

be deemed worthy of conservation; the government's decision to fund paintings rather than photographs of the area is a testament to this interpretation. The discipline of photography was still seen as a purveyor of truth and fact in 1902, and perhaps it was feared that photographic images of the slum would only feed the desire to demolish the area rather than preserve it.

The juxtaposition between the original paintings and the archival evidence provided by the curators raises interesting questions about our perceptions of the past, and the "truth" found in archival documents. The exhibition reminds us that the nostalgia that influenced the painters is no less true than the official government documents, and both tell us valuable information about the attitudes and opinions of people at that time.

Perhaps one of the exhibition's most interesting features was the self-guided walking tour (available in paper format or as a smart phone app) of the actual buildings and streets in The Rocks, painted by the artists in 1902. Following the map, visitors could search out the exact spots where paintings were created, forming their own conclusions about what was lost and what was preserved.

The curators concluded that heritage concerns today do not differ that much from the initial 1902 project; they remarked that the impulse that drove the painters to seek a grant to document the neighbourhood foreshadows our own interest in preserving urban history. Such a conclusion, however, ignores the difference in attitudes between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. One hundred years ago, the paintings in the exhibit demonstrate that there was a real anxiety to hide uncomfortable truths about Australia's poor immigrant beginnings in order to create a noble story about the nation's founding. By contrast, in the twenty-first century, conservators seek to explore and understand the dark and unsavoury aspects of built heritage, recognizing that such truths do not diminish an area's historical value.

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**Vera Frenkel: Cartographie d'une pratique / Mapping a Practice.** SBC GALLERY OF CONTEMPORARY ART, MONTREAL. Mounted at the SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, 2 October–4 December 2010.

It is rare to see a contemporary art exhibition consisting almost entirely of archival documents – archives *per se*, not as materials repurposed for art-making – and engaging deeply with archival themes. In "Vera Frenkel: Cartographie d'une pratique / Mapping a Practice," curator Sylvie Lacerte and artist Vera Frenkel demonstrated that an artist's archives can hold their own in a gallery setting. The documents selected served multiple roles: as stand-ins

for elusive, time-based works of art; as intimate evidence of artistic process; and as an entry-point for understanding Frenkel's cyclical mode of working.

Vera Frenkel is a multidisciplinary Canadian artist whose work has included videos, texts, performances, installations, and Web art. The exhibition focused on three of her complex art works, forming a cross-section of thirty-five years of her career. The first of these, *String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video (Montréal–Toronto, 1974)* was a video-performance project that took place in two cities simultaneously via teleconference, with a five-member team in each city collaborating to enact the movements of the familiar cat's cradle game through choreographed improvisation. *String Games* has a continued existence as a gallery-based artwork in the form of video recordings of the performance in each city synchronously presented on two monitors. In the exhibition, however, the work itself was absent. Instead, archival records such as photographs of the rehearsals, correspondence documenting logistical aspects of the event, and notes on choreography evoked the process of its creation. The documents were displayed in two simple, tabletop vitrines, with additional photographs and enlargements of pages from the printed catalogue that accompanied the original transmission occupying the adjacent wall space.

The second featured work was the multidisciplinary video installation, "*...from the Transit Bar*" (1992–1996). Mounted several times, the work is a functional piano bar in which gallery visitors can have a drink and engage with the bartender, read newspapers from several immigrant communities, and watch – or overhear – a number of personal narratives that play on six video monitors situated throughout the room. The fragmented stories told in the videos recount displacement and loss. As with *String Games*, the work itself was not on display in the *Mapping a Practice* exhibition, but its video element was included in the form of six small monitors displayed on the walls opposite the gallery's entrance. Frenkel and Lacerte judiciously chose brand new, portable DVD players to show the videos, thereby suggesting both the historical distance from the original production and the media migration necessary to maintaining the art work. Material in two adjacent display cases included diagrams, computer programming charts, video scripts, and a bartender's logbook from the third iteration of the work.

The final piece in the exhibition was the recently created video project, *ONCE NEAR WATER: Notes from the Scaffolding Archive* (2008–2009). In contrast to the other two works, it was shown in its entirety as a work of art, with archival material playing a supporting role. As its full title suggests, *ONCE NEAR WATER* is perhaps Frenkel's most overtly archival-themed work of art. The text of its voice-over narration (read by Frenkel herself) is a report to an enigmatic Building Committee about an "archive" consisting of documentation of scaffolding at building sites in an anonymous city. The compiler of the documentation is a mysterious archivist identified only as Ruth. Images in the video include footage of building sites, digital renderings of scaffold-

ing, and photographs that seem to be excerpted from the scaffolding archive, each marked with an intricate alphanumeric code. Viewers catch glimpses of a city that resembles Toronto, but the exact setting is never specified. There are many layers of uncertainty in the work, and its air of mystery is paradoxically heightened by the impression that at its foundation lies hard archival evidence – but evidence of what? Viewers are left to form their own conclusions. This is a work of art that merits contemplation by anyone who thinks about archives.



**Figure 1: Frenkel Exhibit, SBC Gallery.** Credit: Image Paul Lacerte.

There are challenges attending the display of archival material in an art gallery setting. One problem is what to put on the walls: items in frames tend to be understood as works of art, which can be misleading. Another challenge is how to present documents in vitrines, letting them function as evidence and context while ensuring they have enough visual interest to hold a visitor's attention. In both regards, *Mapping a Practice* was successful: the wall-mounted material may have looked somewhat sparse in art gallery terms, but Lacerte and Frenkel's wise curatorial choices allowed the display cases greater prominence and avoided confusion between art and documents.

An underlying theme of the exhibition was that performance and media-based artworks could endure through time, but not without loss and change – and not without archival documentation to support them. The challenges of preserving media-based artwork – and the multi-media archival records that surround it – are readily imagined by any archivist who has grappled

with digital preservation. As reflected in the mandates of InterPARES 2 and the DOCAM project (Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage), media-based art is a broadly significant challenge for digital preservation because it underscores the significance of aesthetic aspects of the electronic record. In fact, Lacerte became intrigued by Frenkel's work and archival fonds when she encountered the artist during the DOCAM project, which Lacerte coordinated from 2005 to 2007. Frenkel's archives, then recently acquired by Queen's University Archives, served as a case study for the project; Frenkel herself reflected on her status as a "canary in the mine" of media art preservation in her keynote address to the 2006 DOCAM Annual Summit.<sup>1</sup> Both artist and curator are thus well versed in the challenges inherent in the preservation of Frenkel's work.

It is important to consider that the exhibition was realized with the artist's close involvement. As such, the documents were only one of the sources of knowledge about the past that informed the evocation of each artwork. Frenkel herself was available to assess the degree to which the chosen documents evoked the creative process surrounding each work. It would surely have been a very different show without her participation.

The catalogue for the exhibition is unusually substantial and scholarly, at eighty-one pages, and as a published record will help to ensure that the show has an afterlife.<sup>2</sup> Essays are in English or French, with abstracts offered in translation. Contributors include Anne Bénichou, an art scholar who has published extensively on issues related to archives and documentation; Alain Depocas, director of the Centre de recherche et de documentation at the Fondation Daniel Langlois and of the DOCAM project; and Stephen Schofield, a visual artist and one of the original participants in *String Games* who kept his own record of the experience. Of particular interest are Lacerte's own essay on the themes of the exhibition ("Les archives comme stratégie et fil conducteur d'une pratique") and Frenkel's contribution, which conveys a deep intellectual and creative engagement with the process of having her

- 1 Vera Frenkel, "Rules for Letting Go," DOCAM Annual Summit, 26 October 2006. Video recording available at <http://www.docam.ca/en/annual-summits/2006-summit/119-vera-frenkel.html> (accessed on 14 January 2011). Frenkel has been a pioneer in media art; she has boldly – seemingly presciently – adopted very novel technologies as platforms for her work. With *String Games*, for example, she made use of the Bell Canada Teleconferencing Studios, then so new that their potential for business use was far from realized and the company was willing to make them available to a contemporary art event.
- 2 Sylvie Lacerte, ed., *Vera Frenkel: Cartographie d'une pratique = Mapping a Practice* (Montreal, 2010). The catalogue is mirrored in an online version, hosted by the Fondation Daniel Langlois, which also includes video recordings of a conversational interview between Frenkel and Lacerte at the exhibition opening and a walk-through of the actual exhibition: "Vera Frenkel: Cartographie d'une pratique / Mapping a Practice," <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/f/page.php?NumPage=2230> (accessed on 15 January 2011).

archives collected and exhibited. In her poetic account, if memory is imagined as a river, then the archival fonds shapes its flow:

... [I]tems in a *fonds*, like scattered rocks in a riverbed, [shape] the flow of ideas that the *fonds* makes possible. If we can locate, even position, the rocks, and if they are big and heavy enough, their placement will have some effect on the path of the water, and it's the flow that matters – the archivist as custodian of the rocks and their location, the curator as agent of the flow ...<sup>3</sup>

The flow of memory, for Frenkel, has immense creative significance beyond the possibility of personal recollection. Her artistic practice is marked by the interconnectedness of individual works – images or characters sometimes recur over the course of decades – and by the continuing exploration of the theme of memory.<sup>4</sup>

Archivists played a significant supporting role in this exhibition, and their contributions are reflected in the catalogue. Most notably, Heather Home, the Public Services and Private Records Archivist at Queen's University Archives and the archivist responsible for the Vera Frenkel Fonds, contributed an essay that elucidates the nature of an artist's archives for an art world audience. Frenkel's archives, she writes, "allow us to peer below the surface and encounter the complexity of the individual, her life experiences, and the myriad idiosyncrasies, biases, beliefs, and feelings that enrich our understanding of the artist and the events that have shaped her life."<sup>5</sup> Home concisely explains the many forces – practical, accidental, self-censoring, materially intrinsic – that shape a personal archival fonds, and make it a worthy subject of examination and reflection. In his foreword to the catalogue, Paul Banfield, Queen's University Archivist, affirms his institution's strong support of scholarship and exhibitions based on its holdings.

Exhibiting documents in a venue that takes them well outside the archival repository and introduces them to new audiences is clearly beneficial from an archival outreach point of view. In particular, art galleries have their own well-developed standards and visual systems, and the approach to exhibiting archives in this setting can be worthy of attention. *Mapping a Practice* demonstrated the role archives could play in revealing the complex, creative processes of Vera Frenkel. More significantly, it made clear that archives themselves – not just the idea of "the archive," but the complex realities of the

3 Vera Frenkel, "The Pleasures of Uncertainty...", in Lacerte, p. 54.

4 Dot Tuer, "Threads of Memory and Exile: Vera Frenkel's Art of Artifice," in *Mining the Media Archive* (Toronto, 2005), p. 36. For a concise overview of Frenkel's art, see Tuer, "Vera Frenkel: Essay," The Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts – 2006, <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/prizes/ggavma/2006/tw127864864140881960.htm> (accessed 20 January 2011).

5 Heather Home, "Encounter with an Artist," in Lacerte, p. 13.

archival fonds – are profoundly fertile ground for the work of one of Canada’s most important contemporary artists.

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**Betty Goodwin: Work Notes.** ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO, TORONTO. Mounted at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 22 September 2010–24 April 2011.

Over the course of her artistic life, Montreal artist Betty Goodwin (1923–2008)<sup>1</sup> avidly created notebooks and sketchbooks, using them to record images, thoughts, quotations, and technical processes. These notebooks were central to her artistic practice and the vital role they played is clearly demonstrated in “Betty Goodwin: Work Notes,”<sup>2</sup> curated by Georgiana Uhlyarik, at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), where they are being displayed for the first time.

Goodwin’s notebooks comprise an integral part of her fonds, bequeathed to the AGO’s E.P. Taylor Research Library & Archives.<sup>3</sup> Along with the notebooks, the fonds contains correspondence, photographs, small objects kept in her studio, and other material, as well as 102 printing plates, a selection of which are also on display here.

“Betty Goodwin: Work Notes” is part of an exhibition entitled, “At Work: Hesse, Goodwin, Martin,”<sup>4</sup> which explores aspects of the studio practice of Eva Hesse, Betty Goodwin, and Agnes Martin. The three parts are thematically linked, however, each had its own curator. The exhibition as a whole is cohesive; it shows the varied approaches of these three mostly contemporary artists, and viewers are able to contrast the methodologies applied by these three, very different, artists. Each area is tightly focused on a particular aspect of the work and working process of the artist under consideration: “The Islands,” Martin’s suite of twelve subtle paintings;<sup>5</sup> the fragile and enigmatic “test” sculptures by Hesse;<sup>6</sup> and Goodwin’s notebooks and printing plates.

Although the artworks in each section are supplemented by documentary

- 1 See Jessica Bradley and Matthew Teitelbaum, eds., *The Art of Betty Goodwin* (Toronto, 1998) for a discussion of Goodwin’s life and work, including an extensive chronology and bibliography.
- 2 <http://www.ago.net/betty-goodwin-work-notes> (accessed 4 January 2011).
- 3 <http://www.ago.net/special-collections> (accessed 4 January 2011).
- 4 <http://www.ago.net/at-work-hesse-goodwin-martin> (accessed 4 January 2011).
- 5 See Ulrike Growe and Heinz Liesbrock, eds., *Agnes Martin : The Islands*, trans. Hugh Rorrison and Dieter Schwarz (Düsseldorf, 2004).
- 6 See Briony Fer, *Eva Hesse: Studiowork* (Edinburgh, 2009).