

Carol Sawyer: The Natalie Brettschneider Archive. Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, 28 October 2017 – 4 February 2018. Curated by Bruce Grenville.

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The Natalie Brettschneider Archive, at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2017–2018, deftly weaves together archival fact and archival fiction to craft an exhibition that tells a story about one (fictional) woman, a genre-blurring performance artist named Natalie Brettschneider, and her connections to a wider network of (actual) creative women. Visual artist Carol Sawyer's installation resembles a historical display constructed from documentary traces and other evidence left behind by Canadian women artists who were active in the early 20th century. Sawyer has spent the past two decades creating and documenting multimedia performances that feature Brettschneider. As part of this body of work, Sawyer has produced a rich range of records, including juvenilia, correspondence, official documents, photographs, and moving images. Within the exhibition, these records manifest as a child's notebook filled with imaginative doodles, 8 mm and 16 mm "found" historical footage,¹ and other convincingly "archival" documents.

During the same 20-year period, Sawyer undertook extensive archival research in various regional and national archival institutions, including the City of Surrey Archives, the Vancouver Art Gallery Archives, Carleton University Archives and Research Collections, the City of Victoria Archives, Library and Archives Canada, and the National Gallery of Canada. There, she found archival

¹ One of the key films of the exhibition, *The Rehearsal*, made in collaboration with artist Evann Siebens, can be viewed on Carol Sawyer's website: <http://www.carolsawyer.net/work/the-rehearsal/>.

traces of national and local artists, musicians, actors, and poets, including Vera Weatherbie, Irene Hoffar Reid, Gladys Ewan, Virginia Ryan, and Francis Duncan Barwick. While conducting this research, Sawyer found that the records documenting these real women amount to what Catherine Hobbs has termed the “flotsam of the individual life.”² Selected documents and items, including a few artworks, a sparse collection of personal items, photographs, and the odd textual document are interspersed among – and placed into dialogue with – Brettschneider’s records throughout the three rooms that make up the exhibit. Small slices of the exhibit are dedicated to these women artists, allowing the viewer to compare Brettschneider’s fictional training, development as an artist, and career with those of her real contemporaries, and forcing the viewer to confront the difference in scale of the available documentation.

Sawyer has characterized her project as a feminist intervention into art historical narratives, which either are silent on the topic of women’s contributions to art or cast women as passive muses for male artistic geniuses. Her critique was thrown into sharp relief by the concurrent Vancouver Art Gallery exhibition, *Portrait of the Artist: An Exhibition from the Royal Collection*, which brought together portraits and self-portraits of famous artists spanning six centuries and was dominated by male artists.

In making her intervention, Sawyer utilizes a number of archival concepts and common realities. For example, she plays with genres of records by perfectly imitating the form and context of genuine archival correspondence (including intrinsic and extrinsic forms, from official stamps to coffee stains) in order to document a noise complaint about Brettschneider’s “caterwauling.” She likewise overcomes the difficulties presented by a lack of provenance for the records by employing the trope of archival documents discovered through serendipity: a photograph of Brettschneider with an Ottawa music ensemble (see figure 1) was “lodged behind a baseboard” of a sun porch, while images of a performance in Kamloops were “found in a box of negatives left in the attic” of a local residence. Meanwhile, verisimilitude and authority are added by notes of thanks written to an archivist for identifying points of connection between Canadian artists and Brettschneider.

Confronted with the imagined personal archive of Natalie Brettschneider, particularly in contrast to the surviving traces of the real women artists,

2 Catherine Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals,” *Archivaria* 52 (2001): 131.



FIGURE 1 “Natalie Brettschneider and unknown music ensemble at the Booth family residence, Ottawa. Unknown photographer, around 1947. Gift of Justin Wannacott, 2015.” Photograph © Carol Sawyer.

the viewer is reminded of the limits of the theories and practices of archival selection and appraisal, which so “fundamentally influence the composition and character of archival holdings and, thus of societal memory.”³ The women artists whose traces Sawyer has included in the exhibition certainly had the means to create records; they were white, educated, and often related to or married to male artists. Yet, even this privileged class of women seems scarcely represented in the archival record. Although records about these women were preserved in archives, as evidenced by Sawyer’s research, their presence there can seem

3 Joan M. Swartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 3.

almost incidental. They are generally included because of their relationships to or with male figures or institutions, rather than as artists in their own right. This lack of representation in archives is what Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario Ramirez have termed *symbolic annihilation* – a phrase that describes the experience of members of marginalized communities who feel absent from or misrepresented by archival collections.⁴

Sawyer's creation of an invented archive documenting the life of an imagined woman artist is a response to the symbolic annihilation she herself has experienced as an artist looking for precedents for her own interdisciplinary practice. As Sawyer puts it, "Say you've never seen yourself reflected in any historical accounts so you're made to feel marginalized, and you're this freaky person. When you realize that history is constructed by the victor – and they exclude what they don't want. . . . History becomes more porous and you discover you have all kinds of precedence for your freaky-ass self."⁵ The shortcomings of the archival record led her to invent and document a story in which she was centred and allowed to see herself fully represented.

Through this invention, Sawyer enacts the idea of *representational belonging*, a term theorized by Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez as a "counterweight" to symbolic annihilation. Representational belonging describes how "community archives give those left out of mainstream repositories the power and authority to establish and enact their presence in archives in complex, meaningful and substantive ways."⁶ Through the creation and documentation of Brettschneider, Sawyer allows a fictional woman artist a degree of representational belonging that is not always available to her real counterparts. Brettschneider thus acts as a stand-in for all female artists who have slipped through the gaps of history and currently languish in obscurity, or who have gained notoriety only as models or muses for more famous male artists.⁷

Ultimately, the *Natalie Brettschneider Archive* is successful in its attempts to highlight and counter this historical bias. Sawyer centres a female artist

4 Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016): 75, 59.

5 Ben Dextraze, "The Natalie Brettschneider Archive," *Iconochasm*, 2017, accessed 6 July 2018, <http://iconochasm.com/past-productions/thenataliebrettschneiderarchives/>.

6 Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing,'" 74.

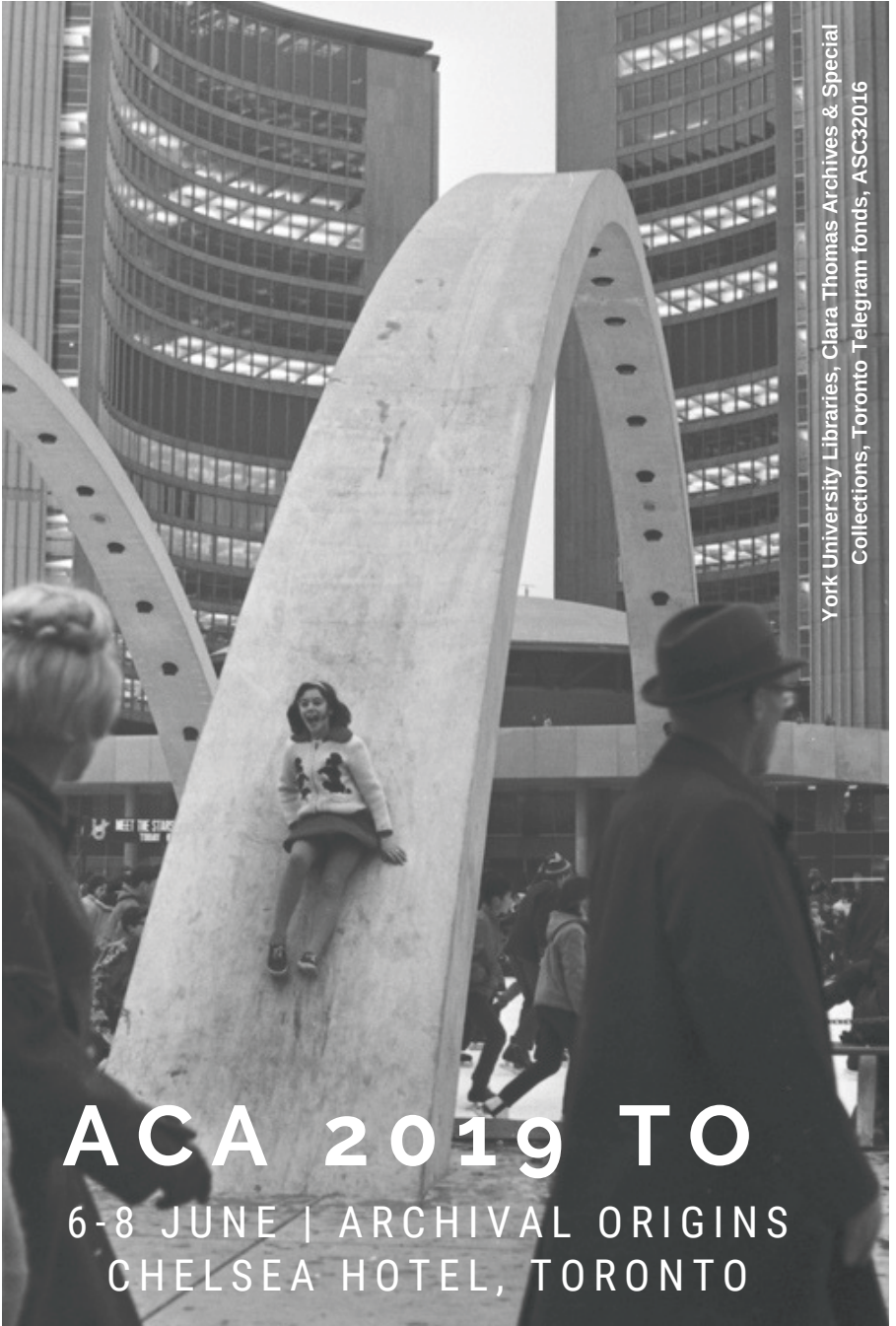
7 "Natalie Brettschneider," Carol Sawyer, accessed 7 August 2018, <http://www.carolsawyer.net/work/natalie-brettschneider/>.



FIGURE 2 *“Natalie Brettschneider and unknown pianist, Banff Centre for the Arts. Unknown photographer, around 1951. Acquired with the assistance of Sarah Fuller, Banff Centre, 2012.” Photograph © Carol Sawyer.*

through a robust array of archival documentation and offers a stark contrast to the worn scraps and slivers that survive for most women artists. In addition to this thought-provoking central critique, there is much for archivists, in particular, to enjoy about Sawyer’s imaginative, humorous, and subversive archival creation. Perhaps most importantly, through her creation, Sawyer surfaces artists who have been unjustly absent from the archival record. Like the fictional Brettschneider photographs found stuffed behind baseboards or in boxes in the attic, the real artists in Sawyer’s exhibition have been given a new opportunity to be discovered and appreciated.

Documents from the Brettschneider archive first appeared in the group show “Facing History” at the Presentation House Gallery in 2001, then as a solo exhibition at the Kelowna Art Gallery in 2009. Since then, the archive has travelled to Ottawa, Victoria, and Vancouver. The next stop is the Windsor Art Gallery in Ontario in 2019. A monograph on the project is currently in production and will launch in conjunction with that exhibition.



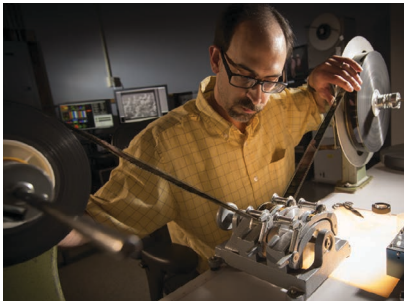
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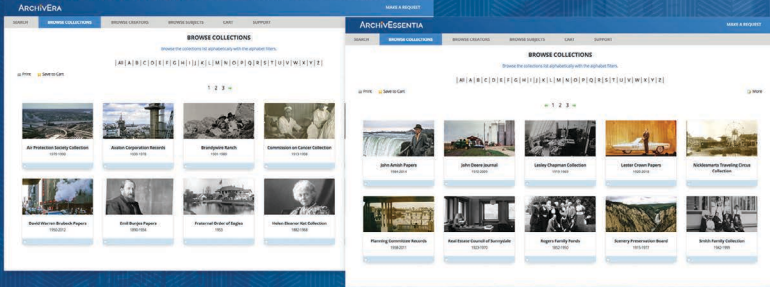
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