

Vera Frenkel**Cartographie d'une pratique / Mapping a Practice**Vera Frenkel, *This is Your Messiah Speaking* (1990–1991)**The Pleasures of Uncertainty...****Vera Frenkel**

When curator Sylvie Lacerte proposed the project that has become *Cartographie d'une pratique / Mapping a Practice*, making me an offer of a ringside seat at the filtering processes of time and chance, I found it irresistible. Yet having one's history explored, however insightful the researcher and benign the intention, is a daunting process that holds twin mirrors up both to the work and to the contexts in which it was done. Caught between these two reflections resides the changing self.

Some detachment was necessary, and the opportunity to view my life and work—that is to say, the story so far—has been refreshing as well as sobering. I have watched with growing interest the carefully considered approaches of curator Lacerte, here at my studio or at the Queen's University Archives, where, with the help of archivist Heather Home, she has selected, diagnosed, and shaped materials drawn from a *fonds* (assembled, it must be said, via a mix of more randomness than order), opening my practice to backstage scrutiny with a view to disclosing how certain artworks came to be.

As is inevitable with all research, sources are by their nature partial, and the many fluctuating realities we encountered as our work progressed gave me a larger sense of the transience of it all, making the project seem at times impossible, while paradoxically all the more engaging. With no idea of the outcome, I was hooked.

My multivalent practice requires keeping close at hand a changing array of correspondence, working drawings, notes, photographs and the like, as well as the recording tools—cameras, audio equipment, scanners—of my era. It has been fascinating to observe how Sylvie digs down to the mysterious root of image, text or process; how she finds the questions to ask that I haven't asked myself, and integrates the elicited physical and psychic clues into a work-life narrative that reflects my practice. It was as though each note or quote, each document or sketch, each snapshot and phone log had within it the DNA of the whole...

So a working process from which I at first anticipated a sense of closure has instead proved to be an opening into the unexpected, honouring the ephemeral while deciphering the fixed and seemingly finished to reveal its infrastructure, its pulse.

The experience of working with Sylvie has been supported all along by Heather Home at the Queen's University Archives, with a welcome mix of personal empathy and professional rigour; and at a friendly, brotherly distance by Paul Banfield, Queen's University Archivist, and Alain Depocas, Daniel Langlois Foundation Director of the Centre for Research and Documentation (CR+D), fellow travellers on the scent of a model or template regarding how best to document and conserve the elusive work of a media artist.

Witnessing this combination of selfless research and skilled mediation has been a privilege. It has also brought about a kind of double vision, an experience of hovering in two places at the same time; immersed in the everyday labyrinth of passions and events from which one draws energy and ideas, and at the same time standing beside it, ghost-like, observing the stitching-together process of how meaning is made.

The one casualty? The standard notion of archives as dusty, posthumous collections of obscure materials has dissolved, disclosing a reality radically different from that tired assumption.

Mid-way through the year or so of our work together, I was asked to host a panel at the Experimental Media Congress in Toronto. *Raiding the Archive* was the curiously aggressive title given us to work with, and it was my task to introduce a distinguished panel of artists whose approaches to the archive could not have been more different one from the other. (1) Considering their work confirmed that the recent, somewhat perturbing, epidemic of interest in archives and archiving was no accident but rather marked an intense awareness both of a world gone mad and the potential loss of a rich legacy of media works created in response. Entering an archive, I

said at the time, means knowingly placing oneself at the heart of a process of unending change: Today's puzzle becomes tomorrow's enigma, giving rise to next week's conundrum, which then opens out into life's inescapable mysteries.

It may move slowly, this process, sometimes employing the bells, whistles, and credentials of academia; it may lurch forward at times, governed by explosive evidence of a single document or unprecedented insight; but whatever the pace, motive, context or instrument, the archive is alive and changing, and it is on this frail and moving basis that we build our notions of the real.

Although *Cartographie d'une pratique / Mapping a Practice* is the first time I've been the subject in public of such investigations, it's not the only time I've been nose to nose with some of the issues involved. I remember well an exchange of letters that I wrote under the pseudonym R. Austen-Marshall (2) and a heated discussion with Jean-Luc Svoboda, the book's translator. He sat between two huge piles of leather-bound dictionaries, insisting angrily that an archive cannot, *must* not, contain such things as the typewriter, crocheted cloche hat or lace gloves described in my text. Surely I meant *collection*? No, I did not. *Archive*, and its gravitas-laden associations, was the word required for the mischief to work properly. It took some explaining, but once he understood that we were dealing with the fictive absence of a non-existent, though brilliant, novelist, via the letters of an invented archivist, he began to relax. We became fellow conspirators, and the CLA (Cornelia Lumsden Archive) was born.

Going back further still, I see my attraction to the archive had its roots in an early interest in detectives and detection, these investigative tropes finding form in *No Solution: A Suspense Thriller*, the cycle of work that included my first video installation, (3) the power of the clue or trace extending for me into the even greater power of absence and the world of speculation it invited, pointing in turn to the *Lumsden* project and its vanished protagonist.

Between mystery thriller formats in the seventies and *A Tangled Triangle: Strands from the Archive-Rhizome in the new millennium* (4) (the text this time written under my own name) were sightings of an ongoing interest in processes of collecting and deciphering, often embedded in my installations in the form of vitrines, which I would refer to blithely as "museums of the making of the work." It is only now, as a "case study" subject to the detective work of others, that I see this as a pattern and begin to fathom what lies at its core.

And indeed, with the recent video, *ONCE NEAR WATER: Notes from the Scaffolding Archive*, featuring the archive of an archivist, *Cartographie d'une pratique / Mapping a Practice* begins to take on symptoms of meta-analysis, and a mise-en-abyme, thrilling and threatening, slowly opens, haunting me with the implications of something I myself said, during a 2006 DOCAM talk I gave in Montreal, *Rules for letting go...*:

"You'll see when we start looking at the work that there is a preoccupation with absence. Writing these notes, it occurred to me that this is not only the mark of a psyche and a century shaped by epic losses, but an indication that it is the meaning of absence in fact that is my true métier, given that the lifetime of an artwork in any of the media I favour— performance, video, sound, site-specific installation, Web art—is both fragmented and transitory, destined to serve as a kind of puzzle to my successors." (5)

Referred to in that talk was my penchant for combining high and popular culture, seen perhaps most explicitly in *Trust Me, It's Bliss: The Hugh Hefner Richard Wagner Connection*, one of several lost works discussed. *Trust Me...* was written for and performed in the ballroom of the Playboy Mansion, where I was living in the adjacent "ballroom flat" during an artist residency at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. (6) Insufficiently documented, only a copy of the programme and a few stills remain of that work.

"Rules for letting go..." as a title might be considered somewhat disingenuous coming from an artist who tends to save every letter, postcard, receipt, and snapshot (though not necessarily identified or in any sort of order). It's just by dint of not being thrown out, of waiting to be "processed," so to say, that the stuff lingers, is eventually boxed, and has accompanied me from studio to studio or, in recent years, to Queen's University and the very special ambience of the Archives there.

And it's there, at the Archives, that object and meaning meet, and where the spaces or times 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 19th 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 our learning and forgetting curves encounter and neutralize each other in the calm stillness of dormancy until such time as someone like Sylvie, entering the quiet, disturbs the tranquility, causing the respective exponential curves of remembering and forgetting to dance with each other again.)

"Memory constructs the past and reconstructs it," writes historian and culture critic Eva Hoffman in the *Time and the Mind* chapter of her recent book on time, (7) underscoring how fluid and in a sense suspect the process of remembering is.

In that regard, bits and pieces salvaged from the past might even be construed as interfering with the ongoing task of this construction or reconstruction process, since an object or document with the cachet of testimony, i.e. a witnessing credential, can claim the authority of *thing* over the flow

of *thought*. Either way, this exhibition can be seen as a pivotal moment, the site of an encounter between the rocks of testimony and the river of memory.

Rocks in a river? The archive metaphor has shifted from a dance of learning and forgetting to items in a *fonds*, like scattered rocks in a riverbed, shaping 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...

To be fair, some revisiting of these issues has occurred as well in my work in the context of preparing various presentations, for example:

- *Museums and New Media: A Shotgun Marriage?* (8)
- *Rules for Letting Go* (9)
- *Mischief and Critique: Notes on an Interdisciplinary Practice* (10)

The focus of the DOCAM talk on the ethics and dilemmas of what is lost and what is preserved anticipated well in advance concerns that later prompted *Cartographie d'une pratique / Mapping a Practice*. I surprised myself on that occasion by my ready acceptance of the transience of a practice characterized by the fragility and in-built obsolescence of time-based media, both digital and analogue, and by the ever-changing demands of site-specificity, and I am surprised again to discover that so many of the issues raised in making this exhibition were haunting me decades ago, along with a necessary scepticism and the habit of raising in my work the question, "Can this be true?"

As deeply suspicious of organized religion as I am of politics, this condition of mild alienation allows me to explore the world and its issues from the modest distance of the wide-angled lens, so it comes as yet another surprise to discover, at the root of the three works around which the exhibition is structured, *String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video (Montreal-Toronto, 1974)*, "...from the *Transit Bar*," and *ONCE NEAR WATER: Notes from the Scaffolding Archive*, the pain and the joy of longing. Longing for what? you may ask, and to that question I have no answer. Yet, different as they are in both theme and medium, these works share an approach to longing that is also evident in the work-cycles in between. (11)



In "...from the *Transit Bar*", the involvement was with the recounting of loss in the comfort of a shared experience of displacement, and with *ONCE NEAR WATER*, the discovery of scaffolding as a key instrument in transforming the cityscape, the longing and the sceptical voice of the interrogator in symbiosis.

As is often the case, the most recent work engages me most intensively and is the means through which I revisit all that came before. There is, for example, the pleasure of discovering, in the choreographic diagrams I drew for the *String Games* improvisations in 1974, geometric structures signalling movement patterns in the service of a greater whole, having more than a casual affinity with the scaffolding forms I found so compelling decades later.

Piecing together what is longed for in these works brings me face to face with Walter Benjamin's thoughts on translation. (12) Considering the nine disparate *String Games* elements that I had asked all contributors to select for themselves—number, letter, word, name, sentence, poem fragment, visual image, gesture, sound—as units of their performance repertoire, I find myself returning to Benjamin's enigmatic text, *The Task of the Translator*, in which he postulated that all languages allude to a greater, over-arching Ur-language of which they are the broken fragments, translation being the transformative bond that might return us to the original lost whole, in his view a seemingly pure, blissful, entity and state.

With the curiosity of the agnostic about the mysterious, even the mystical, I remember being drawn as well to Noam Chomsky's theory of "deep structures" and his proposal of the underlying "hard-wired" linguistic capacities we share. Both Chomsky and Benjamin employ transformation as a key concept (Chomsky even has rules for it as the instrument that relates our deep innate language structures to the surface entities of the individual languages we speak).

Without conscious or deliberate reference to this thinking at the time, but acknowledging it as part of the landscape, *String Games* came out of an irresistible desire to "connect the dots," so to say, not only to bridge two cities as the newly-designed Bell Canada Teleconferencing Studios permitted, but for the participants to reach a connective shared epiphany. And there were times in the second "Enactment" portion of the project when our unlikely mix of independently chosen elements seemed to come together momentarily into a thrilling whole, arriving at a communal Ur-language by the simple means of uttering sounds and making signs and images, recognizable in the same instant as transient, fragile, and possibly delusional. (13)

All this said, what becomes clear is that the self that entered into the SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art project has been sufficiently changed by it that I don't quite know who has emerged. Though flooded by long-forgotten images and ideas and their connection to what preoccupies me now, something has fallen away. The archive, however, remains the embodiment of love and respect for the clues that surface after time and chance have had their way—and as the perfect site for contemplating the meaning of absence.

We would have liked to weave into our cartographic process my love of mischief and the ways in which humour and irony became, over the years, cherished instruments for building scepticism. In that regard, works centering on absence (yes, a touch oxymoronic) had the benefit of having at the same time the potential of being deeply troubling and/or a source of amused speculation. (14)

What I'm left with after all the discussions and retrieval processes, physical and psychic, here in the studio where I'm writing this, is a vivid sense of the evanescence and elusiveness of it all—and as for the frailty of chance, which at first I saw as unreliability, the shifts of meaning that happen during the reconstruction process of memory I now savour as a constant flow of replaceable truths, the pleasures of uncertainty, and the sweetness of beginning again.

And this returns me to curator Sylvie Lacerte and her concept for initiating this exhibition and our work together. I share with Sylvie her heartfelt acknowledgments, noted elsewhere in this catalogue, of the contributions of those who have made this project possible, and I am deeply grateful for the good-humoured, wise and generous support in word and deed of our remarkable colleagues (in alphabetical order): Paul Banfield, Anne-Marie Belley, Anne Bénichou, Alan Conter, Alain Depocas, Jean Gagnon, Heather Home, Katia Meir, Marie-Josée Parent, Stephen Schofield, and Konrad Skreta. They have enriched this working experience beyond all expectations.

And to Sylvie Lacerte, for giving me that ringside seat at a unique exploration of time and chance, my appreciation, admiration, and affection, a super-triple-A thank you.

Vera Frenkel lives and works in Toronto. A multidisciplinary artist, she completed her studies at McGill University and started her artistic practice in Montreal. Her installations, performances, videos, and multimedia projects have been presented, notably, at the documenta IX, Kassel, Germany; the Venice Biennale, Italy; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA; the Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan; the Power Plant, Toronto, and the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada. Frenkel has penned numerous essays which have been published, among others, in *artscanada*, *Canadian Art*, *FUSE*, *n.paradoxa*, *Hors d'œuvre*, *Intermédialités*, and *Public*. Her texts can also be found in anthologies such as *Penser l'indiscipline/Creative Con/Fusions* (Optical/Concordia University, Montreal, 2001) and *Museums after Modernism* (Blackwell's, London, 2007). She has been granted the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2006 and has received several other distinctions, among which, the Canada Council for the Arts' Molson Prize, the Gershon-Iskowitz Prize, the Toronto Arts Foundation Visual Arts Award and the Bell Award in Video Art. The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver have awarded Vera Frenkel honorary doctorates. Professor emeritus at York University in Toronto, where she taught for over twenty years, Vera Frenkel has also been guest professor, artist in residence, and lecturer in universities and museums across Europe and North America. In 2006, she was inducted as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and received, in 2007, the iDMAa (International Digital Media & Arts Association) award.

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(1) Panelists, International Experimental Media Congress, Ontario College of Art and Design, April 10, 2010: Barbara Hammer, Sobhi al-Zobaidi, Tamar Guimaraes, Ken Everson.

(2) R. Austen-Marshall, "The Cornelia Lumsden Archive: Can Truth Prevail?/La vérité, peut-elle s'imposer?," *Museums by Artists*, Eds. Peggy Gale, AA Bronson; Art Metropole, 1983, 97-114. Tr. Jean-Luc Svoboda.

(3) *Signs of a Plot: A Text, True Story & Work of Art*, bi-lateral video-puppet theatre, r.t. 60 minutes, 1978.

(4) Vera Frenkel, *Alphabet City, Lost in the Archives* issue, 2002, Ed. Rebecca Comay, 147-163.

(5) Keynote Conference, DOCAM International Summit, McGill University, Montreal, October 2006:

<http://www.docam.ca/en/annual-summits/2006-summit/119-vera-frenkel.html>

(6) The Playboy Mansion, renamed "Hefner Hall" during its owner's absence, served as a facility for SAIC. Frenkel was guest of the video and performance departments in 1987.

(7) Eva Hoffman, *Time*, Picador, New York, 2009, 109.

(8) Art Gallery of Windsor, March, 2009, updated from CMA (Canadian Museums Association) presentation, Toronto, 1999.

(9) Keynote Conference, DOCAM International Summit, McGill University, Montreal, October 2006:

<http://www.docam.ca/en/annual-summits/2006-summit/119-vera-frenkel.html>

(10) "Gegenwart in den Künsten Symposium," published in the anthology *Is It Now?*, Ed. Sigrid Schade, Zurich University of the Arts, 2007. Note: Together, these three texts by the artist, combined with those on archives and archiving and on absence and remediation, listed in the bibliography, form a kind of autobiography.

(11) *No Solution, A Suspense Thriller*, 1976-1979; *The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story*, 1979-1986; *The Business of Frightened Desires: Or the Making of a Pornographer*, 1985; *Trust Me It's Bliss: The Hugh Hefner/Richard Wagner Connection*, 1987; *Mad for Bliss*, 1989; *This Is Your Messiah Speaking*, 1990-1991; *Body Missing*, 1994-2008; *City Poem/Poem City*, 2008; and on rarely discussed performance works, see Clive Robertson / Alain-Martin Richard, *Performance Art in/au Canada*, Éditions Intervention, Montreal, 2001, and Dot Tuer, "Vera Frenkel: The Secret Life of a Performance Artist," *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women*, Eds. Johanna Householder, Tanya Mars, YYZ Books, Toronto, 2004, 232-239.

(12) "The Task of the Translator," introduction to Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, 1923; translated as "The Translator's Task," by Steven Rendall, *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, vol. 10, n° 2, 1997, 151-165. Online version at: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037302ar>

(13) "Thus translation has as its purpose the expression of the most intimate relationships among languages This imagined, inner relationship among languages is, however, a relationship of special convergence. It consists in the fact that languages are not alien to each other, but a priori, and independently of all historical connections, related to each other in

what they want to say." And, "In translation, the original grows into a linguistic sphere that is both higher and purer." Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," Baudelaire, *Tableaux parisiens*, 1923; this passage in "The Translator's Task," translated by Steven Rendall, *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, vol. 10, n° 2, 1997, 154, 157. Online version at: <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037302ar> or, as Sarah Dudek writes in *Walter Benjamin & the Religion of Translation*: "The biblical idea of a once existing complete language in paradise disintegrated by God after the Tower of Babel grounds Benjamin's theory of language. The particular languages are thus only incomplete pieces of the pure original.": http://www.cipherjournal.com/html/dudek_benjamin.html (14) E.g., *The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story*, 1978-1986; *The Institute™: Or, What We Do for Love*, 2003 and ongoing: <http://www.the-national-institute.org/tour/>