the identity of the book is tied to an understanding on the part of the "reader"/viewer who sustains the difference in the juxtaposition of seeming equivalents.


I have always weighed 98 lbs. Once I weighed more. When I was first married I weighed 124 lbs.
J'ai toujours pesé 44 kg. J'ai quand même déjà été plus grosse; quand je me suis mariée j'en pesais 56 kg.
Ho sempre pesato 44 kg. Una volta pesavo di più; appena sposata pesavo 56 kg.


I have always weighed 98 lbs. Once I weighed more. When I was first married I weighed 124 lbs. But that year we worked so hard taking those darn boats up and down, that I lost some of that weight and went down to 98 lbs.
J'ai toujours pesé 44 kg. J'ai quand même déjà été plus grosse; quand je me suis mariée j'en pesais 56 kg. Mais cette année-là, on s'est tellement fatigués à traîner ces maudits bateaux que je suis descendue à 44 kg.
Ho sempre pesato 44 kg. Una volta pesavo di più; appena sposata pesavo 56 kg. Ma quell' anno lavorammo così tanto a portare su e giù quelle stupide barche che dimagrii e scesi a 44 kg.

No. 5 **I have always weighed 98 lbs.** 1983-84 Panels 2-5

French and Italian (different ways of saying the "same" thing) in each panel – three different sets of twins, for example, layered across a field composed of other photographic images. These acts of dual or multiple identity are played out against, or emerge from, a larger social background: a large running group of young men, all with closely cropped hair, barechested and wearing the same army-issue pants. The boxed images of twins, triplets, etc. are points that ground the texts in this field. They are paralleled by smaller, marginal images, all associated with weight, ranging from weight-lifters (developing the theme of weight, but also competition), bags of foodstuffs, scales, etc. This inner textual field comes to a full stop in a medium-sized image at the bottom right corner of each panel. It is as if each of these was the consequence or dilemma of these doublings. These images could take us to different researches, such as those by René Girard on the monstrous double (the image of Siamese twins), and mimetic rivalry (the images of battling mountain goats). But what present themselves by their repeated points of equivalence here are the images of twins, etc., set against the Dorothy story, which cue us to the continuing issue of personal identity.

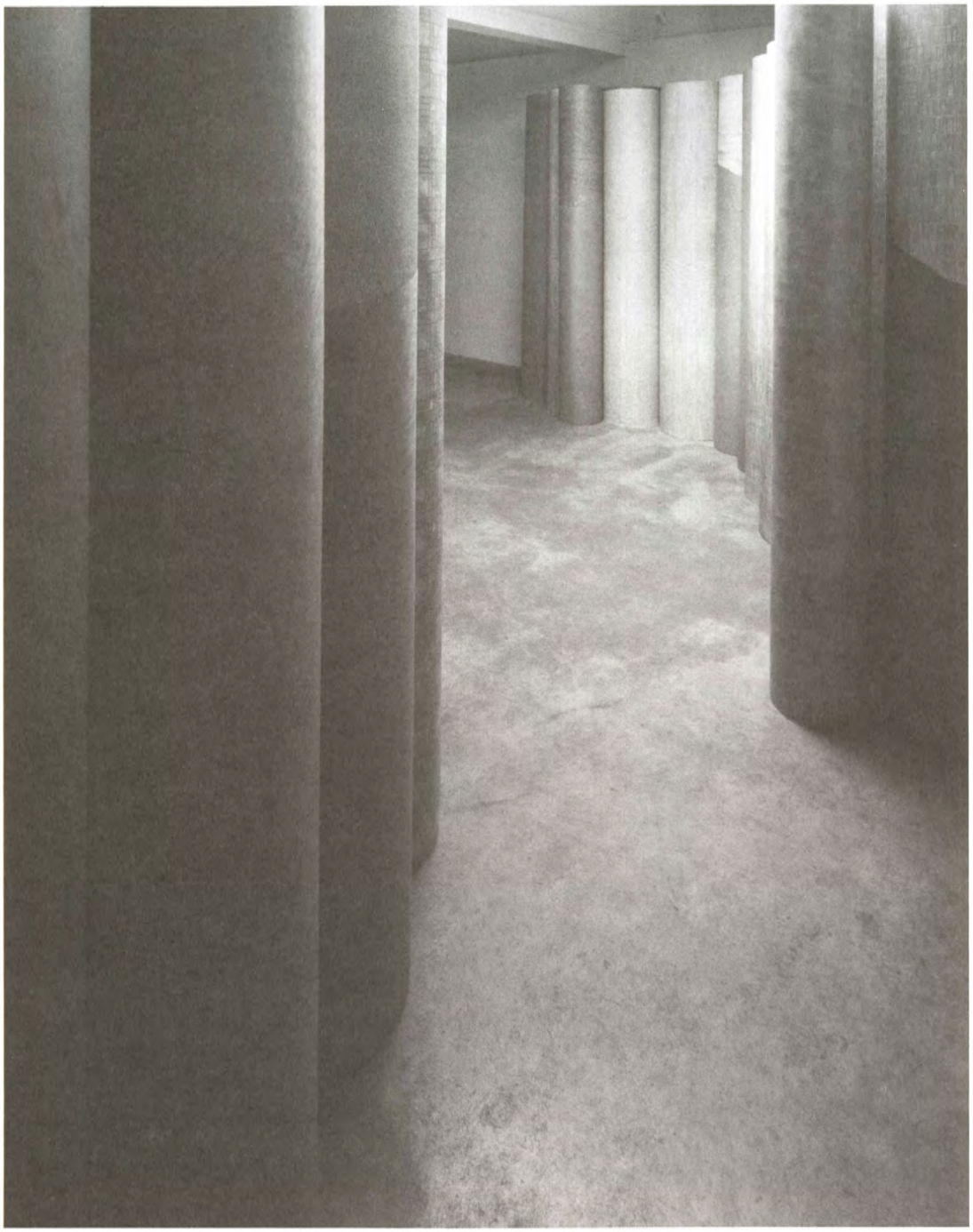
In the Glenbow Museum book, the photo-series was bracketed by two pages of text taken from a quasi-sociological case-study of twins. The images were preceded by statements that emphasized the "notable difference[s]" between twins; they were concluded by statements that pointed out similarities. Yet through this transition from difference to identity the images remain the same. The study used behaviour as a means of identifying what is the same and what is different. For the viewer of *I have always weighed 98 lbs.*, the twins pose another problem, and it is not so much a question of reaffirming identity (equating image to text is one example of simple identification of meaning), but of locating difference. Difference here is what is *remarked* of the nearly identical.

We can search for identifying marks or traits within the twins as a means of discovering difference. (*Four Notable Bakers* turned this into a negative operation with its comparison of genetic defects to bread). Are these traits representational differences between twins? (They were identical to each other and resembled other things, that is, bread, in *Four Notable Bakers*.) Can we search for a difference *within* the image or narrative? To answer these questions would be to assume that the images and text stand on their own, as if they represented the content or intention of the work. This would be to disregard the real function of the work, which operates more on the difference within repetition than on seriality.

What is identical and what is different in these panels is a question of repetition. The panels are generated by a series, a logic that structures image and text and our reading. But in paying attention to this logic and to the detail it coordinates, we might overlook what is different. For instance, we read the background figures as one mass, although the crowd is made through repetition; while the background image continues between panel one and two, panels three and four repeat panel two, and panel five is a duplication of panel one. We do not distinguish difference within this crowd, because we do not even distinguish that the images are the same.

The logic of the numeric series directs us across the piece and we are content, at first, with the closure of the narrative in the text coming to rest at 98 pounds and in

the reiteration of the image of the young boy of the first panel in the last. Yet what is generated by the text is not rigid, and, in fact, can be false. As in *Eighteen Books* and *The Most She Weighed/The Least She Weighed*, the work takes us across, but we must return to the beginning. For each boy in the first and last panels is really two individuals: twins. What is taken as the splitting of the subject across the span of panels is actually the splitting of identity in twins. What we accepted as the identity of repetition in reproduction is difference. The process of the work produces our awareness of difference. Identity can be defined as either difference or sameness. If we were not attentive to difference, that process might have reinforced sameness.



No. 6 **Regal Décor** 1986 (detail)

Regal Décor 1986

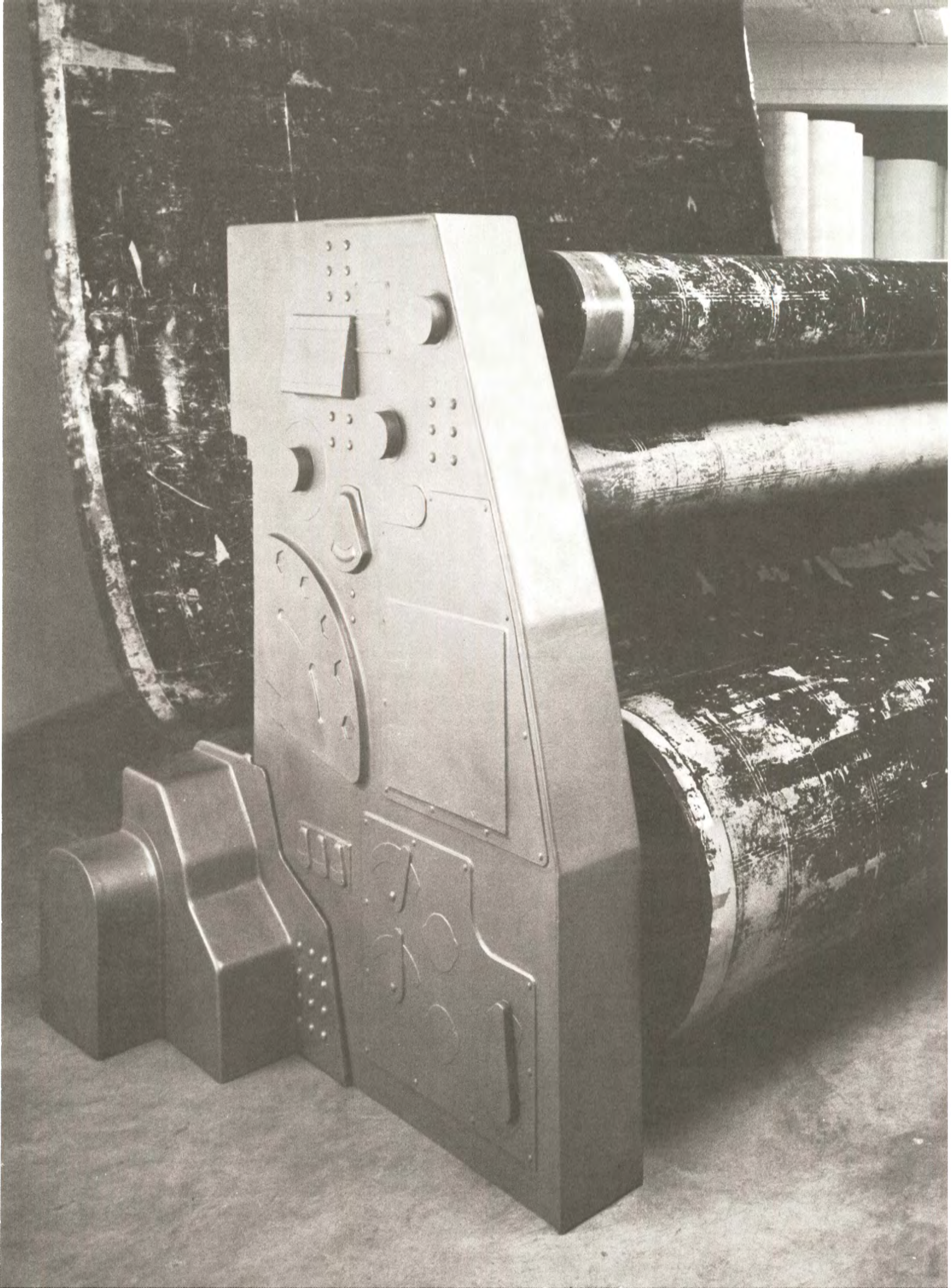
Regal Décor is composed of two elements representing two orders that rarely seem to intersect, although they really do have commerce with one-another. The two elements are juxtaposed almost as two separate installations; but there is a passage between them. We are ushered into the installation and through it by a row of columns, which look like rolls of linoleum. They are not actually rolls, just simulations, frameworks wrapped in whole or half-round with a single sheet of linoleum.

The rolls guide us through, but they also hide the elements and introduce them to us separately. We first come upon a full-scale press. It is an imitation press, made of wood with sono tubes as its rollers. It initiates the theme of production in a general sense in its most literal form, as an object of production, a machine. It does not function as a machine, however, as did the apparatuses of *Four Boys and a Girl* and *Production*; it merely signifies. What is signified beyond production is an imprinting (an imprinted sheet of plastic hangs from the ceiling and runs through the rollers), for it is a linoleum press that is duplicated, a machine that imprints linoleum with a pattern. Linoleum is a material product with its own character; imprinting makes it into a simulation of many other flooring materials. While alienating it from its substance, however, its manufacture gives it a history, as we retain a memory, actual or cultural, of the real thing, whether it be marbles, woods, tiles. The press is Magor's simulated machine reproducing a product that is already a simulation.

The press embodies the processes of production *and* reproduction, in the sense that a reproduction is also something that is produced. But while the display incorporates a process and a product, it is neither, since it occupies the realm of representation (while being material all the same). In the installation, the machine and its products are simply juxtaposed. The machine sits there with the rolls of linoleum as if they were stored around it. More than a juxtaposition is implied, however. A story unravels, the story of linoleum from production to use: that is, from production, with its industrial connotations; to storage, with its commercial overtones; to a destination in use, as domestic consumption.

With the introduction of the second element of the installation, we move from a place of production to a place of consumption. Here the linoleum takes on its function as a product, serving as the flooring around and underneath an imposing baronial fireplace. (Here it has the reduced appearance of the tiles of *Eighteen Books*.) Made of *papier-maché*, the fireplace is set on the linoleum, but it is also set in a photograph. Or rather, it projects from a photographic blow-up of a decorator interior, a living room from a "house-and-garden"-type magazine.

We are given the interior of a place outside production, presumably outside commerce as well. While the rolls serve to camouflage each from the other, the two elements are not separate, as, for instance, a place of work is from one's home. The image does not depict the livingroom of a worker. Consumption cannot be separated from production so easily, however, because the two operate on the level of reproduction indicated by the magazine photograph. Reproduction is the term that joins production to consumption and ensures their continuation. But it is more: it is an actual process. The production of reproduction is materially based and mechanically, or electronically, distributed. It is an ideological process without necessarily seeming to be material – since it is "only" an image.



No. 6 **Regal Décor** 1986 (detail)

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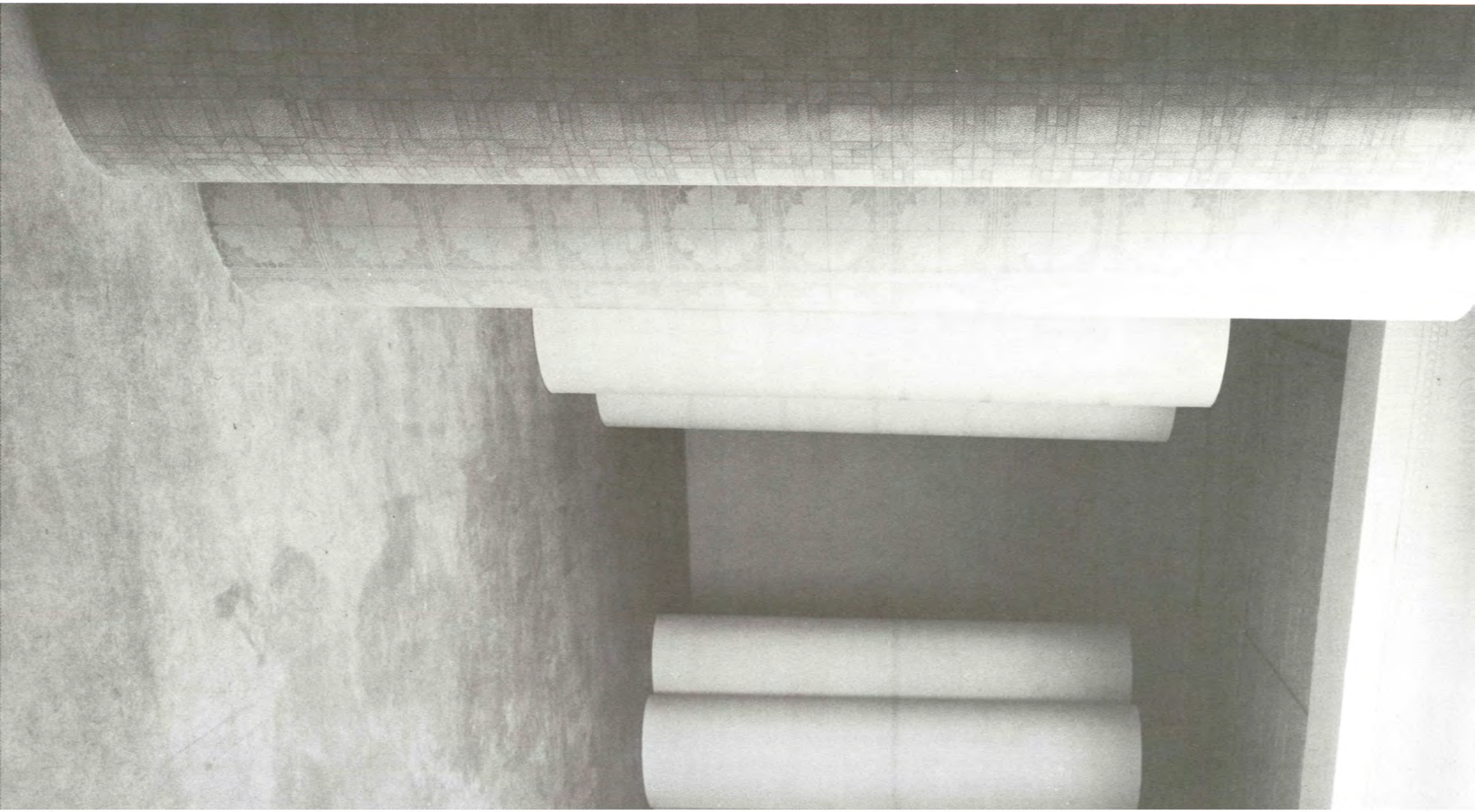

The magazine image serves the ideological process in assisting the reproduction of a reproduction. This is demonstrated almost seamlessly by the fireplace that projects from its own image within the photograph. Like the magazine, the fireplace has its material base in paper; it is a realized simulation. The linoleum helps to give reality, however artificial, to the fireplace. The fireplace in turn lends the image a reality that is reinforced through the scale of the blow-up. Just as the image in the magazine is reproduced on a printing press, so the whole "room" seems reproduced from a "press." The image is folded like an open magazine (it is actually depicted as a magazine), with one page seeming to roll out of the fireplace as if it were rolling off a vertical press. It is at this area of the installation that the vertical rolls, to which the fold is formally related, take on a different association. They are now covered in painted white cardboard, thereby taking on a reference to rolls of newsprint or magazine stock – the raw material of magazine production.

The rolls feed us through as if we were the product manufactured. The whole work functions to take us through and *back*, however, to lead us from the first part to the second and back, in order for us to realize the function of the first in the second, the role of production in consumption. In revealing the process of the production of objects *and* images, the linoleum press, therefore, is the dominant instrument here.

The fireplace, however, can play a positive role. It gives reality to the image, but it is also a disruption of the photographic surface, showing up that reality as fabricated. The fireplace is real and unreal, substantial and insubstantial. If we then examine the photographic blow-up, we notice that it has been manipulated. Another photograph has been inserted within the elaborate gilt frame of one of the paintings. It is also a disruption within these genteel surroundings, analogous to the insinuations of production and commerce and opposed to the repetitive, "one-of-a-kind" paintings surrounding it.

While the livingroom seems a place apart from production, it can be a place for the consumption of art, as the paintings in the photograph indicate. In the sense that it is a private place where things are invested with value, it functions like the studio for the artist. On the other hand, the studio seems to share the values of production suggested by the press. In directing attention to these two areas of production and consumption through a work of art, *Regal Décor* questions the practice of art and assesses the conditions within which it would be viewed and its identity mistaken. In affirming the value of the investment of labour in an artwork, it shows that art, too, is produced and has a history of making. Through that production, even the banality of the fake in *Regal Décor* takes on a positive value.

Born

1948 Winnipeg, Manitoba

Education

1966-68 University of British Columbia, Vancouver
1968-70 Parson's School of Design, New York
1970-71 Vancouver School of Art, Vancouver

Solo Exhibitions

1977 Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
1979 Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
Art Gallery of Southern Alberta, Lethbridge, Alberta
1980 The Ydessa Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
Production/Reproduction, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
1981 The Ydessa Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
Alberta College of Art, Calgary, Alberta
1982 The Ydessa Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
1984 The Ydessa Gallery, Toronto, Ontario
Canada House, London, England
1986 The Ydessa Gallery, Toronto, Ontario

Group Exhibitions

1973 *Stand Back You Fools*, Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B.C.
Process Editions, Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B.C.
Pacific Vibrations, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
1974 *Librations*, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, B.C.
1975 *Current Energies*, The Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montreal
Six Sculptors – New Works, Burnaby Art Gallery, Burnaby, B.C.
Young Contemporaries '75, London Regional Art Gallery, London, Ontario
1976 *West Coast Waves*, The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg
1977 *Four Places*, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
For the Birds, University of British Columbia, Fine Arts Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
1978 *Performance*, Art Gallery of Harbourfront, Toronto
Canadian Contemporary Sculpture, The Saidye Bronfman Centre, Montreal
Obsessions Rituals Controls, Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina
1981 *The Winnipeg Perspective 1981 – Ritual*, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg
1982 *The 4th Biennale of Sydney – Vision in Disbelief*, Sydney, Australia
Mise en Scène, The Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
1983 *1 x 2: Liz Magor and John McEwen*, Glenbow Museum, Calgary, Alberta
1984 *Ian Carr-Harris/Liz Magor: Canada XLI Biennale di Venezia*, Venice, Italy
Repositioning the Familiar, Glendon Gallery, Toronto
1985 *Toronto Now*, Sarnia Public Art Gallery, Sarnia, Ontario
Group Show, The Ydessa Gallery, Toronto
Aurora Borealis, Montreal, Quebec
Recent Canadian Sculpture, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Manitoba

Awards

1974-75 Canada Council Bursary
1977 Canada Council Short Term Grant
1978 Canada Council Short Term Grant
1980-81 Canada Council Bursary
1981-82 Canada Council Bursary

Books and Periodicals

Balkind, Alvin. "Four Places." *Vanguard* 6 (March 1977): 13-15.

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_____. "Liz Magor." *Artscanada* 37 (December 1980-January 1981): 39.

_____. "Modalities of West-Coast sculpture." *Artscanada* 31 (Autumn 1974): 68-73.

_____. "Western Triptych." *Artscanada* 33 (December 1976-January 1977): 44-51.

Malbert, Roger. "Six Perspectives: Mise en Scène." *Vanguard* 11 (September 1982): 8-13.

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List of Works

1 **Dorothy – A Resemblance** 1980-81
Lead, steel, synthetic rubber
90 x 121.5 x 86.0 cm
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

2 **Eighteen Books** 1981-82
Lead sheets, photocopies, light fixture
Approx. 4 x 11 m (overall)
Collection of the Artist,
courtesy of The Ydessa Gallery, Toronto

3 **The Most She Weighed/The Least She Weighed** 1982
Lead, aluminum
38.4 x 77.2 x 38.3 cm and 30.5 x 62.2 x 31 cm
Canada Council Art Bank, Ottawa

4 **Four Notable Bakers** 1983
Artist's book, 44 pp.
21.7 x 17.8 cm
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

5 **I have always weighed 98 lbs.** 1983-84
5 contact-printed photographs on masonite panels
Each: 122.0 x 91.0 cm
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

6 **Regal Décor** 1986
Machine: 183.0 x 350.5 x 122.0 cm
Fireplace and magazine: 243.8 x 437.0 x 51.0 cm
Linoleum rolls: 290.0 x 38.1 x 68.6 cm
Collection of the artist,
courtesy of The Ydessa Gallery, Toronto

Note: No. 1 shown only at Art Gallery of Ontario.
The 49th Parallel installation consisted of Nos. 2 and 6 only.

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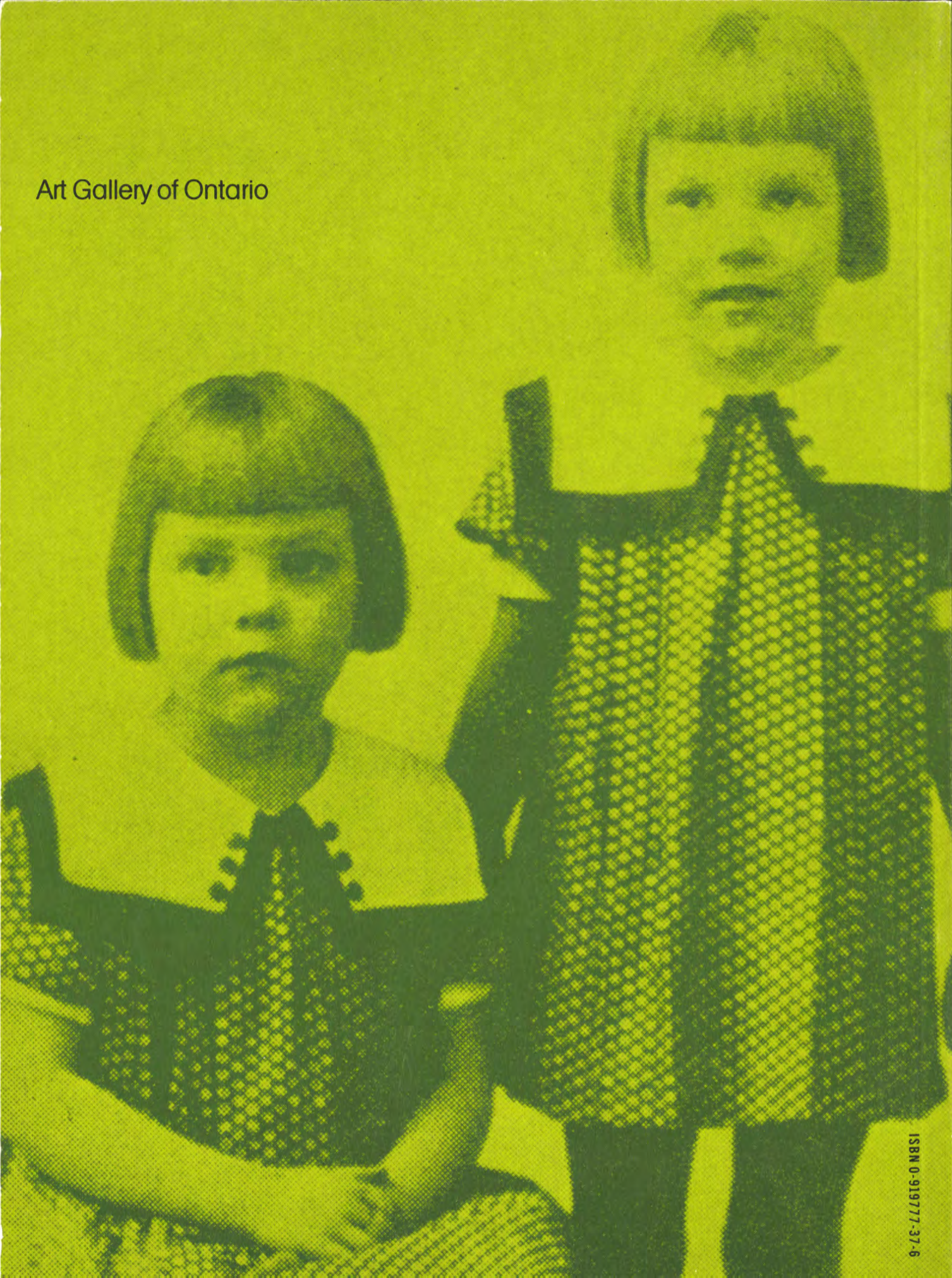

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