

Hank Bull: Connexion. BURNABY ART GALLERY, BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA, 20 January–6 April 2017. Curated by JONI LOW and PAN WENDT.

The concept of archives has surfaced in various programs of galleries and artist-run centres in Vancouver as these institutions investigate art histories in different ways. These initiatives have ranged from web-based projects like the Belkin Art Gallery's *Ruins in Process: Vancouver Art in the Sixties* and *Beginning with the Seventies: Activism, Art & Archives* to on-site exhibitions such as the Satellite Gallery's presentation about Vancouver's Mainstreeters art gang and Western Front's *Past Is Prologue* and Independent Archives Week, which the Front co-hosted with grunt gallery and VIVO.¹ Together these galleries have invited audiences into their institutional archives, hosted exhibits and events that highlighted historical works produced by resident artists, and advocated funding for the conservation and preservation of those works.

Curators Joni Low and Pan Wendt, along with the artist, performer, curator, pianist, documentor, advocate, and ultimate connector of people and ideas Hank Bull, are doing something more expansive in *Hank Bull: Connexion*, recently exhibited at the Burnaby Art Gallery in Burnaby, B.C.² Neither a retrospective nor a solo show in the usual sense, *Connexion* offers the viewer access to both the life and work of Hank Bull, as if from the starting point of his personal fonds, found in a gallery rather than an archives. One of the principles behind the organization of this exhibition was to demonstrate a contrast between museum and studio, public and private. The artist and curators chose objects and works from Bull's home and studio that reference aesthetic themes, political philosophies, and key collaborations that have been important throughout Bull's lifetime. Their choices are especially fascinating when considered alongside writings on personal archives and the expression of the self, including those published recently in the pages of this journal.³

Bull has a long history within Vancouver's art milieu: he was an early member of the Western Front and the founder of Centre A, and he is a current board

1 See *Ruins in Process: Vancouver Art in the Sixties*, <http://belkin.ubc.ca/online/sixties>; Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, *Beginning with the Seventies: Activism, Art & Archives*, <http://belkin.ubc.ca/future/beginning-in-the-seventies>; and Western Front, *Past Is Prologue*, <https://front.bc.ca/wwwf-collection/past-is-prologue>. Vancouver Independent Archives Week was held in March 2017, building on the success of the 2015 event.

2 In 2015 and 2016, the show toured to the Galerie de l'UQAM in Montreal, Saint Mary's University Art Gallery in Halifax, and the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown.

3 See, for example, Jennifer Douglas, "The Archiving 'I': A Closer Look in the Archives of Writers," *Archivaria* 79 (Spring 2015): 53–89. See also the contributions on personal archives in *Archivaria* 76 (Fall 2013) and Catherine Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals," *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001): 126–135.

member of the Vancouver Art Gallery and a beloved long-time community advocate and host of art auctions and other events held around the city. This exhibition is a rare opportunity to see original and nearly obsolete telecommunications media and technologies, with videotapes, posters, sculpture, documents, objects, props, and personal objects made or collected by Bull over a period of more than 30 years, from the late 1960s to today. Through the displays and juxtapositions of this material, the curators of *Connexion* explore ideas around the creation of self, community, and art-making as a lived life.

Documents are a major component of this exhibition, and they are presented in banker's boxes on shelves in the main room of the exhibition space. Each box is inventoried with reference numbers and file descriptions; one can perceive an original order through the categories of information represented on the box labels. Research is encouraged, and is rewarded with the promise of discovering additional connections, as referenced by the exhibition's title. The boxes are placed beside a large, round wooden table with four chairs, inviting the viewer to sit down, open them, and go through the folders. They are surrounded by framed works and pieces from the many projects referenced in the files. Document forms include personal correspondence, ephemera, school compositions, scripts, photographs, and posters. They present evidence of the making and development of a life of ideas, conversation, and networked art-making through collaborative projects, trips around the world, and performances. Bull, like the group who founded the Western Front, deliberately kept everything. Today, this material provides multiple contexts for and entries into the history of the objects and artworks displayed around it. Low sees these papers as presenting evidence of the different lateral ways of thinking, non-linear and non-hierarchical, that are represented in Bull's work.⁴

The Burnaby Art Gallery is housed in a former residence known as the Ceperley House. *Connexion* amplifies this homey, intimate atmosphere by making viewers feel as if they have been invited into the artist's personal space, to hang out in his living room with his friends, and to check out their things, each object eliciting a story. The display of works by Bull's collaborators expands the reach of this show; the aggregation of materials feels natural and alive in the present. In the gallery's reading room is a couch with a wool blanket woven by Bull's sister-in-law, beside which is a table displaying boxes of postcards and vinyl 45s collected by Bull. On the back of one postcard is a reference to a past conversation between Bull and the correspondent about *Documenta 8*, which has its own project file in one of the banker's boxes. There's a hooked rug made by Bull's mother, which is placed near the chairs on which you can sit and watch Norman

4 See Joni Low, "The Malleability of Identity Then and Now," a talk presented 31 March 2016 as part of the Or Gallery's series *Curating the Self* video, 67:09, 3 Aug. 2016, <https://vimeo.com/177463049>.



Hank Bull's installation of boxes at the Burnaby Art Gallery. Photograph by Shyla Seller, 2017.

Cohn's video of a day in the life of Hank Bull, titled "How We Lived." (In this video, the camera follows a young Bull around his home and neighbourhood as the artist introduces the viewer to his local grocery store and fishmonger, and shows off his favourite publications, discussing how one's personal attitude can effect change through ways of living and being and working with others.)

On the second floor of the gallery is the Transmission Table, a studio-like display of some of Bull's recordings and communications equipment, including telephones and a slow-scan television he used in performances and for collaborations. Other material in this section of the display includes the artist's collection of shadow puppets, a still, and spears originally found in the Western Front, formerly used by the Knights of Pythias, who previously occupied the building where the artist-run centre, and Bull himself, reside today. The meaning of these objects and works has shifted over time, and continues to shift as new juxtapositions emerge. *Connexion* invites audience participation and active creation of meaning through the inherent interrelatedness of the materials in Bull's fonds – certain elements have been pulled out and highlighted by the curators and the artist, but much more material is there to research and unearth.

The exhibition does not present its archival materials as untouchable, rarefied artworks that sit behind glass or under lights – their research and

informational value are preserved and hold meaning through their presentation. Because of this, there's a blurring of the public and private spheres; Bull's fonds is not only a record of his professional activities, but it is also an extension of himself, and he has opened it up to the public. His way of life is his art practice, and the records, objects, and works (his own and those of others) that he has aggregated simultaneously explore and perform these ideas of community-building and communal art practices. *Connexion* makes sense as an expression of the potential for conversation and community that Bull has always supported and encouraged. Through the exhibition, everyone is invited to remember, learn, and explore different ideas of life- and art-making. For archivists, especially those working closely with personal records, this exhibition is an opportunity to witness and explore possibilities of pushing the boundaries of what can constitute a fonds, the relationship between a person's archives and the expression of the self, and what meanings can be generated for the researcher or viewer.

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