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Lilly A. Koltun

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FIGURE 1 *Lily Koltun, August 10, 1987, Ottawa, Canada, photograph by Yousuf Karsh. Library and Archives Canada, Yousuf Karsh Fonds, e010689959, ©1987 Yousuf Karsh. Courtesy of the Estate of Yousuf Karsh.*

# Lilly A. Koltun

1951–2021

In early December 2021, under tight COVID-19 restrictions, more than 100 masked friends, family, and colleagues gathered in Ottawa for a Celebration of Life for Lilly Koltun, who died on November 21, 2021; she was 70. It was a bittersweet reunion for the staff of the old National Photography Collection, who turned out en masse. But it also brought together, in animated conversation, archivists, staff, and administrators from Library and Archives Canada and the wider archival community; curators from the National Gallery of Canada; faculty and students from Carleton University and the University of Ottawa; and citizen-advocates for arts and culture in Ottawa. Speakers from Lilly's archival past and artistic present spoke of her activities and accomplishments with a mix of personal history and professional humour, shedding light on a life lived fully and cut short too soon.

Lilly Koltun began her public service career after completing an Honours BA in Art History from the University of Toronto (1973), an MA in the History of Art from the prestigious Courtauld Institute of Art, London, UK (1974), and a stint as an artifact researcher (1974–75) at the then–National Museum of Man. She joined the Public Archives of Canada in 1976, and during her first five years there, was an archivist in Photography Acquisition and Research. They were heady days to be working in Photo A&R. The recently formed National Photography Collection made the Archives a leader in a new field nurtured by museum curators, auction houses, private dealers and collectors, exhibitions, journals, and conferences dedicated to historical and contemporary photography. It was a time when acquisition budgets were healthy and photo archivists made decisions without micromanaged oversight; when exhibitions and publications were considered integral parts of daily work, professional development, and

outreach efforts to make Canada's photographic heritage more widely known to the general public; and when a fledgling computer system and a bespoke database launched a new era of description and access on a network of 10. Lilly was in her element, and we all thrived.

In 1982, Lilly moved up the ladder to become chief of the section and head a team research project on amateur photography in Canada. This resulted in the acquisition of some 30,000 photographs, including work by internationally celebrated pictorialist Sidney Carter; a major touring exhibition; and the landmark publication *Private Realms of Light: Canadian Amateur Photography, 1839–1940 / Le coeur au métier: la photographie amateur au Canada, de 1839 à 1940*. During the academic year 1985–86, Lilly took a one-year leave to become a visiting assistant professor in the Master of Archival Studies program at the University of British Columbia. Shortly after returning from Vancouver, she became director of the newly amalgamated Documentary Art and Photography Division, where she also established and directed the Canadian Museum of Caricature and founded and managed the Canadian Postal Archives. Her achievements during this time were many – and a harbinger of things to come: she navigated the transfer of historic philatelic collections from Canada Post and engineered the repatriation from the American Banknote Company of Canadian philatelic collections that were in imminent danger of being dispersed at auction through Christie's New York. Her crowning achievement was surely the acquisition of the extensive fonds of internationally renowned Ottawa photographer Yousuf Karsh. As the director of the Karsh Estate has acknowledged, Lilly's unwavering support for Karsh's work and her efforts to ensure its preservation have had a profound effect on his legacy, and the strong relationship she established with Estrellita Karsh and the Karsh Estate continues today.

In the mid-1990s, Lilly requested and was granted educational leave to pursue doctoral studies at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, where she earned her PhD in 1997 with a magisterial thesis on the history of Canadian photographic portraiture. Returning to the Archives in the spring of 1995, she took up the position of director general, Policy Branch, and subsequently served as director general, Preservation Branch, and concurrently as director general, Project Archives Place of the Future (the Archives Headquarters Accommodation Project). During this time, she oversaw major infrastructure projects, including the completion of the Gatineau Preservation Centre and the move-in of staff and holdings; planned the renovation of the West Memorial Building; obtained preliminary project approval

for a new nitrate film storage facility; and was involved with the founding of the Audio-Visual Preservation Trust of Canada, a charitable, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the preservation of Canada's audio-visual heritage and facilitating access to regional and national collections through partnerships with members of Canada's audio-visual community.

Capping off a remarkable career, in 2001, Lilly was appointed director general of the Portrait Gallery of Canada, a cause she had spearheaded when still in charge of art and photography. For the remainder of the decade, her commitment never wavered; she deftly and doggedly stick-handled around bureaucratic and political obstacles until a change in government led to the demise of both the Portrait Gallery and the AV Trust. She retired from the Archives in 2010 but never gave up on her vision and, working tirelessly with supporters in both government and the private sector, continued to advocate for the creation of a national portrait gallery.

The Archives, its staff and colleagues, collections and researchers all benefited from the dedication and energy, intelligence and wit, leadership and mentoring that Lilly brought to her work. She dreamed big and was demanding of herself and others – and those lucky enough to work with her were carried along for the ride. Her former Archives colleagues, many of whom made the trek to Ottawa from Montreal and Kingston, responded to news of her passing in similar terms, calling her amazing, incredible, brilliant, creative; “a force to be reckoned with”; “a force of Nature”; “always a fighter”; and “a true inspiration.” She was remembered as “the best of colleagues, and the very best boss”; “a formidable advocate for the Arts”; “a model for the successful integration of flamboyance in everyday work life”; “a dedicated custodian of our pictorial heritage”; and “someone with the largest of smiles.” The Celebration of Life was not only a measure of love and respect from former and current Archives staff, co-workers, supervisors, and protégés but was also a testament to one woman's impact on an institution she served with passion, dedication, imagination, and courage.

After leaving the Archives, Lilly was head-hunted for an array of museum and teaching positions but decided to do what most of us will never have the opportunity, energy, or guts to attempt: return to the fork in the road and follow afresh the path she had not taken in 1971. Leaving behind a successful 30-year career as a civil servant, art historian, photo-archivist, and cultural administrator, she enrolled in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at the University of Ottawa. Her

transition from studying art and researching photographs to making art and taking photographs was accomplished with both enthusiasm and flair – and a radical change in dress and coiffure. Blue jeans and a distinctive fuchsia swath through close-cropped hair signalled her new life as Lilly-the-artist. She quickly established herself in the fields of sculpture, performance, and video art; won awards; and was one of two artists featured in the *Ottawa Citizen's* New Year's Eve spotlight on "Ottawa's People to Watch" in 2016. After earning her BFA in Visual Arts in 2014 from the University of Ottawa, Lilly wasted no time and enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program. Despite serious health setbacks that put her in a wheelchair in mid-August 2019 and kept her in hospital for most of the next two years, she completed her degree requirements and received her MFA in Visual Arts in a small ceremony in her room in the Ottawa Hospital, just two months before death brought her second career as an acclaimed artist to an abrupt and untimely end.

Throughout her life, and especially in her retirement, Lilly drew on her interests and experience as an art historian, photo archivist, cultural administrator, and adjunct research professor to pursue lecturing and publishing; serve on thesis and awards committees; undertake major national and international consultancies; and sit on advisory boards. She also hosted a Rogers television series, *Ottawa's Art Seen*, broadcast in 2011–12; delivered over 100 lectures in Canada and worldwide; published scores of articles and essays in a variety of scholarly and popular publications; produced several edited collections; and curated numerous exhibitions.

Outside the Archives, gardening and cooking were Lilly's passions. In the garden, she planted with courage and flair, and she reaped the rewards in a profusion of scent and colour. In the kitchen, she whipped up beautifully hosted, spectacularly orchestrated multiple-course dinners, seeing every dinner as an opportunity to try out a new recipe.

Ever positive, Lilly faced a devastating diagnosis, multiple surgeries, and a series of setbacks with the same courage, dignity, and resilience with which she had stared down obstacles throughout her career, went toe-to-toe with unimaginative bureaucrats, and bounced back from disappointments as she watched the rise and subsequent dismantling of her many exciting initiatives – from the Canadian Museum of Caricature to the Portrait Gallery of Canada. Part unstoppable force, part immovable object, Lilly inspired a loyal following and was always there for family and friends, for her cats and causes. She will be sorely

missed by all whose lives she touched. On the eve of her Celebration of Life, I had a note from an old friend in Scotland, who conveyed that Lilly's many Scottish friends "had such affection and felt so much admiration for her and not just because her doctorate was from St Andrews University." Rather, he wrote, "Lilly lit up our lives . . . and we have the happiest memories of being with her." And that is exactly what was celebrated in a packed room on a cold, snowy December afternoon in Ottawa.

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