

Special Section on Taking a Stand!: Activism in Canadian Cultural Archives

Note from the Guest Editors



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The papers gathered together here were presented in earlier forms at the second biennial conference of the Archives in Canada Conference Series, held in June 2007 at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa. The series, conceived and co-ordinated by Kathleen Garay and Christl Verduyn, with the ongoing support of Library and Archives Canada, aims at bringing scholars, archivists, librarians, and other professionals from the cultural community, together with the interested general public for the discussion of topics related to archives in Canada. Initiated at McMaster University in 2005, the first conference (“Turning the Knobs on Writers’ Closets”) focused on literary archives. Selected papers from that inaugural meeting appeared as a special issue of the *Journal of Canadian Studies* (vol. 40, no. 2), which Garay and Verduyn guest edited. Bearing in mind the multidisciplinary theme selected for the Ottawa meeting (“Taking a Stand! Activism in Canadian Cultural Archives”), as well as our goal of bringing this important research to the widest possible audience, we have divided the papers selected for publication from the 2007 Ottawa conference into two suites: one for the cultural studies journal *TOPIA* (Fall 2008) and the other in this issue of *Archivaria*.

The selection included here reflects a multi-faceted approach to the conference theme of cultural activism and archives. Focused on the archives of Canadian writers, poets, filmmakers, and visual artists - all of whom are involved with cultural activism and advocacy - this selection addresses, in widely differing ways, the conference’s three central questions: How is the intersection of art and activism demonstrated in archival holdings and how could this connection be better documented? How do activist or advocacy concerns overlap with imaginative creative work in artists’ archives? What new types of archival materials are emerging?

Our selection begins with Pierre Anctil’s study of the role of the Yiddish poet and memoirist, Sholem Shtern: “Préserver l’illisible : présences de Sholem Shtern dans la vie littéraire canadienne.” Shtern’s work is presented in the context of a wider effort to incorporate the cultural traditions of

Europe, particularly the cultures of Eastern Europe, into the fabric of Canada. While his more formal political leanings reveal him to be a left wing radical, Shtern's attachment to the Yiddish language represented a form of activism, which was just as political. Antcil makes it clear that embedded in the language were Jewish hopes for social and cultural emancipation; that these hopes could not be realized in Tsarist Russia made the preservation of the language all the more essential for newly arrived immigrants to Canada. Shtern's archives, donated to Library and Archives Canada following his death in 1991, reveal that upon his arrival in Montreal as a young adult in 1927, he found Yiddish culture in its golden age. Antcil clearly delineates Shtern's identification of Yiddish culture with the radical left, with the industrial workers of the city, as well as with the international Communist movement. While his archives date mostly from the 1950s and after, they reveal that Shtern's devotion to his causes, both activist and cultural, did not falter and that, in the end, his efforts won some success. He was finally able to win a measure of government support for his Yiddish language efforts in the context of the multicultural climate of the 1970s, despite his well-established record of militant Communism. Shtern's efforts at combining activism with creativity continue to bear fruit, particularly in the area of Yiddish Canadian literature, which now attracts the attention of researchers as well as readers.

The very existence of the archival record is the focus of Michele Wozny's contribution entitled "National Audiovisual Preservation Initiatives and the Independent Media Arts in Canada." Her article focuses on a historical survey of preservation initiatives as they relate to Canadian independent media arts documents, and the struggles of media artists as they strive to have their work accorded the recognition essential for it to be made part of Canada's archival legacy. Early film producers found themselves confronting long-standing views that distinguished between the prescribed realms of "high" (art) and "low" (entertainment) culture. While Canada's parliament recognized the need to preserve textual records as early as 1872, the focus for early moving images was on access, distribution, and subsequently, creation. Wozny demonstrates that preservation efforts in Europe and the United States finally found an official echo in Canada in 1937 with the creation of the Public Archives of Canada's Cinematographic Division. However, the unit was disbanded in 1941 following the establishment of the National Film Board. It took almost another twenty-five years of activist lobbying before the Canadian Film Archive was established in 1963. Even then - and to date into the twenty-first century - the battle for support for preservation initiatives continues, with the need for adequate funding always at the root of the struggle. Wozny argues that although preservation standards have gradually been developed, and an important addition to Library and Archives Canada's holdings of films and videos has recently been made through the deposit (1984-1991) of the Canada Council Film Collection, a sustainable strategy

for the long-term preservation of a national media arts collection remains elusive. The independent media arts community, Wozny notes, has launched several preservation initiatives of its own, but adequate conservation requires both technical expertise and suitable space, elements often beyond the reach of independent film producers.

The question of space and popular access to it is taken up in a very different context in Anne Bénichou's study of the work of Melvin Charney: "Les usages citoyens des espaces urbains : entre actualités, archives et œuvres." Charney is a contemporary Montréal architect-artist whose work has long been concerned with "the depletion of amenable public spaces."¹ In over thirty years of art production, Charney's complex work has included photography, graphic works, models, architectural interventions, and public sculpture projects. Bénichou's essay focuses on *UN DICTIONNAIRE...*, a work in progress in the form of an archive, which is included in the collections of the Centre for Canadian Architecture in Montreal. In contrast to his earlier ephemeral structures, between 1978 and 1989 Charney created a series of site-specific installations in Canadian, American, and European cities. One of the elements in *UN DICTIONNAIRE...* is a contextual representation of the space dedicated to democratic expression in Ottawa: the Canadian Tribute to Human Rights, unveiled in 1990. As Bénichou's discussion of *UN DICTIONNAIRE...* reveals, this distinctive, summative archival work presents a vision of archives as a technology for thinking about, and acting upon, the world in new and distinctly activist ways ("*machine à penser le monde et inciter à l'action*").

The selection of papers presented here shows artistic activism represented in a wide variety of forms, and hence, as widely varied in the nature of its archival documentation, with archival materials ranging from conventional correspondence and memoirs (in Yiddish, French, and English) to film, photographic, and architectural artworks. Yet despite the considerable variation in their material legacy, these culture creators would all surely find themselves in agreement with Foucault's assertion that the archive is not merely a passive collection of records from the past, but rather an active and controlling system of enunciation, "that which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence."² The subjects of all three essays presented in this suite clearly demonstrate the shared conviction that archives can, indeed must, provide an occasion for discourses of differentiated activism and hence, for social transformation.

1 Gary Michael Dault, "In Charney's Nightmare City, the Buildings Can't Stand Still." *Globe & Mail* (15 April 2006), p. R9.

2 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Paris 1969; repr. London, 1972), p. 129.