

**Your place at the bar is reserved.**

• We're in a bar, on a train, with a piano player? I can't believe this. This is not true!

• Yeah, I come here maybe once a week.

• My mother said to me, 'I want you to jump off here.' **BETWEEN WORDS**

• I see some there and look their daughter and will be the same.

• They think that what we're going to do is come there and look their daughter and will be the same.

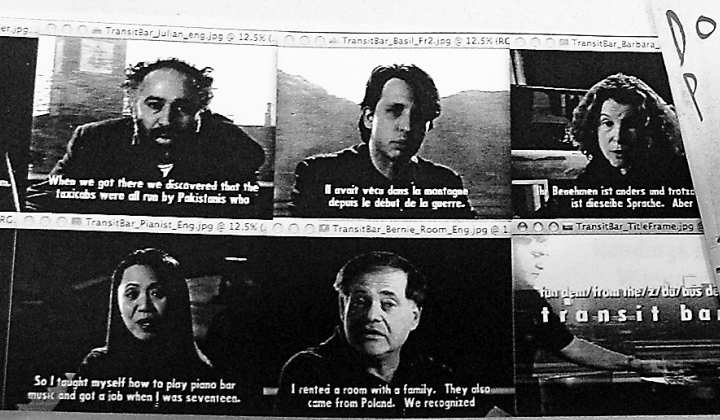
• They recognized each other by the way we spoke.

• I got it through an ad in the newspaper.

• They thought that what we're going to do is come there and look their daughter and will be the same.

• I want you to jump off here. I'm going to save

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P A S S



# CAPTURE AND LOSS: MEMORY, MEDIA, ARCHIVE

## 1.

Years ago, drawn to the ambiguity of the letter X, the sign that indicates cancellation while at the same time marking the spot, I centered a body of work—drawings, collages, performances, and texts—on its contradictory meanings.

Now, decades later, thinking about what I find compelling about archives, I see that I'm drawn again to that same oscillating duality and to the notion that a letter, a poem, a photograph, a sketch, can remain evocative while at the same time be relegated to the past and deemed “over,” since the archive, generally understood, cancels as it asserts.

For media artists, working inside the kind of transience brought about by exponentially increasing change, especially in the areas of recording and electronic memory, and aware that so-called new media are as fugitive as alizarin crimson in sunlight, a fascination with archives and their aura of absent presence is unsurprising, their parallel uncertainties offering a perfect exchange of allegories.

I'm reminded of my first exploration of the archive as both context and form via an exchange of letters between the archivist R. Austen-Marshall, Director of the Cornelia Lumsden Archive, and Peggy Gale, co-editor of the anthology, *Museums by Artists*.<sup>1</sup> Much has happened in the quarter century or so since then but in the delightful way things have of recurring, whether by coincidence or, if you prefer, delayed synchronicity, I find it both comforting and uncanny that I am again writing for Peggy Gale, editor of this issue of PUBLIC, bound once more by a shared consideration of the nature of the archive.

It was not generally known that R. Austen-Marshall was as fictive as his expatriate subject, the missing Canadian novelist, Cornelia Lumsden. My invention of the Lumsden figure was disclosed by a journalist a decade or so after a video account of her “Remarkable Story” first appeared. R. Austen-Marshall was not recognized as a pseudonym, and I have not until now discussed this fictive figure of the archivist since the focus had to be on the absent novelist.

That focus continued at Expo '86 in Vancouver, in the context of *Au pied de la lettre*, the exhibition curated by Tom Graff for the Canada Pavilion, based on the work of four famous Canadians. He had chosen to feature Glenn Gould, Hugh LeCaine, and Marshall McLuhan, and felt that Cornelia Lumsden belonged in that company.

Although I was aware that there had been elaborate diplomatic negotiations with the Gould, LeCaine, and McLuhan executors, and that the documents and objects on display (including Gould's hickory piano, LeCaine's first synthesizer, and McLuhan's manuscripts) had come from their estates, I didn't think of it as an archival exhibition. I was focused on exploring the archetype of the expatriate artist—and her view of Canada from abroad—and simply took delight in seeing the Expo '86 tour guides in front of the Lumsden display case, introducing her as a cherished figure, evoked as were the others by items that signalled at the same time both her presence and her absence.

Leaping forward again to my current work in progress, tentatively called *The Blue Train*, a work based on explorations of the Black Star Archive of documentary photographs given to Ryerson University as an anonymous gift<sup>2</sup>, I'm considering opening one video passage with the words:

*Memory is a trickster*  
*Memory is a nest of lies.*  
*Memory gives you hope where none resides . . .*

. . . and so on. Not exactly cheerful but appropriate for that particular thread of the narrative. It's up to the viewer to decide whether I really mean it. Since I see encouragement of viewer skepticism as part of my job as an artist, I have no difficulty mixing evocations of love and longing with the suspicion that such memories can be misleading.

Living in a world of constantly shifting realities is hard work, but believing in fixed absolutes exacts its own price. However one may view the vagaries of experience, the unreliability of history, the fear of dying and its unknown aftermath, it's a fact that the ongoing multiplicity of media and their evolution extends the artist's reach right into the belly of the culture and out into the unknown. Given all that, I'm content, for the time being, to see memory as a trickster and to admire those who try to contain and protect it, archivists in particular.

## 2.

The fact that issues of archives and archiving have mysteriously converged in my life and work was brought into focus by an invitation to chair *Raiding the Archive*, a panel at the 2010 Experimental Media Congress.<sup>3</sup>

This required that we—the gathered filmmakers, video producers, interdisciplinarians of all stripes and vintages—members of a rather new constituency, address issues of cultural memory writ large, and acknowledge the ways in which the affirmations and erasures of new media practices echo the role of the archive.

While the phrase *raiding the archive* suggests an aggressive move against a fixed entity, in my

view it really means its opposite—a Newtonian phrase for an Einsteinian phenomenon—and that artists engaged in archive-related practices are in truth practitioners of something far more fluid, strong swimmers in the ever-moving flux of cultural memory, skilled re-directors of the flow.

Here, in the country of Arthur Lipsett, whose seven-minute 1961 film, *Very Nice, Very Nice*, pieced together from cutting room floor rejects, earned an Academy Award nomination almost fifty years ago (oddly, despite being sourced in debris, in the *Best Short Live Action Subject* category), archive-raiding is somehow second nature to anyone working with time-based media.

Current examples: Artists David Rokeby and Lewis Kaye, combing the resources of the University of Toronto Coach House (now the Centre of Culture and Technology) where Marshall McLuhan held his legendary Monday night seminars, have created *Through the Vanishing Point*, another way of looking at that archive<sup>4</sup>, and when we need to remember why it all matters, we go back to *Mining the Media Archive*<sup>5</sup>, cultural theorist Dot Tuer's diagnostic book of essays.

So, while the word "raiding" implies hostile, grab-and-run theft, we can also take it as alluding to a process of revisiting and reordering of the archive's contents that releases new meanings, keeping in mind that such processes carry the implication that the new version will be ripe for revision in turn, and that what matters is the interrogation, the reordering, and most important of all, making change visible.

Instruments to effect that release alter and evolve along the way and as the medium changes so does the perceived nature of truth: It is taken for granted, for example, that computers can measure hitherto unimagined parameters of Shakespeare's sonnets, and that infra-red and laser technologies disclose what we were never meant to see and might prefer not to.

Even the most conventional additions to an archive can shift the ground of what is perceived as real. The publication of the full translation of Walter Benjamin's writings, for example, caused the undoing of a generation of Ph.D. dissertations based on what was earlier taken to be his complete works, and, as an aside, we may never recover from the mistranslation of Freud's use of the German word "*Lust*" (in French, *j'ai envie de . . .*, or, colloquially, *I have a yen for*) as the English "lust" (i.e., carnal hunger). In such small ways, wittingly or unwittingly, are our major realities re-shaped.

Abandoning standard notions of the archive as a dusty, posthumous collection of obscure materials, it turns out that selecting from the distant and recent past, combining different disciplines and allowing them to interrogate each other, as media artists do, involves placing oneself in the heart of a process of unending change: Today's puzzle becomes tomorrow's enigma, giving rise to next week's conundrum and the unavoidable paradoxes of living.

The title *Rules for Letting Go*, a keynote talk I gave at the 2006 DOCAM Summit<sup>6</sup>, might be considered somewhat disingenuous for an artist who tends to save every letter, postcard, receipt, and snapshot (although not necessarily identified or placed in any sort of order). Just by dint of not being thrown out, the stuff lingers, is eventually boxed, and either has moved with me again and again from studio to workspace to storage and back, or, more recently, has found its way to Queen's University and the very special ambiance of the Archives there.

The most notorious raiders of the archive are, of course, conspiracy theorists. Unrepentant, intrepid hunters of truth, starting from a basic seam of suspicion and an aggrieved sense of

injustice, they are the true believers, devoting all their time, energy and resources to connecting hitherto unconnected dots that they hope will override the existing connections that carry accepted meanings which they feel the need to destroy.

Considering the recent epidemic of archive-centered projects, it seems that the word “archive,” with the aforesaid aura of mustiness, authority, reliability, and careful, temperature-controlled order, capable of withstanding interrogation over centuries, has now become a sort of all-purpose verbal depot for good intentions.

It is as if application of the word alone serves as a kind of password denoting seriousness, and with vague and over-frequent use, the word risks going soft. Nevertheless, for the time being, “archives” remain sites for inviting theft, revision or the discovery of unexpected truths; a respected arena for retrieval of what was hidden and the always-engaging investigation of who has been left out and why.

A very satisfying recent example of fruitful study of this kind is John Ralston Saul’s book, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada*<sup>7</sup>, in which he traces how profoundly our lives are based on longstanding values of our indigenous peoples, affirming that Canada is a Métis nation, heavily influenced and shaped by aboriginal principles of egalitarianism, a proper balance between individual and group, and a penchant for negotiation over violence—values that Canada has absorbed and appropriated without acknowledging their sources.

À propos re-writing history, and looking back a few decades, I recall one experience that really alerted me to the tentative meanings of all things. Living at the British School at Athens on the main land, I was asked to deliver the BSA mail to its outpost in Crete, referred to affectionately as *The Taverna*. Once I got to Heraklion, I learned from the archaeologist in charge, Sandy McGillivray, a Canadian with an Oxford patina, that he had received unprecedented permission to open the sacks of evidence found by Sir Arthur Evans, discoverer of the Minoan temple at Knossos, each sack with its own carefully detailed notebook. It was on the basis of these catalogued artifacts that Evans had devised the dating system on which I understood all subsequent archaeological dating was (and perhaps still is) based.

Knowing that Evans had had only three work tables on which to lay out his finds and trace their connections, and suspecting that Evans’s dating system was wrong, Dr. McGillivray asked the Greek Minister of Culture for seven tables on which to strew the bits and pieces of evidence that Evans had found during his discovery of Knossos. Extending the material over seven tables permitted countless new permutations and combinations of connection, and therefore of meaning.

I found striking the notion that simply adding four more tables could have such a profound impact on our perception of time; enough to shift the classic system of dating ancient kingdoms and of situating ourselves in the history of the world.

A more extreme example of the potentially threatening impact of raiding the archive was the treatment inflicted on Immanuel Velikovsky whose skilled matching of Biblical narratives with historical events, and the resultant re-write of history, so outraged theologians and physicists alike that they stymied publication of his work as long as possible. There was so much at stake in his implied shifts of meaning that Velikovsky’s publishers neutralized his research by relegating his books to the science fiction shelves.





Whether supporting just or unjust implications, the archive in all its forms and all available media, remains a moving, breathing ocean of meanings and assumptions, and sometimes a source of anxiety.

Alexander MacGillivray is still digging in key sites around the Mediterranean and publishing in respected journals, so perhaps he has found a way to open things up without breaking them down. Velikovsky died a bitter man, though not before Canadian filmmakers Henry Zemel and Jesse Nishihata, working closely with their friend Arthur Lipsett, made a film about him for the CBC.<sup>8</sup> E. M. Forster's multi-purpose injunction, "Only connect!" might be amended here to say "Only re-connect!" encouraging us to sever connections that have rusted into position, and to free the elements that hold the secrets we're after, even if, as Alfredo Cramerotti (Manifesta 8 co-curator, and member of the *Chamber of Public Secrets* collective), in his presentation on the mysteries of the everyday at the International Media Congress, has avowed, they have been in full view all along.

The experience at the British School Taverna in Heraklion served to remind me that our choice or designing of the lens—in Sandy's case, seven tables instead of three—can determine that day's refreshed reality and that we must anticipate the ferociously rapid change of new media, and prepare for the revision that tomorrow's instruments will make possible.

Raiding the archive may move slowly, employing all the bells, whistles and credentials of academia; or, it may happen at lightning speed, governed by the explosive evidence of a single controversial document or brilliant insight, but whatever the pace, motive, context, or instrument, the archive is alive and changing and it is on this frail and transient basis that we build our notions of the real, moving through life, work, love as if we know what we're doing. The phrase "*raiding the archive*" continued to haunt me as I began to prepare the exhibition *Cartographie d'une pratique/Mapping a Practice*<sup>9</sup>, and was in part responsible for the following passage in my catalogue essay: "And it's there, at the Archives, that object and meaning connect, where the spaces between one object or document and the next are accounted for, correctly or incorrectly. This brings us, inescapably, to the twinned issues of absence and memory, the latter still one of life's deepest mysteries (...as attested to by decades of weekly meetings of memory experts at the Ebbinghaus Empire, a University of Toronto think tank named after nineteenth Century German psychologist Hermann Ebbinghaus, whose discovery of the 'forgetting curve' remains to this day a crucial finding. I rather like the notion of the archive as a site where learning and forgetting curves meet and come to rest, neutralizing each other in the calm stillness of dormancy until such time as someone like Sylvie (Lacerte) entering the quiet, disturbs the tranquility, causing the respective exponential curves of remembering and forgetting to dance with each other again.)"<sup>10</sup>

Later the metaphor shifts away from a dance of learning and forgetting towards something more topographic: "Like scattered rocks in a riverbed, items in a *fonds* 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>11</sup>

Artists today make work which both interrogates and cherishes the archival material they're drawn to. What they have in common in their so-called raiding is a gift for making visible what we have not seen clearly before, with work that traces a moral traverse through the confusions, toxins and passivity of the complex world we live in. And an appetite for and tolerance of ambiguity.

## NOTES

- 1 R. Austen Marshall, *The Cornelia Lumsden Archive: Can Truth Prevail? / La vérité, peut-elle s'imposer?* in *Museums by Artists*, A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (eds.), (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 97-114.
- 2 *Archival Dialogues: Reading the Black Star Archive*, inaugural exhibition, Ryerson Gallery and Research Centre, September, 2012. Curators: Peggy Gale, Doina Popescu. Artists: Stephen Andrews, Christina Battle, Marie-Helene Cousineau, Stan Douglas, Vera Frenkel, Vid Ingelevics, David Rokeby, Michael Snow.
- 3 This text is an expanded version of my introduction to the panel, *Raiding the Archive*, at the International Media Congress, Toronto, April 2011, with artists Barbara Hammer, Sobhi al-Zobaidi, Tamar Guimaraes, and Ken Everson.
- 4 *Through The Vanishing Point*, installed first at the McLuhan Coach House Institute, University of Toronto (Fall 2010); then at the Canadian Embassy in Berlin and at MaRS in Toronto, June 2011, in the context of the international McLuhan100 celebrations.
- 5 Dot Tuer, *Mining the Media Archive: Essays on Art, Technology, and Cultural Resistance* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2006).
- 6 *Rules for Letting Go*, Keynote address: DOCAM (Documentation et conservation du patrimoine des arts médiatiques) Summit, 2006, Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science & Technology, Montréal. (<http://archives.docam.ca/en/?p=95>),
- 7 John Ralston Saul, *A Fair Country: Telling Truths about Canada* (Toronto: Viking, 2008).
- 8 Henry Zemel (Dir.), *Velikovsky: The Bonds of the Past*, first broadcast 22 February 1972. CBC-Television. From: <http://www.varchive.org/bonds/bonds.htm>. In the Velikovsky Encyclopedia, ([http://www.velikovsky.info/Henry\\_Zemel](http://www.velikovsky.info/Henry_Zemel)) Zemel notes: "Immanuel Velikovsky welcomed 'time' as an ally that would vindicate him in his battle against the scientific establishment. In later editions of his books, he made a point of 'not altering a single word' so that future generations could judge the merit of his ideas without the confusion inherent in 'what did he say and when did he say it?' In this respect, he was more seer than scientist who, ideally, adjusts theory to fit new evidence. Velikovsky would rather fight for his ideas than revise them. The Velikovsky film I wrote and directed in 1971 presented Velikovsky's views as he wished them portrayed. At the time, I rationalized the abandonment of my critical faculties by telling myself: 'This is the first film in which Velikovsky has a chance to tell his story. Science always has access to the media. Now it's his turn.' As a result, the film featured ephemeral evidence gathered in 1969 by the first lunar expedition. Velikovsky had predicted 'advance claims' he called them—what the astronauts would find on the Moon. He wished to broadcast that their discoveries would support—and later supported—his reconstruction of lunar history."
- 9 Vera Frenkel: *Cartographie d'une pratique/Mapping a Practice*, Curator: Sylvie Lacerte, SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Montréal, 2 October to 4 December 2010 (<http://www.fondation-langlois.org/Mapping-a-Practice>)
- 10 Vera Frenkel, "The Pleasures of Uncertainty..." From: <http://www.fondation-langlois.org/html/e/page.php?NumPage=2238>
- 11 Ibid.