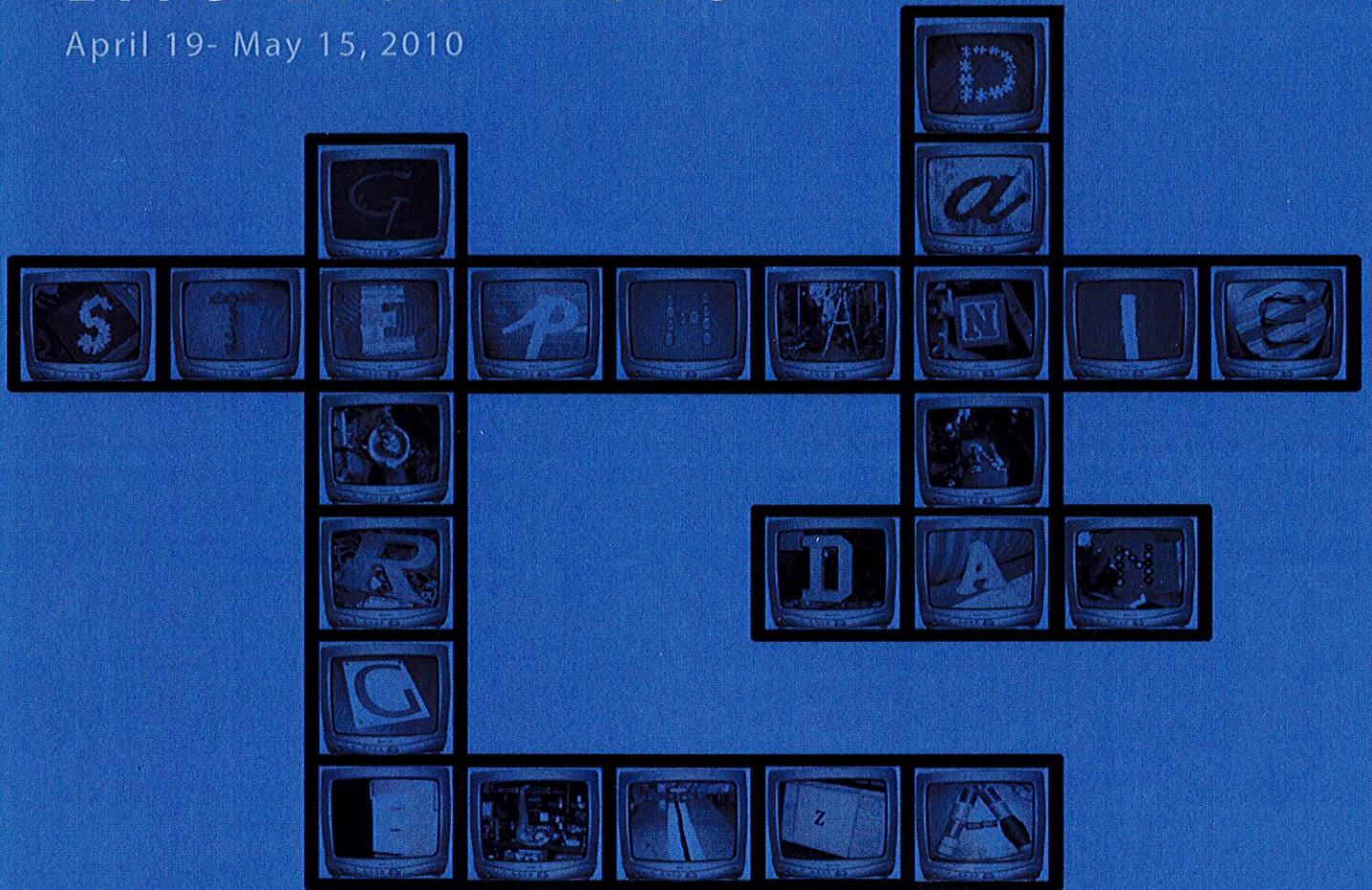
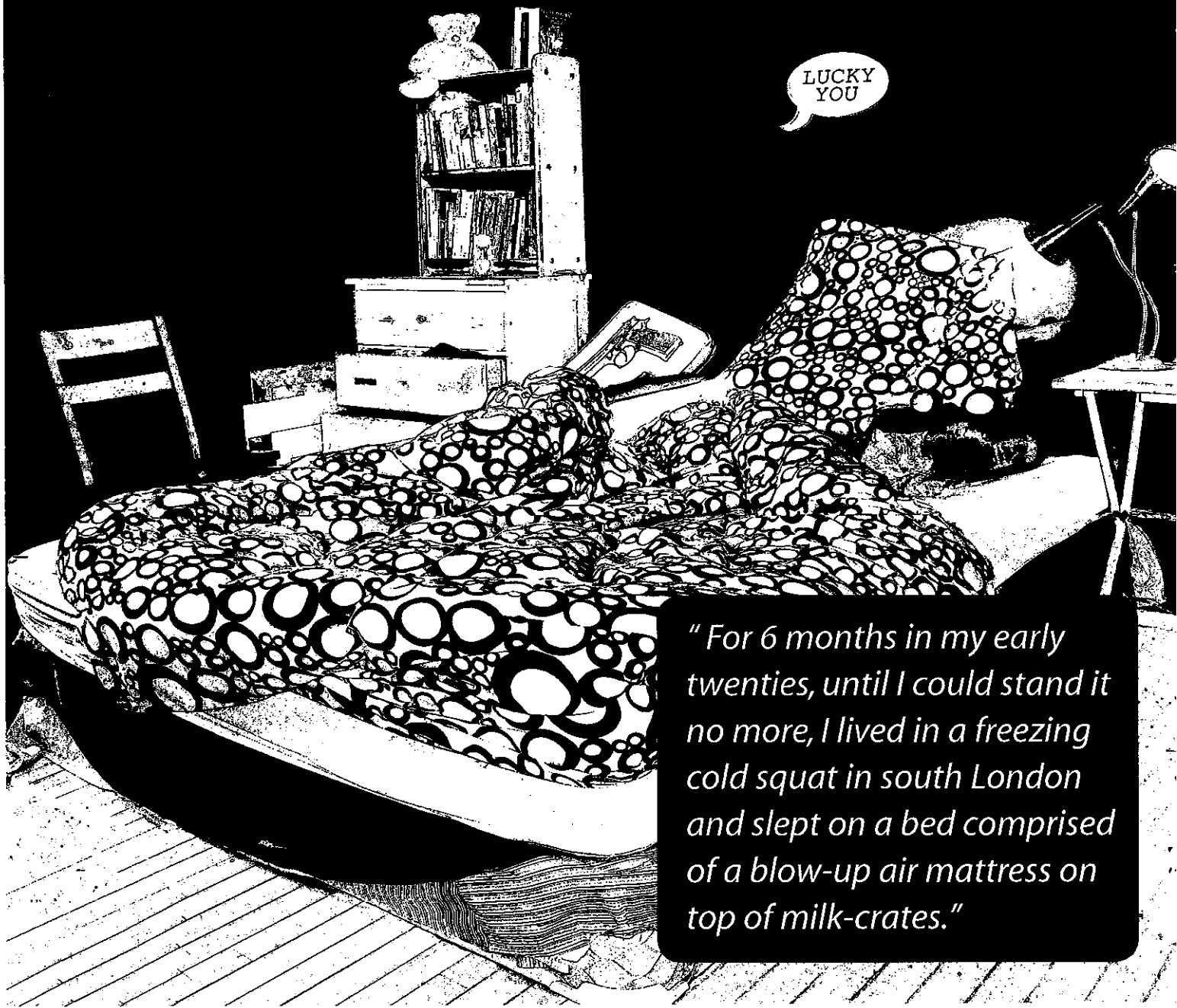


Rachelle Viader Knowles
Life Elsewhere

April 19- May 15, 2010



Art Gallery of Regina



"For 6 months in my early twenties, until I could stand it no more, I lived in a freezing cold squat in south London and slept on a bed comprised of a blow-up air mattress on top of milk-crates."

Life Elsewhere

Carmen Robertson

Wing-backed chairs, crossword puzzles, bedtime stories and beds; emblematic of stasis, rootedness and locatedness. Yet, **Life Elsewhere**, an exhibition of new work by **Rachelle Viader Knowles**, resists symbolic associations with contentment or comfort. The conventionality of seemingly banal cultural markers assume unsettling guises as the artist calls on them to question our sense of belonging and connectedness. Confrontation and unease greet viewers first placated by the iconic symbols.

Notions of displacement and trauma haunt the exhibition. The two works featured, **Life Across Words** and **Bed Time Reading**, engage themes commonly found in Knowles's work. Questions of identity and displacement remain present, problematized through language and cultural constructs. Yet here, the artist investigates fresh avenues of engagement. And, traumatic signifiers are offset by playfulness and witty engagement that force viewers to resist, or at least rethink some of the isolation present. Knowles offers a sophisticated exploration of our sense of place and belonging in the two works created for this exhibition.

In **Life Across Words**, a giant crossword puzzle serves as an imposing structure made up of 24 synchronized videos on CRT 13" televisions. The screens include letters and video footage. Knowles fashioned the high-tech puzzle out of the names of five men and women, each of whom visually inhabit the squares of the grid. Each letter on each screen is made up of found materials and chance images that cleverly spell out each name. Drawn first to the colours, sounds and whimsy of the game, we quickly recognize the control and inflexibility inherent in the grid system in which the players must operate. Entrapment and control dictate the movement and freedom of the five individuals framed within the puzzle.

Celebrated twentieth-century French author *Georges Perec* serves as the muse for this work. Perec's literary puzzles have long inspired the artist but it was her recent four-month investigation of his work while in Paris that pushed her to create **Life Across Words**. A Polish Jew whose parents immigrated to Paris in the 1920s, Perec wrote novels that often include the metaphor of the puzzle in the form of experimental wordplay and constructions of intersecting lives. In 1969, Perec produced a detective novel *La Disparition (A Void)*, in which the central puzzle deals with the disappearance of the e from the alphabet. In addition, he also created crossword puzzles for *Le Point* magazine in Paris. *Life: A User's Manual (1978)*, remains a complex narrative of lives of inhabitants of a Parisian apartment building governed by the structure of a chessboard.

Bed Time Reading repositions word play and puzzles. Comprised of a circle of wing back chairs and a series of black and white graphic images of beds hung on the gallery walls, this work affords an intimate moment of contemplation. An invitation to relax in a comfortable chair before bed and listen to a story typically forges bonds of homey comfort and reassurance. Settling into these chairs delivers on this promise partially as the act of sitting triggers an audio recording of a story heard through the wings of the chair back. Each of the chairs features a different story that relates to honest personal experiences of beds and bedtimes experienced around the globe at different times in the artist's life. Yet, domestic coziness is supplanted by anxiety and tension. Stories meant to lull one to sleep are replaced with personal narratives of displacement and trauma.

An impenetrable void at the center of the interlocking chairs presages the artist's intent. Knowles has peeled away the decorative layer of fabric to arrive at the inner workings of the chairs—springs, batting—laid bare. This inaccessible space bounds all that is embedded in the stories, chairs, and the imposing images of un-made, uninhabited beds that enframe this work.

The stark, graphic rendering of each bed reinforces the tossing and turning experienced by settling into the piece. Disheveled and unkempt, the uninhabited beds do not easily give up their secrets. These visual texts read like books and reference the stories related by the chairs. The bed images, assembled from paginated series of leaves seemingly taken from books, form a grid-like structure that replicates the confining structure found throughout **Life Elsewhere**.

Associations to Perec continue in **Bed Time Reading**. In Perec's *Species of Spaces* he undertook a project to make an inventory of "*Places Where I Have Slept*"—Knowles joins him with her contemplation of bed times. In the 1970s, Perec also became interested in cinema and made a film co-directed by *Bernard Queysanne*, based on his novel *Un Homme qui dort (A Man Asleep)* a text constructed as a monologue consumed with describing sleep states. Knowles attended a screening of the film in Paris in 2009 and *Bed Time Reading* emerged. In the filmic version of *A Man Asleep*, a female voice-over tells the story of the young man who attempts to detach himself from his physical existence and float freely. Knowles captures similar sentiments in her struggle to reconcile her own identity.

The works featured in **Life Elsewhere** pose questions that push far beyond notions of physical space distilled from a series of experiences gathered by the artist during artist residencies she took part in 2008-2009 on three separate continents and by Perec's writings and filmic experience. While Perec explores terrains of melancholy and indifference, Knowles contends with the explicatory puzzle to plumb issues of withdrawal

and engagement. Born in Bristol, England, brought up in Cardiff, Wales and now based in Regina, Knowles is especially sensitive to the sense of longing and loss that accompanies the freedom to move. In earlier works, such as *Home and Other Fictions*, Knowles, according to curator Hannah Firth, acknowledges "home is a word that lives somewhere between story and telling." Blurring fiction and reality, placement and displacement, **Life Elsewhere** takes up story/telling and word puzzles in pursuit of a space of habitation in the global imaginary.

Carmen Robertson

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About Carmen Robertson

Carmen Robertson is a Saskatchewan-born curator, writer and researcher. As an **Associate Professor of Art History** at the **University of Regina**, her research includes contemporary Indigenous arts, media constructions, and curatorial studies. She is currently writing a book on the art of **Norval Morrisseau**.



" My bed in Paris was a small, hard single bed with sheets and blankets, which I can't stand. I complained about it to my mother and she sent me a duvet in the mail. "

Life Across Words

Stephanie (steve) Sherman

It starts in the middle, three hours west from the ocean and three hours east from the mountains, in a small city in North Carolina, in the 600 block of South Elm Street. There, is a three story building filled to the brink with a massive 58-year collection of surplus, amassed by one woman, *Sylvia Gray*, during her tenure as proprietress of a series of stores at the site. Now, at any given time, twenty or so artists live and work amidst the former inventory. Towers of hats and boxes of ribbons and racks of dresses and mountains of fabric and heaps of shoes and layers of wallpaper and stacks of dishes and bundles of wood and drawers of buttons and oceans of books and bags of magazines and piles of radios and walls of machinery. Nothing is for sale. Instead the artists arrange them and rearrange them. We manipulate them and organize them and play with them and work with them and wear them and admire them and configure them and care for them and deconstruct them and reconstruct them and research them and collect them and disperse them and hold them. We puzzle together a museum with this infinitely derivative set of objects, in this Elsewhere where these things ended up.

Somewhere on a bedside table rests a book called *Life a User's Manual*. The story takes place in an apartment building, in Paris, addressed at 11 Rue Simon-Crubbellier. Picture the façade of a building gently pulled away, making 'simultaneously visible' the living rooms and bedrooms and bathrooms and kitchens and stairwells and attics and basements of the tenants within, revealing a whole map of the spaces that occupy daily happenstance. And during this particular summer evening just after eight before television has been invented, time has stopped, and now, in an instantaneous tableau of things, places, and inhabitants, we can see everything and every-one all at once.¹

The book's author *George Perec* was a founding member of the *Oulipo*, "the workshop of potential literature," a group inventing possible worlds through writing under constraints. To this day the Oulipians apply formal constructs, games of chance, and mathematical operations to combinatory literary productions; pre-determined rules generate a space for readerly play. To write this particularly extensive instruction book, Perec layered an organizing rubric (a ten story building with ten rooms on each floor—a hundred chapters for a hundred rooms), an ordering movement (our narrator traverses the building as the knight tours the chessboard, advancing one step straightforward and then two steps to the side) and an applied schema (a

typology of parameters for each chapter such as a floor type, required literary quote, number of pages, animal, color, etc.). The result is a book that proposes multiple operations for its use, which can be read front to back, or as a guide, or as a game, inserted from the middle, coalesced, indexical, take what you will. Horses running endlessly.²

Like the Oulipians, Elsewhere's founding artists applied a series of organizing principles to construct their museum scene: a set of objects (the 58-year inventory found upon their arrival); an ordering premise (internal eternal rearrangement); and a positioning (a signification system simultaneously particularly general and practically specific). The endless permeations from within the collection—re-composing, unfolding, tiling, tending, ad infinitum—premises the slippage between words and things, and most importantly, determines the outcomes of collaborative doing. We sleep in bedrooms, eat in a kitchen, work at desks and we also sleep in the kitchen, eat at our desks, work in the bedrooms. Here, all spaces are places. The things around us form words, continents, geographies, as our names determine types, species and families, which show us how to move, operate, and function. A fish is an animal but also a way of oceaning; breathe with your l's and sea with your gills. The library, the garden, the studio, the station, the front window, the wardrobe, the hallway, the workshop—everywhere we are.

Sometimes we are the same. Every square, room, television in the crossword is an apartment wherein lives a letter. Occupant vowels are four a's, three e's, two l's, and an o, and consonant occupants include two d's, two g's, one h, three n's, a p, one r, one s, one t, and a z (and leave out the b and c, the f, the j-k-l-m, the o, and the u, v, w, x, y series). We cobble together our persons, collecting ourselves at the junctures of a, n, and e's. George meets Eliza, Danna meets Stephanie, Stephanie meets George, Eliza meets George, Dan meets Danna, Stephanie meets Danna, and Danna meets Dan, George meets Stephanie. We realize all of the sudden that letters reside around us, secretly hiding amongst the furniture until we call them out and draw them into plain sight. Our imaginaries and memories of the alphabet hypothesize the character of the letter and the letter as a character—the escaping e, the tight-lipped j, the promiscuous s. Meanwhile, our names make us legible, literally. They turn us into words also, making us more thingly than we realize. We carry our names along; they recognize us in a process of reminding us of our very own occasional some-thing. We grow into our names as we maneuver away from them, as when people say, oh, you look like a so-and-so, as if to say strangely enough, we cannot be recognized in our names even though we carry them with us, even though they call us who we are. Our singular composites launch our pluralities, more moving than dwelling, more appearing than ducking away, evolving our reference to an invisible clue of which we are the key.

Rachelle Viader Knowles has offered us, through an infra-ordinary play, a tele-visionary form for compositing a book in a building and a building in a book. You can realize this scene's potential in any which way that pleases—perform as a game piece, read along with the letters, fall asleep in the story, and live, as inhabitator, purveyor, inventor, and stranger, of your own, usual name.

Stephanie (steve) Sherman

March 3, 2010

1. See *Species of Spaces*, where Perec outlines the plan for "*Life a User's Manual*" in the section "*Project for a Novel*"
2. See *Gabriel Orozco*, artist

About Stephanie Sherman

Stephanie Sherman is a writer, artist, and organizer exploring the magic of place and presence. As co-founder and a Collaborative Director at **Elsewhere Collaborative**, she oversees the transformation of a three-story thrift store into a living museum, an international residency program, and creative laboratory exploring collaboration through things. Her critical projects address the phenomenology of the smile, the story of Walter Benjamin's oeuvre, and the metaphors of architectures and epics. Stephanie grew up next to an amusement park. She holds an MA in Critical Theory from Duke and a BA from U. Penn in English Lit.

About Elsewhere

Elsewhere is a living museum, experimental residency program, and creative laboratory set within a three-story former thrift store in downtown Greensboro, NC. Each year, Elsewhere invites 35 artists to join its community of creators in building site-specific works from the 58-year collection housed within. View projects, collaborators, and concepts at <http://elsewhereelsewhere.org>.

Acknowledgements

This project was made possible by the **Canada Council for the Arts** through the **International Residencies** program including a four-month stay at **La Cité Internationale des Arts** in Paris to research the writings of **Georges Perec**, and a generous production budget to create these new works in response. I would like to thank first and foremost **Dr David Ogborn** for his involvement in this project from start to finish. His creative, technical and professional expertise infused all aspects of this project and to say that the works would not exist as is without him is truly an understatement. You can find more information about David's work at: <http://davidogborn.net>

I would like to thank my colleagues and students in the **Faculty of Fine Arts** at the **University of Regina** who contributed to this project in myriad ways: **Dr Carmen Robertson** for her insightful text, my Research Assistants **Zane Wilcox** and **Lisa Smith**, and students from **Print Media** and **Intermedia**, in particular **Amber Dalton**, paper-cutter extraordinaire. Thank you to the **University of Regina** for granting me research time enabling twelve months of 'life elsewhere', and to **Karen Schoonover** at the **Art Gallery of Regina** for taking a risk and agreeing to exhibit this new work before either of us had any clear sense of what it would be. I would like to thank **Dan, Danna, Eliza** and **George**, artists and facilitators at the **Elsewhere Museum** in North Carolina for generously agreeing to be participants in my project, and to **Stephanie Sherman**, Co-Director of **Elsewhere** for both her participation and contribution to this brochure. Elsewhere is an extraordinary place. If you find yourself in the vicinity of Greensboro, I encourage you to visit.

Rachelle Viader Knowles is an artist working in a broad range of contemporary media including time, text and lens-based installation. Her works have been installed, screened, performed and exhibited in galleries and festivals across the world, and she has participated in artist's residencies in France, Hungary, the UK, the USA, Canada and Argentina. Originally from the UK, she studied at **Cardiff Art College** and the **University of Wales** before and moved to Canada in 1994 to complete her MFA at the **University of Windsor**. She is currently an Associate Professor in the **Faculty of Fine Arts** at the **University of Regina**.

<http://uregina.ca/rvk>

Life Across Words

Rachelle Viader Knowles

24-channel synchronized video installation. Videos and photographs shot at the Elsewhere Museum, North Carolina, USA featuring Stephanie Sherman, George Scheer, Danna Rooth, Eliza Fernand and Dan White.

Video synchronization system designed by David Ogborn.

Metal shelving structure designed by Zane Wilcox.

Title conceived by Stephanie Sherman.

Bed Time Reading

Rachelle Viader Knowles and David Ogborn

8' x 7' black and white laser-printed, tiled images. Clear pins. Tentest backing. 7 interactive wing-backed chairs with embedded sound devices.

Interaction system designed by David Ogborn.

Audio production by David Ogborn at the Electroacoustics Space and Performance (ESP) studio, McMaster University.

Stories written and performed by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

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ART GALLERY OF REGINA

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COLLABORATIVE

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