Towards a Definition of Visual Artists’ Archives:

Vera Frenkel’s Archives as a Case Study

by

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Faculty of Information
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation is an exploratory case study of the archives of Canadian artist Vera Frenkel and their acquisition by Queen’s University Archives in Kingston, Ontario. The research seeks to understand, through empirical investigation, the many factors that shape the artist’s recordkeeping and archives in the personal sphere and contribute to the nature of the eventual archival fonds in the institution. The foundation for the research includes the literatures of archival studies, life narrative, and art.

Vera Frenkel’s interdisciplinary art work reflects a deep engagement with questions of truth and fiction. As an aspect of this theme, records and archives play a role in several of her works, often being revealed as problematic sources of evidence. Fundamental to the artist’s approach to interdisciplinarity is a complex layering of elements that builds uncertainty in the viewer. Given these aspects of Frenkel’s work, research that elicits the artist’s testimony about her archives must be able to accommodate a degree of ambiguity in the construction of that testimony.

In a series of in situ interviews with the artist in her studio, the author investigated Frenkel’s recordkeeping habits and their relationship to her creative practice. As a data source, these interviews were supplemented by the artist’s photographs and hand-drawn maps of the studio.
The author also investigated the processes entailed by archival transfer, examining the extant Vera Frenkel fonds at Queen’s University Archives and interviewing Heather Home, the archivist responsible for the acquisition. Both the personal and institutional spheres were taken into consideration as essential contributors to the nature of Frenkel's archives as a complex cultural artifact.

The research argues for the central role of archives in the acquisition and preservation of contemporary art. It contributes a foundation for understanding the nature of visual artists’ archives.
To my family
Acknowledgments

This dissertation certainly represents a journey, one that I was able to complete only with the help of many along the way. At the University of Toronto, my thanks are due first of all to Barbara Craig, who has been a wonderful supervisor: always supportive, accommodating, and insistent on high standards. She and my committee members, Heather MacNeil, Lynne Howarth, and Elizabeth Legge, were an extraordinary team. Each contributed complementary expertise to the supervision of my project, and each was unfailingly constructive, collaborative, and – not least – great fun to work with. Dot Tuer brought a wealth of ideas and good spirits to her role as external examiner. A highlight of my doctoral studies was Lynne Howarth’s advanced research methods seminar, made even better by the collaboration of my exceptional classmates in the PhD cohort of 2005. More recently, Jennifer Douglas has become my treasured classmate, and her parallel work on literary archives has been an inspiration to me.

The Art Gallery of Ontario, my employer, has played an essential role in my project. On a practical level, the staff of the AGO has accommodated my several leaves of absence over the past 6 ½ years. In particular, Karen McKenzie has been an unflagging champion of my academic efforts, even as they have competed with work for my time and attention. The burden of work entailed by my absence was ably taken on by Sylvia Lassam during a one-year leave in 2005-2006, and has been shared throughout my studies by my colleagues in the E.P. Taylor Library & Archives. The AGO’s collection of artists’ archives is the foundation for most of the ideas in this dissertation. Matthew Teitelbaum’s vision and leadership has been central to the formalization and continuing growth of the AGO’s Special Collections, and Karen McKenzie has played a key role in making the idea of the Special Collections a reality. Over the years, Dennis Reid, Anna Hudson, Georgiana Uhlyarik, and other curators have acted as advocates and collaborators. I am immensely grateful to the numerous artists and artists’ heirs who have welcomed me into their homes and studios, entrusting me as the AGO’s representative with the intimate and irreplaceable traces of art-making.

In my professional community, the work of Catherine Hobbs and the Association of Canadian Archivists’ Special Interest Section on Personal Archives has been an inspiration. My research
coincided with the early years of this group, and it has been a privilege to collaborate with its members towards the shared goal of a richer understanding of personal archives.

Within the bounds of my own research project, a number of people have been generous with their help and expertise. Vincent Bonin, who understands artists’ archives, was an early supporter of my research. He also demonstrated that archival studies could be successfully combined with art writing. Jan Allen, Charles Reeve, Matt Ratto, and Matthew Brower all took time to answer my questions. Karen Teeple and Michele Dale at the City of Toronto Archives not only agreed to accept the loan of the Vera Frenkel fonds for a week, but lent me an empty office to work in. Their accommodation of my research saved me numerous research trips to Kingston at a time when travel would have been difficult. In the text of my dissertation I have acknowledged the key role that Sylvie Lacerte’s curatorial project played in enabling my own research. Beyond that, Sylvie has been a warm and unflagging supporter of my work.

At Queen’s University Archives, Heather Home was nothing short of heroic. She welcomed my research without hesitation, hosting me in Kingston, answering myriad questions, and, extraordinarily, delivering the entire Vera Frenkel fonds to Toronto in order to facilitate my work. I am thankful to Paul Banfield, Queen’s University Archivist, for accommodating my research and for supporting the work of his excellent staff.

To the subject of my case, Vera Frenkel, I am tremendously grateful: for letting a curious student and archivist into the sanctum of her studio, for welcoming my questions, and for approaching my entire project with warmth, openness, and sometimes mischief. The strengths of this dissertation owe a great deal to Vera’s own intellectual engagement with archives. As with any writing about an artist, the success of my efforts is built upon the extraordinary foundation of that artist’s creative work.

Finally, I want to thank my family. My parents have been unstinting supporters – both emotional and material – of my long formal education. My grandfather, D.A. Smith, was the same while he lived. Their love and their values underpin all that I do.
This dissertation is a product of a number of years in which everything happened at once. Over the course of my doctoral studies, I met and married Colin Furness, who has become my single greatest support in life, work, and studies. He has been ready with practical advice from his own PhD work, he has shouldered household and childcare responsibilities, and he has listened to me. Our son David was born halfway through my doctoral studies, and I have stolen hours away from him in order to get this work done. My hope is that the balance of love and achievement in our busy family will continue to foster us all.

Amy Furness
Toronto
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Visual artists’ archives have long been of interest to art historians, curators, and the art-loving public, and these documentary traces of the artist’s life and creative activity are collected by cultural institutions around the world. In cultural circumstances where artists have achieved a certain degree of renown, and where resources exist, an artist’s archives may form part of a foundation or museum dedicated to the artist’s legacy: prominent examples include the Georgia O’Keeffe Museum, the Henry Moore Foundation, and the Donald Judd Foundation. More often, an artist’s archives will be acquired by a larger institution such as an art museum, a university, or national or regional repository. In the United States, the Archives of American Art is a pre-eminence collector in this area. In Canada, artists’ archives are collected by institutions including Library and Archives Canada, the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the University of Regina, and numerous provincial and university archives. These archival collections are used to support research by scholars, curators, and students for exhibitions, theses, and publications; increasingly, archival documents are also featured in exhibitions as contextual material or primary objects of interest.

Although visual artists’ archives are important to a substantial research public, the nature of these collections in their own right has not been seriously explored. In the realm of the visual arts, the traditional view of archival material as an impartial source of “truth” about an artist’s work has begun to shift. The aesthetic value of archives is increasingly perceived, in part because the art of the later twentieth century is sometimes difficult to separate from its archival traces. In the field of archival studies, artists’ archives have yet to receive much attention. However, writings on the topic of personal archives have emerged in a steady stream over the past decade and a half, with a conviction among many writers (for example, Catherine Hobbs and Sue McKemmish) that some of the tenets of archival theory, due to their origins in government or corporate archives, are a poor fit with the records of individuals. In particular, the creative aspect of personal recordkeeping and archives is at odds with traditional notions of records as evidence of transaction. The archives of creative persons such as artists promise a clear, compelling instance of the importance of personal self-expression in personal archives.
This dissertation emerges from the need for empirical studies of personal archives, and from my conviction that artists’ archives in particular are a significant phenomenon because of their unique relationship to the sites of creative production and the institutions of visual art. The field of archival studies is my home base, reflecting my fundamental beliefs that archival material needs to be understood on specialized terms; that archives are essentially different from visual art or other forms of creative production; and that the concept of the archival fonds, however problematic, is still the best model for understanding a person’s archives. Enriching my understanding of personal archives are writings from various fields on the common genres of personal records, and more theoretical writings from the field of life narrative and autobiography. The existing definitions of personal records and archives within archival studies are rudimentary, and I have found it helpful to consider the perspectives of authors from literary studies and sociology who have looked at phenomena such as diaries and photograph albums. From the commonalities among these record genres it is possible to derive

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1 The term ‘fonds’ is defined in the Rules for Archival Description as ‘the whole of the documents, regardless of form or medium, automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular individual, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator’s activities or functions’. In a Canadian context, despite the word’s French-language origins, ‘fonds’ is accepted as an English-language word and is not italicized (as exemplified by usage in Archivaria, the journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists). Bureau of Canadian Archivists: Canadian Committee on Archival Description, Rules for Archival Description (Ottawa: Canadian Council of Archives, 2008), http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/archdesrules.html.
a perspective on the fundamental nature of personal recordkeeping. Ideas drawn from the literature on life narrative have equipped me to look critically at the notion that a person’s true self can be found in her archives. A person’s archives do reflect the self, but they are far from a simple reflection of self.

Visual art is the other principal component of the foundation for this dissertation. To study the records and archives of a contemporary visual artist, it has been essential to build a sufficient understanding of the nature and structure of that artist’s work, and its relationship to the institutions of art. In contemporary art, the relationship between the ideational aspect of a work of art and its physical manifestation at the site of display can be complex, with deep implications for artistic recordkeeping. It has never been easy to separate the records of visual art entirely from finished artistic creation, but in the decades since the Conceptual shift of the late 1960s, the relationship between art and its evidence has become particularly intricate and challenging.

In Chapter 3, I will address in more detail my reasons for selecting a single case study, and Vera Frenkel in particular, as the focus for this dissertation. Essentially, this research is exploratory: there are no prior studies of visual artists’ archives—at least not on a comparable scale—from which I could devise the basis for selecting multiple cases for comparison, or formulate hypotheses to prove or disprove. As it has turned out, the single case is easily rich and complex enough to support an entire dissertation. Frenkel, though initially selected for quite practical methodological reasons, has proven to be a remarkably apposite subject for this study: the conservation challenges posed by her work in new media make the relationship between her records and archives on the one hand, and her artistic oeuvre on the other particularly vital and complex. Layered on top of this complexity is the artist’s creative and intellectual engagement with ideas of archives, evidence and memory, which both complicates and enriches the research data.

Clearly there are solid extrinsic justifications for studying an artist’s archives: enough of a gap in the archival studies literature, and a general consensus that the archives of creative archival creators have cultural value. It is important to add, in an introductory vein, that I initially arrived at my topic through my own experience and expertise. Since 2001, I have been employed at the
Art Gallery of Ontario with responsibility for the museum’s collections of artists’ archives. I have visited numerous artists in their studios and have appraised, arranged, and described many artists’ fonds. In the course of my work, I have had a persistent sense that these collections were an imperfect fit with many aspects of archival theory. At the point of the museum’s acquisition of a fonds, the problem of archival selection is compounded by the challenge of deciding which items from a studio should be treated as art works and which form part of the fonds. In the best circumstances, these decisions can engender a complex discussion: a curator’s connoisseurship and an archivist’s belief in preserving the archival bond sometimes point to different answers; the artist's intention may be weighed against institutional conventions of storage, display and access; and institutional or personal politics may frequently play a role. There are many angles from which to consider the blurry boundary between the personal and institutional, and between the oeuvre and the fonds. My desire to explore the in-between terrain was the driving force of this project.

The account of my research is structured in seven chapters. In the second, I outline the several areas of bibliography that contribute to the foundation for my research. The third chapter describes methodological aspects of the research. In Chapter 4, I provide an account of Vera Frenkel as an artist by looking at selected works and exploring the theme of archives in her oeuvre. The subsequent two chapters are devoted to research results: Chapter 5 to findings in Frenkel’s studio, and Chapter 6 to discoveries in the archives. The seventh chapter contains my discussion and conclusions.

To conclude my introduction, I want to address a few idiosyncrasies of this dissertation. It is a hybrid of a qualitative social science approach, in which research questions are clearly declared and a methodology for answering them is laid out in detail; and a humanistic inquiry, in that it engages with works of visual art. The former aspect means that I have used language like “case study” and “validity,” particularly in constructing Chapter 3: Research Design. The framework

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2 Larry E. Sullivan and R. Burke Johnson describe the hallmarks of social science as ‘including the objective, systematic collection of... qualitative... data.’ Larry E. Sullivan and R. Burke Johnson, eds., ‘Social Science’, in *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (SAGE Publications, Inc., 2009), 481.
and terminology of social science is generally embraced in the Faculty of Information, where I am enrolled. As will become apparent in the following chapters, I have found distinct advantages to the systematic, methods-oriented approaches of social science in dealing with a complex research subject and the subjective aspects that my relationship to that subject necessarily entails. At the same time, much of the substance of my investigation has more to do with fine art, particularly in Chapter 4: Vera Frenkel. Parts of the text are therefore more like art writing and not much like social science at all. Meanwhile, I have tried to be mindful of the conventions of the small discipline of archival studies, which comes under the umbrella of the Faculty of Information. In Canada, archival studies is closely allied to the discipline of history, from which the archival profession differentiated itself about 35 years ago.³ I have elected to use footnotes, rather than parenthetical citations, to be consistent with the style guidelines of Archivaria and my own instincts about creating the best flow of text.⁴ One final note: my use of epigraphs by Vera Frenkel at the beginning of Chapters 5 and 6 might be considered a breach of good style. It has been a challenge throughout my work on this dissertation to stay a step ahead of Frenkel, and to put my observations into better words than the artist herself has often already chosen. By isolating some of her choicest comments as epigraphs, I am acknowledging the power of Frenkel’s eloquence, with its potential to subsume other commentary. Although I sometimes give the artist the first word, I have reserved the last words for myself.

³ The Association of Canadian Archivists, formed out of the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association, was established in 1975.

⁴ Archivaria is the journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists, and one of the best-regarded archival studies journals internationally.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Overview: An interdisciplinary foundation for understanding artists’ archives

A challenge attending this study has been to reconcile the diverse literatures of archival studies, literary studies, sociology, and art history and criticism that come to bear on different aspects of the topic of visual artists’ archives. The literature directly concerning contemporary artists’ archives is small but growing, and is notably interdisciplinary. On the way to reviewing it, I will examine several other bodies of literature for related writings. First, attempting to build a definition of personal archives from the ground up, I will look at writings that examine individual genres of personal records from a historical and analytical perspective. These genres can be placed in a theoretical context by looking at the literature of life narrative, which provides a framework for understanding acts of self-representation. Within the field of archival studies, writings on the fundamental aspects of archival theory (appraisal, arrangement, and description) are broadly relevant as a foundation for examining the role that each of these aspects of archival work plays in shaping the eventual form of an artist’s fonds in the repository. The small but growing body of literature that directly addresses personal recordkeeping provides the beginnings of a conceptual framework and a rationale for investigating the archives of particular kinds of persons, logically including artists. In a related vein, writings on personal information management examine many of the behaviours that play a role in personal recordkeeping, offering a different perspective on the recordkeeping environment. Selected literature from art history and art criticism addresses the unique challenges that visual art, and the processes of its creation, brings to the mix. The problematic information structure of art since the 1960s, the challenges of time-based media art, the function of the studio, and the business aspects of artists’ records are topics that come to bear on artists’ archives. “The archive” and its resonance in cultural theory and contemporary art play a role in the way that artists’ archives are perceived. Finally, I will introduce the small and recent body of writing that directly examines artists’
archives, in which the many contributing threads of literature identified through this review are starting to come together.

**Personal recordkeeping defined through constituent genres**

In defining my research problem, I am rooted in the discipline of archival studies, and its apparatus will form a major part of the literature I identify as the background to my study. However, the records of a visual artist, like other kinds of personal records, originate outside of the bureaucratic systems in which archival theory is fundamentally based. This circumstance may be part of the reason that such records do not necessarily fit easily with archival definitions, a problem which I will explore in the section of this chapter dealing with the archival studies literature. In considering an artist’s records within the personal sphere—that is, before an archival institution has had any explicit role in their custody—it may be helpful to try to build a definition of personal recordkeeping from the ground up by examining various kinds of personal record genres. From these genre-based examples of personal recordkeeping, a set of common traits may emerge.

The notion of *genre* originates in literary theory, where it refers to “categories of literary texts based on similarities of form, content, or function,” according to Stephen Cohen in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature.* In a similar way, records that share similarities of form, content, or function—for example, personal correspondence—may be considered to form a genre. As indicated by Cohen, the concept of genre does not imply the strict categorization of a given work: contemporary genre theory emphasizes the flexibility and interpenetrability of different genres.

Personal records, as commonly considered, include such genres as diaries, personal correspondence, and family photographs, and albums. In the particular case of a visual artist’s archives, one would likely find a number of other genres of records, more loosely defined.

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Records such as preparatory or exploratory art work, source images, publicity material or project files are commonly found in artists’ archives.\(^2\) If the latter three record types qualify as genres, they have not been considered as such in any known scholarly literature. In contrast, sketches or preparatory art work have received a great deal of attention from art historians, but they tend to be treated as art works in their own right. The most common genres of personal records have attracted attention from a range of scholars in fields such as literary criticism, women’s studies, art history, cultural studies (including material culture), and media studies. A brief examination of the literature surrounding the record genres of diaries, correspondence, and photograph albums will serve as a representative survey of this literature, with a short exploration of personal recordkeeping in the digital realm.

**Diaries**

A diary is a particularly concentrated form of personal record. There is an extensive body of writing on diaries, which have received perhaps the most attention from scholars of literature, particularly those writing from feminist perspectives.\(^3\) Stylistic analysis can reveal textual and contextual factors such as the author’s intent and the audience for diaries (see, for example, the work of Suzanne Bunkers and Cynthia Huff, which situates diaries within the tradition of autobiography).\(^4\) Steven Kagle’s critical study of American diaries was one of the first to reflect on the nature and characteristics of the diary form.\(^5\) Kagle’s purpose is to define the literary qualities of his subject, but in the course of laying out his criteria for successful diaries, he

\(^2\) This brief list of common record series is drawn from the Special Collections of the E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario.


identifies certain diary traits that, in more aesthetically neutral terms, may be key points for analysis of diaries as records: artistic intent, distinct authorial voice, and temporal breadth of coverage. Harriet Blodgett’s critical survey of English women’s diaries from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries posits that diaries are like works of literature, in that they are often deliberately crafted creations subject to the influence of genre and devices of rhetoric. Colin Symes identifies three intersecting discourses in contemporary diaries, drawn from different sources: the distribution of time according to the units of months, weeks, and days; the idea that events and experiences surrounding the self should be recorded and calibrated; and the idea of the diary as a prosthetic device that extends human memory. The analytical aspects of diaries identified by these authors—intentionality, audience, a prosthesis for memory—are elements to consider when looking at personal recordkeeping more broadly.

**Personal correspondence**

William Decker’s study of American letter-writing includes a useful introduction to the theoretical and critical examination of letters. Through his analysis, Decker arrives at a working definition of his subject: letters are “texts that at some point in their histories are meant to pass in accordance with some postal arrangement from an addresser to an addressee, and that in some way inscribe the process by which an author personally addresses a specific readership.” This readership, however, may extend beyond the letter’s explicit addressee: Decker proposes that the genre of letter-writing acknowledges the possibility of future interception and

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9 Ibid., 22.
Decker also discusses the materiality of letters, a quality that grants letters a metonymic function as a metaphorical extension of the writer’s body.

Janet Altman’s work on epistolarity is primarily concerned with the genre of literature that adopts the form of letters, but her chapter “Epistolary Discourse” contains analysis that is useful in considering real letters. Epistolary discourse, according to Altman, is characterized by a unique combination of pronominal and temporal variance and temporal polyvalence. By pronominal variance, Altman means the distinctive relationship between the I of the writer’s voice and the you of the addressee, which is different in kind from the addressee of memoirs and diary narratives in that it is explicit and reciprocal. Temporal variance refers to the situation of the letter writer in a present moment of time, from which the writer has a relationship to past and future events (this is similar to the temporal situation of a diarist). Temporal polyvalence signifies the multiple moments implied by a letter: the actual time that acts described in a letter were performed, the moment of writing, and the respective times of sending, receipt, reading, or re-reading. As a structure for analysis, these criteria may have broader application to personal records.

Photograph albums

The phenomenon of the family photographic album has received interesting treatment by Martha Langford, who bases her work on a group of albums at the McCord Museum. Langford analyzes the mnemonic structure of albums, finding in them the vestiges of Western

10 Adrian Cunningham refers to Jack Kerouac’s evocation of this possibility in Kerouac’s phrase ‘the mysterious outside reader’, used in his letters to Neal Cassady. Adrian Cunningham, ‘The Mysterious Outside Reader’, Archives and Manuscripts 24, no. 1 (1996): 140.

11 Janet Gurkin Altman, Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 117–142.

12 Ibid., 117–118.

oral culture. The meaning of albums, she argues, is tied to the oral narrative that would accompany their viewing in a family or other social setting—a narrative that is lost, and therefore forgotten, when the album is decontextualized in a museum setting. “Mnemonic structures that serve oral recitation are put to use as the scaffolding of the pictorial aide-mémoire,” she writes. “We cannot see them, of course. Oral scaffolding is by nature impermanent. The album is what remains.”14 Langford’s structural and narrative analysis of albums can be related to the comments of other authors about the shifting meaning of other kinds of personal records. Her notion of “oral scaffolding” is intriguing as a metaphor for the aspects of meaning brought to records and archives by their creator, and potentially lost when the creator’s voice is no longer present.

Personal recordkeeping genres in the digital realm

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the digital realm, in terms of record genres, is its tendency to assimilate and homogenize different genres and formats into the same personal computing environment. Neal Beagrie, writing in 2005, identified “personal digital collections” as quasi-private, quasi-public amalgams of writings, family photographs, and published or consumer content such as articles and music collections.15 José Van Dijck, one of the leading scholars on digital memory practices, brings digital photographs, video recordings, and music playlists under the collective heading of “mediated memories.”16 Her work is an interesting counterpoint to studies of personal recordkeeping because it takes memory practices in the digital realm as its starting point and looks at the broad terrain of recordkeeping without using the vocabulary of archival studies. “Mediated memories,” she writes, “means our memories are embodied by individual brains and minds, enabled by the technologies and material objects that render them manifest, and embedded in social practices and cultural forms.”17 When Van Dijck looks

14 Ibid., 21.


17 Ibid., 174.
backwards to analog formats of mediated memories (such as photographs, diaries, and letters), she does so holistically, describing personal memory practices as keeping a “shoebox” of memories. She feels that the digital environment is an exciting development for the mediation of memories, and that it offers greater potential for people to remix past media objects into current interpretations of their own lives. In the digital environment, the metaphorical shoebox thus becomes a multimedia digital memory machine. Genres of personal records have always been fluid and evolving, but the digital realm promises to increase the rate of change.

**Common elements of personal record genres**

The common elements of the various personal records genres include the mediation of memory that Van Dijck identifies, and the integral relationship of each genre to the technologies available to records creators. Memory-making may be partly intended for others who come after the record creator: collective or cultural memory outlasting the individual human lifetime is the goal of certain personal records. Family photograph albums are clearly intended for retention past the compiler’s lifetime. There is an indeterminate boundary between this kind of collective recordkeeping in the personal realm and social or organizational recordkeeping. Even the most strictly personal records may perhaps be said to function as public or social records when they are published or transferred to an archival repository.

In terms of technologies, the most fundamental recordkeeping technology may be literacy itself. The availability of blank or pre-printed volumes for diary keeping plays a role in the form and appearance of the eventual record. Photograph albums depend on the availability of the technology of photography, which first made it possible to produce and reproduce images of people on an affordable basis. The availability of albums themselves, like that of diaries, similarly plays a role. Arguably, the function of mediating memory and the relationship between a record genre and available technologies are aspects that are common to all records, not just the personal.

The creative act of self-representation, related to the literary genre of autobiography, is clearly at play in many diaries and letters. It is possible to see personal records as an extension of the
body into time and space. This is the self-conscious aspect of personal recordkeeping, and it is where the question of artistic expression becomes involved. Certainly self-representation plays a complex role in the contextual meaning of a personal record, since it brings literary culture, period style, and the matter of genre into the mix. It may be that the element of self-representation is ultimately the unique and defining characteristic of personal records.

**Life narrative**

The literature on life narrative may be helpful in furnishing a context for the various genres of personal records and, more importantly, serving as a lens for looking at records and archives in terms of self-representation. Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil, in their examination of writers' archives, found that the scholarship of life narrative (or “life writing”) offers a nuanced alternative to the notion—rooted in a Romantic ideology—that personal archives are revelatory of the creator’s essential self.\(^{18}\) For the purposes of addressing my own research problem, it may also be useful to consider the archival creator’s account of her own archives and recordkeeping as a form of life narrative. The second edition of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s *Reading Autobiography*, which encyclopedically incorporates the contributions of other scholars, is currently a definitive textbook on the subject of life narrative and will be used as the key piece of bibliography for this section.\(^{19}\)

The term *life writing* is more widely used than life narrative, and is understood to encompass creative acts of self-representation, prominently including the diverse genre of autobiography, but also a variety of other autobiographical forms that may include diaries, genealogies, personal letters, and self-portraits.\(^{20}\) Literary scholar Marlene Kadar sums up the scope of life writing as “genres in which the conventional expectation is that the author does not want to pretend


\(^{20}\) A description of sixty genres of life narrative is provided in Appendix A of ibid., 253–286.
While providing a wide umbrella, the term *life writing* still carries a bias towards written forms of self-expression that may be an awkward fit in considering the case of a visual artist. Smith and Watson use the preferable term *life narrative* to encompass “biographical acts of any sort,” employing it “as a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital.” The potential limitation of *life narrative* is its narrative thrust. Taken as a whole, a personal archival fonds is the site of many actual and potential narrative constructions (the archival creator’s own account of her fonds or her site of recordkeeping being a narrative of particular interest to my research), but a typical fonds is so complex and diverse that it is difficult to think of it as a unified narrative in its own right. Still, Smith and Watson’s definition nominally encompasses non-narrative acts of self-presentation, and a fonds can certainly be viewed through this lens. Although most of the texts considered by scholars of life narrative are written genres such as autobiographies, diaries, and letters, there is increasing scope for the consideration of a wide variety of formats of self-representation. It is entirely plausible to consider the personal archival fonds as a form of life narrative, as Douglas and MacNeil have done. Marlene Kadar, in her afterword to *Working in Women’s Archives*, reflects on the way in which archives can be seen in terms of life narrative: “Like a conventional literary text, the archive, too, is a complex site of influences and representations. But it is also an incomplete site, created by this donor or that; by this survivor or by that librarian. … In other words, part of what makes the archive a complex text is that it is a fragmentary piece of knowledge, or an unfixed and changing piece of knowledge.” However complex and fragmentary an archival fonds may be, it is still possible to address its various aspects through the theoretical framework outlined by Smith and Watson.

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23 Smith and Watson’s description of the literary studies term *self-portrait* may also be useful, since it refers to a present-oriented (rather than retrospectively oriented) narrative.

The first important aspect of Smith and Watson’s framework deals with the complex relationship between life narrative and the self. As Smith and Watson delineate, there are various forms of “I” operating in any autobiographical act: the historical, narrating, narrated, and ideological “I”s are all different aspects of the author’s self.25 Smith and Watson explain the different “I”s as follows: the real historical “I”, the true self, is fragmented, changing through time, and ultimately unknowable. The narrating “I” is the speaker of the narrative; the narrated “I” is the subject of the narration; and the ideological “I” is a way of regarding the discursive context for the narration and the cultural and historical aspects of the definition of selfhood. These aspects of the self exist in a complex, dynamic interrelationship. Smith and Watson find that the concept of performativity, adapted from postmodern theory, can be a useful way to construe the dynamic construction of identities in autobiographical works: “identities are not fixed or essentialized attributes of autobiographical subjects; rather, they are enacted and reiterated through cultural norms and discourses, and thus remain provisional and unstable.”26 Similarly Max Saunders, in his recent book on life narrative in modern literature, argues that “whether or not one believes there is a pre-existent, essential self—even if its process of construction is really a process of re-construction—it only becomes a self for us as it is represented, mediated, constructed.”27

The element of truth in life narrative is therefore highly elusive, because there are aspects of the self that cannot be known by the author, or that only come into being as they are presented in the autobiographical act. Stanley Fish, quoted by Smith and Watson, puts the problem lightly but succinctly in a New York Times article about the unreliability of biography: “autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, no matter how mendacious, is the truth about themselves, whether they know it or not.”28 Smith and Watson articulate the same challenge: “the truth of [an autobiographical] narrative becomes undecidable; it can be neither fully verified nor fully

26 Ibid., 214.
discredited”—deliberate hoaxes notwithstanding. Questions around truth and reliability might yield some very complex answers in the case of a personal fonds.

The complexity of intrinsic truth in life narrative is complicated again by the cultural context that infuses any autobiographical act and shapes the ideological “I.” Smith and Watson note the wide variety of voices that may filter through the dialogue between the different “I”s in a life narrative: “The voices of the narrating ‘I’ and narrated ‘I’ are permeated by a dialogism through which heterogeneous discourses of identity are dispersed.” Literary theorist Françoise Lionnet’s term métissage refers to this kind of braiding together of voices and language in postcolonial life narratives. Lionnet’s perspective on autobiography is of particular interest for my research because Frenkel has cited her work as an inspiration in her own approach to interdisciplinarity, as I will explain in Chapter 4. The term métissage, which has no exact English equivalent, has its roots in the Latin term mixtus, referring to fabric where the warp and weft are of different fibres. It is free from moral judgment or negative connotation, problems that attend many English terms around racial mixing. The crucial aspect of métissage, for Lionnet, is the way that it creates space for “the other ‘noisy’ voices of history,” in contrast to the binary dialectic that prevails in the Western tradition between the dominant cultural discourse and a simplified Other. Since these voices tend to come from oral traditions that have been repressed or marginalized, attempting to represent them in a fixed, authoritative written version would be highly problematic. Indeterminacy is thus a key aspect of métissage as a strategy, allowing as it does for a heterogeneous discourse: “opacity and obscurity are necessarily the precious ingredients of all authentic communication.”

The second aspect of Smith and Watson’s framework that I will highlight deals with the immediate context for a given narrative. One part of this context is the notion of the coaxes of a

30 Ibid., 81.
32 Ibid., 4.
life narrative, “any person or institution or set of cultural imperatives that solicits or provokes
people to tell their stories.”33 The role of the archival institution and the archivist could be
thought of in these terms: their relationship with the artist situates recordkeeping activity in
relation to an eventual transfer to the repository. Messages of encouragement—whether overt
or implicit—for the artist to keep or select certain kinds of records can be thought of in terms of
this coaxing role. Certainly the researcher investigating a personal fonds through a dialogue with
its creator is acting as a coaxer with respect to the resulting account of the fonds, which will be
kept in mind in interpreting Frenkel’s narration of her studio. This account also takes place
within a particular site or setting, namely a research interview in which it is appropriate and
expected that the artist will describe various aspects of personal recordkeeping that would
probably not be of interest in an ordinary social setting outside that context.34

Finally, I will note Smith and Watson’s distillation of one aspect of the discursive context for a
life narrative: such narratives are constructed according to the “cultural scripts” that govern the
presentation of self as a particular kind of subject.35 Self-representation by artists might be one
such script; the genre of artists’ self-portraits has endured since the Renaissance, reflecting the
cultural myths that attend the artist’s status. Art historian Charles Reeve has examined the
phenomenon of artists’ autobiographies. Contrasting life narratives by Renaissance sculptor
Benvenuto Cellini, filmmaker Derek Jarman, and contemporary British artist and management
consultant Lucy Kimbell, he argues that there is an increasing self-effacement of the subject in
contemporary autobiographical acts by artists.36 Cellini’s autobiography, written 1558–1566,
represents the first such work by a visual artist. His narrative is hugely self-assured, filled with
accounts of his own brilliance and founded on early modern moral certitude. In stark contrast,

33 The notion of the ‘coaxer’ is originally articulated by sociologist Ken Plummer, Telling Sexual Stories:
Interpreting Life Narratives, 64.


35 Ibid., 56.

36 Charles Reeve, ‘Is an Artist? Art, Autobiographies, and Humanity’s Disappearance’, Reading Room:
Kimbell’s *Audit* (2002) is a report of a self-representative statistical exercise in which the artist mailed questionnaires about herself to 69 friends, family members and acquaintances, asking them questions about her worth from a wide variety of perspectives, from the personal to the abstract. The received data were tabulated and presented by the artist as a kind of self-portrait. As Reeve argues, “this technique suggests Kimbell is literalizing the idea of the individual as an empty intersection of probabilities rather than a solid core of being.” Clearly, a cultural script will reflect a wider cultural context. As Smith and Watson’s analysis makes evident, life narratives are never simple; there are numerous factors to consider in the analysis of any autobiographical statement.

**The transformative role of archival institutions and processes**

The personal fonds in the institutional sphere is shaped by archival practices that reflect, at least to some extent, the theoretical literature of archival studies. My perspective in outlining this literature will emphasize personal recordkeeping as the nearest approximation to artists’ archives that exists as a concept in the archival studies literature.

**What is a (personal) record?**

It is self-evident that archival institutions collect archival material, which in the Canadian *total archives* tradition includes selected personal records (known as *manuscripts* in some other traditions) as well as the more universally acquired records of government and other sponsoring institutions. *Archives* and *records*, however, are terms from the realm of archival theory and practice that are not necessarily used by the creators of the material acquired by archives. The typical author of a diary, for example, may consider her activity in the context of memory and self-exploration, or perhaps as part of a larger tradition of the diary as a genre, but is less likely to view her creation in terms of its characteristics as a record. In other words, the transformative role of the archives could be said to begin at the level of defining the object of collecting.

37 Ibid., 35.
Pragmatically, it must be assumed, archivists and archival institutions simply acquire what are commonly understood to be archives, usually without definitional quandaries. However, an idea of document still shapes this activity at a fundamental level. In examining the intersection between personal records and archival institutions, it is important to have a clear notion of the nature of material being sought for acquisition. These questions become particularly relevant when a collecting archives appraises archival material which includes unusual non-textual media, such as drawings or artifacts. Probably every personal fonds, in its context of creation, has intimate provenancial relationships with material that would not be considered records or documents by most archivists. To the records creator, the distinction between these classes of material may be unconsidered. The intellectual basis for severing records from non-records, or excluding a meaningful artifact from a personal fonds at the point of acquisition, is a problem attending archival work.38

The concepts of record and recordkeeping require a working definition, while bearing in mind that these notions are grounded in archival science and are unlikely to be reference points for the archival creator. The Society of American Archivists (SAA) Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology supplies two (of seven) definitions of record that pertain to the present purpose:

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38 The scope of diplomatic theory may be an uneasy fit with personal archives for other reasons. It is overwhelmingly concerned with textual documents (whether paper or electronic), although the aims of the InterPARES II project to deal with the records of artistic creation should be noted here (www.interpares.org/ip2/ip2_index.cfm). The issue of visual and other material evidence is complicated. Although apparently a question apart from personal records, which are commonly understood to include material in all media just as organizational records do, Heather MacNeil has noted that individuals and families are significant creators of non-textual records (Invitational meeting of experts on arrangement: Final report and recommendations, 2005). Additionally, the factor of creative self-expression in personal records may be particularly problematic in the case of visual material, where the aesthetic qualities of a visual document are traditionally viewed with suspicion by archivists (see Hugh Taylor, “Documentary art and the role of the archivist,” 1979). The archival scholarship nearest to this question may be the work of Joan Schwartz (“We make our tools and our tools make us: Lessons from photographs from the practice, politics and poetics of diplomatics,” 1995), in which diplomatic ideas are fruitfully applied to photographic records.
Data or information that has been fixed on some medium; that has content, context, and structure; and that is used as an extension of human memory or to demonstrate accountability. … Data or information in a fixed form that is created or received in the course of individual or institutional activity and set aside (preserved) as evidence of that activity for future reference.  

The emphasis on fixity of content, structure, and context is only partly appropriate for the present purposes. In the examination of the various genres of personal records such as diaries and letters, it will become apparent that the notion of fixity may not extend to all aspects of a record’s meaning—that records, in fact, regardless of the concreteness of their existence, owe much of their significance to the mutable context of their creation, transmission, and interpretation. In light of these doubts, Tom Nesmith’s suggested definition adds a layer of fluidity to the standard understanding:

A record is an evolving mediation of understanding about some phenomena—a mediation created by social and technical processes of inscription, transmission, and contextualization.  

As will be discussed, the idea of a record as a “mediation” allows a greater scope for the role of context in creating meaning.

The definitions of personal records and personal recordkeeping are not clear-cut, perhaps because in the archival sphere they are often defined in terms of an exception to the recordkeeping activities of organizations that are the focus of more archival attention. Outside of archival science, scholars writing on aspects of personal records often come from disciplines such as literary studies and sociology; they are unlikely to group the diaries or letters (etc.) that are the


40 This definition may bring into doubt records in electronic form (this doubt, however, may itself be grounded in archival notions of permanence, for the mere fragility of electronic records should not be the basis for discounting them; they are transmissible, and their formats and functions include phenomena such as blogs and email with substantial roots in “traditional” media).

object of their particular study under the collective heading of personal records. In specifically considering the phenomenon of personal recordkeeping, a number of scholars from within archival science, too, have implied a scope for the activity that escapes the boundaries of standard glossary definitions. There are thus a few different perspectives that should be considered in this definitional exercise.

Again, the SAA *Glossary* reflects a traditional archival understanding of *personal papers*:

(also personal records, private papers), n. ~ 1. Documents created, acquired, or received by an individual in the course of his or her affairs and preserved in their original order (if such order exists). ~ 2. Nonofficial documents kept by an individual at a place of work.

This definition is problematic because it leaves no room for documents created outside the course of an individual’s affairs, unless *affairs* is defined so broadly as to encompass any aspect of a life. It also implies that the office is the locus for recordkeeping activity, a notion that would exclude the personal records created as part of private life.

As for personal recordkeeping, the definition offered by the SAA *Glossary* leaves even less room for private personal activity: “n. ~ The systematic creation, use, maintenance, and disposition of records to meet administrative, programmatic, legal, and financial needs and responsibilities.” In contemporary Western society, as in many other societies, there is a range of financial, health and identity documents that individuals are more or less obligated to keep, more or less systematically, for practical or juridical purposes. One obvious example is personal income tax records, the keeping of which is mandated by law. It could be argued that there is a different kind of activity involved in the creation of a personal diary or snapshot (for example), which may include memorialization and self-representation, and is the product of the creator’s volition.

42 For example, Catherine Hobbs calls for more attention to be paid to personal records created out of personal volition, rather than as a byproduct of transactions with organizations; other examples are discussed in the ‘Archival authors directly addressing personal recordkeeping’ section of this chapter. Catherine Hobbs, ‘The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals’, *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001): 126–135.

to a much greater degree.\textsuperscript{44} It is a secondary goal of my study to contribute to a definition that encompasses both of these notions, and the range of personal recordkeeping activity in between.

Chris Hurley moves the definition of \textit{record} into contentious territory in addressing the question of personal electronic records.\textsuperscript{45} Hurley insists that keeping records must be the sole purpose of the archival endeavour, whether an archivist focuses on the records of organizations or individuals. The conception of records as evidence, in his view, should precede any other consideration in collecting. However, Hurley sees the popular conception of evidence for organizational records—that is, in terms of legal accountability—as too narrow to accommodate all archives. Rather, the archival purpose requires articulation of “the functional requirements for socio-historical evidence,” and this articulation has not yet been achieved.\textsuperscript{46} Hurley perceives a potential problem in this circumstance:

If records are maintained to satisfy a need for evidence of identity, do we still need to maintain their qualities as records. Evidence of identity will be found in sources other than records; so does a distinction between records and other materials serving as socio-historical evidence need to be retained? To answer “yes” we must be convinced that retained records, with their qualities of recordness kept intact, serve as evidence of identity in ways which other sources of socio-historical evidence do not.\textsuperscript{47}

Hurley is arguing rhetorically for the primacy of archival recordkeeping, but the emphasis in his phrase on differentiating records from “other sources of socio-historical evidence” invites examination of similarities as well as differences. Hurley does not specify what other sources he is thinking of, but one imagines published works, works of art, and material culture—or perhaps what the orphaned non-entities that former records with their “qualities of recordness” \textit{not} kept

\textsuperscript{44} James O'Toole, in his examination of the symbolic significance of archives, noted the emphasis in the archival literature on the practical element of recordkeeping (including personal recordkeeping) at the expense of understanding other reasons for creating and keeping records. James O'Toole, ‘The Symbolic Significance of Archives’, \textit{The American Archivist} 56, no. 2 (1993): 234–255.


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
intact might become. Perhaps the concept of recordness, with its emphasis on provenance and context, is one way of looking at a range of such evidence, including artifactual.

Hugh Taylor hints at these possibilities in his examination of textual records and media: “Archivists reared in a largely textual environment have had a tendency to ‘read’ all media of record literally, without realizing that all forms of communication are loaded with conventions and semiotic ‘signs’ inherent in their respective technologies.”48 The form and media of records need investigation for their role in the meaning of documents, a study which Taylor suggests could be considered a “‘modern diplomatic,’ which emphasizes not only the content but also the form of documentation over time.”49

Archival appraisal, selection, and collecting

Through archival appraisal, the purely personal record makes a transition into part of the institutionalized public memory.50 In terms of creating value and meaning in archives, an appraisal decision is probably the most powerful action that an archivist can perform. Appraisal, in the most traditional terms, is “the process of identifying materials offered to an archives that have sufficient value to be accessioned.”51 This seemingly simple definition belies the fundamental role that appraisal plays in archival practice and the plethora of approaches taken by archivists to appraisal. Implicit in it are questions about the nature of records and archives and the role that archives—and archivists—play in society. While very little of the archival

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49 Ibid., 457.

50 This observation echoes Craig (2001), p.175.

51 Pearce-Moses, A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology. Pearce-Moses provides the following narrower terms for appraisal: content analysis; context analysis; documentation strategy; functional analysis; macro appraisal; use analysis.
appraisal literature is concerned with the specific problem of the appraisal of personal archives, the subject is dealt with secondarily or obliquely by a number of authors.52

The literature of archival appraisal has its origins in the early manuals of archival administration that accompanied the dramatic increase in public records in the early decades of the twentieth century. Such manuals were written primarily by and for archivists managing public records, and each addresses the question of private records (and personal records) briefly and secondarily. Muller, Feith, and Fruin, in the text commonly known as the “Dutch Manual,” were explicitly concerned with the management of the Dutch state archives and viewed family archives as a different category of material altogether: “very often they have been gathered together in the strangest manner and lack the organic bond of an archival collection in the sense attached to it in this manual.”53 There is no further explication of the strange, inorganic aspects of family archives. The records of persons acting in official capacities are included in their definition of archives, but clearly only insofar as these record administrative duties. Muller, Feith, and Fruin acknowledged that an overlap between the records of an official’s public and private personae may sometimes occur, or that the latter may illuminate the former, but the exception they draw for the archival retention of personal records in this instance clearly arises from the imperatives of public recordkeeping rather than any interest in records of the private person per se.54

The two patriarchs of English-language archival theory, Sir Hilary Jenkinson and Theodore Schellenberg, were both employed in government positions, and it was from the perspective of administering public records that each wrote his main works on appraisal and archives administration. The management of personal archives is naturally secondary to these authors, given this context. Jenkinson, in particular, scarcely mentions personal or family archives in his


54 This point is made explicit in Muller, Feith, and Fruin’s “Item 3” (p. 155).
Manual of Archive Administration (1966; first edition 1922), because his goal was the systematic administration of public records that were mushrooming following the First World War. Schellenberg’s Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques (1956), written from a government archives perspective, makes reference only to those quasi-official personal records that serve as evidence of the individual’s relationship to government and are useful in establishing collateral rights.

The notion that the archives of government or organizations and those of persons should be treated differently seems to have its historical origin in the nature of institutional mandates. In Britain, Australia, and the United States, public records have traditionally been the purview of archival institutions, while manuscript materials are customarily collected by libraries. The divide in activity between archives and manuscript repositories is not strict, however, and the two kinds of material are often found under one institutional roof. Maynard Brichford authored what was for nearly three decades the standard manual on appraisal for the Society of American Archivists. In the effort to be of use to a broad range of archival institutions, he took as his premise the pragmatic reality that archives and manuscripts are frequently administered together, or at least according to similar principles. In the matter of private archives, he identified the institutional collecting policy as the central, most basic appraisal decision.

A more philosophical approach to the problem of appraisal was taken by Hans Booms, who looked at the activity of appraisal in terms of the society that archivists attempt to document.

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While not specifically concerned with personal archives, his ideas have powerful implications for the appraisal of such material. Booms makes the argument that the values that determine archival significance are generated by society itself, rather than by potential researchers or current administrators. Records should therefore be appraised according to the terms of the society in which their creator was situated. In Booms’ view, appraisal is a more difficult task than had commonly been recognized, because archivists themselves are situated in society and possess a resulting subjectivity in their approach to records. His suggested approach to understanding the societal values of an archival creator involves a process of historical analysis of the creator’s function in society. Individual archival institutions, working within defined areas of responsibility such as a municipal government or a subject focus, should seek to develop documentation plans based on such historical analyses.

The notion that subject matter should underlie appraisal decisions for collecting archives persists in the concept of documentation strategy, pioneered by Helen Samuels. Without perceiving personal records as a distinct problem, she emphasizes the integration of individuals, government, and other institutions in contemporary society. Thus, for Samuels, the records of individual people are not merely the records of individuals, but involve many other persons and organizations. It could be said that documentation strategy operates on a macro level at which individual records creators and their fonds are not the focus and where distinctions between personal and organizational records are of secondary importance.

Regarding strategies for the collection of personal archives, Samuels points to the artificiality of the prevailing assumption that a whole person can be documented in a single archival institution with a subject-based collecting focus. She proposes instead that archivists accept the notion of a dispersed collection involving the multiple institutions in which the person (in other words, the subject of documentation) has been involved. Samuels’ model for documentation strategy is uniquely open to the participation of different kinds of heritage institutions in the documentary endeavour. She suggests that the approach to documentation should not be limited by professional silos; library and museum materials should be seen as complementing archival

documentation. In a pragmatic observation that sits at odds with traditional appraisal techniques, Samuels notes that most recordkeeping integrates many media and formats, including published material, which tend to be format-specific. The gravest potential problem with Samuels’ approach is that it can only be applied to records creators who maintain strong relationships with institutions, and it cannot begin to accommodate persons who work independently, under which heading would fall many of those in creative professions.

The Canadian total archives tradition offers an alternative to the Australian and American preoccupation with the difference between manuscripts and archives. The idea of total archives, articulated by the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives in their report to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), ostensibly embraces archives of all kinds (public, private, personal, etc.) in all media. In theory, each archival institution, emulating the practice of what was in 1980 the Public Archives of Canada (PAC), acquires the records of its sponsoring institution together with private material according to its mandate. At the PAC—now Library and Archives Canada (LAC)—this practice seems to have arisen out of a long history of acquisitive Dominion Archivists operating as national historian-collectors before eventually gaining the mandate to administer the records of government. A total archives approach is now the norm at most Canadian government, church, and community archives, as well as many university archives, although a number of the latter are primarily collecting institutions.

One might imagine that this holistic tradition would eliminate any tension or difference between personal and other archives, but there have been a number of indications that this is not the case. In 1995, Shirley Spragge published an impassioned plea that Canadian archivists not neglect their cultural responsibility in facing the looming problem of electronic records, which

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61 Adrian Cunningham (1996) enthused about the potential for the total archives approach to mitigate the trend of “corporate myopia” he saw among the exclusively corporate and governmental archivists in Australia who were failing to recognize the importance of anything other than evidentiary concepts of value in archives.
she saw as a particular challenge for the acquisition of personal and private archives. After all, for most institutions, the total archives approach leaves the collection of private and personal archives as a largely discretionary activity vulnerable to neglect when budgets are tightened or sponsoring organizations demand narrow accountability.

The total archives approach, at least at the national level, is supported by the Canadian model of macro appraisal, articulated in the mid-1990s by a number of scholar-archivists at the then–National Archives of Canada and officially adopted by LAC as a methodology for the appraisal of government records. With its analytical emphasis on business functions, administrative structures, and the identification of Offices of Primary Interest, the model is clearly conceived with government records in mind. A search of the LAC website (February 2011) yields no corresponding official method for the appraisal of private records. Terry Cook, the primary author of the LAC-BAC’s *Appraisal Methodology*, has articulated in other writings that documentation strategy may be the most appropriate method for non-government records. It is clear, anyway, that macro-appraisal, with its emphasis on functions and offices, is an uneasy fit with personal records. Several authors have noted that functional analysis is a difficult conceptual apparatus to apply to the non-transactional activities of human beings and associated

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63 Laura Millar, ‘Discharging Our Debt: The Evolution of the Total Archives Concept in English Canada’, *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998): 103–146.


65 There is, however, a report entitled “Acquisition Priorities: Setting Priorities for Private Archives” which addresses the institution’s collecting priorities in light of diminishing resources and the changing landscape of collecting institutions in Canada (http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/modernization/012004-2055.01-e.html, accessed February 28, 2011).

Catherine Hobbs is further concerned by the tendency in macro-appraisal to view the individual as a citizen—that is, in terms of his or her interactions with the state—rather than as a fully-rounded human being with a private existence.

Greater attention is paid to the distinct character of personal records by Barbara Craig in her text on archival appraisal. Craig describes the phenomenon of personal archival appraisal, emphasizing that the selection and retention of documents is an activity fundamental to an individual’s process of making sense of his or her place in the world. Uniquely, Craig discusses the appraisal processes that take place within personal recordkeeping prior to any kind of archival involvement. These personal editorial decisions shape records in a meaningful way, although the criteria on which they are based are seldom articulated: “While personal appraisal may appear to be unsystematic, even shambolic, that appearance masks a group of related logical assessments, each firmly grounded in personal needs and knowledge, supported by privileged instant access to them and to an understanding of their personal meaning.”

Although the appraisal of personal archives can more or less be accommodated by the prevailing understanding of archival appraisal (see, for example, Frank Boles’ 2005 manual, Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts, which treats personal archives under the heading of collection policies), there is still a need for a more fully articulated theory of personal archival appraisal.

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70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., 12.

72 Frank Boles, Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005).
At the same time, very little is understood about the actual practice of appraisal. Clearly there is a need for further empirical study of personal archives appraisal, which may in turn contribute to the development of theories that more fully account for this fundamental archival process.

Archival arrangement

If appraisal transforms the record into part of societal memory, archival arrangement potentially reshapes it to bear the imprint of systems that reflect modern bureaucracy and standardization. The practice of arrangement arises out of the largely practical need to impart order on archival holdings. This need may be felt by the archivist, who is professionally compelled to have intellectual and physical control of holdings, and by the researcher, who usually wishes to find particular documentation as efficiently as possible. In the case of organizational records, formal filing systems are typically already in use by the archival creator and will form the basis of arrangement decisions by the archives. Indeed, such systems were already in mind when the archival arrangement structure of series and files was developed. In contrast, personal systems of recordkeeping are not usually as regular as those used for organizational records, with the consequence that archival arrangement may effect a greater transformation on personal archives than on organizational archives. The idiosyncrasies of a person’s own method of arranging records may include groupings that do not resemble organizational records series, or may form an organic quasi-chaos that resists any kind of sub-grouping. Personal records are also more likely than organizational records to contain material in a variety of non-textual media, with which it can be difficult to reconcile the textual notions of file and series.

Schellenberg devotes a chapter to the arrangement of manuscript collections in The Management of Archives. “Organic collections,” as he terms personal fonds, are only part of his focus, which also includes artificial collections and miscellaneous material. He describes the various bases for

73 A recent study by Barbara Craig begins to address this need: Barbara L. Craig, ‘Doing Archival Appraisal in Canada: Results from a Postal Survey of Practitioners’ Experiences, Practices, and Opinions’, Archivaria 64 (Fall 2007): 1–45.

establishing archival series, an endeavour made challenging by the fact that “personal papers are usually arranged badly” by their creator. Schellenberg recommends two main approaches to designating series, according to record types and according to the relation of records to the creator’s activity; both are frequently combined within a single collection. He holds the belief that records originating from personal or family affairs can usually be cleanly distinguished from those relating to “the activity for which the person whose papers are being preserved became noteworthy.” In short, personal recordkeeping idiosyncrasies and the melding of life and work hold little interest for Schellenberg, except as challenges to be overcome.

The principle of respect des fonds, which lies at the heart of modern archival arrangement theory for both personal and organizational records, is “the principle that the records of a person, family or corporate body must be kept together in their original order, if it exists or has been maintained, and not be mixed or combined with the records of another individual or corporate body.” This concept received its most-cited articulation by Michel Duchein. The historical and theoretical background to Duchein’s essay is French archival thought in a bureaucratic context, so it is not surprising that he had little to say about the fonds of personal creators. Persons are among the possible creator/agencies cited by Duchein, but much of his analysis of the nature of the fonds presupposed complex organizations subject to hierarchical structuring, jurisdictional changes, or dissolution.

Terry Cook reflected on the nature of the fonds for the benefit of the Canadian archival community, which adopted the concept of the fonds as a nationally-mandated approach to

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75 Ibid., 183.
76 Ibid., 185.
77 Bureau of Canadian Archivists: Canadian Committee on Archival Description, Rules for Archival Description.
arrangement enroute to the development of national descriptive standards. While the majority of his essay deals predictably with organizational archives, he made a few comments about personal fonds. The “conceptual unity” of a personal fonds, he said, “should be self-evident,” yet is often quite complicated. A person’s involvement in community, political or professional associations may lead to the creation and retention of records that more properly belong to the fonds of these organizations; a poet, in Cook’s example, may retain records from serving on the executive of the Writers’ Union of Canada. This so-called complication, though, is really a straightforward exception, and it does not address the peculiarities of applying a principle of arrangement originating in bureaucracy to a body of personal material. The other potential complication identified by Cook is the records originating from personal collectivities such as marriages and broader family structures, which he saw as potentially requiring the development of more explicit criteria for fonds identification.

Whatever awkwardness the concept of the fonds and provenance-based principles of arrangement may possess in the case of personal archives, the historical alternatives—particularly in the United States and Australia, where manuscripts and archives have often been administered by different types of institutions—clearly represent a more aggressive role for the archivist. In the administration of personal archives by libraries, the terminology—manuscript collections and manuscript curator—points to a different approach in which (typically) the textual mode prevails, archival materials are structured to reflect a collecting approach, and the professional in charge is mandated to interpret the collections for the benefit of researchers.

These differences were represented in an exchange of essays on the treatment of personal papers that appeared in Archives and Manuscripts in the mid-1970s. Graeme Powell argued from the librarian’s or manuscript curator’s perspective, refuting archival approaches to the arrangement of personal records on the basis that the archivist’s first responsibility is to the


80 Ibid., 42.
“historian.” The notion of original order, he contended, is often meaningless anyway because manuscript collections are frequently simply “disordered.”81 Instead, Powell sought standardized rules for arrangement on the basis of records form and generating activity.

Chris Hurley responded critically to Powell’s essay, rejecting the notion that personal records are merely disorderly, and expressing doubt that such disorder could be quantified as a basis for the imposition of an artificial order by the archivist.82 Hurley argued for the archaeological significance and complexity of the original order of personal records. He remained convinced that the sound application of archival principles and approaches—whether to the records of an organization or a person—amounted to an optimally objective, transparent, and minimal intervention by the archivist.

Richard Cox, writing from an American perspective nearly twenty years later, said remarkably similar things in considering the divide between methods of administering manuscripts and archives. He saw this gap as due partly to a “lack of understanding about the nature of historical manuscripts”:

> The vast majority of personal and family papers are records with the same organic, orderly nature deriving from functions and activities as institutional records discussed by archivists at least since the late nineteenth century.… While there may be much for us to study about the nature of personal recordkeeping, it is not a study about chaos but one about the impulses driving individuals and families to create, maintain, and use their own records.83

This insistence arose chiefly from a perceived need to refute the apparently tenaciously held view in manuscript circles that acquisition and arrangement should primarily serve the historian/user. In Cox’s view, an understanding of the origins and purpose of personal records


amounts to a recognition that, as records, this material should be treated according to the same archival principles as organizational records.

One element that Cox saw as distinct to manuscripts—and distinctly troubling—is the material aspect of some personal records. He agreed with Cook that personal records have been seen too often as artifacts, which in Cox’s strict archival terms would place them in a different—that is, lower—order of value. Cox tried to dissect the delicate balance between the symbolic and evidential value of archives, but principally concluded that symbolic reverence for physicality would make records merely artefactual, and archivists merely antiquarian; he did concede, however, that “in some rare instances, the characteristics of the original record convey important evidential and even informational characteristics that would be lost if the originals were destroyed.” Cox’s anti-material position may arise from his suspicions that the convergence of heritage institutions may potentially obscure the distinct character of documents, a quality that is placed at risk through digitization and mass-archiving along with publications and artefacts. But he does not articulate his grounds for thinking that material concerns pertain only to manuscripts and not to all archival documents. Ultimately it is this failure to come to grips with materiality and symbolic aspects that stands in the way of a resolution of the archives vs. manuscripts divide for Cox.

A few authors have written about the arrangement of personal archives taking an empirical, case-study based approach. For example, Annelie Spiedelsbach described the complexities inherent in the William Irvine Papers, an instance of personal archives containing elements of organizational recordkeeping in the form of Cooperative Commonwealth Federation records. Spiedelsbach found that the application of certain prescribed approaches to arrangement, specifically the establishment of subgroups according to Gracy’s manual of archival arrangement

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85 Cox, ‘The Record in the Manuscript Collection’, 52.

and description, would actually distort the internal order of the archives.\textsuperscript{87} Without being prescriptive, this case suggests a sensitive approach to dealing with perceived idiosyncrasies in the arrangement of personal archives. The findings of Margaret Southcott et al. affirm the need to approach each body of personal papers in a spirit of practical problem-solving, with archival theory serving only as a starting point.\textsuperscript{88}

Doubt that professional adherence to archival principles in arrangement amounts to an objective, transparent treatment of archives began to emerge in archival writing in the 1990s. Brien Brothman, in his exploration of archival values, considered whether arrangement has an effect on the value and meaning of records.\textsuperscript{89} Although he was not specifically concerned with personal archives, his observations are important in the current context:

\ldots the most basic disruption of original order, of course, is the removal of the records from the originating site of provenance and their placement in archives. And once records are transplanted from their native homes, archival arrangement also necessarily distorts original order in more subtle ways. In the first place they become archival. The assignment of record group numbers, volume numbers, and inventory designations and descriptions as well as other archival adornments to permanently retained documents also serve to transfigure, if not to transform, the record. \ldots Such operations can be said to effect an elevation of the records to almost mystical status while tending to diminish the vitality that once permeated the record. Archival practice, in other words, remains an art.\textsuperscript{90}

One might question the idea that the numbering of archives elevates them to a mystical status, but in the case of personal archives in particular, it is easy to see that a transformation takes place through regularization and labelling. Even the idea of original order in archives cannot be

\textsuperscript{87} David B. Gracy, \textit{Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description} (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977).


\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 85.
seen as an impartial preservation of the original state of records; “rather, it is the imposed socio-historical order of a tended garden.” 91 Personal archives that move from a context of idiosyncratic ordering and the material setting of a home or studio into the institutional context of an archives will undergo an alteration of meaning. One thinks of Michel Foucault and his postmodern broadening of the author function: in Brothman’s vision, the archival institution, the archivist and their professional standards take part in the authorship of a processed archival collection. 92

More recently, Heather MacNeil has argued in a related vein that in keeping with the scope of contemporary textual criticism, archives can be understood as cultural texts. 93 In archival theory, the archival fonds has traditionally been understood as complete and authentic at the point at which it leaves its creator’s possession. The goal of archival arrangement, as conventionally understood, has been to reflect authentic original order, as if it were possible to pin down the “original” order of an evolving entity like an archival fonds. Rather, in MacNeil’s view, the fonds in the institution can be understood as an ongoing cultural creation, the product of many authorial forces. Although the concept of original order remains important, the authenticity and meaning of a fonds should be assessed within a broad and ongoing time frame.

Similarly, Jennifer Meehan, drawing on empirical observations, discusses the limitations of the principle of original order as applied to personal fonds, which she argues are often too idiosyncratically structured to support a literal, physically-oriented interpretation of the concept. 94 Instead, she proposes that original order should be understood as a conceptual framework that can assist in the top-down analysis of a personal fonds in the institution. Factors that shape the internal order of a fonds, such as its custodial history and the prior interventions of archivists, can thus be accommodated in this approach.

91 Ibid.


Theoretical concerns around arrangement have yet to come to bear demonstrably on the practice of arrangement of personal archives, at least in terms of any prescribed methods adopted by the profession. Arrangement is still seen as an outstanding problem for the professional community, with the arrangement of personal archives in particular needing further study. To begin to address this issue, the Canadian Council of Archives sponsored the Invitational Meeting of Experts on Arrangement in 2004. The group noted in its final report that “there is a paucity of guidelines addressing the problems that present themselves specifically in the context of personal fonds.”

Archival authors explicitly addressing personal recordkeeping

The subject of personal recordkeeping and personal archives has been taken up directly by a few archival authors. In general, these writers tend to view personal archives in relation to organizational archives, whether observing that scholarly attention to the latter has excluded or otherwise failed to address essential aspects of the former, or arguing that the two are essentially similar. Like most dichotomies, the distinction between personal and organizational archives is imperfect. Indeed, when the notion of personal archives is distilled to its most personal aspects, as some authors are keen to attempt, it becomes an abstraction that is insufficient to explain many aspects of the records in an artist’s studio. Given the relative newness of this area of the literature, it is likely that the definition of personal archives is still evolving.

A special issue of Archives and Manuscripts in 1996 may be seen as the starting point for the contemporary interest in personal archives. Sue McKemmish, in a frequently-cited article from that issue, explored the way in which personal records function as evidence of the self. McKemmish examined the notion of literary warrant for personal recordkeeping, finding that the broad societal mandates for creating and maintaining such records include their contribution

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to society’s collective memory. She identified the function of a collecting archives in shaping societal memory as a valuable topic for future study. Adrian Cunningham identified intentionality as a particularly interesting question with regard to personal archives.\(^97\) He rejected the common view that records are unselfconscious creations, arguing instead that most records are purposefully created for audiences that may not be immediately evident. Cunningham explored this aspect using examples of personal recordkeeping, finding that the search for the “mysterious outside reader” can deepen our understanding of the author function in some documents.

Such ideas were treated with some impatience by Michael Piggott a few years later in a review of several published editions of diaries.\(^98\) Piggott found discussions of the intended audience for diaries “tiresome,” suggesting that all diaries invite a wider readership to some degree: in his view, the perceived dichotomy between personal and communal recordkeeping is artificial, and real instances of diaries readily illustrate the blurriness of this distinction.\(^99\) Piggott called for more empirical studies of actual diaries.

Canadian archivists began to look seriously at personal archives around 2001, when a special issue of *Archivaria* was devoted to the theme. Catherine Hobbs, reflecting on the nature of personal archives, argued that the personal element of these archives had received little attention in the literature compared to the records of personal transaction.\(^100\) These latter records fit more readily with the prevailing interest in government and other administrative records, but they do not encompass evidence of personality and creative expression, an aspect of personal archives which Hobbs felt is deserving of greater consideration. Hobbs identified the aesthetic and symbolic value of personal records as a major factor in the appraisal criteria for cultural archives, identifying these values as a topic for future study. She continued her exploration of these ideas

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\(^{97}\) Cunningham, “The Mysterious Outside Reader”.


\(^{99}\) Ibid., 87.

\(^{100}\) Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals”.
in a 2010 essay, arguing for an approach to personal archives that places the personal creator and the circumstances of records creation at the centre of a personal fonds.\textsuperscript{101}

Other notable articles in the same issue dealt with the acquisition of private records and the literature of personal archives appraisal. In her commentary on private records acquisition strategies, Barbara Craig observed that “we urgently require detailed studies of the uses of documents and documentary forms of communication by private persons in their personal lives.”\textsuperscript{102} Persons engaged in artistic activities were noted as an area of particular interest for the “unique forms” that their records might take, in contrast to the more standard forms of documents created by persons in a corporate environment. Riva Pollard’s literature review on personal archives appraisal confirmed the marginalization of personal records in archival theory, while noting that the application of appraisal theories that focus on the broad societal context of records creation, such as that of Hans Booms, may be the best starting point for the development of appraisal methodologies for personal archives.\textsuperscript{103} Pollard, Craig, and Hobbs shared the conviction that there is something essentially different about personal archives that had yet to receive adequate attention in the archival literature.

In contrast, Richard Cox argues against the notion that there is any substantial difference in nature between personal records and organizational records.\textsuperscript{104} He sees the essential needs which engender both kinds of recordkeeping as the same: “to capture transactions, document activities, serve legal and administrative functions, and provide a basis for memory.”\textsuperscript{105} Cox has doubts about the tendency to emphasize the artefactual qualities of personal (and organizational)

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\textsuperscript{102} Craig, ‘The Archivist as Planner and Poet: Thoughts on the Larger Issues of Appraisal for Acquisition’, 181.


\textsuperscript{104} Cox, ‘The Record in the Manuscript Collection’.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 52.
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records, which he believes are rarely integral to the evidential and informational characteristics of records.

More recently, Cox summarized his views on personal recordkeeping in a book, notable for being the most extensive published treatment of personal archives. Cox’s commentary extended to subtopics such as document genres, psychological motivations for personal recordkeeping and collecting, and material culture aspects of recordkeeping practice. His focus was on the recordkeeping activities of the average person, and he expressed a wish to see the continuation of such activity in the digital age, with some prescriptive comments on ensuring the persistence of paper-based and digital recordkeeping. Although Cox explored diaries, letter-writing, and family photographs, and seemed to acknowledge that media, genre and social norms play significant roles in shaping personal recordkeeping decisions, he remained oriented towards the norms of organizations in his ideal of personal archives: after outlining the advice of a self-help writer on personal organization, he observed “and with this we begin to see the development of what can be termed a personal archives.” While recognizing many aspects of the nature of personal records and archives, Cox did not address the possibility that such archives’ idiosyncratic nature may be something that does not need intervention by archivists; that instead it may open the possibility of analysis and understanding on its own terms.

Harold Edwin Thiele, in his doctoral dissertation, made a study of literary warrants in personal recordkeeping, a topic that could serve to articulate the complex external reasons for creating


107 Cox, Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling, 189.
and keeping personal archives.\textsuperscript{108} Thiele’s scope, however, was limited to legislative warrant for the creation and maintenance of records in connection with personal income tax in the United States. Like Cox, Thiele defined personal recordkeeping as essentially similar to organizational recordkeeping, choosing to minimize or disregard those aspects of personal recordkeeping that are shaped more by personal volition than by a juridical context. Given this approach, his work is of very limited interest in considering most personal archives.

The personal element in all recordkeeping and archival activity was stressed again by Michael Piggott in a discussion of human behaviour as an aspect of records and archives creation deserving of further study.\textsuperscript{109} Piggott observed that essentialist explanations for personal recordkeeping are difficult because of the complexity of the human subject. One possible way to break this problem into manageable pieces, Piggott suggested, would be to look at people as recordkeepers in their individual social, professional, and other roles. Visual artists as a particular group would form a good case for this kind of study.

A session at the Association of Canadian Archivists conference in 2001 focused on personal archives as a neglected area of the archival literature, and it led to the establishment of the Special Interest Section on Personal Archives (SISPA) in 2002. SISPA has promoted conference sessions focused on personal archives at the last several annual conferences of the ACA, and held a series of online discussion forums with leading authors and practitioners whose work is of interest to personal records archivists. In November 2010, SISPA Chair, Catherine Hobbs, led a two-day ACA Institute on the topic of personal archives, bringing together 16 archivists from across Canada who work with personal archives in a variety of institutional settings (including national, provincial, university, and community archives). The discussion touched on the core archival functions of appraisal, arrangement and description, with a half day devoted to the challenging topic of acquiring and processing born-digital personal records.

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Archivists in attendance at the Institute generally felt that archival standards were somewhat at odds with the nature of personal archives, and that the need remains strong for a forum to discuss problems that are specific to personal archives. The place of personal archives in the Canadian totality is still being clarified.

Meanwhile, recent writings on literary archives have forged ahead in exploring an important category of personal archives. In particular, Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil’s work, cited above, examines authors’ archives in a way that parallels my own research aims. They looked at a number of writers’ archives as creative productions that can be meaningfully understood through an interpretive framework combining archival theory and the literature on life-writing. A precursor to this kind of work is Pamela Banting’s poetic essay on “The Archive as Literary Genre,” in which Dorothy Livesay’s fonds is examined as a kind of “avant-garde literary mode that deconstructs traditional ideas of the book and the author.” There have also been a few serious literary studies of writers’ fonds, the most extensive of which is JoAnn McCaig’s book on Alice Munro’s archives.

**Personal information management**

When it comes to making sense of personal archives in the personal sphere and the behaviours that contribute to their use and organization, the bibliography of personal information management may be useful. “Information” is a different paradigm from records or archives. It is a more abstract concept, typically construed in terms of useful content that is sought, retrieved, and used by a person (and possibly stored in the interim). The sources of information are diverse, going well beyond records: published materials and personal interactions are among the most common sources. However, the personal information environment commonly includes spaces such as homes and offices that coincide with the personal recordkeeping

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110 Douglas and MacNeil, ‘Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers’ Archives’.


environment. It is important to be clear that the purpose of the personal information management literature is generally to provide evidence for the design of computer systems that will better support personal workflows. However, some recent studies of digital personal information management have also sought to answer questions about the long-term care of personal digital archives by institutions. The subject of personal information management thus overlaps to some extent with personal recordkeeping, and while not entirely aligned with my subject of study, it may have the advantage of offering a slightly different perspective on aspects of personal recordkeeping.

Thomas Malone’s 1983 study of desk organization is foundational to this literature.\textsuperscript{113} His research revealed the main modes of desk organization to be \textit{files} (ordered, labelled groupings of documents) and \textit{piles} (disordered groupings, probably unlabelled). The latter were characteristic of “messy” offices, and more common among participants with non-routine job responsibilities. A pile of documents tends to owe its existence to a person’s tendency to place important information close at hand, in part for the reminding function of having material where it will be regularly encountered. There may be an approximate inverse chronological order to the contents of a pile due to the dynamics of its creation, as more recent material tends to be placed at the top of a pile. Its contents remain loosely grouped and unlabelled partly because of the difficulty of document classification, which has both cognitive and mechanical aspects. The piles of papers in a messy office were seen by Malone as a challenge that could be aided by the design of personal computing systems that enabled fluid, multiple classifications and “intelligent” labelling functions.\textsuperscript{114}

Other authors have built on Malone’s findings without contradiction. Donald Case examined the phenomenon of information \textit{storage} by social scientists and humanists, reasoning that there would naturally be a time lag between the time that information was retrieved and when it was

\textsuperscript{113} By ‘desks,’ Malone also intended shelves, filing cabinets and other related areas of participants’ offices. Thomas W. Malone, ‘How Do People Organize Their Desks?’, \textit{ACM Transactions on Information Systems} 1, no. 1 (1983): 99–112.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 111.
actually used.115 In the interim, it accrued in their offices. Case found that many information management behaviours of the academics in his study were similar to such behaviours in office workers; Malone’s findings about the messy offices of people in non-routine jobs, he found, were particularly relevant to understanding the behaviours of academics, who have very non-routine jobs and tend to have more information material (including books, journals and papers) than the typical office worker. Barbara Kwasnik contributed the idea that classification decisions in a personal information environment depend heavily on the context in which the document is being used, rather than objective descriptors such as author and title.116 Steve Whittaker and Julia Hirschberg, writing in 2001, authored what may be the most recent study to focus on paper documents.117 Their study of office workers in a research laboratory looked further at filers and pilers, making the counter-intuitive discovery that the pile method has advantages over filing in terms of making recently-accessed materials easier to find and expending less overhead effort on the management of paper information. Pilers tended to set up more work surfaces in their offices in anticipation of their mode of working. The subjects in Whittaker and Hirschberg’s study were preparing for an office move, which presented an opportunity for rationalizing their paper document collections. The authors observed that workers found the process of assessing material for disposal to be time-consuming and emotionally difficult.

The digital environment has been the focus of more recent studies of personal information management, although not all authors find it possible to separate electronic from paper archives completely. Deborah Barreau brought Kwasnik’s findings about context into the electronic environment, finding that the basis for classification decisions was influenced by the hardware


and software environment in which these decisions were made.\footnote{Deborah Barreau, ‘Context as a Factor in Personal Information Management Systems’, Journal of the American Society for Information Science 46, no. 5 (1995): 327–339.} In 2006, Joseph Kaye et al., working in the field of human-computer interaction, made a study of academics’ archiving habits that is highly relevant to a consideration of personal archives. The scope of the materials they considered included “papers, emails, documents, internet bookmarks, correspondence, and other artifacts,” including both paper and electronic information, based on \textit{in situ} interviews and observation of the subjects’ office spaces.\footnote{Joseph Kaye et al., ‘To Have and to Hold: Exploring the Personal Archive’, in CHI 2006 Proceedings (presented at the CHI 2006, Montreal, 2006), 275.} The authors found that the purpose for keeping such archives goes well beyond information retrieval, including significant aspects such as the creation of a legacy (archival information kept despite the absence of any quotidian need for retrieval) and the construction and maintenance of identity. The latter operated both as an outward act of self-representation and a reflexive confirmation of self for the subjects. It was seen to manifest in various ways, including physical aspects of storage and the visible display of tokens, as well as the actual contents of the personal archive.

In 2009, Peter Williams, Jeremy Leighton John, and Ian Rowland reported on their Digital Lives Research Project, a UK-based investigation of digital personal archives that is significant in part because it marries the literatures of personal information management and archival studies.\footnote{Peter Williams, Jeremy Leighton John, and Ian Rowland, ‘The Personal Curation of Digital Objects: A Lifecycle Approach’, Aslib Proceedings: New Information Perspectives 61, no. 4 (2009): 340–363; the authors review the personal information management literature, for example citing as a foundational study Malone, ‘How Do People Organize Their Desks?’; they also refer to literature that is squarely within the realm of archival studies, such as McKemmish, ‘Evidence of Me’.} Williams and Rowland are scholars in information studies, while John works in the Department of Western Manuscripts at the British Library. In developing a compact but comprehensive account of personal digital archiving practices, the authors reviewed numerous studies of personal information management with an emphasis on digital collections, framed in terms of an information life-cycle perspective that acknowledges the changes in purpose and significance of “archived” material that can occur over time. They also considered authors, such as Sue
McKemmish and Kaye et al, who have looked at symbolic aspects of personal archival behaviours. Williams et al. found that there was still insufficient understanding of how—and why—individuals organized and retrieved material in their digital archives. Indeed, the challenges of designing software to accommodate patterns of personal information management remain current; Jeremy Leighton John was quoted in a popular science article in 2011 as saying “It’s amazing that software companies haven’t really got to grips with personal information management.” In a recent survey conducted by the Digital Lives project, a third of participants reported a serious loss of data at home, and of these, more than two thirds had simply misplaced files.

One challenge in applying the bibliography of personal information management to the situation of a visual artist is posed by the unique hybrid qualities of the artist’s studio. While a studio is certainly a work space, it is a more independent and idiosyncratic space than the corporate office environment that generally forms the background to studies of workplace information management. Conversely, a studio is not a domestic space either, and thus differs from the home environments that are studied by some investigators of personal information management. The studio tends to lack the fundamental social and collaborative aspects of typical office and domestic environments. The office of an academic researcher in the humanities—or other typically non-collaborative field of study—might be the closest analogue.

**Art history, theory, and other art writing**

The preceding sections of this literature review have focused on the archival aspect of artists’ archives, providing a range of perspectives for examining artists’ recordkeeping. The other major component of my research problem is the complex circumstance of contemporary art. Paradigm-shifting developments in artistic style since the 1960s have problematized the relationship between art and art documentation, with consequences for the role of the artist’s

121 McKemmish, ‘Evidence of Me’; Kaye et al., ‘To Have and to Hold: Exploring the Personal Archive’.

studio and the art museum. An “archival impulse,” a stylistic trend, has crept into art of recent decades. As a result, there is new room to reconsider the relationship between an artist’s archives and the traditional notion of an oeuvre of finished art work.

**Conceptual art**

Conceptual art, a major art movement of the late 1960s, is important to the problem of defining a contemporary artist’s archives because, in historical terms, it marks a profound change in the relationship between the physical, visual manifestation of an art work and the documents that support it. The information structure of art was among its aspects that were extensively theorized by artists and others in the art world during the heyday of Conceptualism (roughly 1966–1972). In broader parlance, including information science and some Conceptual art speak, the notion of “information” is used in a way that is similar to the archival science term “content.” The problematization of the nature and placement of this information or content (also referred to as “idea” or “concept”) in terms of the structure of the art work is perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Conceptual art. It is related to another key question in Conceptualism, the aesthetic status of the medium, or the material manifestation of the work. The relationship between content and medium in Conceptualism is far from simple, and has been explored in the writings of a number of artists and critics from the earliest days of Conceptual experimentation to the present day. There is literature dealing with this problem that may be important for understanding the role and status of some documents in visual artists’ archives.

One of the prevailing models for the transformation that certain art underwent during the early years of Conceptualism is the notion of “dematerialization,” first articulated by Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, and revisited more recently by Lippard in her anthology of Conceptualism, *Six Years.*

In their 1968 essay, the authors examined a perceived division growing between the

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visual aspect of this art and the information and ideas that have traditionally been enmeshed with art in a less overt capacity. In contrast, they argued, the emphasis of dematerialized art is on its non-visual, ideational elements even as it continues to operate within a visual idiom.

Alexander Alberro’s recent framing of Seth Siegelaub’s ideas about the structure of Conceptual art work amount to a model for the information structure of art. Part of Siegelaub’s response to the challenges of trying to promote and sell the work of Conceptual artists was analytical; he articulated the difference between the primary information of an art work, which was its ideational essence, and its secondary information, which amounts to its physical manifestation in the world—“the material information by which one becomes aware of the piece, the raw matter, the form of presentation.” The distinction between primary and secondary information is philosophical, but it has implications in terms of defining the role of the art market in Conceptual art—an obvious interest of Siegelaub’s, given his role as an art dealer. It also clearly echoes the structure of the record, with primary information approximately equalling the content of the work, and secondary information its medium. Indeed, Siegelaub’s statement on the nature of Conceptualism sounds like it has a great deal to do with records: “Gradually there developed an ‘art’ which didn’t need to be hung. An art wherein the problem of presentation paralleled one of the problems previously involved in the making and exhibition of a painting: that is, to make someone else aware than an artist had done anything at all.” In other words, the portion of the work that was involved in its presentation functioned as evidence, as a record of an artistic event. This so-called “secondary” information was nonetheless vital to Siegelaub’s business; along with a contractual agreement that he specially devised for Conceptual art, it was the basis for buying and selling this kind of art.


125 Ibid., 122.

The connection between records, or at least documents, and some Conceptual works is quite overt. The artist Sol LeWitt, in his “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” touches on aspects of documentation in his work and the work of his contemporaries. He makes a disclaimer that his paragraphs do not amount to “categorical imperatives” but that they represent his best effort to articulate his ideas at the time, so elements may be inconsistent.\textsuperscript{127} LeWitt sees documents as being one of several elements that are fundamental to works of art:

> If the artist carries through his idea and makes it into visible form, then all the steps in the process are of importance. The idea itself, even if not made visual is as much a work of art as any finished product. All intervening steps—scribbles, sketches, drawings, failed work, models, studies, thoughts, conversations—are of interest. Those that show the thought process of the artist are sometimes more interesting than the final product.\textsuperscript{128}

Such documentation may sometimes even constitute the physical manifestation of a work. “Any idea that is better stated in two dimensions should not be in three dimensions. Ideas may also be stated with numbers, photographs, or words or any way the artist chooses, the form being unimportant.”\textsuperscript{129}

Art museums, generally speaking, have responded to the challenge of Conceptualism by acquiring its works despite their attendant challenges. Such an art work may be thought of in similar terms to intellectual property, which is readily bought and sold regardless of the status of its medium or carrier. In an art museum context, the documentation that supports a work tends to have an indeterminate or individually negotiated status. Although it plays a vital role in the museum’s ability to display a work, such documentation tends to be maintained in the art conservator’s or registrar’s files, or kept in the vaults away from public view. More recently, a flourish of interest in Conceptualism has produced a number of exhibitions in which documentation features prominently in art gallery spaces, typically displayed in vitrines that set it

\textsuperscript{127} Sol LeWitt, ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’, \textit{Artforum} 5, no. 10 (1967): 83.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
slightly apart from the actual works. Curator Michèle Thériault, a major participant in these exhibition initiatives, describes the complex role of the document succinctly:

The status that the archival document now holds within the context of contemporary art is the subject of much debate, particularly in relation to the “shift” that its new status as an art object, among other things, brings about in the information it contains, the knowledge base to which it contributes, and its affiliation with the various contexts to which it belongs and with which it has been associated.

Since the 1960s, many artists have continued to work in a more traditionally visual idiom, and art-making today is extraordinarily diverse in style and conceptual approach. The information model of art may be more or less relevant in considering a given artist’s work and, hypothetically, more or less relevant in considering documents in his or her archival fonds.

**Time-based media art**

From an institutional standpoint, one of the most challenging directions art has taken since the 1960s is the adoption of new media technologies such as video and computer software and hardware. Art that is based on such media has an innate tendency to change rapidly through time owing to the factor of technological obsolescence. In a sense, the difficult aspects of new media art represent an acceleration or an extreme instance of characteristics that have always been inherent to art; indeed, one of the leading conservators of this kind of art, Pip Laurenson of Tate, prefers the term “time-based media.” Among the film, audio, and video works in her

130 In a Canadian context, the two most significant projects have been Vincent Bonin, *Documentary Protocols (1967–1975)* (Montreal: Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, 2010) and Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965-1980, organized jointly by Grant Arnold (Vancouver Art Gallery), Catherine Crowston (Art Gallery of Alberta), Barbara Fischer (Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, University of Toronto), Michele Theriault with Vincent Bonin (Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University), and Jayne Wark (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design).


132 ‘Time-based media is a term used to refer to works of art which are dependent on technology and have duration as a dimension.’ Pip Laurenson, ‘Tate Time-based Media Conservation: About’, *Tate*, February 2007, http://www.tate.org.uk/conservation/time/about.htm.
care, she also cites extremely low-tech instances of installation and performance because they pose the same conceptual problems in terms of conservation as high-tech examples of media art. A challenge shared by all of these art forms is the complexity of the decision-making entailed by the installation of a work in the gallery. Art in traditional media is considered complete and finished—at least to a major extent—when it leaves the artist’s studio. With new media work, installations and performance, the quantity and quality of interpretation necessary to the realization of an individual instance of the work is likely to require the continued creative involvement of the artist (if s/he is still alive). Effectively, the artist’s sphere is extended into the gallery or museum. An integral part of this redrawn relationship between artist and institution is the documentation that surrounds the work and that may begin to stand in for the artist’s voice when the artist is no longer available to fill his/her role. This documentation is a prominent part of the leading strategies for media art preservation. Memory thus plays a role in the conservation of installation works in a museum setting. In Pip Laurenson’s words, “There are parallels to be drawn between the way that intangible heritage such as musical traditions are [passed] down, in that re-installing these works keeps them in the memory of the museum, ensuring that the memory of how to install them is renewed.”

One of the leading research initiatives on time-based media art is the Variable Media Network, based at the Guggenheim Museum and the Fondation Daniel Langlois (Montreal). The main tenet of its approach to media art preservation is that art works can be conceived as creative entities independent of the specific media in which they are realized, and that the “preservation” of a work can be achieved primarily through emulating its essential aspects using new hardware and/or software. These essential aspects are determined through extensive consultation with the artist using the Variable Media Questionnaire, a software tool that attempts to create a flexible but codified body of knowledge around a work of art. The current (third) iteration of the questionnaire conceives of the artwork in terms of the various parts that are necessary to its realization. Recognizing the social, subjective aspect of art works, the newest version of the questionnaire also addresses curators, conservators, studio assistants, and even viewers as

sources of important perspectives on the work of art. The principles of the Variable Media approach were laid out in 2003 in the publication *Permanence Through Change*.  

A possible limitation of the Variable Media approach lies at the heart of its very strength: its emphasis on present-day, proactively gathered documentation through its questionnaire. This emphasis may come at the expense of a historical perspective on a work; in the words of Steve Dietz, a project participant, “Certainly it is important and even valiant to conscientiously accede to the artist’s intentions—no argument. But at what point might this change the historical record? Is this a concern? And if so, for whom?” The Variable Media approach also assumes a timely effort on the part of the museum to work with the living artist to ascertain artistic intention, which may not always occur. There remain questions around the role of archival documentation contemporary with previous iteration(s) of the work.

In a Canadian setting, the recent DOCAM research project (Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage, 2005–2010) created a model for documenting and conserving media art. The DOCAM model differentiates the phases of creation, dissemination, research and custody in the life span of an artwork. One of the project’s core observations is that documentation, which often originates as a communication or reference tool for the use of the artist and her collaborators, can play many roles over the lifetime of an artwork and through different phases of its existence:

First and foremost, from the moment the work is conceived, its documentation serves the artists and their collaborators—the first producers of documentation. As its development progresses, the documentation targets an increasingly wide audience, from

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conservators to curators and art critics, thus playing an important role in the mediation, dissemination and history of the art. Next, and often concurrent to this, the documentation is used and expanded upon through a variety of actions and activities, such as the work’s installation, preservation and restoration. Over time, re-installation and re-contextualization may be carried out. Later still, documentary elements may serve to compensate for various “losses” or deteriorations suffered by the work, stemming primarily from the obsolescence of its technology or components. Ultimately, it is the documentation that will survive the work, becoming its historical witness and sometimes supplementing any remaining fragments or relics.137

This approach recognizes the complex evolution of an artwork’s social context through time, and the evolving role of documentation throughout this span. Without being prescriptive about the validity of historical vs. contemporary approaches to interpretation, it makes room for the consideration of archival documents as part of the documentary context for a work of art.

The studio

Perhaps to a greater degree than any other profession, visual artists are traditionally associated with a studio as the site of artistic creation. This physical association has been problematized by the same shifts in the history of art in the second half of the 20th century that gave rise to the dematerialized conception of art. Minimalist sculptors turned to third-party fabricators to realize their works, and Conceptualists attempted to divorce the process of art-making from its physical manifestation. Both of these movements challenged the traditional identification of the work of art as a physical object that was created and finished in the artist’s studio before being displayed in the gallery or museum. The term “post-studio” was coined to reflect this characteristic of certain kinds of art in the 1960s.138 Although the creation of many forms of art still takes place in a studio, it can no longer be taken for granted that the function of the artist’s studio can fully be identified with a single physical location.


138 The term is widely used (for example, in Christina Kennedy’s essay “Exhibiting the Studio” in The Studio), and perhaps was coined by artist John Baldessari.
A seminal text for critical writing on the studio is a 1970–1971 essay by French Conceptualist Daniel Buren, entitled “The Function of the Studio.” In it, the artist rejected the role of the studio as a place for the creation of physical, portable works of art. Buren asserted that the traditional artist’s studio functions as part of the larger art system of creating works for collectors and museums. For Buren, the studio, as the original context of creation, has a unique status in its relationship to the work of art: “In the studio we generally find finished work, work in progress, abandoned work, sketches—a collection of visible evidence viewed simultaneously that allows an understanding of process: it is this aspect of the work that is extinguished by the museum’s desire to ‘install.’” A portable work of art, in Buren’s view, loses its soul outside of the studio context: “The alignment of works on museum walls gives the impression of a cemetery: whatever they say, wherever they come from, whatever their meanings may be, this is where they all arrive in the end, where they are lost.” Worse, however, would be for the work to remain in the studio and never be seen, which would amount to total oblivion. This conundrum Buren referred to as “the unspeakable compromise of the portable work.” He therefore committed to making only site-specific works in situ.

Buren’s manifesto reflected a fundamental challenge to the role of the studio in relation to the art system; nonetheless, a flourishing of exhibitions and publications around the topic of artists’ studios belies the notion that the present is a “post-studio” era. Contemporary artists’ studios continue to invite critical examination, not least by the artists themselves. The idea of the studio has been problematized, but there is little doubt that it persists as a physical reality (as a general practice, contemporary artists have not abandoned their studios) and a complex idea that is worthy of contemplation.

The first of a number of recent exhibitions focusing on artists’ studios was mounted by the Dublin City Gallery (The Hugh Lane) in 2007. Called simply The Studio, it functioned partly as a celebration—or perhaps a creative critique—of the museum’s extraordinary acquisition of

Francis Bacon’s London studio, painstakingly moved and reconstructed inside the Dublin museum building. Co-curator Christina Kennedy acknowledged critical ambivalence towards the archaeological treatment of the studio, which turned a creative space into an artifact. Jens Hoffmann, her collaborator, took the idea of an artist’s studio as his focus, reflecting on the many directions the studio has taken since the publication of Daniel Buren’s essay. Contemporary studios may manifest themselves as production offices, personal exhibition spaces, or mobile, immaterial centres of activity that follow the artist. The art works in the show, created by several prominent contemporary artists as a reflection and commentary on the problem of artists’ studios, suggested a variety of viewpoints about the studio as artifact, conceptual space, or site of labour. The exhibition included a symposium, tours of Dublin artists’ studios, and an extensive catalogue.

Also in 2007, the Centre Pompidou held a significant exhibition on artists’ studios (Ateliers: l’artiste et ses lieux de création dans les collections de la Bibliothèque Kandinsky), featuring an extensive display of artists’ archival material from the collections of the museum’s library. Through the display of evocative photographs of artists’ studios, together with notebooks, correspondence and related ephemera, the exhibition traced the evolution of the studio through the twentieth century alongside broad trends in the visual arts. As the prevailing styles in art gradually became less centred on the creation of physical work, the studio evolved from a strictly physical location to a conceptual apparatus for artistic creation, and more recently to a centre for distributed artistic production. The exhibition included a two-day symposium event (“Objets d’archives:"


143 Hoffmann and Kennedy, The Studio.

L’Atelier au 20e Siècle”) which featured curators, archivists, critics, and artists discussing aspects of the documentation of artists’ studios.\(^{145}\)

A similar exhibition took place at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2010, in conjunction with Chicago’s Artists Month of that year, which took the theme of “The City as Studio.”\(^{146}\) A series of open studio events was organized, inviting the public to view artists’ studios throughout the city. An accompanying book of essays included a wide variety of perspectives on studios throughout the history of Western art, including contemporary artists writing about their own studios.\(^{147}\) The thematic chapter groupings (the studio as “resource”; “set and setting”; “stage”; “lived-in space”; and “space and non-space”) give some sense of the variety of ways in which studios can be conceived.

Two recent anthologies of essays on the subject of the artist’s studio provide a conceptual framework for considering the contemporary studio. In their introduction to The Fall of the Studio: Artists At Work, Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice point out the historical and etymological relationship between artists’ studios and scholars’ studies.\(^{148}\) Countering the notion of the post-studio era implied by the title of their book, they argue that the Conceptual rejection of the physical studio in fact leads back to the enduring model of the study/studio, identified as “a virtual condition of personal artistic reflection or ‘studious activity’ that permeates contemporary artistic ways of making.”\(^{149}\) This model is echoed in the words of contemporary artist Thomas Hirschhorn, quoted by Michael Diers: “For me, the studio is not only a practical place of work,

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\(^{148}\) Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice, eds., The Fall of the Studio: Artists at Work (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2009), 9.

\(^{149}\) Ibid.
but also a mental space. I stay in my studio, without doing anything, and I also think of my
studio when I’m somewhere else. My studio is above all a space in my head.”

Diers and Monika Wagner’s anthology *Topos Atelier: Werkstatt und Wissensform* provides many
intriguing examples of artists playing with the notion of the studio itself as a work of art, and
arguably a form of self-representation. One of the earliest of these was the sculptor
Constantin Brancusi, who donated the entire contents of his Paris studio to the French state on
his death in 1957. It can be seen today, reconstructed, as an annex to the Musée national d’art
moderne, with the artist’s tools and preparatory works alongside his remaining inventory of
finished work.

In a related vein, the artist Brian O’Doherty explores the nature of the artist’s studio in
relationship to the “white cube” gallery spaces in which modern art is typically displayed and
sold. O’Doherty raises the notion (interesting in light of the life narrative literature reviewed
above) that the artist’s studio is a kind of self-representative text that can be “read.” He
describes artist Lucas Samaras’ 1964 exhibition, in which the artist moved the entire contents of
his studio into the gallery, transforming the studio into an art work and calling it *Room #1.*
Samaras is quoted as saying “It was as complete a picture of me without my physical presence as
there could possibly be.” For O’Doherty, Samaras’ exhibition is a prime example of the

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150 “Für mich ist das Atelier nicht nur ein praktischer Ort der Arbeit, sondern auch ein mentaler Raum.
Ich verweile auch in meinem Atelier, ohne etwas zu tun, und ich denke auch an mein Atelier, wenn ich woanders
bin. Mein Atelier ist vor allem ein Raum in meinem Kopf.” Thomas Hirschhorn, quoted in Michael Diers,
Michael Diers and Monika Wagner (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010), 1.

151 Michael Diers and Monika Wagner, eds., *Topos Atelier: Werkstatt und Wissensform* (Berlin: Akademie
Verlag, 2010).

152 Brian O’Doherty, *Studio and Cube: On the Relationship Between Where Art Is Made and Where Art Is Displayed*
(New York: Buell Centre/FORuM project, 2007).

153 Ibid., 7.

154 Lucas Samaras, quoted in ibid., 4.
studio intruding into the space of the gallery, a post-modern redefinition of the traditional boundaries of the museum. The flip-side of this permeable boundary is the visit of an outsider (usually an art historian, curator, or critic) to the artist’s studio.\textsuperscript{155} O’Doherty sees the studio visit as a persistent “trope” in modernism, a “preface to the public gaze” that brings an external context into the studio space.\textsuperscript{156}

The Conceptual renegotiation of the relationship between studio and museum has also been explored by the artistic collective Art & Language. Exploring the implications of this situation on their own practice, they wrote that “The boundary between work and institution became a matter of debate, contingency and negotiation. The real site of production moved from the studio to the institution or gallery.”\textsuperscript{157} Curators could play a role in artistic creation, and artists could play a role in the institutional presentation of works of art. However, one consequence of the newly negotiable boundaries, in their view, was that artists became complicit in the power structure of the gallery through their new managerial role in the institution. They lost the autonomy and privacy that the traditional studio had guaranteed, and which had made possible the critique of institutions from a safely autonomous vantage point. In the contemporary studio, there is always another person (usually an assistant, agent, or curator) implicitly or actually present. Art & Language’s solution to continuing their critique of institutions has been to present installations of fragmented, disfigured and contingent works in their museum exhibitions. Like Lionnet’s \emph{métissage} in the life narrative discussion, this practice is “conversational”; the fragmented works “will always … strive, albeit with limited success, to supply a context for themselves … beyond the reach of the institution within which they have been no doubt comfortably lodged.”\textsuperscript{158}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{155} The art critic Clement Greenberg was famous for his visits to the studios of modernist painters and sculptors, in which his comments would often shape the direction of the artist’s future efforts. Florence Rubenfeld, \textit{Clement Greenberg: A Life} (New York: Scribner, 1997), 269.
\item \textsuperscript{156} O’Doherty, \textit{Studio and Cube}, 19.
\item \textsuperscript{157} Art & Language et al., ‘A Place to Work’, \textit{Museum International} 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 32.
\item \textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 39–40.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
The contemporary artist’s studio is thus a complex entity, and is not necessarily even a single physical place. Its relationship with the institutions of art has been problematized. This complexity apparently only serves to reinforce the close ties between the studio and the identity of the artist; in the words of Art & Language, again, “The studio has of course always been as much an ideological construct as a physical location, the image or description of the studio always an active reflection of the artist’s self-image, whether substantial or mythical.”\(^{159}\) The literature on artists’ studios brings a great deal to bear on the consideration of an artist’s archives.

**Biographical approaches to art**

Interest in visual artists as personalities has a long history in Western culture, and the origins of the biographical tradition are commonly associated with Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* (1550).\(^{160}\) Foucault’s problematization of the notion of the author notwithstanding, there remain serious arguments for the conceptualization of the artistic oeuvre as the production of a single artistic creator, and strong public curiosity about biographical aspects of artists. One recent example of a biographical compilation on artists is Calvin Tomkins’ *Lives of the Artists*, in which the author presents biographical feature essays on ten famous contemporary artists. Originally published as articles in the *New Yorker*, his essays take as their premise that “the lives of contemporary artists are so integral to what they make that the two cannot be considered in isolation.”\(^{161}\)

Gabriele Guercio’s examination of the artist monograph as a scholarly phenomenon addresses the historically persistent idea of the artist as an individual personality linked to an oeuvre of

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 37.


work. Although the author does not explicitly address artists’ archives, this biographical conceptualization of the artist and the concept of the oeuvre are almost prerequisites to the notion of an artist’s fonds as an entity worthy of examination. Indeed, Guercio’s account of the oeuvre could almost function as a description of the fonds as greater than the sum of its parts:

Envisioned as an oeuvre, the artist’s works not only become dialectical elements within a whole but elicit responses that overcome, at least imaginatively, the very disjunction between the reality of the artwork and reality itself. The artist’s works, that is, exist beyond the supposedly distinct terrains of inside and outside, genetic and personal, human and art historical. They reify a life in the immanence of the multiple states it attracts and generates.

Guercio is writing about Renaissance painters, which means that his task is partly to impose a unifying concept on numerous well-known, discrete art works. His comments, however, could be applied to art of any period, including art movements in which the distinction between the art object and its documentation is not clear cut. Guercio does mention a few examples of artists specifically addressing documentation for the sake of their own posterity: Picasso, who was meticulous in dating his work, and Marcel Duchamp, who created works such as the *Boîte en valise* series (featuring miniature replicas of his most important works) that served partly as records of artistic creation.

The idea of the artist’s oeuvre as a phenomenon with coherence and unity receives an interesting treatment from anthropologist Alfred Gell, who sees the distributed mind of the artist being made visible through his or her work, the oeuvre functioning as an index to the stopping points of the artist’s agency. The cumulative traces of past artistic activity are thus a key ingredient in future production:

“This thinking” takes place outside us as well as inside us. The poet writes down his lines, and then scratches them out, altering and improving his verses in ways that crucially depend on the existence of physical traces of his previous (mental) activity. And this is


163 Ibid., 111.
still truer of the graphic artist, who continually uses his own past production as a spur to his future production, altering and modifying freely as he goes along. And in more general terms, the artist lives surrounded by his own works, completed or half-completed, which litter the studio and provide him with an ever-present record of his activity over many years.\textsuperscript{164}

Although Gell is writing mainly about works of art, his comments are also relevant to artistic recordkeeping. Indeed, the implication of his vision is that records and artworks alike have an indexing function in relation to the artist’s agency; they are bound together into an ongoing cycle of artistic inspiration.

**The business of being an artist**

It is important to remember that there are straightforward juridical reasons for artists to keep certain records. This circumstance does nothing to negate other ways of looking at artists’ archives, but is an element to keep in mind when examining a particular archival fonds. Senior Canadian artist Ted Godwin, in a handbook for emerging artists in Canada, dedicates a chapter to the concerns of “Inventory, records, and all that jazz.”\textsuperscript{165} Godwin outlines the challenges facing artists in the Canadian tax system, which can be a poor fit with artistic labour. By the time the expenses of keeping a studio and purchasing art supplies are deducted from the sales revenue of a typical artist, there is little income left over to justify the artist’s status as a professional. This situation can make artists vulnerable to tax auditing. Godwin recommends that artists maintain an accurate inventory of every work they create, recording descriptive data about the work as well as its price, disposition and subsequent provenance. Even if an artist has a dealer, s/he should maintain an independent inventory for purposes of verification. Accurate records of expenses and revenue are also an essential aspect of artistic recordkeeping.


Magda Salvesen and Diane Cousineau have examined the topic of artists’ estates, looking at the cases of several prominent American artists.\(^{166}\) The authors are primarily concerned with the ways in which the artists’ legacies have been managed to optimize posthumous reputations and art values. Their book is largely written from the perspective of an artist’s widow, an approach that is useful in drawing attention to the possible role of spouses or partners in the creation and maintenance of archives, yet has limited applicability to the situation of women artists and single artists. The authors tend to see artists’ archives as a natural extension of the artistic legacy, addressing the topic particularly in a chapter on “Stephen Polcari on the Archives of American Art.”\(^{167}\) Polcari is a former director of the Archives of American Art, and in this capacity has extensive experience with artists’ archives. His observations are focused mainly on the topic of collecting archives, and he makes a general comment about his approach to appraisal: “My impulse is that one should err on the broad side. One doesn’t know what in the future we’ll want to know or what will be important. There are no criteria for artists …”\(^{168}\) This view affirms the idea that artists’ archives are a complex and loosely defined phenomenon.

### Archives and ‘the archive’

The understanding of archives on which my research is based is founded in the discipline of archival studies, with its own definitions and theoretical framework. Yet the research—and the artist whose archives I am studying—is operating in a larger cultural framework in which the word *archive* has wider meanings. The popularity of the concept of the archive in cultural studies for much of the past decade has been so great that the word is sometimes used to denote seemingly any collection, repository, or embodied form of memory or knowledge. Although this large and nebulous conception of the archive is not part of the immediate foundation of my research, it bears mentioning as an aspect of the broader cultural context, and for the sake of clarifying my scope.

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\(^{167}\) Ibid., 322–328.

\(^{168}\) Ibid., 327.
The critical theory understanding of *archive* is rooted in the writing of Michel Foucault, whose definition is developed in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Foucault explains that the archive is “the general system of the formation and transformation of statements”; in other words, it is a law that governs the possibility of statements or forms of cultural expression—the terms of discourse—within a given cultural and chronological horizon.\(^{169}\) The archive of one’s own time is unknowable by virtue of its imperceptible boundaries and the intrinsic impossibility of self-knowledge. To examine the archive, therefore, one must focus on the nearly historical, finding the boundary of the archive within discourses that have recently ceased to be current: “the discontinuity that separates us from what we can no longer say.”\(^{170}\) Foucault’s concept of the archive is only abstractly related to the historical record.

The concept of the archive was famously developed by Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever*. In it, the author explores the politics of the archive—the idea that insurmountable laws might govern discourse—through an exploration of the archive of Freudian psychoanalysis, which is itself preoccupied by a search for origins. In the case of Freud, Derrida finds, the taxonomic categories imposed by contemporary language (works of theory, private correspondence, autobiography, personal or intellectual recollection, to give a few of his examples) break down in the face of a paradigm-shifting oeuvre.\(^{171}\) In contemporary culture after Freud—among other transformative intellects of the twentieth century—the word *archive* has become unknowable: “Nothing is … more troubled and more troubling today than the concept archived in this word ‘archive.’”\(^{172}\) Derrida’s “archive fever,” the *mal d’archive*, is the passion or yearning for the elusive archive of the archive, a quest for an unknowable cultural origin.

\(^{169}\) Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 130.

\(^{170}\) Ibid.


\(^{172}\) Ibid., 90.
A contemporary yearning for the archive is manifested in the proliferation of scholarly activity, starting in the 1990s, that draws on the concept. Termed “the archival turn,” this phenomenon includes scholarship from many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, and is concerned with the nature of the archive itself rather than its use as a research resource.\(^\text{173}\) In the field of art history, one of the frequently cited pieces of writing in this vein is Hal Foster’s “An Archival Impulse.”\(^\text{174}\) Foster describes a multifaceted “archival” trend in contemporary art that “seek[s] to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present.”\(^\text{175}\) Such information typically takes the form of found images, materials, or texts that are retrieved and reworked by the artist, or offered as fodder for potential reworkings by the viewer: “although the contents of this art are hardly indiscriminant, they remain indeterminant like the contents of any archive, and often they are presented in this fashion—as so many promissory notes for further elaboration or enigmatic prompts for future scenarios.”\(^\text{176}\) The collection and recombination of these found, indeterminant materials is a further characteristic of archival art. Foster sees archival art as ultimately constructive and optimistic, seeking as it does “to transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of a utopia,” and building forward-looking creations from the traces of the past.\(^\text{177}\)

By the date of Foster’s essay, the archival aesthetic was already a significant trend in contemporary art, as exemplified in the international exhibition and anthology *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art* (1998), the extensive research anthology *Interarchive* (2002), and the interdisciplinary art publications *Lost in the Archives* (2002) and *Information is Alive*

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\(^{175}\) Ibid., 4.

\(^{176}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{177}\) Ibid., 22.
Each of these projects reveals numerous contemporary artists whose work involves motifs of collecting, classification, storage, or labelling. The relationship between this kind of art and the archival records of a particular artist is complex, and it tends to vary with the individual case. Sven Spieler has offered a uniquely rich interpretation of the relationship between archive and art, recognizing that a crucial difference between an archive and any other kind of collection is the disconnect between the purpose for which each constituent record was originally created, and the purpose for which the archive was assembled. In his view, this intrinsic aspect of archival nature leaves room for the experience of the unheimlich, or uncanny, in archives, an element employed by artists throughout the twentieth century: the encountering of a resonance between the traces of the past and a future experience. As I will explore in Chapter 4, there are archival aspects to the art of Vera Frenkel (her work is featured prominently in Deep Storage, and she was a contributor to Lost in the Archives, for example), and this circumstance can be brought to bear on the perception of her archives and her studio. There is certainly an affinity between archival art and the records of an archival artist, and the nuances of this relationship will be explored in the following chapters.

Artists’ archives

The bibliography of writings dealing directly with artists’ archives is relatively new, with the notable exception of Victoria Blinkhorn’s 1988 Master of Archival Studies thesis. In recent years the popularity of the “archival impulse” in the art world has led archivists who work with artists’ archives to publicly articulate their role and the nature of the collections under their care. Meanwhile, the same impulse has fed the popularity of archival collections among art scholars. In the aftermath of the dematerialization of the art object, the status of art documentation is


unclear, and the archival impulse makes room for the aesthetic aspects of such documentation to receive serious consideration. The literature in this area is very small, but reveals a trend towards a synthesis of archival and art historical perspectives.

**Archival studies perspectives**

Victoria Blinkhorn, in her Master of Archival Studies thesis of 1988, addressed the specific topic of appraising the archives of visual artists.\(^{180}\) Her research is primarily of interest for constituting a modern archival studies perspective on several issues that surround the acquisition of artists’ archives, provided that *artists* are somewhat narrowly conceived of as painters whose finished oeuvre is autonomous and readily distinguished from their archival fonds. Blinkhorn’s thesis is important for having made a sound argument for the acquisition of artists’ fonds by archival institutions—generally narrowly conceived of as government-based institutions, although she acknowledges a cooperative role for art museums in collecting this material—at a time when Canadian artists’ archives were not being widely collected. Her analysis is sound as far as it goes, but it reflects an archival studies discourse that is not yet troubled by postmodern considerations, nor by any doubts about the suitability of classical archival theory for personal archives. Blinkhorn’s conception of art, too, is essentially modern. In a few footnotes she acknowledges possible doubt about some of the positivist assumptions she has inherited, without taking the leap into considering the challenges of contemporary art.\(^{181}\)

In support of her thesis, Blinkhorn conducted empirical research in the studios of four living painters, but she reports these findings only as a highly distilled description of the document

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\(^{181}\) For example, in note 19, page 78, she acknowledges the notion that the work of art is only completed in being perceived by the viewer, but she does not pursue the implications of this subjective element for preparatory and unfinished works of art.
formats that artists are likely to generate. These are cleanly divided into records proceeding from “personal and professional activities” and “artistic activities,” with thorough lists of document types proceeding from each. Blinkhorn acknowledges that overlapping and blurring of categories are likely to occur. Her analysis of artists’ records proceeds from an essentially a priori approach to the challenge of artists’ archives, with a starting assumption that archivists participate in sustaining the popular “mythical image of artists as non-producers of archives.” Archival theory provides a basis for archivists to document artists as part of their wider mandate to document society. In this conception, archivists are unlikely to have an understanding of what artists actually do; indeed, Blinkhorn’s assumption is that artists in their studios are mysterious and even intimidating to archivists. Her analysis of artistic functions is thus intended as a tool for archivists to use in their efforts to achieve a soundly appraised artistic fonds. In this model, only those impartial records created for the use of the artist as a byproduct of activity have archival nature, and therefore anything the artist creates for wider diffusion or with creative intent is outside the scope of the archivist’s consideration. Clearly, there is little room in this framework for considering post-Conceptual art/documentation, or for applying life-narrative theories to an artist’s fonds.

Within the field of archival studies, there is virtually no other literature on artists’ archives until 2006. A wide-ranging article published that year by Nancy Bartlett deals with the many ways in which the archives of modern art are mediated by archival and institutional practices. Although Bartlett’s nominal subject is artists’ archives, understood in a similar sense to my

\[\text{182} \text{ It would have been more interesting, for my present purposes, if Blinkhorn had instead presented her observations of these artists as unique case studies within her larger analysis. However, I’m mindful of the academic context of her research, which includes the limited envelope of a master’s thesis.}\]

\[\text{183} \text{ Blinkhorn, ‘The Records of Visual Artists: Appraising for Acquisition and Selection’, 52.}\]

\[\text{184} \text{ Ibid., 135.}\]

\[\text{185} \text{ Ibid., 82.}\]

own—“these include documents (be they visual, verbal, or aural) that reflect the actions of the artist’s creative expression and his or her identity as an artist…”—her discussion is primarily focused on the many external factors that may have shaped such collections in a twentieth-century American context. Bartlett considers a perceived ambivalence towards memorialization inherent in modernist artistic practices, the relatively late establishment of collecting institutions for archives in the United States, and the homogenizing tendencies of library classification among other examples of mediating forces on archives. She looks briefly at particular examples of artists’ archives, but her level of focus is generally at the level of the broader national culture of collecting these materials.

**Art writing perspectives**

In the past decade or so, artists’ archives have received increasing attention from authors writing about art. One of the earliest such essays is by Ingrid Schaffner, in the context of the catalogue to the exhibition *Deep Storage*, discussed above. Schaffner contemplates the back end of museums, particularly the vaults where collections lie “in a state of temporal remission,” institutionalized but not on display, as a site of inspiration for numerous artists. In passing, she describes artists’ archives as similarly lodged in a hidden realm of the museum:

> The artist’s life is a grand archive, in which every discarded receipt, marginal note, or studio scrap might some day be deemed tremendously significant. Besides Warhol, consider the Robert Mapplethorpe and Jackson Pollock/Lee Krasner Foundations, dedicated to compounding interest in their subjects daily through the availability and upkeep of archives. These archives spawn those other great testaments of worth, *catalogues raisonnés*. … Jockeying for control of the raw material are institutions like The Getty, which offers to pay living artists large sums of money for their dead papers. While these activities maintain and minister to a flourishing art market, with studios run like small businesses in the larger economy, the resultant accumulations of documents

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187 Ibid., 122.

are also telling memory banks, demonstrating the ways in which historic figures are valued.\textsuperscript{189}

Artists’ archives are thus envisioned as a component in the contemporary art system, functioning in a supporting role (contributing to the market for an artist’s work), while constituting interesting cultural collections in their own right.

Artists’ archives were the focus of a one-day symposium held at the Chelsea College of Art and Design in April 2007: \textit{Did Hans Namuth kill Jackson Pollock? The Problem of Documenting the Creative Process}.\textsuperscript{190} The program examined the notion of documentation from a broad perspective, including pro-active efforts such as filming and photographing the artistic process, and the creative co-option of documentation of process by artists themselves. The roles of archivists and conservators were accorded a prominent but far-from-prevailing position in the discussion. A special issue of the \textit{Journal of Visual Arts Practice} contains the proceedings of the symposium. Of note is an article by Sue Breakell and Victoria Worsley, who work with artists’ archives at Tate Library & Archive and the Henry Moore Institute Archive, respectively.\textsuperscript{191} Writing for an art world audience, the authors examine documentation of the creative process from an archivist’s perspective. They provide an overview of the role of the archivist and describe the archives of two contemporary artists for whom documentation is a key part of the creative process.

Tate has hosted two study days in recent years on aspects of artists and archives. The first of these, “The Archival Impulse,” was held in 2007, with selected proceedings appearing as Tate Papers in 2008. In her paper, Sue Breakell examines prevailing cultural theory views of “the

\textsuperscript{189} Ibid., 19.


archive” from the perspective of an archivist who works with artists’ archives. Breakell notes the widespread appeal of the idea of archives in contemporary culture, but questions the assumptions of cultural theorists, including Jacques Derrida and Hal Foster, that the archive includes any collection or accumulation, or that archives are the embodiment of state or institutional power. Instead, she illuminates the archival principles and practices that she feels make actual archives worthy of interest in many other ways. She cites examples of artists’ fonds from Tate Archive, as well as recent works of art that involve knowledge of the structure and contents of archives.

The Tate “Archiving the Artist” study day in 2009 focused more directly on artists’ archives, featuring a variety of perspectives from artists, archivists and users of artists’ archives. The content of the talks included several boundary-blurring examples of artists and others working creatively with their archives, including artist Jamie Shovlin’s construction of fictitious archives from his own records, and the unorthodox arrangement and description techniques being brought to bear on the home/studio and archival records of artist John Latham. In the ensuing discussion, participants considered the extent to which archival theory and practice fits with creative archives, and the ways in which artists perceive their own archives.

Towards a synthesis of art writing and archival perspectives

The dematerialization of the art object has made possible an expansion of the conventional notion of the artist’s oeuvre as a relatively discrete body of finished work. The troubled and indeterminate relationship between art documentation and finished artwork has allowed art historians and critics to turn their attention towards the aesthetic aspects of documentation and

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the blurred boundary between art and documentation. A few key examples of recent art scholarship follow.

Ann Reynolds has explored Robert Smithson’s work in the 1960s and early 1970s, paying close attention to Smithson’s archives as the key to understanding the artistic context of creation. Smithson, primarily known for his large-scale landscape sculptures (or “earthworks”), is difficult to categorize; his art resisted institutional acquisition and his oeuvre is understood through his writings and preparatory materials as much as through his surviving works of art. In a similar vein, the Canadian Conceptual artist Iain Baxter& is the focus of the recently launched Baxter& Raisonné, an ambitious online catalogue project led by librarian and art historian Adam Lauder. In contrast to traditional catalogues raisonnés, which aim to present an authoritative register of all works by a particular artist, the Baxter& project acknowledges the complex relationship between art and its physical manifestations in the work of this pioneering Conceptualist. It takes an open-ended approach to documenting Baxter&’s work, describing itself as “an innovative electronic collection and virtual exhibition and research environment,” and including a collaboratively curated selection of documents from the artist’s fonds. While an integral, overlapping relationship between archives and art work seems to be related to the conceptual element in Smithson’s and Baxter&’s practice, a similar phenomenon has also been observed in at least one instance of a more visual, materially-based artist. Briony Fer’s study of the sculptor Eva Hesse’s “studiowork” is a careful, intensive exploration of a body of not-quite-artwork, a series of experimental sculptural creations that function as a record of the artist’s ideas while inviting aesthetic critique as works of art.


who was born Iain Baxter, added an ampersand to his name in 2005 as a statement reflecting his expansive approach to life and art.

\[196\] http://archives.library.yorku.ca/iaain_baxterand_raisonne/about

A recent collection of essays edited by Anne Bénichou engages directly with the theoretical problems posed by documentation practices in contemporary art.\textsuperscript{198} In her introduction, Bénichou describes the range of problems that artistic documentation entails. The essential role of documentation in many dematerialized art forms since the 1960s, she argues, holds implications for museological practice and for our understanding of the boundaries of the art work: “The documentation of contemporary art is one of the key issues, even one of the necessary conditions, of constituting the heritage of contemporary art and developing its critical and theoretical discourses.”\textsuperscript{199} In an art museum context, Bénichou argues, it is not currently clear how and by whom art documentation should be created in the first place; how documentary materials should be exhibited; and what museum department (for example, curatorial, conservation, the library) should have custodial responsibility for such collections. The conceptual framework of her anthology takes the work of art as the starting place for examining documentation; therefore, it deals with the set of archival/quasi-artistic materials that are associated with a particular work and give it a form, even if this set has blurred or fluid boundaries.

The idea of the artist’s fonds is not prominent in the book, appearing only in a key essay by Vincent Bonin that will be discussed below. However, Bénichou’s own essay, “Ces documents qui sont aussi des œuvres …,” is firmly situated in the grey area between art and artists’ archives. Bénichou looks at examples of “holistic documentation” developed by certain artists: bodies of documentation that are treated as art works in the sense of that they are either published or collected by art institutions. Among the examples she discusses are Eva Hesse’s test pieces (the artist’s own term for the “studiowork” explored by Fer, above), Robert Smithson’s conceptual documentation, and the artistic partnership Gilbert & George’s approach to their entire life as a work of art. This latter example is seen as a product of the avant-garde

\textsuperscript{198} Anne Bénichou, ed., \textit{Ouvrir le document: Enjeux et pratiques de la documentation dans les arts visuels contemporains} (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2010).

\textsuperscript{199} “La documentation des œuvres d’aujourd’hui est un des enjeux essentiels, voir l’une des conditions de possibilité, de la constitution du patrimoine artistique contemporain et du développement des discours critiques et théorétiques.” Ibid., 11.
notion of the fusion of art and life: “It involves an attitude of systematic and compulsive preservation that rests on the following principle: if life is art, one must document the entire life.” Without invoking archival theory, Bénichou proposes the notion of “les corpus documentaires d’artistes” as autonomous creations (versus seeing documents only in terms of the art works to which they are linked), an idea that is clearly related to the idea of the artist’s fonds.

The recent scholarship of Vincent Bonin is perhaps uniquely allied with my own area of research. Bonin is a professional archivist-turned-curator who worked with artists’ archives for several years at the Centre for Research and Documentation at the Daniel Langlois Foundation. In a talk given at the 2009 DOCAM Seminar, Bonin described the intellectual problem of artists’ archives, observing the lack of dialogue between archival studies scholars on the one hand, and curators who explore the permutations of “archival” art on the other. Bonin sees artists’ fonds as a unique problem, insufficiently comprehended by either the archival or art perspective. He describes the archives of Conceptual artists as the most challenging and interesting terrain for the exploration of ideas surrounding artists’ fonds.

Bonin’s essay on Andy Warhol’s *Time Capsules* is unique among the contributions to Bénichou’s anthology in reconciling an archival perspective with an art historical framework. The time capsules to which he refers are simultaneously an art work and a body of archival

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201 Ibid., 65.


documentation, and are problematic in both regards. Beginning with a studio move in 1974, Warhol developed the habit of depositing the accumulation of objects (including records) in his studio into an ordinary cardboard box on a monthly basis. Each box was sealed and labelled with the date of its creation. By the time of his death, Warhol had accumulated nearly 600 of these boxes, which now form part of the collection of the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. The museum is part-way through the task of opening the boxes and cataloguing their contents; these efforts have revealed a mix of archival documentation, publications, ephemeral records, and an infinite array of artifacts. Bonin explores the *Time Capsules* as a challenge to archival theory, finding that they have aspects of both a fonds and a collection, and that they defy notions of archival appraisal by forming indivisible bonds between documents with evidential value and circumstantial studio detritus. They are like an artwork (the artist mused about selling them piecemeal, and thought of including an autograph drawing in each in order to increase their future value), but they managed to traverse the distance between the artist’s studio and the museum’s vaults without ever being exhibited as an artwork (at least within Warhol’s lifetime). Bonin examines the finding aid to the collection, observing the ways in which it mediates the contents of the *Time Capsules* and forms a representation of them that is imperfect, like any representation. His analysis is sympathetic; he notes that the Warhol Museum’s archivist, Matt Wrbican, brings an unsurpassed knowledge of the *Time Capsules* to the task of writing the finding aid. Through his efforts, Wrbican becomes in a sense another of Warhol’s myriad studio assistants, but he uniquely bridges the gap between the absent artist and the researcher. In short, Bonin’s account of the *Time Capsules* in their institutional setting owes its strength to his unusual synthesis of art and archival theory, forming a compelling precedent for my own research.

The foundation of literature on which this dissertation is built is clearly large and diverse, even if only a small portion of it lies directly beneath my own investigation. In the next chapter, I will turn to the methods and techniques I used to carry out my research.
The pursuit of my research required a plan. In essence, it was simple: look at Vera Frenkel’s records in her studio, talk to her about them, and then look at the archival material that had been transferred to Queen’s University Archives and talk to the archivist about the process of getting it there. Along the way, however, there were many decisions to be made. When I deem my account of these decisions “research design,” I am participating in the discourse of the social sciences, although my own research feels just as closely allied to the humanities. The overarching goal of this chapter is to be accountable to my research subject and to potential readers of my results, while providing an account of what I did.

**Research questions**

The ultimate purpose of my research is to clarify both the nature of visual artists’ archives in the personal sphere, and the nature of the transformation these archives undergo as they are acquired and processed by an institution. I have distilled the inquiry into the following major research questions:

- **RQ1.** What are the significant characteristics of an individual visual artist’s personal archives in the personal sphere?
- **RQ2.** What is the nature of the changes in structure and content of an artist’s archives associated with their acquisition, appraisal, arrangement, and description by an institution?

RQ1 entails a complex range of secondary questions concerning such aspects as the formality or informality of records creation; the way in which records are used, stored and retrieved; material aspects of records; the relationship between records and art works; and the intended audience of records. RQ2 is complex in a different way, in that it implies that the qualities of an artist’s personal archives before and after acquisition are discernible and can be meaningfully compared to each other. It likewise involves a number of secondary questions about the different archival
processes involved. The positioning of the questions at a general level invites the question why “an individual visual artist” and not specifically “Vera Frenkel.” As I will outline below, there is a complex relationship between the specific case and the general knowledge one hopes to build from it.

**The case study approach**

The term *case study* is widely used in a variety of contexts, often referring to any situation that bears examination as an exemplar. In devising a way to study artists’ archives, I needed to develop a more robust and considered understanding of whether and how a single case can be used to develop answers to research questions. In the social sciences, the case study approach has been carefully considered in terms of its strengths, limitations, and applicability to various kinds of research problems. Clearly, the case of one artist can only tell us so much about the practices of all artists, but perhaps the case of one artist is the best place to begin.

**Rationale**

For a number of reasons, the case study is the method of choice to approach the problem of artists’ archives. As a method for in-depth examination of a single example, it answers the requirement for a starting place in a so-far-unexplored research topic. The exploratory nature of my research points to the selection of a single case for study, rather than attempting to compare the archives of two or more different artists. So little is known of the nature of visual artists’ archives that it would be difficult to identify a meaningful basis for the selection of multiple cases, or for comparison of data. Rather than grapple with poorly founded comparisons, I prefer to study a single case in substantial depth. This approach should furnish the broadest possible range of exploratory findings, because the resulting observations do not run the risk of being shaped by similarities or differences in the nature of other case(s) selected for concurrent study. A single case study will form a more useful basis for future study of artists’ archives.
Robert Yin argues for the appropriateness of the case study method for research that seeks to understand complex social phenomena.\textsuperscript{1} According to Yin, a case study approach is best suited to research that addresses \textit{how} or \textit{why} questions. Yin’s argument for the validity of the case study as an approach distinguishes among \textit{exploratory}, \textit{descriptive} (that is, narrative without an analytical purpose), and \textit{explanatory} investigation.\textsuperscript{2} My study falls under the heading of \textit{exploratory}, in that it seeks to define questions for future research. Because there are no comparable studies of visual artists’ archives, and the definitions being used in designing my research are only provisional, further exploration of the phenomenon is an appropriately limited goal.

**Suitability**

Case studies, in contrast to experimental approaches to research, are concerned with the context surrounding the phenomenon under study, and are particularly well suited to situations where the boundary between phenomenon and context is unclear.\textsuperscript{3} The events and processes surrounding the creation of an archival fonds and its transfer to an institution are certainly complex and closely integrated with a cultural context (indeed, this concern with context resonates well with archival theory). Yin cautions that case studies of “decisions, programs, the implementation process, and organizational change” are less well bounded than cases centred on an individual.\textsuperscript{4} Delineation of the unit of analysis is essential when studying such processes, in order to avoid confusion arising from different understandings by different actors in the case. The situation of a personal fonds has some characteristics of a process: its creation, acquisition, and processing unfold over time. The archival creator of a personal fonds is a discrete entity, however, and the resulting fonds in its institutional context, and the institution itself, are also

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2} Ibid., 21.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 18.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 29.
\end{itemize}
quite clear-cut.\textsuperscript{5} When we refer to the “Artist X fonds” at a given archival institution, it is fairly unambiguous what we are talking about.\textsuperscript{6}

**The case study vs. ethnography**

Although the case study approach has something in common with ethnography, and invites the use of certain similar data-gathering and analytic techniques, ethnography is not my overall method of choice for one important reason: it implies study of a cultural group or population. An ethnographic approach would suggest a study of several artists’ archives, which is problematic for the same reason that multiple case studies would be problematic. For the sake of emphasis, the common ground among different artists’ archives has yet to be established. The highly individualistic nature of creative production makes generalization about artists difficult, and there is a risk that the truly interesting aspects of the single case would be lost in the attempt to answer the larger question directly. The challenge of validity and generalization from individual case studies will receive further discussion below.

Ethnography may involve a broad variety of data-gathering techniques, but the technique most often associated with it is participant observation. Personal archives pose a practical methodological challenge in that it is not feasible to study their creation—which takes place in private, often solitary circumstances, over indeterminate periods of time—through direct participation.

\textsuperscript{5} True, a measure of uncertainty is likely to creep into the delineation of the fonds in the personal sphere; the records identified as archival by their creator, and the records perceived as archival by the archivist or archival scholar will almost certainly overlap in scope, but are unlikely to be identical. This difference, though potentially important, is not likely to jeopardize the selection or definition of the case.

\textsuperscript{6} This statement, of course, assumes a single archival repository as the eventual custodian of the records—there are many instances in which records are split among multiple repositories, which would make the case much more difficult to define. This type of situation will be left aside for future research. What is less clear cut but still of contextual interest is the indeterminate quantity of records that has been excluded from the fonds, through various processes of selection, over time. If the research case is the eventual fonds in the archival institution, this material may be too distant to be knowable, although it is possible that a study of personal archives that focused exclusively on the archival creator might be more closely involved with the question of excluded material.
observation. This practical limitation rules out participant observation, which has formed the basis of recent studies of organizational records. The private nature of personal records creation makes it an activity that is almost impossible to observe, certainly without obtruding on the activity itself and on the private life of the records creator. The many processes of negotiation, appraisal, selection, and arrangement that are involved in the transfer of a personal fonds to an archival institution would likewise be very difficult to observe directly, whether because of the sensitivity of acquisition negotiations or because much of an archivist’s decision-making process will be internal. Such archival work is also likely to take place over a protracted period of time.

**Case studies and generalization**

The use of the case study approach invites questions about the generalizability of its results, and about what knowledge these results are intended to represent. Robert Stake differentiates between the *intrinsic* case study, in which the case itself is of paramount interest and there is no broader aim to learn about a general problem which the case represents, and the *instrumental* case study, in which the particular case serves as a tool for learning about a larger phenomenon. For my research, the latter situation applies: the general problem of how to study the phenomenon of visual artists’ archives forms the context for the selection of a particular artist’s fonds. Charles Ragin and Howard Becker state that “implicit in most social scientific notions of case analysis is the idea that the objects of investigation are similar enough and separate enough to permit treating them as comparable instances of the same general phenomenon.” In the context of my research, this statement would reflect the assumption that personal archival fonds,

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as acquired by archival institutions, have enough fundamental commonality that the analysis of one such fonds can reveal aspects of the broader phenomenon of personal fonds in archives—or at least that the study of these fonds can be approached in a similar way.

As a criticism of the case study approach, it could be argued that there is insufficient certainty that a chosen case is representative of the wider phenomenon under study. In terms of my research, this criticism would assert that the case of a chosen artist cannot be proven to adequately represent the wider population of artists. However, the concept of naturalistic generalization, advanced by Stake, offers a way to open the possibility of future generalization from a single case study. Rather than place the onus on the author of the case to anticipate future generalization from a given study, Stake proposes that the generalization can take place in the mind of the future reader. For example, a future researcher investigating the archives of another visual artist might read my case study of Vera Frenkel. Based on their reading of the study and knowledge of the characteristics of their own particular case, they might conclude that my case study is entirely, somewhat, or not at all applicable to their own situation. If they find that there is some applicability, naturalistic generalization has occurred.

In addition, Geoff Walsham describes four types of generalization from interpretive case studies. As defined by Peta Darke et al., the interpretivist approach is characterized by its subjective view of reality, in which phenomena are understood through the beliefs and values assigned to them by researchers and participants. The historical and cultural context surrounding a phenomenon is seen as an essential part of any understanding. Clearly, in dealing with a phenomenon such as visual artists’ archives, for which notions of quantification and positivist generalization are such a poor fit, an interpretivist approach could be very appropriate. In Walsham’s analysis, the results of an interpretive case study can be generalized in the

10 Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*.


following ways: development of concepts, generation of theory, drawing of specific implications, and contribution of rich insight. My case study of Vera Frenkel’s archives, given its stated goal of defining the phenomenon of visual artists’ archives, could very plausibly contribute to the development of concepts around personal archives and visual artists’ archives in particular. The possibility of further generalization according to Walsham’s other categories will remain to be seen.

Case studies and validity

Robert Stebbins describes the notion of concatenation as a means to establish the validity of exploratory research over time. This argument holds that the validity of the single case study will be bolstered by each similar study that is carried out in the future: “a chain of qualitative case studies steadily expands the range of applicability as well as the level of validity of the accumulating findings from each component field investigation.” The single case becomes a foundation that can be built upon by future researchers, or over the course of the original researcher’s career. There is thus a potential, longitudinal validity to my research that can only be measured by related studies in the future.

Sources of evidence in case studies

A case study can involve a variety of sources of evidence, including—inter alia—documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artefacts. While Yin recommends the use of multiple sources of evidence, Stake argues that an approach using documents alone is ideal because it is non-interventive. Arguably, this concern might be relevant to my research problem, because it is possible that techniques such as interviews could amount to an unintentional intervention by the researcher in the activity of the archival creator


14 Ibid., 15.

15 Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 102.
and the archivist. In attempting to reconcile these two views, the key question is whether, for
the purpose of my research, existing records are adequate data sources. The very limited
potential of observation as a data source for this topic has already been outlined. In an effort to
address the question of the adequacy of documentation as a data source for the study of
personal fonds, I undertook a pilot study in June 2006.

Pilot study

Scope

As a preliminary test of the case study approach to an archival fonds, I undertook an informally
structured pilot study in June 2006 of the archives of Canadian poet bill bissett\(^\text{16}\) at the Clara
Thomas Archives and Special Collections, York University. This study involved an exploratory
attempt to examine a fonds based on a preliminary theoretical understanding. I had two
principal goals:

1. To better understand how a case study approach could be applied to an actual
   instance of an archival fonds
2. To test a series of very preliminary research questions using the fonds and
   administrative files as a data source.

I also formulated a number of informal, secondary questions concerning aspects of the role of
the archival creator and archival institution in shaping the bill bissett fonds. The combined
scope of these questions was very broad, and far exceeded a manageable focus for a research
study if the questions were to be addressed in a scholarly manner. The secondary questions
were used only as a tool to consider the possible range of focus for an eventual study and arrive
at a narrower, more feasible set of research questions. The following questions, directed more
towards methodological aspects of the research problem, were articulated as the framework for
the pilot study:

\(^{16}\) bissett, like the poet e.e. cummings, habitually spells his name without capital letters.
1. To what extent can the role of the creator and of the archival institution in creating the fonds be discerned from the interrogation of the structure and content of the fonds?

2. What questions can be answered with reference to the archives’ supporting documentation (accession and working files)?

3. What questions remain for the creator of the fonds and for the archival institution?

Implications

As a research problem, the study of a personal fonds in an institutional setting poses challenges in terms of the limitations of different data sources and the practical constraints of the institutional setting. The pilot study made it apparent that there is only so much that can be learned from looking at the fonds itself, and that secondary documentation (including finding aids) is unlikely to furnish a great deal of evidence of institutional decision making, and even less of the role of the creator. Nevertheless, each of these data sources proved to be an important component of the study. It is also clear that other data sources and research techniques would complement this kind of study, and indeed would probably be necessary to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of the research questions.

The pilot also made clear that the practical constraints attending this kind of study of a personal fonds are serious. Dissertation-level study of a private fonds would probably require the negotiation of an exceptional agreement between the fonds creator (or his/her representative), the archival institution, and the researcher. Accession and working files remain private, and access to them is likely to be granted only by special arrangement. The pilot and all notes generated in the course of research towards it are subject to controlled disclosure per the terms of a research agreement with the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections at York

17 This circumstance may have to do with there being little demand for access to this material, so that archival institutions have not needed to develop procedures to facilitate or control such access. Although FOIPPA legislation applies to administrative files in many archives, my anecdotal knowledge is that researcher requests for these materials are virtually unheard of.
University. This means that a dissertation or published research could not be undertaken according to similar terms. The support of the fonds creator would obviously be a prerequisite to this kind of study, as would be the support and trust of the archival institution.

**Factors determining subject and site**

I selected Vera Frenkel as the subject of this case study because her situation meets a number of practical criteria. From the perspective of having completed the research, it is hard to imagine an artist better-suited to my research questions, as I hope will become apparent in the following chapters. However, the basis of my choice was much more mundane. The following criteria were developed following my experience with the pilot study, and are based on knowledge of the Canadian archival system and consideration of avoidable difficulties that might attend my research:

- **The subject should be the archives of a living visual artist who has an existing relationship with an archival repository; that is, one or more installments of the artist’s personal archives should already have been deposited at the institution, with the understanding of further such acquisitions.**

  Vera Frenkel is a senior Canadian artist who began to donate her archival records to Queen’s University Archives (QUA) in 2006. She remains very active in her artistic practice and continues to generate records, which QUA is committed to acquiring at a future date.

- **The artist must be willing to participate in the study and to have his or her records and archives form the subject of intensive study.**

  In February 2008, Vera Frenkel provisionally indicated her willingness to participate in the study and to make her records available for examination.
The archival institution must be willing to participate in the study; such participation would involve making available its collections, allowing staff to be interviewed, and granting access to its administrative records, subject to the agreement of the artist/donor.

An informal understanding was reached with Paul Banfield, Queen’s University Archivist, and with Heather Home, the archivist responsible for acquiring and overseeing the processing of the Vera Frenkel fonds. The need for access to the administrative records was substantially diminished when Frenkel furnished me directly with copies of the correspondence in which selection and arrangement decisions were negotiated. Given this circumstance, I judged that a request for access to the records would be an unnecessary and disruptive intrusion.

Because my understanding of archival acquisition, arrangement, and descriptive practices is grounded in a Canadian tradition, the archival institution should ideally be part of the Canadian archival system.

QUA is a very well-established institution in the Canadian archival community; it adheres to national standards in arrangement and description.

The archival fonds chosen as a subject for the research will need to have an acquisition history which permits access to the decision makers who have been involved; in other words, the relevant archives staff members will need to be identifiable and available for interviews. Ideally, the time-frame for acquisition will be recent enough that staff members feel able to answer interview questions about their role in the acquisition and processing of the fonds.

The first stage in the acquisition of the Vera Frenkel fonds by QUA dates to 2006, which is optimally recent in terms of this study. Heather Home, the archivist responsible for the acquisition and processing of the Vera Frenkel fonds, indicated her availability and willingness to participate in a research study.

The archival fonds chosen as a subject for the research must not be in the holdings of the Art Gallery of Ontario.
This oddly specific criterion is added here as an acknowledgement of my own constraints; the AGO has one of Canada’s largest collections of artists’ archives, including several fonds that would make excellent case studies. However, as the Special Collections Archivist at the AGO, I have had at least some responsibility for processing every acquisition of the past several years. It would be impossible for me to study the institutional aspects of these fonds with any critical distance.

Additional considerations

Vera Frenkel donated a substantial body of archival documentation (4.22 metres of textual records, photographs, and artwork; 31 audio cassettes) to the Rare Book and Special Collections Division of McGill University Library in 1990. This material was then transferred to QUA at the artist’s request in 2008. Because the artist’s donation to McGill happened over two decades ago, and at a remove of 16 years from the QUA acquisition, there would be serious practical challenges attending its inclusion in my study. A comparison of the material to the records currently in Frenkel’s personal sphere would have to face a huge temporal disjunction; in other words, there is no basis for assuming that the artist’s recordkeeping practices have remained substantially similar over the course of nearly 20 years, meaning that knowledge of the state of the McGill records before their transfer is an impossibility. Furthermore, the staff involved in the acquisition and processing of the McGill material could not be expected to remember their decision-making processes with much detail after this length of time. I therefore made the decision to acknowledge this material and make reference to it as necessary (insofar as its contents represent lacunae in the records in Frenkel’s possession or at QUA, for example), but not to engage in in-depth analysis of its contents as part of the study.

Intended research design

In order to get started on my research, and to meet University of Toronto requirements for ethics review, I mapped out the way in which I intended to complete my research. This process is described in broad terms in the following diagram, and will be explained in greater detail
As it turned out, this is not exactly the way the research process actually unfolded, but it is important for the record to be clear about what I intended to do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage I: Personal Sphere (RQ1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. &quot;Guided tour&quot; of records with Vera Frenkel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Interrogation (examination, analysis) of fonds in studio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Follow-up interview with Vera Frenkel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preliminary data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage II: Institutional Sphere (primarily RQ2; RQ1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Examination of administrative files and finding aids at Queen's University Archives (QUA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Examination of Vera Frenkel Fonds at QUA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Interview with archivist(s) at QUA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preliminary data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage III: Wrap-up (RQ1, RQ2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7. Concluding interview with Vera Frenkel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Intended research diagram.
Overview of intended data sources

With reference to Figure 1, the data sources for my research were intended to be as follows:

Stage I:

- A “guided tour” by Vera Frenkel through her sites of recordkeeping (chiefly, her studio), (step 1 in Figure 1);

- Vera Frenkel’s records in situ in the personal sphere of recordkeeping: both the contents of the records and their physical disposition (step 2);

- A semi-structured interview with Vera Frenkel concerning her recordkeeping practices, and specifically questions raised through the preceding examination of the records (step 3).

Stage II:

- QUA’s finding aid, accession files, and any other administrative records pertaining to the acquisition and management of the Vera Frenkel fonds (step 4);

- The contents of the Vera Frenkel fonds itself (step 5);

- The results of a semi-structured interview with Heather Home, the archivist responsible for acquiring and processing the fonds (step 6).
Stage III:

- The results of a semi-structured interview with Vera Frenkel, concerning any outstanding questions raised by the examination of her archives in Stages I and II (step 7).

**Intended data collection strategies and techniques**

Stage I of the research was designed to centre on the artist’s personal recordkeeping environment, addressing RQ1. The guided tour technique (step 1) was suggested by Jenna Hartel, who found it an excellent means of gathering rich data about the home information environments of gourmet cooks. The idea is that a discussion of personal recordkeeping will flow more easily from the artist being present in the recordkeeping environment (the natural context, in ethnographic terms) and having records at hand to inspire description and insights. The tour would begin with a general invitation to take the researcher through the recordkeeping site and describe the records found there; probe questions would be used as needed to elicit more detail about the records encountered. Because the guided tour was expected to provide verbal narrative data with a spatial component (meaning that reference would be made to records in their physical locations), data collection would involve both audio and visual recording techniques. The tour would be audio-recorded and transcribed. The technique of the photographic inventory described by John Collier and Malcolm Collier would be used to document the tour, and to bolster and supplement the verbal record. A bird’s-eye sketch or map of the location of groups of records would form a useful adjunct to transcripts and photographs.

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18 Jenna Hartel, ‘Information Activities, Resources, and Spaces in the Hobby of Gourmet Cooking’ (PhD, University of California, 2007).

The guided tour was expected to elicit the artist’s own personal take on her recordkeeping environment, and the resulting data would be understood as shaped or constrained by that perspective. In order to broaden and contextualize the results of the guided tour, the recordkeeping site would subsequently be examined in detail independently of the artist’s guidance (step 2). The focus of this examination would be determined to some extent by the guided tour, seeking to clarify, contextualize, and enrich the data gathered at the previous stage. The examination would involve first-hand observation techniques, with data to be recorded through note-taking.

The follow-up interview with the artist (step 3), concluding Stage I of the research, was intended to address any questions arising from the guided tour and detailed examination. The expected focus of this interview would be to seek the artist’s perceptions concerning groups of records not covered in the guided tour, but identified by the researcher in the subsequent examination. Questions concerning the physical disposition of records or other material aspects of the recordkeeping environment might also be addressed. The interview would take a semi-structured form, in order to ensure that key questions are addressed and efficient use is made of the artist’s time. Because the questions will be contingent on the examination of the fonds in the studio, an interview schedule would be drafted after that stage of the research. The interview would be audio-recorded and transcribed.

The data to be gathered at Stage II was expected primarily to address RQ2, with the dual goal of investigating the Vera Frenkel fonds at QUA, and furnishing the basis for a comparison to the data gathered in Stage I. Although this stage of the research would take place solidly within the institutional sphere, there is a sense in which it would continue to address the personal sphere through the attempt to perceive the interventions of the institution on this portion of the archival fonds (by implication, if these interventions can be perceived, the researcher has gained some knowledge of the state of the records before they were acquired). RQ1 would therefore be addressed to a lesser extent at this stage. The archives’ administrative files would be consulted to find evidence of acquisition, appraisal, and arrangement decisions (step 4). A similar focus would guide the examination of the finding aid to the fonds. These two data sources, as documentation created by the institution, would be expected to furnish research
answers—or not—in a fairly straightforward way. Data from each of these sources would be captured through note-taking.

The Vera Frenkel fonds itself was expected to be a more complex data source, owing partly to its sheer size (9 metres of textual records and other material; 427 videocassettes; 11 diskettes; 4 data tapes). To avoid becoming lost in these archives, a top-down approach was proposed to their interrogation; each of the four series indicated in the fonds-level description (Teaching, Projects, Artistic activities, and Personal) would be broadly surveyed and a representative group of files (or similar records units) would be sampled (step 5). The aim would be to examine records from a range of time periods, creator activities, and physical formats. The sampling strategy cannot fully be determined in advance: it must be sensitive to the structure and content of the fonds; and it must accommodate questions raised by preceding stages of the research. Throughout the interrogation of the fonds, it should be borne in mind that the series designations and the chronological labelling of fonds contents are themselves the results of the archives’ interventions. As the product of QUA’s acquisition of Frenkel’s archives, the fonds is a complex cultural artefact at the centre of my research.

The goal of the interview with the archivist (step 6) would be to clarify and contextualize the data gathered in Stage II. To some extent, the substance of this interview could be structured in advance. The schedule would be developed following the prior stages of the research, in order to address questions that had arisen through data gathering and preliminary analysis. This interview would be recorded and transcribed.

Finally, the concluding interview with Vera Frenkel (Stage III/step 7) would seek to address any outstanding questions from the previous stages of the research. The questions posed would be entirely contingent on the gathered data and its ongoing analysis; the interview schedule would therefore be developed at the conclusion of Stage II. This interview was expected to take a

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20 Queen’s University Archives, ‘Vera Frenkel Fonds [archival Description]’ (Queen’s University Archives, 2008), http://db.archives.queensu.ca/.
traditional verbal form (that is, without any physical or visual component) and would be audio-recorded and transcribed.

**Actual research design**

Probably a minority of exploratory case studies unfold exactly as planned, given the complex and variable circumstances that tend to be involved. In reporting on the methodological aspects of research, there is always the option of describing what happened as if it had been planned that way. In some cases, the deviation from plan might not be of much interest, but in my own, I would argue that an accurate account will form an important context for my research findings, and might possibly be of use to anyone designing similar case studies in the future.

My intended research design, with its stages and steps, was very linear. It proceeded in what seemed like a logical direction from the personal sphere into the institutional sphere, each clearly delineated from the other. The research process as it actually developed looked more like the diagram in Figure 2:
Figure 2. Actual research diagram.

Put in the simplest terms, everything became much less linear. This metamorphosis had to do with a number of interesting things that happened along the way, some of them initiated by
Frenkel, some by Heather Home, and some generally due to circumstances around and within the case.

The “guided tour” turned out to be an excellent technique, owing to Frenkel’s interest in it and her fluency in being interviewed. I had initially imagined the tour taking about an hour to complete, but instead it expanded to five sessions, each approximately an hour in duration and covering a different area of the studio. These were held on August 24, September 10, October 5, November 2, and November 30, 2009. I had expected to schedule these sessions closer together in time, but had not anticipated Frenkel’s demanding work schedule. The interviews were one of several priorities for her in the fall of 2009. As I had planned, these sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed.

When I proposed the bird’s-eye view map technique as visual documentation of the guided tour, Frenkel quickly appropriated the activity as part of her own contribution to the interviews. Although initially I was concerned that this approach would not allow me to capture details as I perceived them, I soon realized that it had the considerable advantage of furnishing the artist’s own representation of her recordkeeping space. It also freed me to focus on listening and responding to Frenkel’s spoken words. Thus, as a data source, this activity furnished five bird’s-eye view maps of the recordkeeping environment, each drawn by Vera Frenkel during one session of the guided tour and corresponding to the different area of the studio covered by that session.

My proposal to photograph the studio during the interviews did not go as smoothly. Frenkel vetoed the suggestion, and in retrospect it seems naive of me to suppose that she would welcome this form of documentation of her private space.21 She did compromise by offering to

[21] By way of background, in my work as an archivist I have taken photographs of the archival records of several artists, with the agreement of each, so my proposal was based in prior experience. However, as a student researcher, I was not in the same position, and the future dissertation was a venue for quasi-publication of the resulting photographic data. More importantly, every artist and every studio is unique. Both Frenkel and her studio are more private than I had expected.
take photographs of the studio for me at a future date. Because of the demands of her health and her work, Frenkel actually took these photographs substantially later than the guided tour, and in fact after the rest of my data gathering had concluded, in March and September of 2011. They are thus very different from the sort of ethnographic photo survey I had planned. The 18 photographs, which appear throughout Chapter 5, are less about specific details than general patterns in the studio. They do not represent the specific state of the flux of materials in the studio at the date(s) of the guided tour, so it is difficult to use their content to corroborate or illustrate any particular observations from the tour. Moreover, in the narrowest sense, the photographs are an unreliable data source. I was not present when they were taken, so I cannot judge to what extent the material they record may have been selected or staged. Frenkel proposed the use of her camera phone for some of the photos, with its capacity to make panoramic images, and I agreed that it would be acceptable despite the low resolution of the resulting images. This description of the background to the photographs may read like a litany of compromises, and to counter that aspect, I want to make it clear that I see an important advantage to the eventual photographs. The same aspect that makes them problematic is the thing that makes them interesting: they are riddled with subjectivities. Taken by Vera Frenkel, they are a very contingent, very qualified, and incomplete portrait of her studio.22

Back in February 2010, just after I had wrapped up the series of guided tours and was trying to negotiate a date for my own examination of Frenkel’s records in the studio, I received an unexpected offer of help from Heather Home. As part of one of her frequent acquisition trips to Toronto, she proposed that she bring along the entire Frenkel fonds from QUA to facilitate my consultation of those records. Although I had planned to review only a sample of the records, it became apparent from the box-file list that the series arrangement indicated by the fonds-level description had not actually been imposed at the file level. I thus thought it best to survey the whole of the textual records and make a more detailed sampling as I worked. The City of Toronto Archives agreed to serve as a trusted temporary custodian of the fonds and to

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22 Frenkel might well not consider them in that light. I think I have outlined the contingent aspects of their creation clearly enough to emphasize that the photographs were not presented to me by the artist as anything like a portrait of the studio.
supply me with work space, and so I had a remarkably convenient opportunity, the week of February 22, 2010, to examine at the Vera Frenkel fonds in Toronto. Although I hadn’t yet completed what I thought of as “Stage I” of the research, I realized there was no good reason not to move on to looking at the QUA records before looking at Frenkel’s records in her studio or conducting a summary interview. Additionally, as I reviewed the records and the box-file list, I realized that the distinction between Stage I and Stage II was not as clear-cut as I had imagined. In Chapter 6, I will discuss this aspect of the research in greater detail.

One further aspect of my plan for Stage II was modified. In the course of our guided tour meetings, Frenkel supplied me with copies of the correspondence between her and Home in which the parameters of the archives were discussed. These documents have both an appraisal function (in the sense of indicating what records would be selected for acquisition) and an arrangement function (in delineating the categories of records). They formed the major part of the information I had hoped to gain from the QUA administrative file for the Frenkel fonds (step 4 in the research diagram). Both Frenkel and Home were open to talking about the circumstances of the acquisition. I had undertaken not to record any financial data encountered in the course of my research, and was mindful of respecting Frenkel’s privacy. On balance, I decided that it was not necessary to seek access to the remainder of the administrative file.

My notion of examining Frenkel’s records in situ was based on similar descriptive inventories of artists’ archives that I have made in the course of my professional work. In contrast to the expansion of the guided tour, my own survey of the records was much reduced from what I had originally imagined. Frenkel’s recordkeeping space had been animated by her oral narrative during the guided tour, and proved to be mysterious and strangely mute without her commentary. I will say more about this problem in Chapter 5. My examination of the records took place on March 25, 2010.

Having already veered into Stage II, and having lost faith in the overall trajectory of my research plan, I decided that there could no longer be any distinction between the Stage I follow-up interview with Frenkel (former step 3) and the final interview, and so I chose to merge them into one session. This was held on May 10, 2010, and was audio-recorded and transcribed
according to plan. All that remained from my research plan was my interview with Heather Home (step 6), which was initially intended to take place prior to my concluding interview with Frenkel, but was in fact not contingent on the latter. I visited QUA to conduct the interview and have a look at the Frenkel fonds in its institutional setting on May 19, 2010. This interview was audio-recorded and transcribed, as planned.

**Data analysis**

As expected for this kind of exploratory study, the process of data analysis was complex and iterative. Prior to the concluding interview with Frenkel, some preliminary analysis took place, with the goal of focusing the outline for that interview. At the conclusion of the data-gathering stage, I entered all transcripts, notes, bird’s-eye view maps, and photographs into the qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti. I used the coding function of Atlas.ti to develop an informal index to the data, flagging recurring themes, names, and observations, and allowing me to collate similar elements. The terms used in the coding function (see Appendix C) are not rigorously structured, and I made very little attempt to correct overlapping or ambiguous instances among them. Rather, they represent my own process of inductive analysis of the data. Because of their informal nature, the “codes” cannot be used for measurement (for example, inferring significance by counting the instances of a certain term). They are included as an appendix only to represent the process of analysis.

For the most part, the process of making sense of the data was inductive, as the existing theoretical basis for understanding an artist’s fonds is fragmentary at best. As expected, a great deal of richly-descriptive data was gathered, forming the basis for observations that have not been suggested in the existing literature. Most of my textual data consisted of Frenkel’s own words, which naturally were in her own idiom and reflected her own specific circumstances and attitudes. This material demanded analysis from the ground up, in which I attempted to focus my reading within Frenkel’s statements, rather than apply an extrinsic framework of ideas to her words. It was important to the nature of my study to allow the voice of the artist to come through in my final account, which entailed privileging a number of her statements by preserving them as quotations. However, there was also a deductive aspect to my analysis, in
that ideas drawn from the literature review have shaped the development of my research questions, and were used as lenses through which to view and make sense of the data. The process of analysis involves bringing together common themes and observations from the data, and the resulting writing, in the interest of coherence, is structured around these themes. Inevitably, there will be elements in the data that seem less interesting to the person doing the analysis, or that may resist grouping according to prevailing themes, and these bits and pieces are left out of the final account. It is important to acknowledge the element of personal subjectivity in my analysis, in that my background and the vein of my conversations with Frenkel inevitably shaped both the content of the interviews and my subsequent reading of them.

**Constraints and limitations**

Part of the rationale for selecting a poet’s fonds, rather than a visual artist’s, for the pilot study was a wish to simplify my relationship to the case by mitigating the element of personal and professional bias at a preliminary stage. My academic background in art history and my professional experience working with visual artists’ archives at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) are fundamental to my choice of visual artists’ archives as a research topic.\(^{23}\) This personal background gives me a knowledge base and analytical skills that are important to the topic. At the same time, however, I have to remain alert to the ways in which my background shapes my perceptions. For example, my preconceptions of artists’ studios shaped my intended research design in ways that required modification. My background also shapes my relationship to my research subject in more complex ways. My employment at the AGO may have played a role in shaping the research relationship between Vera Frenkel and me.\(^{24}\) As an archivist, I was

\(^{23}\) BA (Hons.) Art History and English, McMaster University, 1995; Master of Studies in the History of Art and Visual Culture, Oxford University, 1997. I have been employed as the Rosamond Ivey Special Collections Archivist at the Art Gallery of Ontario since December 2001, with responsibility for building and maintaining the museum’s collection of visual arts archives.

\(^{24}\) The AGO, the second-largest art museum in Canada, owns five works by Frenkel: two works on paper and a sculpture from the early 1970s, and two videos. It has yet to acquire one of her major installations. As the major collector of artists’ archives in Toronto, the city where Frenkel’s career as an artist has unfolded, the AGO might have been expected to try to acquire Frenkel’s archives, but no such overtures have ever been made.
hardly a neutral observer when it came to discussing the archives in the studio; an artist’s commentary on her records may take on a confessional aspect when it is addressed to an archivist. Frenkel had a good sense of a professional archivist’s skill and knowledge set from her collaborations with Home. Although I made every effort to be neutral and non-judgmental, I occasionally had the sense that Frenkel spoke about her recordkeeping to me as though I were the expert, or an arbiter of the quality of her efforts. At one point, Frenkel expressed admiration for a finding aid I had written for the archives of another artist, an old acquaintance of hers whose fonds is held by the AGO. The orderliness of the archival arrangement was appealing to her. While I did my best to stress the individual differences of each archival fonds, it may be that the spectre of an expectation of orderliness hung in the air. At the same time, my scholarly and professional appreciation for the significance and complexity of the archives must have been apparent. My background is therefore acknowledged as an asset and a constraint.

The next chapter functions as an extended description of my research subject, examining themes in Vera Frenkel’s work that may have an effect on her recordkeeping and archives, and on her narrative of the same.
Chapter 4

Vera Frenkel: Art and Life

As a subject for a case study of an artist’s archives, Vera Frenkel is an excellent candidate for a number of reasons. There are certainly practical factors that contributed to my selection of the artist, as I outlined in the preceding chapter. More interesting, however, are the several ways in which the nature of Frenkel’s work—both its chosen media and the ideas and themes that prevail in it—enriches and complicates the subject of study. Firstly, the interdisciplinary mode in which she works means that her art is manifested in diverse forms and a wide range of media, making it difficult to delineate the boundary between art work and context. In particular, Frenkel’s bold adoption of new technologies as art media makes her artistic recordkeeping unusually vital and complex in terms of its essential relationship to the survival of her art work. These aspects are complicated by her pattern of revisiting elements of earlier works of art, repurposing them into new creations. Finally, throughout Frenkel’s body of work runs a profound, often playful and poetic exploration of the nature of archives, memory, and truth. All of these aspects of her work unavoidably shape her archival records, and, I will argue, the latter characteristic is likely to shape her own account of her records.

The following account of Vera Frenkel as an artist is focused closely on aspects of her work that relate clearly to my subject of study. My intention is not to argue that an archival perspective on her art affords significant original insight into the works themselves. Indeed, scholars have already written on memory and “the archive,” truth and fiction as themes in Frenkel’s work, and I will naturally touch on these writings in the following account. Other scholarly writing on Frenkel has focused on themes of exile and displacement,¹ loss,² and the nature of bureaucracy.³

Social and cultural commentary has also been noted as an integral aspect of Frenkel’s role as an artist. The fundamental purpose of all of these writers, in keeping with the larger goals of art history and criticism, has been to elucidate Frenkel’s work and tie it into a broader cultural understanding. My own purpose is to furnish a background to my investigation of Frenkel’s archives.

**A biographical sketch**

Representing an artist’s life and career in a brief written account can be problematic, particularly in the context of this dissertation, in which theories of life narrative form part of the theoretical background. The following biographical statement is therefore presented only as one possible account and one part of the context for considering Frenkel’s work. To allow the artist to speak for herself, I refer first of all to Frenkel’s own biographical statement, available on her website and included here as Appendix D. It begins with a statement of the prevailing themes in her work (“Rooted in an interrogation of the abuses of power and their consequences …”), listing several of the artist’s most important exhibitions. In subsequent paragraphs, the artist outlines the major prizes she has won, her several recent solo and group exhibitions, and the collected edition of her video-based art work. She describes her teaching record, her artistic residencies, and her public lectures. Finally, she highlights her published writings, including catalogue essays and contributions to anthologies. Personal information is virtually absent from this biography;

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there is no date of birth or city of residence indicated, nor is there any mention of Frenkel’s educational background.

While acknowledging the artist’s desire to be understood primarily through her work, I want to touch briefly on the other aspects of her life that appear in various published accounts. These will provide some context for my research findings, as well as for the works of art I describe in this chapter. In a 2007 interview with Robert Enright, Frenkel mentioned her early biography, describing her remarkable escape, as an infant in her mother’s arms, from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939. The two joined Frenkel’s father in England, where he had travelled ahead to try to get visas for the family. Enright observed that aspects of this narrative, and the retelling of it, are implicit throughout Frenkel’s artwork. There are other biographical traces in this interview. From England, the family soon immigrated to Montreal. Frenkel’s studies included graduate work in anthropology and sociology, and as many studio art courses as McGill University’s curriculum would allow. She also audited Arthur Lismer’s art education course at the Montreal Museum of Fine Art. Apart from the Enright interview, other biographical details can be pieced together from the published record. Frenkel moved to Toronto in the late 1960s, just as her career as an artist was beginning. Most of her career has unfolded in that city, apart from several international sojourns related to artistic residencies and major exhibitions. Frenkel taught visual arts for a number of years, first at the University of Toronto and then at York University, where she helped to establish the Interdisciplinary Studio Programme at the Faculty of Fine Arts.

**Interdisciplinarity**

Because my research is taking place within the discipline of archival studies, in which specialized knowledge of visual arts should not be assumed, the potentially complex sensory and material qualities of interdisciplinary art need to be emphasized at the outset. Although carried out within the framework of understanding of the visual arts, interdisciplinary art is not limited to

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visual forms of expression. In the context of artistic production, the terms *interdisciplinary* or *multidisciplinary* often mean the combination of practices in different artistic disciplines.7 Art that combines elements of film, music, performance, and literature, for example, is easily identified as interdisciplinary in a basic sense. The forms of interdisciplinary art are naturally extremely diverse, but an often-related art form is that of the *installation*, “a one-off work (often a large-scale assemblage) conceived for and usually more or less filling a specific interior (generally that of a gallery).”8 The purpose of these standard definitions is to make it clear that Frenkel’s art is not necessarily the kind of tangible creation that can be hung on an art gallery wall, although she makes that more traditional kind of art as well.

It is important to take note of the wide variety of forms that Frenkel’s art has taken. She began her artistic career as a printmaker, meeting with early recognition at the highest institutional levels: she won first prize at the *Segunda Bienal Americana de Artes*, Colombia, in 1971 and represented Canada at the Mostra Grafica of the Venice Biennale in 1972. Two exhibitions of her prints were circulated by the National Gallery of Canada the same year. She also achieved success as a poet, and sometimes combined the two art forms: a volume of her work in both formats, entitled *Image Spaces*, was published in 1971.9 Her artwork began to take new directions in the mid-1970s, when she began to explore forms of installation. An early installation work, *Map With Gates* (1973–74), allowed gallery visitors to participate in constructing a shifting, impermanent evocation of a landscape. Participants could select and position sheets of paper bearing words and poems (the latter, each referring to a landscape feature, were written by Frenkel herself) on a structured series of clotheslines hung across the gallery. In 1974, Frenkel created the ground-breaking *String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video (Montréal–Toronto, 1974)*, which marked her first foray into the use of video as an art medium. A video-

7 A closely-related term is *multidisciplinary*, which the *Oxford Dictionary of English* defines as “combining or involving several academic disciplines or professional specializations in an approach to a topic or problem.” *Oxford Dictionary of English*, s.v. “multidisciplinary.”

8 *The Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists*, s.v. “Installation.” Not all installation works are “one-offs”; many of Frenkel’s installations, for example, have travelled to multiple venues and been adapted to each new setting.

performance project that took place simultaneously in two cities, it made use of Bell Canada’s brand new teleconference facilities, with a five-member team (representing the five fingers of a hand) in each city collaborating to enact the movements of the familiar cat’s cradle game through semi-choreographed improvisation. Frenkel also collaborated with composer Peter Perrin on three live performance works, under the collective title *Frenkel/Perrin: Words Movement Music*, that were performed at St. Lawrence Hall, Toronto, in 1975. These in turn became the visual source for *The Big Book*, a large thirty-page collaged “diary” of the events with commentary, now in the Art Bank collection.

Video has remained a preferred medium for Frenkel, evolving in recent years into digital video formats. Often, Frenkel uses video as an integral element of a larger interdisciplinary work. A series of works about a fictitious lost Canadian novelist, *The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story* (commenced in 1979), has involved video, installation, and textual components. *This is Your Messiah Speaking* (1990–1991) is a video work that was most prominently presented as a computer animation on the Spectacolor Board at Piccadilly Circus in London. It has also been shown as a video installation in a gallery setting, and has taken the form of printed text and images. Perhaps Frenkel’s most well-known work, “… from the Transit Bar” (1992–1996), is a multimedia installation in the form of a functional piano bar with a built-in video narrative element. The material components of this work have evolved with each iteration, but the catalogue entry for the work at the National Gallery of Canada, which acquired it in 1997, lists its diverse media as “bar structure and equipment, tables and chairs, player piano, plants, newspapers, raincoats, stools, bar sign, lighting, carpet, 6 video monitors, 6 laser disks, software.”

Frenkel’s most recent work, *ONCE NEAR WATER: Notes from the Scaffolding Archive* (2008–), is a digital video installation with related wall works. Though often integrally related to components in other media, some of Frenkel’s video works may also be seen as stand-alone creations, as in the 2005 DVD compilation *Of Memory and Displacement: Vera Frenkel*:

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Collected Works.\textsuperscript{11} Frenkel has commented on the way in which her video recordings function as art and archival records at the same time: “Even after a project is dismantled, people see that part of what I do. The tapes seem to take on a life of their own, but in many cases, having had another role, they have a dimension that alludes to absence. Viewers can sense that something is at work beyond what they’re seeing, if only by virtue of the fact that the tape has been wrenched out of its initial context. What’s in front of them is only a fragment. And that’s fine with me.”\textsuperscript{12}

Frenkel has also embraced the Internet as an artistic medium that allows her to create an interactive presence for her works, extending and expanding the active life of works beyond their existence as time-limited gallery installations. Body Missing (1994- ), a work that builds on elements of “… from the Transit Bar”, began as a video installation. In a subsequent iteration it was augmented with a parallel website that could be accessed through Internet terminals in a gallery setting. It has been distributed as a video recording, and its website has a continued existence.\textsuperscript{13} The Institute\textsuperscript{TM}: Or, What We Do For Love (1998- ) had its first manifestation as a published text work, later becoming an installation with a website component that the artist still maintains.\textsuperscript{14} Frenkel feels a particular affinity with the online environment: “the Internet is second nature because I had been working with interwoven narratives, with different time periods, with all kinds of language—visual, textual, audio—and, for me, the Web was like swimming in natural waters.”\textsuperscript{15}

While embracing new technologies, Frenkel has always made extensive use of language, both written and spoken, in her practice. Many of her art works have a significant written

\textsuperscript{11} Vera Frenkel, Of Memory and Displacement: Vera Frenkel: Collected Works (Toronto: VTape Distribution, 2005).

\textsuperscript{12} Vera Frenkel, interviewed by Dot Tuer in Vera Frenkel, Vera Frenkel (North York: Art Gallery of York University, 1993), 40–41.


\textsuperscript{15} Vera Frenkel, quoted in Enright, ‘Boundary Blurrer’. 
component: “… from the Transit Bar”, for example, included a tabloid newspaper edited by the artist, with oblique commentary on the bar environment. “… from the Transit Bar” was also extended into an artist’s bookwork titled The Bar Report, published in connection with York University’s 1993 exhibition of works following themes initiated in “… from the Transit Bar”. In addition to her poetry, Frenkel has written textual essays that blur the boundary between creative writing and non-fiction (for example, “I can tell you simply” is a far-from-simple narration that reads as a conspiracy and counter-conspiracy story about neo-Nazis in the American South, but functions obliquely as a report on an artists’ project at the Banff Centre). She has published a great deal of critical writing in art journals such as Vanguard, artscanada, and FUSE Magazine, and in numerous anthologies and exhibition catalogues, and she is very active as a lecturer, conference speaker, and panellist.

Frenkel embraces other art forms as necessary to the realization of her work. Although she is not averse to collaboration—frequently working with video and sound production experts or computer programmers on the production of her works—she harnesses a noteworthy range of her own skills. Her voice, which is clear and resonant, can be heard as the narrator of several of her works. In a number of her early video productions, she tried her hand at screen acting (notably in Her Room in Paris, in which she plays most of the roles). There was an element of budgetary need in her involvement (she had no resources to hire actors) but the resulting ambiguity of the authorial voice seems better than accidental (and, as film critic Jay Scott observed, “she’s a very good actor.”) Frenkel wrote a number of piano compositions for “… from the Transit Bar”, with the assistance of collaborating musicians. The Institute™ includes three original songs written by the artist in a tongue-in-cheek vein. They are referred to as “dreadful songs” on the companion website to the piece, which offers the following explanation: “Making no pretense at being a song writer or composer, Frenkel sees this aspect of The Institute™ as just

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16 The Bar Report is published as a component of Vera Frenkel.


another form of narrative; a use of grass roots folk idioms laced with cabaret irony born from
the experience of working with and observing institutional practices and the prices they exact.”19
In her CV, Frenkel refers to The Institute™ as a “video-web folk-opera,” a description that
captures the work’s multifaceted nature.20

Describing the huge variety of media and forms employed by Frenkel’s art carries a risk of
implying that the diversity of her efforts is an end in itself, which is emphatically not the case.
To Frenkel, worthwhile interdisciplinary production is defined not by the range of art forms
employed, but rather in terms of the driving force or rationale behind the combination of
disciplines, and the rhetorical coherence of the whole. Frenkel has articulated this philosophy in
an essay that takes as its starting point the frustrations of attempting to teach interdisciplinary
approaches in a bureaucratic, under-funded university environment. She argues that
interdisciplinary art has an interrogative essence that weaves its contributing parts into a
cohesive but dynamic totality:

Unlike a nesting of congruent layers added up, or a 3-D tic-tac-toe of interlaced world-
views multiplied, an intermedial project or work of métissage, can be seen as a poly-
voiced force-field of oscillating contradictions, an exploratory journey, or, as the media
artist David Rokeby has said, tracing the contours of a large vessel in the air with his
hands, “… a place for holding ambiguity… right there.” Encompassing both text and
gloss, projects of this kind feature a deliberate avoidance of finality, inviting the viewer
to ask: “Can this really be true? Am I supposed to believe what I am seeing?,” in this way
building vital scepticism. Due to its capacity for commentary and self-reflection, serious
or mischievous as the case may be, such work becomes diagnostic, if not forensic, in
discerning meaning from fragmented cultural clues.21

Interdisciplinary work thus has the capacity for multilayered communication through its
different elements. Like poetry, such work should provide no easy answers: “what begins to


20 Vera Frenkel, ‘Vera Frenkel: Curriculum Vitae’, 2011,

21 Vera Frenkel, ‘A Kind of Listening: Notes from an Interdisciplinary Practice’, in Penser L’indiscipline:
Recherches Interdisciplinaires En Art Contemporain / Creative Confusions: Interdisciplinary Practices in Contemporary Art, ed.
take shape is a non-linear, open-ended, testimonial, paradigm-shifting practice.” The resulting ambiguities, and the viewer’s state of doubt, are fundamental to the interdisciplinary aesthetic. Frenkel acknowledges Françoise Lionnet’s articulation of the strategy of métissage in *Autobiographical Voices* as a contributing source for her vision of interdisciplinarity.

**Selected works**

*The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story*

*The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story* is particularly significant to the focus of this study for three reasons. Firstly, the theme of archives runs through the work as a mischievous—but ultimately profound—critique of the notion of documentary evidence. Next, it is perhaps the project by Frenkel with the longest active life, during which the artist has continued to recycle and reanimate the traces of earlier iterations. Finally, it is interesting as a playful deployment of many standard motifs in life narratives. The work is really a series of works centred around the fictitious character of Cornelia Lumsden, a Canadian novelist active in Paris between the two World Wars who mysteriously disappeared—perhaps she is dead, perhaps still living. Lumsden’s lost novel, *The Alleged Grace of Fat People*, is set up to be a missing Canadian classic. Her sojourn in Paris is based on the stories of many expatriate artists and writers who made the city a centre of art in the 1920s.

*The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden* began as a two-part video work with related installations and textual elements. *Part I: Her Room in Paris* (1979) is styled as a documentary, featuring a CBC commentator interviewing the Friend, the Rival, the Expert, the Lover and the Confidant. As described above, all but the last two of these characters are played by Frenkel herself (the others by her artist colleague Tim Whiten) (see [Error! Reference source not found.]). The effect is almost believable, and full of humour when the ruse is understood. Jay Scott has described an

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22 Ibid., 36.

23 Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture.*
early showing of the tape to a party of Can Lit giants, and the delighted reactions of authors such as Margaret Laurence in recognizing aspects of their own lives in the Lumsden story.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{lumsden_still.jpg}
\caption{Vera Frenkel, Video stills from \textit{The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story: Part I: Her Room in Paris} (1979, R.T. 60'). L. to R., Frenkel as The CBC Reporter, The Rival (with Tim Whiten as René), and The Expert, three of the four roles she plays in this work. Source: www.verafrenkel.com/artworks/lumsden/images/index.html. Images © copyright Vera Frenkel.}
\end{figure}

In \textit{Part II: “…And Now, The Truth” (A Parenthesis)} (1980), the intertwining of fact and fiction in the Lumsden story becomes more intricate. During a lecture by Frenkel (on the topic of art and artifice, of all things) given at the Powerhouse artist-run centre in Montreal, 1979, the artist was confronted by a woman in the audience who claimed to be Susan Cornelia Lumsden, asking “by what right are you using my name in your art? I and my family wish to know.”\textsuperscript{25} Frenkel claims to have been floored by the interruption of reality into her Lumsden fiction, but she quickly responded by challenging the woman to prove her own identity. Footage of a subsequent interview with Susan Cornelia Lumsden is woven into the video, further confusing the question of truth. Although she introduces her own family documents and attempts to set the record straight about the Lumsden identity, Susan Cornelia Lumsden also begins to play along with aspects of Frenkel’s fiction.

\textsuperscript{24} Scott, ‘Vera Frenkel: Canada’s Pre-eminent Video Artist, Story-Teller and Mischief-Maker Hits Her Stride’.

\textsuperscript{25} Frenkel, \textit{Of Memory and Displacement: Vera Frenkel: Collected Works}. 
Her Room in Paris was developed into a gallery-based installation work, and one of its early iterations was mounted at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in 1982.\textsuperscript{26} The installation resembled a historical recreation of Lumsden’s room, complete with a day bed, the author’s desk, and personal photographs and belongings.\textsuperscript{Error! Reference source not found.} Anne Bénichou has noted the deliberate artificiality of the room, seeing it as a parody of historical recreation that is riddled with intertextual clues to its fictive aspects. Frenkel chose the library of the historical Agnes Etherington house (now an integral part of the gallery building) as the setting of the work. With the support of curator Louise Dompierre, she repurposed uncatalogued amateur artworks by Etherington from the museum’s vaults as Lumsden’s work, and forged a postcard to draw a documentary link between the fictive Lumsden and the real Etherington.\textsuperscript{27} A photograph of Agatha Christie hanging on the wall was labelled by Frenkel as “Agatha Lumsden, sister of Cornelia,” as if hinting at a relationship with detective fiction. There was a small, old-fashioned television set replacing the mirror on Lumsden’s dressing table, with the Part I video playing on it.

The Cornelia Lumsden mythology was further developed a few years later in a textual piece presented as a section in the anthology Museums by Artists.\textsuperscript{28} The author of the piece is given as R. Austen-Marshall, Archivist of the Cornelia Lumsden Archive, “as introduced by Vera Frenkel.” The Cornelia Lumsden Archive (CLA) was until recently situated in Galt, Ontario, and is now located on Davenport Road in Toronto, rather near Frenkel’s studio at the time. It is, in the words of its archivist, “the most complete, detailed and unusual Archive of its kind in the world,” its kind being chiefly distinguished by its private status.\textsuperscript{29} Austen-Marshall expresses

\textsuperscript{26} Likely Stories: Text/Image/Sound Works for Video and Installation; Works by Vera Frenkel (curator: Louise Dompierre), Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, Canada, 1982.

\textsuperscript{27} Bénichou, ‘De l’archive comme oeuvre à l’archive de l’oeuvre: Vera Frenkel’.


\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 101.
some confusion about the inclusion of the CLA in the anthology, noting that in the strictest sense, the Archive is of or about Cornelia Lumsden rather than by her, “unless … we are meant in the terms of your project to understand that authorship is located wherever it may be discerned.”30 In the context of the other projects by artists in the book, the nature of the CLA as a fictitious museum by Vera Frenkel is apparent to a careful reader.

The Museums by Artists piece is structured around an Introduction or prospectus to the CLA, with addenda and accompanying correspondence from Frenkel and Austen-Marshall to Peggy Gale, one of the editors of the anthology. The Introduction gently mocks the conventions of

30 Ibid., 100.
archival management, including self-reflexive documentation (“My assistant Mrs. Solera, requests in particular that we point out that the Archive includes the photographic archive of the Archive, just as these photographs, in turn, embrace the Archive itself as their subject, or those aspects of it susceptible to photography,”) and obsessive taxonomies (a list of classification schemes discussed and rejected by Archive staff includes Ordering by Context, By Order of Acquisition, By Order of Importance, By Frequency of Mention, and By Degrees of Authenticity). There are several references to the elaborate administrative structures erected around the Archive, but the actual contents of the CLA remain largely mysterious: there is mention of Lumsden’s signature white cloche hat (“now scheduled for bronzing”), her suicide note, her second suicide note, and reams of ephemera, but very little in the way of substantial archival documents.

In 1986, an exhibit on Cornelia Lumsden somehow appeared as part of the exhibition “Au Pied de la Lettre,” devoted to four prominent Canadians, at the Canada Pavilion at Expo 86 in Vancouver (the others were Marshall McLuhan, Glenn Gould, and Hugh LeCaine). Frenkel recounted in a later interview that “a museum case was set up with her hat, gloves, typewriter, and there was a framed piece of manuscript—it was in Marian Engel’s handwriting. It was a piece that was absolutely plausible and perhaps mischievous.” Adding further mischief, the manuscript was a letter to Hugh LeCaine that implied a relationship between him and Lumsden. Frenkel has recalled that Expo tour guides would indicate the exhibit to visitors without apparently questioning its authenticity.

Bénichou sees the suite of Lumsden works as a critique of the supposed infallibility of the documentary record; she cites numerous examples of faux documentation in the Lumsden

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31 Ibid., 105, note 11; 109. Austen-Marshall/Frenkel continues: “Ordering by Degree of Authenticity has found favour with our more earnest members because it acknowledges the place of ambiguity, confusion, expedience, chance and greed in the process of retrieval of documents and objects from the past, or elsewhere.”


33 Ibid.
works, noting the degree to which these efforts by Frenkel weave other authors and histories into the fiction in a complex intertextual relationship. The mysterious “disappearance” of Lumsden can be read as a feminist critique of the archival invisibility of the marginalized artist; in the words of Dot Tuer, “Her whereabouts unknown, her cause of death untraced, her journals misplaced, Cornelia Lumsden becomes emblematic of a modernism in which memory was at once unfettered and repressed, where exile permitted the dissolution and reinvention of self.”34

Clearly, the creator of the complex documentary mythology around Cornelia Lumsden must be well-versed in the nuances of life narrative. The motif of the expatriate writer in Paris in the twenties is an often-repeated cultural script of the twentieth century, with Ernest Hemingway perhaps the most famous example, and Canadian novelist Morley Callaghan another. The notion that there had been a brilliant Canadian woman writer in Paris at the same time, with a mysterious and possibly tragic life story, is tremendously appealing. The viewer’s eagerness to follow the threads of the narrative is key to the success of the work. At the same time, the absence of an autobiographical voice at the centre of the Lumsden mythology is an essential aspect of the mystery. Lumsden’s story is told only through its artifactual and documentary traces, which, despite earnest efforts to preserve them, scarcely include her own voice. Lumsden’s “I”, in other words, is tantalizingly absent.

A remarkable aspect of the Cornelia Lumsden story is its protagonist’s refusal to die. Lumsden—or someone claiming to be Lumsden—appeared in “Artists in Residence,” the radio play connected with *The Institute™* in 2003. Frenkel commented in her interview with Robert Enright that she has tried to kill off the character, even finding the perfect aging motel on the west coast of Florida to stage Lumsden’s death, but circumstances intervened.35 She professes a lack of conscious control over the life of her characters: “It isn’t that I want the figures to

34 Tuer, ‘Worlds Between: An Examination of the Thematics of Exile and Memory in the Work of Vera Frenkel’, 23.

35 Enright, ‘Boundary Blurrer’. 
continue; it’s that they become instruments and they play themselves out for as long as they are
needed.”36 It is not clear whether Cornelia Lumsden may yet figure in a future work.

**Body Missing**

More recently, in the multipart work *Body Missing* (1994–), Frenkel has explored the subject of
the theft of art works by the Third Reich for Hitler’s planned *Führermuseum* in Linz. The work began as an installation at the Offenes Kulturhaus in Linz. Its first iteration featured large
transparencies that covered the windows of the front façade of the museum building and
combined images from video sequences and archival material. The website element of *Body Missing* was launched in 1995, reintroducing the elusive Transit Bar from Frenkel’s earlier work
of that name.37 In the website version, the Transit Bar has been located in Linz (although, as its
welcome page indicates, “… the Transit Bar might be anywhere”), becoming a meeting place for
a number of regulars who know something about the art theft and are attempting to investigate
or commemorate the missing paintings. Their conversations are overheard by bartenders—
including a “Vera,” allowing the artist to enter her own art work—each with their own story.
There is a collaborative aspect to *Body Missing*, in that several artists were invited to develop their
own web-based works, and these are woven into the whole. Viewers are also invited to
contribute research resources or knowledge of missing art works. Aspects of the website were
later woven back into subsequent installations of the work in the form of six large photo murals
that combined images from the website along with visual documentation of the various
installations of “… from the Transit Bar” and *Body Missing* (see, for example, Error! Reference
source not found.).

The archival aspects of the *Body Missing* website are multifarious, ranging from recurring images
of documents to deeply disquieting evocations of lists and storage. At the simplest level, as
Elizabeth Legge notes, “*Body Missing* is littered with virtual documents: Hitler’s personal will,
archival photographs, floor plans, and extracts from typewritten official military reports are

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36 Ibid.

37 http://www.yorku.ca/bodymissing/
interspersed among artists’ narratives and images, raising the question as to what might constitute the factual, authoritative, reliable version of things.⁴⁸ A floor plan of the Offenes Kulturhaus, which functioned as a Wehrmacht prison during World War II, functions as a partial site map. The Body Missing website also includes a great deal of text representing oral testimony, in the form of personal stories told to quasi-strangers in bars, and overheard rumours. These fragments can be pieced together in various ways to form a narrative, but many ambiguities remain. We are never sure, for example, about the temporal setting of any of the narrative elements; some seem to have taken place during the war, and most afterwards. Whether it is 1946 or several decades later is not clear.

Frenkel herself has commented on the uncertainties in *Body Missing* and related works: “the possibility of travel between virtual and real space, of meeting real or fictional people and those who hover on the border in between, opens a perceptual process that supports the inquietude that is at the conceptual heart of the work, calling into question once more both the accuracy of memory and the complacency of the archive.”39 In other words, Frenkel’s vision of interdisciplinarity is very much at play here.

![Figure 6. Vera Frenkel, *Body Missing*, six-channel video photo-video-web installation (1994 and ongoing), site map. Source: www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing/barspace/site-map.html. Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.](image)

The main site map of *Body Missing*, hand-drawn by Frenkel, can be seen as an intricate classification system or perhaps a critique of taxonomies, since it functions incompletely as a way-finding device for the labyrinthine site (Error! Reference source not found.). The map is an arresting image, thanks to Frenkel’s elegant copper-plate handwriting and the confident, intricate lines that represent pathways and links.\(^{40}\) It suggests the artist’s creative engagement with the problem of taxonomy.

At the same time, as Legge has described, there is a sinister aspect to lists and classification. The Nazis, of course, were consummate recordkeepers, leaving many documentary traces of their Kunstraub activities. The bar regulars refer to lists as evidence of the crime, but in exploring the site it becomes apparent that there are many lists, each incomplete and overlapping with the others in a vexed taxonomic relationship. The lists are gathered together on a page titled “The List of Lists”:

(From the notebook left in the bar.)

- what was collected
- what was stolen
- what was safeguarded
- what was confiscated
- what was transported by train

[…]

- what was unsuccessfully claimed
- what is still missing\(^{41}\)

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\(^{40}\) The site map has been reproduced in more than one publication (notably on the front cover of vol. 29 of *The Journal of Canadian Art History*).

As Legge observes, the most bureaucratic elements of *Body Missing* are also those where the echoes between missing art and missing persons are most strongly heard. For example, there is a disturbing similarity between images of Hitler’s art storage facilities and widely known images of concentration camp dormitories. Deep within the *Body Missing* website is a page with a series of such ambiguous images, set against a dark background (Error! Reference source not found.). Although the images depict art racks, the viewer may feel uncomfortably close to the missing bodies evoked by the work’s title. Storage, orderliness, and bureaucratic procedures are not necessarily benign. In Legge’s words,

Statistics lend themselves to use as a “moral” tool and instrument of persecution. That is, the bureaucracy of record keeping has a dangerously predictive or prescriptive, as well as a recording function. We record what we are looking for and information may be graphed to project inevitability. Through its gathering of censuses and statistics, the Nazi bureaucracy was able to project its own paranoiacally projected double, the “worldwide Jewish conspiracy” hidden behind different national identities.42

Ultimately, the motif of records and recordkeeping in *Body Missing* gestures towards some of the darkest uses to which bureaucratic tools have been put.

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The Institute™: Or, What We Do for Love

In The Institute™, Frenkel describes and narrates a series of retirement homes for artists, set up by the federal government in former hospitals (closed by the government) across Canada. As mentioned above, the work began its life in 1998 as a published text work. Its next manifestation was as a CBC radio drama, a collaboration between Frenkel and a number of
friends (including prominent arts journalist Eleanor Wachtel, whose familiar voice lent a particularly believable tone to the piece). A gallery installation made its debut in 2003, set up to resemble a waiting area or sales office for the Institute, Hamilton (the first of several planned Institute sites), with conservative leather furniture and potted plants (see ). The website component of the work was woven into the installation on a number of strategically placed screens; it resembles a commercial prospectus for the Institute as a facility, in the genre of website that is a common element of the marketing strategy for many institutions. Elizabeth Legge argues that The Institute™ is “the apotheosis of Canada’s nationalized vision of the arts. At the same time it represents the reduction of the academy into a euphemized and bureaucratized ‘care facility’ through the process of governmental attrition.” Public archival collections are implicated in both the nationalized vision and the euphemistic aspects of this critique.

43 Ibid.
Like *Body Missing*, the website of *The Institute™* is labyrinthine and rewarding of persistent exploration. It includes profiles of residents and board members, descriptions of programming, and even interactive electronic greeting cards, mostly navigable through a floor plan of The Institute building. Among the departments of The Institute is the Library & Archive, an official-looking description of which is accessible via the Outreach section of the site: “As you may imagine, the Archive of The Institute™ is a very special place. It has even been referred to in the local press as ‘sacred.’” It’s not entirely clear whether The Institute Archives are the same department, since their official-seeming web page indicates that they have a different place in the Institute’s administrative structure: “Indeed there is the beginning of an archive under the

Figure 8. Vera Frenkel, *The Institute™: Or, What We Do for Love*, Photo-video-web installation, Partial view showing two of the three projection screens and other elements of the installation. Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, 2004-2005. Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.

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auspices of the Gallery, and found just outside its right wing. Rudimentary, perhaps, but already featured as protagonist in three law suits and countless speculations.”  The one archive plays a role in institutionalizing or enshrining cultural memory, and the other—unless it’s actually the same one—serves as fodder for gossip and conflict. To the extent that The Institute™ functions as a critique of institutions, bureaucratic duplication of functions would not be out of place.

The Institute, like any bureaucracy, has a number of back doors. Exploring the site map of the main floor plan, one can click on a number of rooms that offer “Glimpses Inside.” There is an “Archive,” the link to which leads not to any official description, but to a passage of text, as if the Librarian is being interviewed:

Lilly Le'Tourneau, Librarian:

… the real challenge is… to persuade the Residents to donate their papers and other belongings: letters, photographs, sketches, scores, manuscripts, musical instruments, whatever. We encourage Residents to donate these while they’re still alive and fit, but if they can’t bear to part with their work and working materials, bequests are fine too. We have a wall in the dining room where we place bronze or silver name-plaques honouring those who’ve agreed. … We start the process just as soon as they move in. The decisions and valuations take a long time. Also, let’s face it; some of these people are famous. We need to move quickly before someone else gets to them.

The description is true enough to the spirit of collecting by archival repositories to be believable, but it has a vaguely sinister aspect that is hard to pin down. As Lilly continues, it becomes less clear whether she feels she is collecting archival materials or the residents themselves: “We feel strongly that these materials are part of our collective cultural heritage. And of course we can take better care of them than their families can.” As acquisition targets, the Residents sound

46  http://www.the-national-institute.org/theinst/level_two/floor_plan/index.html
47  http://www.the-national-institute.org/theinst/level_two/floor_plan/archive/3_a.html
48  http://www.the-national-institute.org/theinst/level_two/floor_plan/archive/6_a.html
like sitting ducks; Lilly LeTourneau’s attitude to collection-building reflects a grim sense of entitlement.

The floor plan also features a link to a “Library,” where the text of a dialogue between staff members appears phrase by phrase, as if overheard (Error! Reference source not found.):

- What are we going to do with all these boxes?
- The ‘Jeremy Fine Estate’?
- Not yet, he’s still with us remember. He’s just placing the materials in advance so he’ll have room for a little pool-table in his apartment.
- Dumping, you mean.
- Not really. We asked them to think about donating their archives …
- And now we’re stuck with floor to ceiling boxes!
- Quit moaning. Consider yourself lucky we’ve got something to list and count. Get your clipboard.\(^{49}\)

Here is the flip-side to the semi-official statements about collection-building: the staff grumbling about the volume of mundane work; the cynical take on a donor’s motivation; and the bureaucrat’s predilection for listing and counting.

\(^{49}\) http://www.the-national-institute.org/theinst/level_two/floor_plan/index.html?library
ONCE NEAR WATER: Notes from the Scaffolding Archive

The recent video ONCE NEAR WATER: Notes from the Scaffolding Archive (2008–2009), as its title suggests, is perhaps Frenkel’s most overtly archival-themed work of art. In it, the artist returns to themes of loss and the elusive nature of evidence, but brings them into a more quotidian setting. The core component of the work is a digital video recording, fashioned as an illustrated personal narrative with documentary aspects. The text of its voice-over narration, read by Frenkel herself, is a report to an enigmatic Building Committee about an “archive” consisting of documentation of scaffolding at building sites in an anonymous city. The compiler of the documentation is a mysterious archivist identified only as Ruth, who worked covertly to gather evidence of some kind of wrongdoing. Ruth has passed away, leaving what resembles a suicide note along with the scaffolding archive, and entrusting the entirety to the old friend who now narrates the story. There are many layers of uncertainty in the work, and its air of mystery is paradoxically heightened by the impression that at its foundation lies hard archival evidence.
The video is a dreamlike collage, beginning and ending with images of a lake’s calm surface. In between, we see footage of building sites, digital renderings of scaffolding, and photographs that seem to be excerpted from the scaffolding archive, each marked with an intricate alphanumeric code (Error! Reference source not found.). Viewers catch glimpses of a city that resembles Toronto, but the exact setting is never specified. Ruth’s preoccupation with scaffolding is only partly explained as an investigation: “In the stand-off between cranes and water, scaffolding is the interlocutor, the sweetener, the mediator, satisfying a longing for structure on the one hand and love of transience on the other.”\textsuperscript{50} The balance between structure and transience could be seen as reminiscent of the nature of archives themselves; indeed, Ruth (as read by the narrator) remarks: “Legal or not, the scaffolding and also the archive mark the erasure of places where we played, worked, loved, mourned and buried our dead.”\textsuperscript{51} The narrator’s relinquishment of the scaffolding archive to the committee is a kind of burial. With the final image of the lake’s surface, the narrative and the viewer find some resolution, despite the questions that remain.


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
Discussion

The challenge of documentation

Art theorist Dot Tuer, writing about Frenkel as a performance artist, adopted a persona as a “secret archivist” to write an essay that explores the traces of Frenkel’s early performance works. It is a fitting approach to an art form that depends heavily on records—often in fragile media formats—for its continued existence through time:

At best, I am able to uncover some sort of photographic evidence—usually an underexposed image taken during the live performance or rehearsal shots that give few clues to the dynamism of an art form that involves bodies and props and actions and audiences. At worst, I am given videotapes by performance artists who have faithfully documented their work on some newly heralded technology like reel-to-reel or three-quarter inch video, only to discover that the signal has deteriorated and the image turned to white snow, so not even a blurred silhouette is discernible. Sometimes, just sometimes, there is a review or an article, or god-forbid, a catalogue, but that is as rare as a James Joyce love letter.52

Tuer describes having access to Frenkel’s papers for the purposes of her essay, and her trope of the secret archivist functions to link several of Frenkel’s works through the documentary evidence that has survived them. Tuer’s archival concerns could be extended to much of Frenkel’s oeuvre: with the exception of her prints, many of her works involve media—including video, the Internet, and time itself (in the case of the performance works)—that pose challenges in terms of preservation.

Frenkel’s major installations tend to have complex lives, as described in the account of her work above. They are reinvented and adapted to suit each new exhibition venue, and their material components are often replaceable—but by no means arbitrarily so. The acquisition of a Frenkel installation is therefore a substantial undertaking for an institution.\textsuperscript{53} When “… from the Transit Bar” was acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in 1997, its transfer to an institutional setting, as described earlier, required much more than the cataloguing of its diverse material components. Frenkel compiled substantial archival documentation to accompany the work, collaborating with the NGC to facilitate the future installation of the piece after her death. Similarly, when the Agnes Etherington Art Centre acquired \textit{String Games} in 2006, documentation was an essential element of the acquisition. \textit{String Games} itself is an interesting case because the original performance survives only in the form of the secondary photographic and video documentation of the participants in each teleconference studio. These videos have, in a sense, become the work, and they are accompanied by other integrally related archival documents. The AEAC collections database lists the date of the work as 1974/2005, with an explanatory note:

\begin{quote}
\textit{String Games} encompasses core impulses and methods of Vera Frenkel’s extraordinary art practice from the 1974 performance, including documentation of preparatory rehearsals and three collaborative improvised sessions with teams working simultaneously in two major Canadian cities, and successive forms of documentation and promotion, through the 1978 Vancouver Art Gallery presentation in \textit{Lies & Truth: an exhibition of mixed-format installations by Vera Frenkel}, to its 2005 reconstitution and presentation in \textit{This must be the place}, curator Dana Samuels’ celebration of landmark electronic art at InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, Toronto. The unusual chronological span of \textit{String Games} conveys the cumulative nature of the piece: it is the definitive 2005 iteration and accompanying documentation that constitutes this gift.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{53} Not to mention a private collector—indeed, private acquisition of a major Frenkel installation is implausible.

\textsuperscript{54} Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen’s University, ‘Frenkel at AEAC’, 2011 Unpublished spreadsheet containing excerpts from collections database.
\end{small}
Frenkel was closely involved in the installation of the work in an exhibition in 2010, as she normally is in the exhibition of any of her time-based works.55 The “accompanying documentation” has not yet been put to the test.

As I outlined in Chapter 2, the challenge of preserving any kind of art work is bound up in the nature of all material to change through time. This challenge is compounded by the aesthetic problems that attend interventions by custodians (curators or conservators), especially when the artist is no longer present. In the case of less tangible works (whether they involve ephemeral but low-tech aspects such as performance, or new and rapidly evolving technologies) the transformative effects of time come into the foreground. Frenkel, inserting her own voice as a quotation in R. Austen-Marshall’s commentary on preserving the Cornelia Lumsden Archive, articulated her view of the aesthetic problems attending the conservation of contemporary work: “curators and conservators must be more than just materials experts. … [They] really have to understand the spirit of the work before they know how to deal with it, otherwise they’re just embalming.”56 In other words, contemporary art can be at risk of a kind of death in an institutional setting when it lacks the ongoing creative input of the artist.

Anne Bénichou has observed that Frenkel’s work poses many challenges to its own institutional preservation; in addition to the limited life span of video, the intricacies of her installations make them difficult to recreate without her involvement. Bénichou cites a personal conversation in which the artist expressed her reluctance to submit her works to systematic documentation by third parties, which carries the risk of immobilizing the works and limiting the possibilities of their reception.57 Instead, the limited extant documentation of Frenkel’s work requires art

55 Examples of recent exhibitions of Frenkel’s work in which the artist has been involved include Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965–1980 (University of Toronto Art Galleries, September 11–November 28, 2010; touring subsequently to other venues), and Vera Frenkel: Cartographie d'une pratique/Mapping a Practice (SBC galerie d’art contemporain, Montreal, October 2–December 4, 2010).


historians and curators to seek out oral testimony—the artist’s, or that of her collaborators—in attempting to recreate or write about her art. At the same time, Frenkel works independently to perpetuate her own art, in a certain sense, by recycling the traces of existing works into new ones: aspects of “…from the Transit Bar” became Body Missing, for example, or Cornelia Lumsden made a reappearance in “Artists in Residence.” “What emerges,” according to Lydia Haustein, “is a highly complex oeuvre that not only refers to historical phenomena but also generates its own history.”

As quoted by Anne Bénichou, for Frenkel, this approach amounts to a “reinvention of meaning,” keeping an aspect of the older work alive by repurposing it in a new context and inviting new readings. Bénichou suggests that in dealing with Frenkel’s work, the art historian must renounce any pretense of truth and objectivity, and must instead seek ways to collaborate with the artist in sustaining her work. After Frenkel’s death, the nearest substitute for the artist’s collaboration will be documentation, either the documentation explicitly attached to specific works, or the broader, less purposeful evidence of the artist’s fonds. Clearly, there is a potentially dynamic and complex role for the artist’s archives in the ongoing preservation of her work.

Truth and fiction

The theme of truth as a troubled ideal has been one of Frenkel’s most enduring preoccupations: her first major show at the Vancouver Art Gallery, in 1978, was titled Lies & Truths. A series


59 Bénichou, ‘De l’archive comme oeuvre à l’archive de l’oeuvre: Vera Frenkel’.


of video works in the late 1970s, *No Solution: A Suspense Thriller*, played with the genre of detective fiction in its intricate presentation of a possible murder case that lacks a body (and, as its title suggests, any resolution). The works described above each have their own complex relationship with truth and fiction, from Cornelia Lumsden’s supposed relationships with historical persons, to the seeming documentary aspects of the scaffolding archive in *ONCE NEAR WATER*. In her interview with Robert Enright, Frenkel described this kind of ambiguity as essential to her practice: “I’m walking through the gateway between art and life and, for me, that blurring is a necessity because I feel that so much of life is invented and so much of art is inevitable.”

Anne Bénichou has observed the complexity of Frenkel’s self-presentation as an artist with particular reference to the Cornelia Lumsden works, which she sees as a kind of autofiction. Frenkel has used a number of techniques to cast doubt over the authority of her own authorial voice. Her own appearance as a bartender in the *Body Missing* website is one example (in fact, Frenkel did frequently serve as a bartender in the original installation of “… from the Transit Bar”). Another example is an ostensibly autobiographical text that contextualizes and extends aspects of *Body Missing*. In it, Frenkel describes her attempts to forge a connection between two disparate initiatives in Vienna, both efforts to help with the restitution of property seized by the Nazis from Jewish families, and both hampered by bureaucracy and decades of inaction on the part of the Austrian government. Each section of the text is introduced with a quotation from an earlier narrative by Frenkel about the flight of the Freud family from Vienna, a story that resonates with the artist’s own early history. The story is closely tied to real life through printed web links and photographic documentation, but it also aims at an unverifiable “truth”: the protagonists are anonymized, the photographs are carefully composed to contain little in the way

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62 Vera Frenkel, quoted in Enright, ‘Boundary Blurrer’.


of definite content, and, nearly a decade later, the web links are all dead.\textsuperscript{65} Even Frenkel’s essays are sometimes framed by fictive elements, to poetic effect. “A Kind of Listening,” for example, begins with the autobiographical narrative of an epiphany in the form of a chance encounter in a university cafeteria, a framing device that speaks to the essential ambiguities of the artist’s interdisciplinary practice (which, significantly, is also the literal theme of the essay).\textsuperscript{66}

In that same essay on interdisciplinary practice, Frenkel explains that her complex take on truth is expressed at a deep structural level in her work. The layering of different voices and disparate elements in her work is related to the relationship between testimony and collective memory; her kind of interdisciplinary art has, she argues,

\begin{quote}
\ldots an underlying structure that emerges out of the effort to bridge unbridgeable gaps between disparate parts, realities or languages. The new structure, born of the tension of the gap between, and the urgency to overcome it, finds ways, remarkably, to invent meanings that can be conveyed and understood. Thread by thread, gesture by gesture, in a special kind of intermediality, such work weaves frail and precarious connections across the spaces between locked-in meanings on either side.
\end{quote}

The process of inventing a grammar from fragments, a way of acknowledging the constituent past and structuring the hybrid future, distinguishes interdisciplinary practice from layered reprises or media spectacles, and lays the groundwork for what [philosopher Avishai] Margalit has called an ethical community of memory.\textsuperscript{67}

Art itself, for Frenkel, has a role as a kind of testimony that is made possible by its layered, fragmentary and even self-contradictory aspects. Given her deep consciousness of the creative potential of layered testimony, and her pattern of blurring the boundary between art and life, it

\textsuperscript{65} The failure of hyperlinks a decade later is likely not significant. The most intriguing links, however, are those cited as the source for the excerpts from Frenkel’s Freud narrative: they point to \url{www.zaesuren.de}, a German domain name (now nonexistent) that translates as “breaks” or the more poetic “caesura,” which in the context of a narrative on the theme of archival linkages seems too apt to be literally true. In fact, \textit{Zaesuren} was a short-lived online journal.

\textsuperscript{66} Frenkel, ‘A Kind of Listening: Notes from an Interdisciplinary Practice’.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 41.
seems wise to approach any act of self-representation by Frenkel—including her account of her archives—with these complexities in mind.

Perceptions of archives

In her narrative for the anthology *Lost in the Archives*, Frenkel describes a moment of reflection while visiting the Freud Museum in Vienna, where she had been planning to install a version of *Body Missing*: “Resting for a moment between the staged formalities of the visit, I thought simply how very much I loved archives; their different shapes, sizes, and smells, their aura of mission, their archaeological desires and fevers, their necessary eccentricities.”⁶⁸ In this piece, archives are seen as creative acts by lone cultural workers who are isolated by bureaucracy. Each archive represents a small step towards restitution for decades-old war crimes. Eccentricity and obsessiveness are nonetheless part of the character of archival activity: “… An archive, any archive, inhabits, via its commitment to cultural continuity, a delicious meeting point of collective sanity on the one hand, and individual madness on the other, private obsession being a necessary credential for the task. True archiving requires marrying the sense of the first to the senselessness of the second in order to function most effectively.”⁶⁹ Frenkel’s attraction to archives is evident in this commentary, as is her simultaneous awareness of the insanity—perhaps even the danger—of untempered archival obsession.

Frenkel’s perceptions of archives can be traced through her art works. In *The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden*, there is clearly an element of obsessiveness in the characterization of archives and archivists, most acutely in the rendering of R. Austen-Marshall. The collective yearning for the missing author plays out in the elaborate apparatus of the Lumsden Archive, which fetishistically preserves every physical trace of its subject. In *Body Missing*, the view of archives takes a sinister turn. Hitler’s will stands in for the frightening thoroughness and efficiency of Nazi recordkeeping, while the fragmentary lists kept by the bar regulars can never account for the entirety of the crime they partially represent. In a more mundane setting, albeit one with a


⁶⁹ Ibid., 151.
sinister aspect of its own, the view of archives reflected in *The Institute™* conveys a familiarity with the experience of being archived: the official language of archival acquisition, the unofficial knowledge of the politics and intrigue surrounding donations, a cynical imagining of the way an archivist perceives his or her work. Frenkel has clearly considered the role of archives in supporting a bureaucratised “solution” for managing Canada’s aging cultural elite. One imagines that Frenkel would bring an awareness, and a self-awareness, to the process of being archived herself. In *ONCE NEAR WATER*, the artist returns to a more optimistic view of archives. In the midst of relentless urban development and possible corruption, the scaffolding archive is a solitary act of creative subversion. The building of such an archive is a profoundly constructive act, even if the scaffolding archivist has been unable to survive it.

Frenkel’s comments on interdisciplinary art could be extended to encompass a perspective on archives themselves, which could also be said to share a fragmentary grammar held together by uncertain threads of connection. The ideas about archives that can be traced throughout her oeuvre make it clear that the artist has thought about the nature of archives in a sustained way, and from numerous points of view. Given this history and her deep-rooted, ethically grounded approach to interdisciplinarity—which is at the heart of her approach to “truth” itself—Frenkel’s view of her own archives could hardly be simple or straightforward. Teasing out the strands of her account of her archives is the task of the next chapter.
Chapter 5
In the Studio

…I don’t think you’ve ever seen this place. It’s a midden. There are layers and layers and layers of reality, sloughed-off, transformed retroactively, and now surfacing in the form of letters I wrote twenty years ago or more, or received; photographs I’d forgotten existed for more than half my life; working notes, drawings; posters for shows—mine and friends’. It’s like the most elaborate version of my most elaborate work.1

The Studio

A researcher’s impression

To begin with, it might be helpful to have an independent description of the studio, without Vera Frenkel in it. “Independent” is a tricky word; the circumstances of my access to the studio could not have arisen without the several hours of “guided tour” interviews that led up to the opportunity to explore and observe on my own one afternoon in March 2010. At this date, curator Sylvie Lacerte had come to visit Frenkel in the thick of research and planning towards her exhibition, Vera Frenkel: Mapping a Practice. Earlier the same day at the AGO, Lacerte had met with me to discuss some complex questions about Frenkel’s archives at Queen’s. There are other factors that may colour these observations: the limited piece of time available; the presence of the artist and her curator in the next room; and my own experiences as an archivist who visits artists’ studios with a documentary and acquisitive eye. Bearing these subjectivities in mind, this is the closest thing I have to an impartial view of the studio.

The room is vast: a downtown store property, the building occupying the whole lot and the studio almost the whole of the main floor (the remainder is living space, although the two are open to each other and not demarcated with absolute clarity). The studio is skylit and simply finished, purpose-built for working.

But it’s hard to imagine working easily in this space because every surface is covered in piles of papers. There’s a long work-table down the centre of the room like a spine, other tables and shelves, and a double futon (where I now sit) clustered around it. There are filing cabinets against the walls, a large tiled built-in bathtub, shelves jammed with binders and boxes, and loose piles of papers and ephemera. One wall is mainly devoted to bookshelves, full but quite orderly. Also on that wall, there is vertical storage for works of art, rolled works on paper, and a tall filing cabinet. The bones of an orderly studio are here, but around them is an accretion of boxes, piles of papers, electronic equipment (phones, computers, faxes, printers, video players), office supplies, news clippings, lamps, pens, labels, cerlox combs, tape, brushes, and computer disks. Framed art works lean against the wall. There’s a quiet hum of computer fans working in the background.

There are file boxes everywhere, and binders: the traces of attempts at order, over many years, all subsumed in disorder now. The studio bears the traces of immense activity and immense inertia.

Vera commented, before I sat down to try to write this, that the studio changes constantly, that a detailed inventory was futile because the studio would be different next week. I don’t disagree.

Some random box labels near where I sit: MAD FOR BLISS; BUNRAKU/KYOTO 1979; HOUSE MATERIAL. Then: Umberto Eco, On Literature. A defunct cordless phone on top of that. Then several boxes of Instantab (TM) self-adhesive instant tabbing (office supplies are everywhere).
Reading along the wall shelf:

- Binder titles: Body Missing OK '99 prints/Katerina/Irit/opening snaps; Frightened Desires—Mtl.; Photographs earlier work; The Institute website. The contents of each are from quite different dates.

- A file box, on top of which are more cerlox spines and a box of audio cassette covers.

- A very old (push-button) phone sits on top of the horizontal print cabinet underneath. Inside the cabinet is a binder labelled, “Correspondence Arlene (May 1999).” Access is blocked by a paper shredder, on top of which is an open cardboard box with Body Missing pamphlets from Montreal, 1995.

- The label of a file drawer underneath the fax machine reads “Current filing”; its contents at a glance are mid-1990s.

- Stacks of papers in front of the newest Apple computer appear to be entirely current.

There are high piles of boxes against the patio doors. A card catalogue cabinet hints again at attempts at order. “MASTER PHOTO ARCHIVE” is proclaimed on sticky notes on a narrow cabinet.

The east “corridor” of the studio feels less central (or maybe I just know this already): there’s no obvious place to sit; piles of things are even more random (if possible). Among the stacks are an Easter basket, various banker’s boxes, a file cart/trolley full of newspaper clippings.

One slim white file box is entirely without a label (as are its similar-looking neighbours, under the central work-table). It contains unlabelled folders full of various documents—I don’t see what, it feels too nosy to look inside. I think most of the records boxes are not particularly well labelled, if at all—sometimes they just have the name of their general location on them, as if they were part of a move.

I reposition myself in the basement (accessed at last!): it’s a long, narrow, unfinished space with a concrete floor and countless boxes on shelves against either wall. The boxes down here are
larger and more clearly labelled: “T.BAR GLASSES 94–95,” “NOTES MUSIC CORRESP.,” “PUPPET MATERIALS,” “D.D. RABBIT MASK/CERAMICS,” “MAP WITH GATES/OSHAWA & AGO.” One box is labelled “office supplies.” There are big flat boxes probably with art works inside, racks of paintings, and art crates.

There are several unique chairs in one corner, and stacks of newspapers on a table. I’m not sure this is a recordkeeping space so much as storage. Some stuff is actually artefacts relating to installations. There are also boxes of “new” publications from particular exhibitions (e.g., Power Plant Transit Bar). Those records that are down here may be so partly for practical/accidental reasons, like the move.

If I were the archivist acquiring these archives now, I wouldn’t know where to begin. If there’s an overall order to the studio, it must be in the form of countless fragmentary and intertangled systems. There are very few groups of records inviting designation as a “series”—maybe the artwork in storage, but artwork is probably not intended for the archives. Maybe the “morgue” of newspaper clippings, but it’s probably distributed through several locations and it’s impossible to have any sense of its overall size or scope. I couldn’t say that any discrete part of the studio looks entirely dormant, as though it could be easily packed up by an archivist.

The independent observation is only a single impression, but it functions as an entry point. It’s the part of the description of the studio that can be teased apart somewhat from the artist’s own account, although Frenkel set the stage for it as well.
Vera Frenkel’s studio as an artist’s studio

It is clear from a first impression that Frenkel’s studio is in some very real sense a location for art making. This much is also clear from contextual clues, such as the way the artist refers to the studio as a work space; even the simple dedication of substantial square-footage as studio space reflects a certain kind of importance. However, Frenkel’s studio does not resemble the studio of a painter or sculptor, in so far as it is possible to generalize about artists’ studios. There are no visible works in progress, sketches, or maquettes. Specialized storage for framed and rolled works of art is immediately apparent, but the works in storage are clearly not actively being worked upon. The quantity and quality of natural light is less than what is usually desired for traditional visual art-making, except perhaps in the area immediately under the skylight. Paper is the most obvious material evident in the studio, but it is generally the kind of paper associated with writing and commonly-used communication technologies (rather than with the creation of works of art on paper). Video and computer equipment is also clearly present. The visual aspect of Frenkel’s studio is mysterious and impenetrable, in that it would be necessary to examine papers and media materials in some detail in order to have any sense of her current activity.

I also knew, prior to my first glimpse of the studio, that the processes involved in Frenkel’s work often meant collaboration with video production studios (our very first meeting had been in such a studio). I knew that some of her work exists on the Internet and requires the collaboration of programmers, who presumably would carry out their work elsewhere than Frenkel’s studio. This distribution of the skills and labour involved in the fabrication or realization of Frenkel’s works means that in some sense hers is a post-Minimal or even dematerialized studio, and yet at the same time, the physical presence of her studio is undeniable.

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2 This function might seem self-evident, but it has been brought into question by recent literature on artists’ studios (see Chapter 2).

3 My own generalization is based on the studios of artists that I have visited in the course of my work at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and images of artists’ studios that have been published in countless art books.
and powerful. The inadequacy of my independent observation of the studio is related to these characteristics; without the guided tour, it was very difficult to apprehend the studio at all.

Making the tour

As has already been described, my investigation of the studio with Frenkel unfolded over the five sessions of the guided tour, plus a wrap-up interview in which larger questions were considered. Each guided tour session was based in a different section of the studio. The first of these (August 24, 2009) took place in the front sitting area, which has elements of living space (a sofa, chair, coffee table, fireplace; also an adjacent kitchen), but into which Frenkel’s work unavoidably enters. On her map of this area (Figure 11), Frenkel wrote “so-called living area—mostly studio.” In the second session (September 10) we moved into the studio proper, focusing on its southwest corner, which is characterized by video playback equipment, a row of shelves and filing cabinets, work-tables, and a large futon, centrally placed as a location for sitting and working (Figure). The third session (October 5) proceeded in a clockwise direction to the northwest corner, the hub for computer-based work and the location of a visually-prominent bathtub intended for use in printmaking (Figure 13). The northeast corner, the focus of session four (November 2), is characterized by storage for large rolled and framed works of art, and cabinets containing photographic prints and slides (Figure 14). Finally, our last session (November 30) concerned the south-east corner, the site of bookshelves containing publications on Frenkel, published material used in her research, and books by her friends; it also housed a staging area for sorting through records potentially destined for the archives (Figure 15). At the centre of the studio proper, and visible in Figure 13, Figure 14, and Figure 15, was the work-table referred to in the “independent” description of the studio. A key to the bird’s-eye views is provided in Figure 16, which shows the spatial relationships among all five with reference to landmark items of furniture in the studio.

There is an undeniable temporal inconsistency in the data sources for the studio, as initially described in Chapter 3: Research Design. Although the guided tour took place as intensively as Frenkel’s busy schedule allowed, and unfolded over the course of just three months, that period of time was easily long enough for the contents of the studio to have evolved. The photographs
of the basement were taken by a studio assistant in 2005, and thus they differ in date from my actual visit to the basement, although the contents are very similar to what I saw. The photographs of the studio proper were finally taken in March and September of 2011, so they reflect the studio in different states altogether.4 There is thus both a spatial and temporal aspect to Frenkel’s commentary in the guided tour: each statement was made in a particular corner of the studio at a particular date. Because the goal of this chapter is a degree of synthesis—a coherent account of the studio overall—, the narrative of discovery has been de-emphasized. I have made reference to the bird’s-eye maps of the studio throughout my account, and each quotation is cited by date so that it is linked to the physical context of its origin. Photograph captions indicate the date the images were taken.

4 I want to be transparent about this inconsistent time frame; in conventional terms it might be seen as a weakness of my research data, but I will argue instead that it is a meaningful aspect of my findings.
Figure 12. Studio map, September 10, 2009. Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Figure 13. Studio map, October 5, 2009. Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Figure 15. Studio map, November 30, 2009. Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Figure 16. Diagram showing combined layout of studio maps.
**Keeping records**

The question I asked repeatedly during the guided tour had to do with probing the evidence of recordkeeping activity; any pile of papers, filing cart, filing cabinet, or banker’s box was queried in terms of what kind of activity was taking place there. In a recurring phrase, Frenkel describes her ordinary mode of personal recordkeeping as “random access.” The approach begins with placing documents within arm’s reach of a working area while they are immediately necessary to her work. For example, two filing carts are placed at hand in Frenkel’s sitting area, central to a primary location for receiving and sending correspondence, reading, and meeting. They are clearly indicated in the bird’s-eye map of the first guided tour session (Figure 11: coordinates B-2 and C-2). Another centre of activity is her principal computer, around which records tend to accumulate (see Figure 13: B-3: “Top of table—working documents …,” adjacent to the Apple G5 computer and monitor at A-3—A-4. Also see Figure and Figure for a view of this area.). Following their immediate use, records tend to “migrate,” to use Frenkel’s term: the unfolding of everyday life and work determines which records and files are nearest at hand, without much deliberate intervention. At a subsequent stage of recordkeeping, Frenkel may provisionally sort stacks of records, a process that she described with reference to records near her sitting area: “I do know what’s there. The stacks of things are thematic. … And it’s always— I mean everything that’s on that table … has been there for a while, not maybe quite in that order—the stuff that I go to.”5 She recognizes that this mode of working is in some regards unsatisfactory, because it may make documents hard to find quickly: “My praise for the random access methods that I use is sometimes over-optimistic, and there are some things that I really need to know where they are.”6 Frenkel’s management of her current records resembles the “piling” method described by Malone in his study of personal information management.7

The artist’s paper recordkeeping method is mirrored in the digital environment, in which Frenkel makes extensive use of her computer’s desktop as a recordkeeping space, and clearly

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5 Vera Frenkel, interview by Amy Furness, August 24, 2009.
6 Ibid.
7 Malone, ‘How Do People Organize Their Desks?’
sees this practice as analogous to her paper piles: “my random access preference is evident on the desktop.” The chronological sorting function of the computer’s operating system allows her to emulate the way in which more recent records are kept closer to hand in the physical world. When digital files and folders proliferate to the point where the desktop becomes unusable, Frenkel saves them all together in a folder named “Desktop [date],” which clears the deck while preserving the previous context of the documents and maintaining them at a single level of remove from the current desktop. When a project is finished, she gathers all of the electronic records together—regardless of file format—and saves them in a single master folder, backed up offsite. Although retrieval from backup can be complicated (in fact, Frenkel described it as a “cabalistic exercise”), she feels that the material is safe. In general, Frenkel felt that digital recordkeeping worked “better” for her than its analogue counterpart.

A certain amount of self-deprecation about her recordkeeping methods was apparent in the guided tour: the reference in the map of session two to the “attempted filing system” on the futon is one example (Figure: B-3). At one point, encountering a sequence of records in a filing cabinet, Frenkel remarked as she indicated the files on the bird’s-eye map (see Figure 13: B-3): “Alphabetized, why don’t I say that bit? Alphabetized. One of the few bits of evidence of order.”

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8 Vera Frenkel, interview by Amy Furness, October 5, 2009.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.
Figure 17. The bank of computers in the northwest corner of the studio, with piles of current records (September 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Figure 18. The principal computer, with images of several Frenkel works on its screen (March 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Figure 19. The fax machine and west wall shelving, with a glimpse of the alphabetized filing cabinet (September 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Recordkeeping as a mixed pleasure

There are certain aspects of recordkeeping that Frenkel seems to enjoy, although it’s possible that in describing these to an archivist she was partly trying to establish a sympathetic connection. Nonetheless, she confessed to enjoying the apparatus of filing and storage: “I love boxes, I love storage units of all kinds. Whether I know how to use them is another matter.”11 I did observe independently that boxes, stationery, and storage devices were in ample evidence throughout the studio. Similarly, Frenkel professes to enjoy filing once in a while, almost as a meditative exercise:

Oh, there are times that I … give myself the time to sort things and it’s a very peaceful way to spend time, and while I may resist it from time to time, when I get to do it it’s very rewarding. But then at some point my conscience kicks in and I think I should be doing something else and that’s why this particular filing system hasn’t become finished. Even though I’m sure there’s an empty drawer in the filing cabinet behind you where I could place it. But I quite like sitting with my feet up on the futon and looking through all the papers and putting them in the file folders, and then alphabetizing the folders, and then the phone rings or something happens and that’s abandoned for another week or two. … And I’ve been known to do this in two or three different parts of the studio, depends on what prompts it in the first place. It’s usually a project that requires organizing. But anyway it’s nice to sit here and maybe when we finish I’ll do some more filing.12

The implication, though, is that a more important or more urgent activity always takes over. There is never enough time or energy to devote to recordkeeping, no matter how attractive the prospect of organizing records may be: “I’ve a great longing for order, I just don’t have enough stamina to see it through, or life keeps diverting me.”13


12 Ibid. It is possible that the process of being interviewed about her records spurred Frenkel to devote more attention to recordkeeping: “The other filing cabinets we cleared some space so that these files would eventually get into that space, and for all we know this conversation may be my inspiration to do that.” It is difficult to distinguish intentions from eventual action, however, and important to keep in mind that the project of preparing the archives for QUA was a circumstance that underlay all of our conversations.

13 Vera Frenkel, interview by Amy Furness, November 30, 2009.
Although Frenkel did not say so directly, the problem of taxonomy seems to hold some interest for her as an intellectual exercise. The complexity of real life can make classification an interesting puzzle, although it also has a tendency to defeat filing efforts. Regarding a current effort to sort documents in her sitting area, Frenkel remarked:

...there’s just too many files and too many categories of files: some are work-related, some are practical, some are sentimental and you know, it’s all, I don’t have a taxonomy that—the taxonomic categories are always shifting, and I’m terrible at filing things. I
mean I can file them all right, but...the decision-making involved is more complicated sometimes than I expect. If I get a very wonderful letter from a friend with whom I've worked, does that go into the Exhibition category? Does it go into the Personal Correspondence category? And often it doesn’t go anywhere, it goes into one big file of stuff to be filed. 14

Frenkel’s interest in taxonomy persists in the digital realm: “To do a search, I have to have labelled it in a way that I can remember. Do I label it with the name of the artwork? Do I label it with the name of the exhibition? Do I label it with the name of the city? ... And with correspondence..., there are many ways of doing it; its taxonomy is fascinating.” 15 To the extent that it is fascinating, taxonomy seems to be interesting to Frenkel because there is no easy solution to its problems. This same characteristic can result in a lack of resolution—or, put more concretely, a lack of filing—as well.

The morgue

Frenkel’s penchant for filing is reflected in her keeping of what she calls a “morgue,” a structured collection of newspaper clippings (the term is common in newspaper offices, where it refers to reference files of clippings). Elements of the morgue may be found in different pockets of the studio, although the word morgue appears on only one of the bird’s-eye maps, in between the stools on which we sat (Figure 15: B-2). Examples of file titles would include government, cultural funding, strange events, and obituaries. Frenkel likes the filing aspect of the morgue: the selective retention, classification, and retrieval. Sometimes the retrieval happens in the relatively short term, when it is useful to have a record of past published words to hand: “I've done this to some good effect, you know, when somebody’s written something stupid, if I've had the energy to write and say, ‘But you said this eighteen months ago. I have the clipping in front of me.’” The material nature of the morgue is a significant characteristic: “I like the...physical presence of the newsprint and it’s getting more and more poignant”—the poignancy is due to the decreasing size of printed newspapers in the digital age. I asked Frenkel about the

14 Frenkel, interview August 24, 2009.

15 Frenkel, interview October 5, 2009.
morbid connotations of the word “morgue,” which she downplayed: “It’s a lugubrious name but… I don’t hear it that way. It’s just dead newspaper stuff.”

Ultimately, the purpose of the morgue is deeply connected with the nature of Frenkel’s artistic practice. The passage of time can lend additional meaning to the contents of the morgue, and the combinations of material within the files can be satisfying, “a combination of structure and randomness.” This sort of retrieval, better characterized as browsing, has a more profound purpose for Frenkel: the morgue is “full of cautionary tales of how the world works or doesn’t work. And since I have a socially engaged practice, when I have the time to go through the files in the morgue it’s always both sad and amusing, and enlightening.”

The notebooks

Although decidedly a non-traditional recordkeeping practice, Frenkel’s habit of making cerlox-bound notebooks may be related to her enjoyment of stationery and filing. Her description of this activity is somewhat tongue-in-cheek: “I recycle paper and make notebooks out of them, and when that work-table is clear it’s a pleasure to do ’cause I’ve got a binding machine. So I get very virtuous, I save all this old paper, I cut it up into the sizes that I want and I have combs of various circumferences … and I feel very virtuous when I do that. But it probably takes me far longer in time in labour than it would take me to buy a notebook.” The physical process of doing the binding is satisfying to Frenkel. The bookbinding takes place on the central work-table, and the related equipment is indicated on the bird’s-eye maps in Figure 14: B-3 and Figure 15: B-2.

From a recordkeeping perspective, the particularly interesting aspect of these notebooks lies in their collating function, since their manufacturing binds together documents from disparate moments and repurposes them as a carrier for a new record altogether:

\[\text{16 Frenkel, interview August 24, 2009.}\]

\[\text{17 Ibid.}\]
Later I use them and if ... I do them five by eight then it’s half a letter behind it, or half a document, or half a drawing. But mostly it’s photocopies of no particular use except they tell things about my life that I might not want to disclose quite in that fashion. But if I weren’t me and I found one of those things, I’d be fascinated—because the network of time periods and the kinds of things, I mean, it’s just in itself a palimpsest.\textsuperscript{18}

There was more than a hint of mischief in this description. I asked Frenkel whether her archivist knew that she was repurposing her records in this way. “No. I should tell her. Well, they’ll get my notebooks in the long run anyway—maybe that’s why we didn’t talk about it.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{“Filing’s not so bad; retrieval’s the problem”}

Frenkel told me that one disadvantage to filing, whether in a filing cabinet or a box, is that it amounts to a kind of burial of records. “I really am very bad at retrieving stuff once it’s filed. It’s as if it’s buried.”\textsuperscript{20} This same phenomenon pertains with digital storage media: “… one of the people that I was working with on the last production brought me these [binders] and they’re full of DVDs and CDs, and they’re identified. Once I put them in there, I didn’t go back in. It’s a very neat way of storage but it’s not alive for me. But they’re protected.”\textsuperscript{21} There is, however, a distinct upside to the burial. A box of records, once closed, tends to remain so until the passage of time has made the contents mysterious: “When I do open an old box it’s always astonishing. It’s really trash and treasures in equal measure.”\textsuperscript{22} There is a time capsule aspect to the burial and retrieval, although not as deliberate and calculated as a traditional time capsule (nor really akin to Warhol’s time capsules, since Frenkel’s activity remains private and is not positioned in terms of posterity or the art market). By packing records away, Frenkel moves them into a deeper cycle of the browsing and rediscovery process that is fundamental to her studio practice.

\textsuperscript{18} Vera Frenkel, interview by Amy Furness, November 2, 2009.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Frenkel, interview September 10, 2009.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
Practical factors

As a number of archival studies authors have commented, the process of personal archival appraisal is often shaped by extraneous events such as moving house or suffering a flood in the basement. Current recordkeeping is similarly subject to events and processes that upset the normal order and methods of keeping records. For example, Frenkel moved to her current studio in 2003. The process inevitably involved packing just about every material possession—including records—into boxes for the purposes of relocation. Frenkel’s studio at York University had to be vacated on fairly short notice at around the same date, meaning that its contents (furniture, artwork, and records) had also been shoehorned into the present studio. In
the aftermath of these moves, boxes of records were less likely to be unpacked than boxes containing items necessary to daily life. As a result, at the time of our guided tour there were still boxes of records throughout the studio that had remained unpacked since the moves.

In order to deal with the number of boxes and the precise requirements for their relocation, Frenkel had developed a numbering system, including an attempt to protect more sensitive material:

> The boxes … marked with an “X” … are boxes of journals, and they were kind of disguised so that people wouldn’t open them and read them. … In the move … I created an entire nomenclature or numbering system for the boxes and I gave people diagrams of where they go and so on, and we did the move in stages and it still was a terrible upheaval. Everything went into the wrong place anyway. But those boxes I particularly wanted to make as modest and unassuming as possible. And they will go to Queen’s eventually, but not yet.23

The plan for the relocation of boxes was complex and carefully managed, “almost a military exercise,” in Frenkel’s words. There was a detailed map of the bookshelves that should have permitted an exact reconstruction of the contents of the shelves from her previous studio. However, the movers still got things wrong. Then, immediately following the move, Frenkel undertook an artistic residency in England (the Leverhulme Foundation Professorship and Artist Residency), and some renovation work went on in the studio in her absence. By the time she returned, things were in serious disarray. The move occurred before Frenkel had made adequate space and shelving for storage in the studio, and the lack of storage remains a key obstacle to a more orderly studio environment: “much of what needs to happen here is proper storage facilities,” she commented, whether for records, equipment or domestic materials.24

A primary obstacle to recordkeeping for Frenkel is a very ordinary lack of resources: there is never enough time to do everything. Frenkel recalled: “In terms of daily filing, I once had a graduate student who said, ‘I file every Friday. If I don’t use my Fridays for filing I can’t find

23 Ibid. September 10, 2009.

anything.’ But to have a whole day to file—I don’t have that.”25 The necessary time is displaced by Frenkel’s ongoing work, which she finds much more urgent and compelling: “if it’s a choice between advocacy that’s going to maybe allow me to sleep at night in the long run […], or organizing my papers with the view of what happens to me posthumously, I’m much more interested in working on the current problem.”26 Her work continues seven days a week, with long hours.

Compounding the lack of resources in recent years has been Frenkel’s physical limitations, which have had an impact on her ability to manage the physical contents of the studio space. She has lost her ability to stand for extended periods and to lift boxes, which unavoidably affects recordkeeping tasks: “If I were more mobile there would be fewer boxes around, I’d be able to handle them. And if I had more financial resources, there’d be fewer boxes around.” There is a visible consequence in the cluttered appearance of the studio space, which Frenkel recognizes. “It’s not an inaccurate picture of a very busy life with limited resources.”27 In other words, many aspects of Frenkel’s recordkeeping are influenced by fairly mundane events and ongoing challenges. The appearance of the studio is shaped by the same factors.

The limitations of studio assistants

From time to time throughout the mature stage of her career, Frenkel has had an assistant in her studio. While she was an instructor at York University, some of these assistants were graduate students seeking apprenticeships for academic credit or paid experience. The support of the university substantially reduced her cost of hiring a student, and Frenkel’s teaching salary made possible her own out-of-pocket contribution. The presence of any assistant would tend to affect recordkeeping, but a student assistant in particular required an adjustment of working practices

25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
because, in Frenkel’s words, “you have to create an environment where someone else can learn.”

Frenkel’s prestige as an artist has meant that there has never been a lack of keen—and frequently talented—students eager to take on an assistantship, but it has been a challenge to retain students for a satisfactory length of time, given the necessary investment in training them. The challenge of a multidisciplinary practice means that the skills involved in producing Frenkel’s work are diverse, and the learning curve can be steep. Recordkeeping, of course, is only one part of an assistant’s possible duties. Some attempts on the part of assistants to help with recordkeeping are out of tune with Frenkel’s mode of working: there is a set of binders on Frenkel’s bookshelves that represent one such effort, assembling articles about Frenkel’s career in chronological order (see Figure 23). They are indicated with the label “Archive in Binders” on the map of November 2 (Figure 14: A-4) and “Ring binder archive of articles” on the map of November 30 (Figure 15: A-2–A-3), but at the time of the guided tour, they hadn’t been opened in several years.

In the years since the relationship with QUA was established, filing and packing up records has been an important part of the work of assistants, but has often proven to be a complicated and inefficient task. The importance of recordkeeping and personal archival appraisal has necessitated Frenkel’s close involvement in the process, with the assistant’s role tending more to physical assistance and clerical help. The work just “chips at the surface” of the larger

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Figure 22. Bookshelves, with the assistant’s binders at lower right (March 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
recordkeeping challenge. Meanwhile, too much possessiveness, obsessiveness, judgmental feeling, or misdirected energy on the part of assistants have all proven to be problematic. One assistant, for example, had strong feelings about alphabetizing correspondents by first name rather than surname, contrary to Frenkel's habits. This difference wasn't the grounds for ending the assistantship, but to Frenkel it was symptomatic of a lack of flexibility and respect that ultimately made the assistant a poor fit with the artist.

Assistants seem to exist at the nexus of a tension between Frenkel's vocations as an educator/mentor and a solitary artistic creator, and between her enormous productivity and her need for uninterrupted reflection.

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I’ve had some very good assistants in the past, but if they’re really good you want to usher them on their way, you know, you want them to be themselves, not only attentive to your needs. And it’s a great pleasure to see them become artists or active as artists. Which leaves the option of training someone, getting used to them, them getting used to me, and then releasing them and starting all over again. And so … it’s intrusive. Even the nicest helper is intrusive.30

Part of the difficulty has been the presence of another person in the studio. Notwithstanding her extensive and successful track record of collaboration, the essence of Frenkel’s work seems to happen in private.

The ideal assistant would be a trusted intimate, an unflagging, intuitive supporter of the artist’s work. Frenkel remarked, “You know, if I had several lives to live, I wouldn’t mind being my own assistant, and sort of taking care of all these things.”31 That being an impossibility, Frenkel at another juncture considered the next best thing. She mentioned the case of another senior Canadian artist, a man whose wife is an integral support to his art-making:

And I thought to myself, lucky man, that he’s got someone so attentive and so empathetic and so concerned, and you know, so experienced. And I look around and lots of women artists over the years have said, ‘Well, what we need is a wife.’ Now I think times have changed and I think it’s not quite like that, or not as much as it was when those things were said, but it helps to have a spouse that knows what matters to the other spouse, and …irrespective of gender to have someone that knows what matters most and helps you achieve it.32

A spouse may also survive an artist, potentially becoming a trusted executor and overseeing the ultimate disposition of records and other essential aspects of the artist’s estate—the kind of situation assumed by Salvesen and Cousineau in their book on artists’ estates.33 Frenkel’s efforts to prepare her archives for QUA are being made independently, with no role carved out for this kind of trusted survivor. It is a tremendous undertaking, and one which may require a great deal of confidence in the archivist.  

31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Salvesen and Cousineau, *Artists’ Estates*.
In the guided tour, one instance arose of collaboration by friends in Frenkel’s recordkeeping. The evidence caught my eye immediately because of its bold and incongruous labelling:

This long, old filing cabinet that has labels on it, *Master Photo Archive*—I didn’t put those labels on there. … There was a big book… on women’s performance work that YYZ published and… Dot [Tuer] wrote a piece in which she takes on the persona of an archivist and discovers my archive, and it was the day that she and Johanna [Householder] were here and they just went through all these photographs and they did the labelling, they gave me the dignity of the master photo archive. I haven’t been in these drawers since.\(^3^4\)

Clearly, only trusted colleagues and friends would be permitted to dig into the studio records and reorganize Frenkel’s photographs. The purpose—the anthology *Caught in the Act*, published in 2004—was important to Frenkel, and documentation of Frenkel’s work was important to the purpose of the book.\(^3^5\) The “Master Photo Archive,” in fact, contains mainly prints and negatives by third-party photographers, who often had equipment and technical knowledge that exceeded Frenkel’s, and who were able to document performances in which she took part. These complement Frenkel’s own photographs, which tend to be in slide format, so they are in a sense another instance of collaboration in recordkeeping. Consistent with Frenkel’s comment that she hadn’t used the cabinet since it was assembled, the “photo archive” appears simply, without the title “Master,” in the corresponding map of the studio (Figure 14: A-1). It remains a small anomaly in Frenkel’s recordkeeping, an essential body of performance documentation that will be critical to any future scholarship on her career, but remains quite separate from her own recordkeeping and creative processes. In a sense, it seems ready for the archives, but Frenkel is not ready to part with it.

**Personal appraisal processes**

Frenkel mentioned a few different ways in which she applies evaluative criteria to her records, whether through quasi-routine destruction or through attempts to sort out and retain the most

\(^{34}\) Frenkel, interview November 2, 2009.

important records. I commented on the presence of a shredder near the futon in the studio. It
didn’t make it on to the bird’s-eye map for that session, but Frenkel described her frequent
deployment of the shredder as a tool for protecting her privacy: “I use it as much as I use any
machine in this place. … You know, I’m a pack rat, so I don’t shred active correspondence or
even dormant correspondence, but things with my name on them. Often envelopes with my…
name and address, bank statements, stuff like that.”36

There were a few examples of appraisal backlogs in the studio that will be described under
“Archival transfer,” below. These included Frenkel’s extensive collection of slides, which was
awaiting her assessment so that she could prioritize her scanning efforts: “I’m in the process of
deciding which slides are just for the record, and which are really of artworks or artworks
themselves, and then I’ll divide the scanning between the simpler ones and the more complex.”37
This kind of appraisal is very specific to the artist herself, requiring her own intrinsic knowledge
of her art-making processes. It would be impossible for any third party—even, for example, a
curator with exhaustive knowledge of Frenkel’s work—to carry out this appraisal in the same
way. In the mean time, many of the slides were occupying a corner of the sitting area (see
Figure 11: A-1). Appraisal, obviously, is a time-consuming activity, and is hindered by the same
lack of resources that make filing a challenge.

Another appraisal backlog was centred on records in various video formats. These require time
to review, and money and specialized equipment to reformat. Regarding the U-Matic cassette
deck in her studio, Frenkel commented, “The reason that equipment is still here is that I really
have to see that material [videos related to early art works]. I think if I had all the money in the
world I would just hand it over to some lab to digitize and give me back as DVDs, but I haven’t
the resources to do that. So I have to select which parts of it should be transferred.”38 Personal
archival appraisal is particularly time-consuming where time-based media are concerned.

37 Frenkel, interview August 24, 2009.
38 Frenkel, interview September 10, 2009.
Part of the challenge of appraisal comes from Frenkel’s self-described “pack-rat” tendencies, which in turn seem to be related to the complexity of her work and its strong dependence on recordkeeping for survival. Under these circumstances, the decision to part with any record is significant. Indeed, Frenkel admitted that “there’s not a lot of stuff that I would consider unimportant. There’s things of various degrees of importance but as we’re talking, I’m feeling… I should really get into that and get those DVDs identified and numbered… because they are my work. I know they’re safe for the time being, but if I really needed to retrieve something… I wouldn’t be able to.”

The DVDs, as important as they are, compete for recordkeeping attention with other records in the studio for Frenkel’s finite time and energy. Unlabeled and unreviewed, they share the monolithic importance of everything else in the studio.

**Archival transfer**

The selection of material for transfer to QUA is the ultimate archival appraisal decision, and it forms a visibly important component of Frenkel’s current recordkeeping activities. The process of preparing material for transfer began with close involvement and guidance from Heather Home:

It started out with Heather’s help. Heather came and spent some time with me and brought acid-free folders and boxes and all kinds of things that I liked. And we went through some of the boxes that I had brought with me from the other studio and things that she thought—I was ready to throw away more stuff, I think as I recall, but Heather will remember how it was for her. There were things that Heather found of interest that surprised me, you know, keeping the envelope that went with a letter, and I don’t remember now what it was but I respected her judgment, and I went along with it. And then there was some things that I thought were important; I don’t remember her ever contradicting me and saying, “We don’t need that.” And somehow we got a number of those smaller file boxes filled. […] And she left me some of those materials to work with and I just continued. I think she was here two or three times and guided me….

The process has had to accommodate Frenkel’s desire for close involvement in the selection process, which she perceived was different from Home’s usual, or preferred, way of carrying out

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39 Ibid.

appraisal and acquisition: “There was one figure in Canadian culture who had died, and Heather got a batch of stuff in green plastic bags. And she was thrilled because she could just go through it and decide for herself. So I’m a nuisance in the sense that I have opinions and I delay the whole process because I’m saying I don’t want to just send you one huge green plastic bag of stuff.”41 The studio move actually played a role in shaping the first accession of records by QUA, because it forced the packing and labelling of many of Frenkel’s records. Although the artist still needed to review them before transfer, the process was easier because the material was centralized and the box’s contents were known.

Following Home’s initial visits, Frenkel has continued her selection efforts as circumstances and resources permit. The work has involved reviewing and sorting materials that have been in a dormant phase of semi-active storage, frequently with the collaboration of an assistant. In the case of textual records, the activity of reviewing has taken place on the central work-table, usually with the help of an assistant: “At that time I had cleared this big table so we had room to label things, catalogue them, make decisions about them, and there were three categories. One was current, …and then boxes for Heather, and then boxes to turf.”42 In the case of video materials, the process of review is particularly time-intensive, and has required the acquisition of specialized equipment. To play back the ¾” video cassettes on which some of Frenkel’s early performances are recorded, she had to source an old U-Matic cassette deck—in fact, the supplier required her to purchase two, and QUA helpfully bought one of the units. While they are in the queue for review, the cassettes occupy a visible place in the sitting area, and the U-Matic deck has been added to the array of video equipment in the studio (see Figure 24, Figure: B-1, Figure 15: B-4).

The decision to transfer material to QUA cannot be taken lightly because of the way Frenkel uses her records. In a quotidian regard, she enjoys the juxtapositions—with events, or other records—that can occur when the right records are at hand. During the second tour session, a

41 Ibid.
42 Frenkel, interview October 5, 2009.
file folder of material from Anne Bénichou (who wrote a substantial article on Frenkel in *Parachute*, as mentioned in Chapter 2) caught Frenkel's attention because that very morning she had finally, after some effort, received copies of the journal issue in which Bénichou’s article was published.43 “So it’s kind of nice for me to be able to make that connection. If I was smart, I would probably send all of that to Queen’s, but you don’t know when you’re going to need it, you know?”44 The potential for serendipitous connections involving records and events would be ended by archival transfer.

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43 Bénichou, ‘Vera Frenkel: L’invention d’une artiste.’

44 Frenkel, interview September 10, 2009.
More profoundly, the presence of certain records is essential to Frenkel’s work. Records often hold the potential for future work; regarding a group of video cassettes on the bookshelves in her sitting area (see Figure 11: A-1), Frenkel remarked, “I’ve never edited it [the footage of a performance] and the idea of parting with the raw material before I had a chance to edit, even though that production was twenty years ago—we looked at some of it and it’s very compelling; I really want, I wanted to do that in another life… if there would be time.”

Frenkel also referred on several occasions to the cyclical way in which her artistic practice unfolds, which means that records may be required as the foundation for a new version of an existing work:

In 2003 we installed the first version of *The Institute* at the Barnicke gallery at Hart House…and then I did a radio program for CBC called “Artists in Residence” about this retirement home for artists that was a chain of former hospitals across Canada. And in the early eighties I was doing a series of works called *The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden* and in the radio play, suddenly Lumsden turns up, or someone who claims to be Lumsden. You can’t imagine how old she might be by this time. And I don’t remember that I really needed to go back into the early work, but I needed to have it nearby in case there were details that… I mean, there were sightings of Lumsden, and… her conduct in *The Institute* was reported on by other inmates, but if I were doing a visual version of that I might go back into the earlier drawings, videotapes, photographs. So I didn’t part with them. I didn’t expect her to turn up again… I think I’ve mentally tried to kill her off many times. I even found a perfect place where she was going to die and it just didn’t work out.

The overarching Lumsden narrative has remained active through several decades, and there is a sense in which the transfer of related archival material would amount to the death of the Cornelia Lumsden character. The decision to transfer material to QUA is seldom easy, because Frenkel is seldom certain that a given work is entirely finished. In rare instances, archival transfer can be a release:

We had stuff to throw away, stuff to keep, and then stuff for Queen’s, and we made a start and there wasn’t that much stuff. Partly because I work in cycles. If I ever felt that a work was fully completed… I did give Queen’s all the *Transit Bar* stuff that I had, and there was a whole archive, and I was really happy to give them that because it was a very rich archive, it had all kinds of things… There I had no conflict; in fact, I had a feeling

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45 Frenkel, interview August 24, 2009.

that many, many people tell me they have, of relief that the material is in a responsible place, in a safe place with responsible people. Other stuff I have felt ambivalent about parting with. Not the first twenty boxes, but now 'cause some of it’s still current for me. That’s a problem.47

In other instances, archival transfer may have been a mistake: “Because my work is… in cycles, … a work of art that may have been installed eight years ago has had several lives since then, several adaptations, or may be folded into a new work. So I can’t ever say that a work is absolutely finished; it’s rare. Queen’s has substantial archives of works that I’ve declared finished but it turns out that we may have to exhume that material for the next installation.”48 The word *exhume* crept into Frenkel’s words again, suggesting an association between archives and burial. In a very real sense, though, the archives will remain part of Frenkel’s living practice as long as she is alive. Exhumation is possible: the cycles of burial, rediscovery and creative juxtaposition that characterize Frenkel’s practice can—theoretically, at least—continue into the archives; they will just become deeper and slower.

**Landmarks in the studio**

Perhaps the most notable difference between Frenkel’s bird’s-eye maps of the studio and her verbal account is that the former more so feature furniture, equipment, and examples of storage than actual records. As I began to review the guided tour data, this aspect surprised me as an unexpected emphasis. To some extent, the prominence of furniture can be accounted for as a side-effect of the data-gathering technique; the construction of a map involves the identification of landmarks as a way to get one’s bearing, and is a means to situate other features of the landscape. However, the maps also serve as reminders that the category of records and archives was extrinsic to the studio; it belonged to the agenda of my research project, and to QUA’s acquisition efforts. The maps are conceptual renderings of the contents of the studio that were drawn in the context of an interview about records and archives, but without strict instructions only to represent archival material—Frenkel had free rein to represent her studio as she felt was suitable in the circumstances. By way of further context, Frenkel had stated clearly that her

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conception of archives before Home’s involvement was a narrower selection of documentation that pertained directly to her art works, rather than a holistic personal fonds. She was counselled by Home not to conceive of archives too narrowly, and assured by me that the purpose of the guided tour was to elicit her own perceptions about the archives in the studio. Thus, it is not surprising that elements of storage and organization predominate in the maps. Although my initial instinct was that furniture should be outside the scope of my investigations, it became apparent that certain items sparked narratives of the past, and others were associated with future intentions. Furniture was thus functioning in a way similar to archival material in the studio. I will expand upon the four elements of furniture that were most prominent in the guided tour narrative.

The bathtub

A large, tiled bathtub is prominently located against the west wall of the studio, under a skylight. Although its genesis was quite practical and work-related, its presence lends a slightly grand, eccentric air to the studio, which Frenkel seems not to mind:

Now the bathtub harks back to an era of photography where it was useful to have a large bathtub in order to print very large mural-size pictures. Why I had that put in I’m not sure except that it—well I know how it happened. It happened that the bathtub was incredibly inexpensive, less expensive than a sink would have been, and I thought it was going to be the real bathtub upstairs but it turned out to be too shallow, so it’s perfect for prints with that technology still being alive. So it should really go down to the basement where the enlarger is, but I quite like it and it’s nice for watering plants and stuff and it always startles people who think that it’s really my bathtub. You climb up there? You take baths in the studio? You know. Louis the fourteenth might do that. So it’s a source of water and it’s in fact quite useful, but that was the original intention.⁴⁹

The bathtub is framed by storage space, with cupboards underneath. A removable platform covers half of its top, presently used for box storage but originally intended as a drawing station, which it still is, potentially—“If I ever got back into watercolours and Haiku, which I’m always

⁴⁹ Frenkel, interview October 5, 2009.
threatening to do.” Frenkel mentioned this half-serious yearning for a more simple and concrete era of her practice on more than one occasion, and the bathtub seemed to be a conduit for these impulses. In the map to the session of October 5, the bathtub is labelled, “Bathtub/½ is base for box storage” (Figure 13: A-1–A-2).

Figure 25. Storage surrounding the bathtub (September 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.

50 Ibid.
The slide cabinets

There are five slide cabinets in Frenkel’s studio, large institutional pieces of furniture acquired when the Art Gallery of Ontario was divesting itself of its slide collection (ca. 2005) and offered the cabinets gratis to anyone who could come and pick them up (see Figure 11: B-1, Figure 13: C-3, Figure 14: B-2). An inside “informant” at the AGO thought of Frenkel, and she jumped at the chance to have the cabinets. Each drawer of the cabinet contains removable wooden boxes for slides, a storage feature that appealed to Frenkel, who has countless slides documenting her working process and her finished works, and some slides which are works of art themselves (the “empty slide containers/both boxes & drawer inserts” are indicated in Figure 14: B-2). The potential for orderly storage is an attractive aspect of the cabinets, and Frenkel imagines that they may be useful for more than slides: “They’ll be for slides, or they’ll be for storage of small things. I mean I can imagine there’ll be lots of tools, drawing materials, all kinds of, anything that fits those boxes.”51 The notion of a systematic array of drawing supplies leads to a vision of future creative work: “I have a fantasy that … I’ll have a drafting table in front and I just pull the drawers out and get all my toys.”52

The central work-table

The long, glass-topped work-table at the centre of the studio dates back to Frenkel’s days at York University, and it has accompanied her through several moves. Due to its central location in the current studio, it functioned almost as a pivot line for the different sessions of the guided tour, appearing in more than one bird’s eye map and receiving mention in three different sessions (see Figure 12: C-3–C-4, Figure 14: B-2–B-4, and Figure 15: B-1–B-3). The table was always meant to be the “central working station” of the studio.53 It is the locus of Frenkel’s notebook-binding activity. More than any other item in the studio, it seems to represent the potential for future work, and the power of quotidian realities, such as physical limitations and

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
accumulations of records and other material, to postpone that work. Frenkel has recently had a difficult time standing for protracted lengths of time, which precludes printmaking. During my visits, the table was covered almost entirely in papers, audio-visual equipment, and office supplies, to Frenkel’s chagrin: “I love that table when it’s cleared, and then I can really work at it, but it gets piled up very, very quickly.”

In the map to our session on September 10, the table is labelled, “work table currently used for placing stuff to be stored” (Figure: C-3), and on November 2, the table is labelled, “work-table covered with documents, newspaper clippings, book-binding equipment, files of urgent stuff to do” (Figure 14: B-3–B-4). More recently, the table has been a primary site for sorting through archival material in preparation for donation to QUA: “It’s serving as a resource more than a work-table at the moment. But I have worked at it and it’s been very pleasant to work at, and I promised myself to keep it clear [but] it’s not possible.”

Despite its centrality—literal and figurative—to the guided tour, Frenkel elected not to supply an image of the work-table. The omission is significant; as Frenkel explained when she sent the final batch of photographs, “the work table changes all the time and I thought it best not to favour a particular configuration.”

In other words, the ongoing evolution of the table’s surface resists a definitive representation.

The east wall shelving

The east wall of Frenkel’s studio is largely structured by a built-in shelving unit that includes specialized storage for large works of art (unframed, both flat and rolled; and framed), and a number of bays of bookshelves (see Figures 26 through 32). Like records in boxes, the works of art in storage had a latency that could be reanimated if Frenkel could find the time to review them: “The rolled works are sometimes drawings, often posters, sometimes blueprints, maps, I think; I know that if I spent a day just looking at that third bay, for example, and opening them

54 Frenkel, interview November 2, 2009.


56 Frenkel, email to Amy Furness, September 20, 2011.
Figure 26. The east wall of the studio looking south (March 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Figure 27. Detail of print cabinet (storage for flat works of art, March 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.

Figure 28. Detail of framed prints leaning against cabinets (March 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
up I would find all kinds of interesting stuff, and there’s a kind of built-in optimism to all this because it assumes that I will have the time, and it’s not a reasonable assumption.”57 More frequently accessed were the packing materials stored in an adjacent compartment of the wall unit, since they were needed for ongoing life and work activities. Contrasting the character and activity level of these different areas of the east wall, Frenkel remarked that “some of it is meant to come and go, and some of it is meant to be safe and sound and not moved.”58 The material on the shelving was a mix of art, records (probably future archives), and ordinary office or studio supplies. The art and records were potentially part of the cycle of burial and rediscovery that characterizes the rest of Frenkel’s recordkeeping. They were safely stored and relatively accessible, but clearly it would take some effort to review them.

57 Frenkel, interview November 30, 2009.

58 Frenkel, interview November 2, 2009.
The bookshelves to the south of the wall unit are a more complex kind of storage, with the books organized into a number of different sections. Moving from left to right, the first section is a sort of reference library on Frenkel's career: “This area is a … not terribly efficient way of holding onto evidence of work that I’ve done, evidence in the form of publications, anthologies.”\footnote{Frenkel, interview November 30, 2009.} It is labelled, “Things written about work” in Figure 14: A-4, and “Catalogues/Magazines/Books re VF” in Figure 15: A-2 (see also Figure 22, above). Within this
area is the set of binders containing articles about Frenkel’s work that was compiled by an assistant (as described above), and referred to by Frenkel as a kind of “archive” (she uses the term in quotation marks in Figure 14: A-4; see also Figure 15: A-2). Next on the bookshelves are a couple of bays devoted to resource material used in developing Frenkel’s interdisciplinary works, which typically involve in-depth research. The next section, consisting of at least one bay of shelving, is dedicated to “Books by friends” (Figure 30; see also Figure 14: A-4 and Figure 15: A-3). Frenkel clearly has a large number of published friends, and the personal association of these books is important to her, as reflected by their prominent location on the shelves and the interspersal of elements of personal display on these shelves. Below these books is a section of video tapes labelled, “video archive,” the video recordings that will remain in the studio for potential use (see Figure 15: A-3–A-4).

The remainder of Frenkel’s extensive personal library continues up the staircase to the second floor, which starts from the southeast corner of the studio (Figure 31). The books in this section are in a different order than the artist had planned at the time of moving into her current studio:

When I moved, I moved from a loft that was three storeys high and I had bookcases on all the stairs, and we did this very elaborate packing procedure where we numbered the boxes according to the shelves and so on. And I thought I was doing it in the most reasonable way. I didn’t take into consideration movers. Even though I gave them a diagram of where the boxes [should go], it didn’t happen. So those are half-organized; I mean there are sections on theatre, and sections on film, and sections on Italian novels, and French novels, and German novels, but it’s semi-random and one of the pleasures of that is if I for some reason can’t sleep, or need diversion, I kind of roam through those shelves—and there’s some more up in the bedroom—and I always find something that is exactly what I need.60

The element of organic disorder has creative or poetic advantages to the artist that recalled, for me, her enjoyment of the serendipitous connections between her semi-active records.

60 Ibid.
A playful element of classification is involved in Frenkel’s occasional habit of rearranging the contents of her bookshelves on the way up and down the stairs:

There’s a constant shifting taxonomy, and of course they are pure autobiography, I mean I’m looking at stuff that I have, you know, there’s even some children’s books there that I may not have read as a child but discovered as an adult and bought, and I’m astonished at how many poetry books I have, and which of the authors of whom I have more books than of any others, and where the anthropology, sociology, and social sciences fit in, and I’m just doing this very slow process of organizing the books, and it’s deeply satisfying and inspiring.61

Books are outside the realm of recordkeeping, strictly speaking, and Frenkel’s personal library will not form a part of the eventual Frenkel fonds. However, the bookshelves featured significantly in the tour, and Frenkel’s comment that the books are “pure autobiography” fits neatly with a reading of the studio and the guided tour in terms of life narrative. Frenkel perceives a relationship between her bookshelves and her archives, both of which can function as representations of her life. In each case, the incidental juxtapositions of items can be at least as interesting as the classification scheme, and Frenkel sometimes finds humour in the adjacency of disparate titles.62

Because of the process involved, the activity of preparing records for transfer to QUA has largely taken over the southeast corner of the studio in front of the bookshelves, making it in some sense a centre of activity. Frenkel commented that the character of this activity was quite different from the activity that animates the opposite corner of the studio, around the computers, where she carries out her current work. “So it’s not as transient as the other part of the studio; it feels more dormant to me. At the same time, this whole area, which is the Queen’s preparation, is transient but it’s fixed in time. It’s like Miss Havisham’s wedding, it’s just kind of


62 Frenkel’s comments about her books recall Walter Benjamin’s famous essay ‘Unpacking my Library,’ in which he writes that ‘the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before my eyes are conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books.’ Walter Benjamin, ‘Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting’, in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 60.
Figure 31. Frenkel’s bookshelves, proceeding up the stairs (March 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
calcified. Miss Havisham, of course, is a memorable character in Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, who had been cruelly jilted while preparing for her wedding, and spends the remainder of her life at home in her wedding dress with the clocks stopped at the moment of her betrayal. Indeed, the map of this part of the studio is crowded with labels (Boxes of files/Drawings/Morgue/Publications/Archiving materials) that convey the range of suspended activities that have taken place in this corner, barely leaving room to indicate the stools on which we sat for the interview (Figure 15: A-2). Sorting through records is a difficult activity to depict, but some of the resulting stacks of papers are portrayed by Frenkel in Figure 33.

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63 Frenkel, interview November 30, 2009.
Figure 33. The south-east corner: records in the process of being sorted (March 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
The role of furniture in the studio

Each element of significant furniture—the bathtub, the slide cabinets, the work-table, the east wall shelving and the bookshelves—has a different relationship to Frenkel’s practice and recordkeeping, but each reflects an important aspect of that practice. There are links to the past and the future embodied in the studio furniture: the bathtub recalls a simpler past when Frenkel’s practice was channeled into watercolours, haiku, and printmaking, rather than complex multimedia installations. The slide cabinets partly represent an ideal for the future, their orderly drawers housing either slides or tools. In a sense, the central work-table combines these aspects. Its origin lies in Frenkel’s printmaking practice, while the potential for future work is reflected in the vision of achieving a clear working surface. Records, the residue of everyday practice, have tended to get in the way of realizing this vision. The shelving on the east wall serves partly as a display of the accumulation of Frenkel’s past work, the rolled prints and drawings clearly visible from most points in the studio. Similarly, her bookcases function as a display of accomplishments, relationships, and ideas, although they are also a practical and frequently used information resource. Each element of furniture is factored into Frenkel’s narration of her studio as a living recordkeeping space. These are aspects that will probably not survive archival transfer; obviously the furniture itself is not destined for the archives, and elements of personal display might be photographed as part of the documentation of an archival acquisition, but are generally not recreated in the archives. Most elusive of all is Frenkel’s commentary, reflecting her reminiscence, aspiration, and patterns of activity in the studio.

Recordkeeping outside of the studio proper

Although the main floor of the studio is clearly the main site of Frenkel’s recordkeeping and artistic practice, there are other areas of the building where recordkeeping takes place. The basement functions as a major storage space, a continuation of the studio where less actively used materials are kept. Its exclusion from the guided tour was decided by practical considerations, but I was still able to examine it on my own. The upstairs of the studio was a
different matter; a more personal domain, it was off-limits to the tour. It was nonetheless mentioned in passing during our interviews, and I can say a few things about it here.

The basement

Frenkel’s limited mobility prevented us from continuing the guided tour into the basement, but it was apparent that she considered it an extension of the studio space on the main floor, and a space entirely germane to the guided tour. I was able to make an independent visit, as described at the beginning of this chapter, and I received Frenkel’s comments on my notes. In addition, the artist supplied me with five photographs of the basement that had been taken by an assistant during a retrieval effort in 2005. Unsurprisingly, these images show boxes and art storage crates. The range of box labels is instructive; in Figure 34, for example, the diverse labels include “costumes & props,” “notes music corresp,” “Transit Bar tabloids PP 1994-95,” (all related to the installation of “…from the Transit Bar” at the Power Plant in Toronto in 1994–1995); “K Tapes–NSAST–S.G.” (possibly video materials, related to No Solution–A Suspense Thriller); and several boxes with no labels at all. Figure 35 reveals what looks like art works in storage, the only legible labels in the image reading “BM Mural,” 3, 1 and 5, evidently a series of elements from the Body Missing installation. In Figure 36 we can see art crates and a group of boxes containing catalogues to a Vera Frenkel exhibition at Hart House, along with household storage, stools that might be related to the Transit Bar, and a box for a flatbed scanner. Figure 37 is more mysterious, featuring more art crates and what might be a printing press (in the upper right corner), a box for a keyboard storage drawer and a dusty suitcase, and several boxes without discernible labels. Figure 38 contains more art crates, boxes for a DVD player and television, and a box labelled, “T. Bar discs & contact sheets/working materials.”

As the least accessible part of the studio building, the basement held some mystery; to some extent, as already described, any material stored in boxes tends to become half-forgotten in terms of Frenkel’s recordkeeping methods. The material in the basement was usually there for practical reasons: cumbersome size and the infrequent need for its retrieval, meaning that the full contents of the basement were in some sense unknowable— “a whole other world,” as
Frenkel once referred to it. For example, as we commenced the guided tour, Frenkel recalled canisters of film that she had stored years ago for a colleague, and that had recently piqued the interest of a documentary producer. She imagined that if the films were anywhere, they would be in the basement, but the search would involve the efforts of more than one person: “There are treasures here, it’s just going to involve some detective work.”

Nonetheless, when she reviewed my “independent” take on the studio, Frenkel emphasized that the materials in the basement have not been forgotten. The potential for work to take place in the basement was evident: there is a temporary table down there, set up for times when Frenkel’s mobility permits her to descend the stairs and sort through boxes in storage. There are art works stored there, which are at least as clearly inventoried and potentially active as anything in the main floor studio space. Indeed, the contents of the basement had played a key role in realizing the acquisition of The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story; Part I: Her Room in Paris by the AEAC in 2003:

In the basement I had major shelving put in before we moved anything, and in there are my father’s paintings, ’cause he was an artist late in life, an amateur but quite good. And more boxes, but they’re labelled with components of installations and things. And when the Agnes Etherington Arts Centre acquired Her Room in Paris, which is a Cornelia Lumsden piece, we exhumed boxes from the basement and did a whole inventory and reconstructed the work. And we were missing one or two elements; I replaced them or gave them something better, consolidating from another Lumsden installation what I thought would work well with that. And then it was installed a couple of years ago in the old Agnes Etherington House. But that took some doing, and there I needed to work with an assistant and it involved unpacking, you know, cataloguing, repacking, it was I think more of an archivist’s delight than an artist’s delight. But that’s what I would have to do with other works that are down there.

The materials in the basement are clearly loaded with potential in the same way as any records in the studio. When I queried her use of the term exhumed, Frenkel explained that the process of retrieving boxes from the basement was somewhat labour intensive, involving an assistant with a

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64 Frenkel, interview September 10, 2009.

65 Frenkel, interview August 24, 2009.

digital camera helping Frenkel identify, at a distance, containers of interest (Figure 34–Figure 38): “We would go down and locate those boxes and bring them up and open them, so then that’s where the word ‘exhume’ seemed to be appropriate, maybe a little more dire than it needs to be.” The word retrieve, she thought, would be happier and more apt.

Although basement storage is never optimal from the standpoint of preventative conservation, Frenkel has taken definite measures to protect the basement area from adverse events. After a threatened flood, Frenkel installed a gas generator that will supply power in the event of a power failure and maintain pumps and plumbing systems. This fact arose during a guided tour session (see label, “Gas generator in patio,” Figure 13: C-4): “So, gas generator—that doesn’t have much to do with storage until you go to the basement and you’ll see what was at risk.”

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67 Ibid.

68 Frenkel, interview October 5, 2009.
Figure 34. Basement shelving for boxes (2005). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Figure 35. Art racks in basement (2005). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.

Figure 36. Crates, boxes and general storage in basement (2005). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Figure 37. Storage of boxes and crates in basement (2005). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.

Figure 38. Storage crates in basement (2005). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Personal space vs. studio space

It is impossible to draw a clear line between personal space and studio space in Frenkel’s home/studio. In our first guided tour session, Frenkel told me the story of a GST officer who had visited her, attempting to verify what percentage of her home was devoted to work space:

And I simply showed him around and I said, “The fact is the entire space is studio-related. There are places to sit down, yes, and there’s a place where I sleep, yes. But even in bed I work.” And he wouldn’t leave. He was having such a good time. He agreed with me but he said, “We’re going to give you the lower [estimate], fifty-five percent.” And I said, “Fine.” I gave him a tape measure. I said, “You can measure everything and anything you see and decide whether it’s work-related.” And he acknowledged that indeed it was, but on paper, he said, this didn’t look realistic. And then I couldn’t get rid of him … he kind of liked being in an artist’s studio once he’d accepted the fact that this was indeed the truth. He wasted a half day of my life.69

In the map to that same session of the guided tour, the sitting area is labelled, “So-called living area—mostly studio” (Figure 11: B-4). The encroachment of work, and its residue of records, is visibly apparent throughout the space.

Upstairs

Although Frenkel did include the living area in the guided tour, the upstairs was identified as personal space and remained obviously off limits (see Figure 39 for the nearest possible view of the upstairs). Frenkel clarified that there were two filing cabinets upstairs containing original publications related to her work, and these would be the only elements upstairs that she would connect directly to her studio practice. The subject of the upstairs space recurred in the guided tour, however, and Frenkel offered a bit more detail:

I’ve been blaming myself for not using that room as was intended, which was a guest room or a study, and the light would be wonderful, and you know. Every time I go in there I regret it, and some of that again has to do with my physical limitations, I can’t lift the boxes and they’re piled high. And some of those boxes are not mine, they’re my

69 Frenkel, interview August 24, 2009.
parents’, so … there was a lot of nostalgia and a lot of urgency at the time … after my mother died to... save what was hers and what had some meaning for me. And at first it was too painful to go through the boxes, and then just didn't happen. So I have a Victorian box room in this studio. In there also are two filing cabinets, and in one of those filing cabinets are original publications, which contain articles by me or about the work and that’s an entity unto itself; it’s just there in case I need it. And has a desk and, you know, stationery and stuff. Then there were times when I worked there in amidst all the boxes it was like being in the, in the Black Star archive where, you know … the only furniture were packing crates and then there was a folding chair and a computer. And from that computer you could access these three hundred thousand images, so it's very Wizard of Oz-ish, you know?\(^{70}\)

In this description, despite the clear presence of personal storage (Frenkel’s mother’s belongings) the space sounds very related to the studio—at least in terms of Frenkel’s future intentions. The room is a potential study, its use still impeded by boxes that are an artifact of moving the studio. Another way of interpreting Frenkel’s comment is that the digital aspect of her work means that in some sense, her studio can be manifested anywhere that a computer is present. A kind of box room, as the upstairs seems to be, is a backdrop for working that resonated in some way with the artist. The location of the bookshelves is also related to the upstairs—in fact, quite literally, the shelves form a connection from the main floor. The element of personal display in the bookshelf contents extends up the stairs, retreating gradually from view (Figure 39).

\(^{70}\) Frenkel, interview October 5, 2009.
Figure 39. The view upstairs (March 2011). Image © copyright Vera Frenkel.
Discussion: Archives in the studio

The potential studio

Boxes of records can get in the way of more than information retrieval; sometimes they are a physical impediment to the realization of Frenkel’s goals for the studio space. The back of the studio has a set of doors that give onto an enclosed patio, but they were blocked by stacks of boxes at the time of the guided tour, to Frenkel’s chagrin: “In a more civilized life these would be open and I would have an outdoor extension of the studio, but that hasn’t happened.”71 The accretion of boxes in front of the bookshelves as part of the sorting effort to prepare material for QUA was also an obstacle to realizing that space as a reading area. “As it is, it’s quite dormant and I know that when we clear all this stuff that’s in front of it, it’ll be, you know, a pleasure. It’ll be a revelation. My fantasy was that there would be … a really good reading lamp and a very comfortable chair and this would be my library.”72

The experience of being interviewed about her records inspired in Frenkel some thought about the potential of clearing space in the studio: “I did have a vision for the first time since I’ve lived here, and I attribute it to you, of what this place would look like. I’ve had this absolute … daydream of having a party here and … all this space would have been cleared and it was the perfect studio that it could be, and I’m just grateful for the vision. I don’t think the reality’s ever going to happen.”73 The notion came up more than once that records were, in a sense, standing in the way of a fabulous party. “And that had been my fantasy when I moved in: I think we’ll put a garden on the roof, and we’ll have a jazz group playing up there, and we’ll have people meandering through the whole place, not taking into consideration years and years of debris.”74

71 Ibid.
72 Frenkel, interview November 30, 2009.
73 Frenkel, interview November 2, 2009.
74 Frenkel, interview November 30, 2009.
In other words, the studio had once been imagined very differently from its current appearance, and the accumulation of records did not form part of that vision.

Frenkel sees her studio and her records as a work in progress. She has various perceptions, not necessarily serious, of how her studio ought to appear:

I saw some photographs online about apparently a very distinguished woman artist working in the media in the States, I haven’t heard of her before, and there are photographs of her in her studio and it’s so attractive, and so impeccable, and so moderne, and so organized, as is the website. She’s got all her catalogues page for page scanned, you can download her entire catalogue. The woman is very present. Now she may be a dragon lady for all I know, or she may be a saint—I can’t tell—but the studio was enviable. Now she probably has elves … 

The “elves” comment refers, of course, to studio assistants, and implicitly Frenkel’s own frequent lack of one.

Some of Frenkel’s comments suggest a feeling that there is a kind of moral imperative to managing her records. In some regards, this feeling is related to conventionality or propriety, a sense that disorder is something that requires apology, or at least going through the motions of apology. Archivists, or archival thinking, offer Frenkel a more forgiving perspective on idiosyncratic recordkeeping:

Some years ago [art historian] Charlotte Townsend came to visit me in my former studio and she walked in and she said, “This is an archivist’s heaven”—you know—I was busy apologizing for the chaos and she was just thrilled and found it all very challenging. Heather Home is like that, too. They’re not daunted. It’s delightful for me; it’s very forgiving. Of course they don’t have any responsibility to make decisions about the stuff except to archive it in their fashion, but they’re better at it than I am.

The archival perspective, however, offers Frenkel an incomplete absolution from her feeling that records must be methodically kept. There is a more compelling purpose to organizing her archives than mere decorum: “I do live with the notion that it should be organized. Some of it

75 Frenkel, interview August 24, 2009.

76 Ibid.
has to do with being in the last third of my life and it’s unfair to leave a whole lot of unsorted stuff for somebody to, you know, dig through. And it would be unfair to just toss it, which happens, so I have to give it some thought instead of just musing about it.” Frenkel joked, perhaps with underlying seriousness, that the unfinished archives may be a reason for living: “I sometimes think that there’s a deep underlying superstition, if that’s the word, that as long as there’s this much to do I can’t die—because how could I leave this for someone else? It would be a nightmare. So it’s keeping me alive in some weird way.”

On balance, Frenkel seems fully aware that the idiosyncrasies of her recordkeeping methods are not only adequate to her needs, but are in fact an essential aspect of her practice. She recounted the comments of her former husband on her work space (the anecdote arose twice over the course of the guided tour sessions):

My ex-husband astonished me one day. I had a wonderful studio just north of the Tarragon at Howland Avenue in a factory building, and almost every space I’ve been in at some point were piles of stuff. No matter how much I like a clean world and clean space—and Japanese architecture is one of my favourite interior architectures. Somebody was asking him about me: How does she find stuff? And he said in a most eloquent way, and I can’t remember the exact words but I remember being very moved, surprised and moved, he said: “Vera needs all this around her because she needs random access to resources, and she herself is surprised in good ways by what she discovers and by the juxtapositions that are unexpected, and they feed her practice.” And he went on about it, and I was so pleased because it gave dignity to what otherwise might have been disorder.

The description of this overheard comment suggests personal revelation: that a person intimately connected to Frenkel—but exterior to her artistic practice—had recognized something essential that she herself realized to be true about the way she worked. The process of “grazing” through records—or “stuff,” more broadly—is fundamental to her process: “I do retrieve things, I mean maybe not as romantically as my ex-husband supposed, but I do rediscover things and … reinvent them and reinvest them in a new work, so there’s several kinds

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77 Frenkel, interview September 10, 2009.

of recycling that go on.”79 There is a sense, as suggested by the quotation at the start of this chapter, in which Frenkel’s studio is like an elaborate version of one of her works of art. In a similar vein, she commented in the course of the guided tour that “[My studio] hovers between fictive and documentary reality. Some things go on here very effectively and some things are evidence of what’s gone before.”80

Frenkel said more about the inspirational importance of her “recycling” processes with reference to her personal library, which functions in a similar way:

When looking at my whole collection of books it’s an analogue for the rest of what’s around here … and I have found that rearranging things … I’ve come across things that I had forgotten and they just delight me. And it’s the serendipity of that, it’s not like being in the stacks as a student, because I’ve generated this material. It’s not someone else’s archive that I’m roaming around in, but it’s very pleasant.

She continued her train of thought, ultimately finding herself at peace with the fertile disorder of the studio:

If I forget standard notions of domesticity, if I forget what’s expected of people—there’s a woman I knew in London who had been a student and I think a lover of Jung … and it’s a longer story, but we became friends. She always had stacks of books and she was a psychoanalyst and a very wise person, and I’d go to visit her and, and take flowers or chocolate or, you know, whatever. She was not mobile. And I was never perturbed by her mess, ’cause it was always so terribly interesting. And she didn’t mind not being domestic in a conventional way. So once I’m free of those notions—they do haunt me from time to time. I would like to clear the dining table and have people for dinner from time to time instead of using it as a workspace or a storage space. But clearly I’m doing what I want to do.81

79 Frenkel, interview September 10, 2009.
80 Frenkel, interview October 5, 2009.
The archives and posterity

Whether or not to devote finite resources to the challenge of orderly recordkeeping is a problem confined to the studio; the main impact of Frenkel’s choices is felt by herself. The process of archival selection is much more consequential, since it is the artist’s opportunity to shape her own fonds. The Vera Frenkel fonds will be a major element of her legacy, and it will have a complex and vital relationship with the art works for which the artist wants to be known. This relationship is difficult and still unresolved in Frenkel’s mind:

How [the reconstruction of installation works] would be done after my death, who knows. […] I’m pretty sure that most such efforts would be gross misrepresentations of what I had intended even with a lot of photographic evidence. So at times I think of that as a mischief; at times I think of that as a loss. At all times it’s a dilemma.82

Frenkel has made an attempt to assemble binders of documentation that can furnish the necessary information on her works of art:

I’m planning—do you see the big binder for *Once Near Water*?—…I’ve already started on other projects, putting them in binders like that, and that includes photographs of the work, statements about the work, reviews on the work, and so on; so that it’s possible—although I don’t know why I would want that—but to hand that to someone and say that’s all you need to know about this work, if you don’t have the chance to see the work itself. So that’s my ambition. And that’s one time that worked.83

With the binder approach, it is more possible to control the reception of a work of art; a binder represents a very focused process of selecting records towards a very specific end. The binders, however, represent the artist’s view, and future curators might well want to look beyond them as a source of information. Frenkel herself is somewhat ambivalent about the notion of handing anyone a definitive dossier of information about one of her works (as she said, “I don’t know why I would want that …”). Even if it proves possible for Frenkel to continue the binder-making process, the presence of the rest of the archives can have a contextualizing effect that mitigates the authority of the binders. There is a significant contrast between the holistically

82 Frenkel, interview October 5, 2009.
conceived fonds, with its organic internal order, and the deliberately crafted documentation of individual works. Apart from the obvious difference in scope, there is a difference between the clear intention behind the binders and the myriad contexts of creation of records and accumulations of records in the fonds.

In some sense, the transfer to the archives entails a loss of control for Frenkel over how her works are perceived and interpreted. In a public institution, the archives are generally available to the public, and the only gatekeeper role is played by an archivist who is generally trying to keep the gate as open as possible and facilitate use of the collections. During the guided tour, Frenkel expressed frustration with a student’s take on “… from the Transit Bar”. The student’s account was based to a large degree on a particular bartender’s log in the Frenkel fonds at QUA. Because the author of the log was an artist who wrote engagingly and articulately about the experience of playing a role in the work, the resulting document is an attractive source of knowledge about the installation. But in Frenkel’s view, the bartender’s log records an atypical experience of the work. She herself frequently tended the bar, and most of the other bartenders were simply bartenders. The log needs to be read in the context of other documentary sources. However, it is difficult to ensure the desired balance of research once the archives are in the institution:

Now there’s not a whole lot I can do about it, that material is in the archive and unless I have the time to annotate everything, which I won’t have—shouldn’t attempt—I’ll have to be prepared for that. But it does reflect for me the unreliability of archives in general, and of archival research: that it’s a kind of fascia therapy, you know, go through the body of the material and you go where it leads, but because something is easier to read, or because the other bartenders were not as literate, this is giving a mistaken view of what it was like working in this installation.84

“The unreliability of archives in general” is a potent phrase, speaking to the partial truth of a single strand of testimony.

84 Frenkel, interview May 10, 2010.
When I asked Frenkel about her perceptions of her own records as archives, she answered, “I don’t have that view yet.” She explained:

… the answer is I don’t know how I feel about my own archive. In some ways I’m grateful that… some of these things are safe. In other ways, I feel vulnerable because there are things there that I might not have chosen to share, and Heather was extremely, again, persuasive. Because I had originally perceived the Vera Frenkel fonds as being centred on key artworks and much like the archive that was connected to the Transit Bar, and that those would structure what people would see, and people would see my working life and my whatever I made that they may be curious about; and Heather wanted everything, and that includes, you know, the mother-in-law and the grocery list, and the whatever.85

The holistically conceived archival fonds was clearly a relatively new idea to the artist, and one to which she was still becoming accustomed. The personal, intimate element of such a fonds is clearly a departure from the idea of an archive centred just on art works, and has implications for seeing the fonds in terms of life narrative and self-representation. Home had been persuasive about the holistic approach and Frenkel seemed to be on board with it, but the artist’s thoughts around her fonds were still resolving.

Preconceptions of archives and literary antecedents

Frenkel brought a great deal of prior thought about archives to the guided tour, as became apparent from her literary allusions and comments. It bears reiteration that records and archives were a topic of inquiry that I brought to the studio tour, although the subject was naturally familiar to the artist from her experiences with having her archives acquired. And, of course, there were aspects of Frenkel’s perceptions of archives that predated her interactions with archivists and archival institutions. To her, the word “archive,” in some contexts, may have “the whiff of the obituary” about it.86 This comment arose in the context of Sylvie Lacerte pulling together material for the Mapping a Practice exhibition, when in one moment Frenkel perceived that the show might, theoretically, be possible without her participation. The common

85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
association of dust with archives also arose at least once, as did the character of Miss Havisham: “The word … does suggest, you know, blowing the dust off Miss Havisham’s wedding, I mean blowing the dust off a stack of papers.” The implication is that archives are ossified, accruing dust. “Blowing the dust off” suggests an act of retrieval or resuscitation, despite the connotation of dormancy.

The morbid or static associations of archives were certainly present among Frenkel’s comments in the guided tour, but they were far from her prevailing view. In reflecting on her own evolving archival fonds, Frenkel mentioned a few early encounters with ideas around archives and taxonomy that inspired her in various ways. She mentioned on a few occasions her enjoyment of the fortuitous juxtapositions of books on a shelf, which, for her, is connected with the notion of archives as a site of unexpected discovery. The association dates back to her student days:

As a graduate student at McGill I had a pass to the stacks and had a carrel where I worked, and, well, I didn’t know about archives really but I had access to books, and periodicals, and things that were not available in the library itself and I found … the serendipitous process that we all know about where you’re looking for a book and you find a thousand things along the way that really are exciting that illuminate whatever it is you’re looking for. And I thought of archives as that kind of resource, but I didn’t have any real experience …

Browsing the shelves and encountering the traces of other intellectual routes and connections is rather like the way Frenkel enjoys rediscovering her own records in her studio. In the setting of a library or archives, however, one has an almost infinitely rich opportunity to discover the traces of other minds.

This sense of infinity is also found in Jorge Luis Borges’ short story *The Library of Babel*, which Frenkel mentioned at our first meeting as she agreed to participate in my research. At the time, she said only that the story, which she had read years ago, had been inspirational to her about archives. Borges’ Library is a geometric abstraction containing every possible text in seemingly

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87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
random sequence, a universe unto itself where meaning and order might elude the literal-minded. In a later email to me, Frenkel highlighted some passages that she imagined might have appealed to her earlier self, including the story’s concluding sentences:89

I hereby state that it is not illogical to think that the world is infinite. Those who believe it to have limits hypothesize that in remote place or places the corridors and stairways and hexagons may, inconceivably, end—which is absurd. And yet those who picture the world as unlimited forget that the possible number of books is not. I will be bold enough to suggest this solution to the ancient problem: The Library is unlimited but periodic. If an eternal traveler should journey in any direction, he would find after untold centuries that the same volumes are repeated in the same disorder—which, repeated, becomes order: the Order. My solitude is cheered by that elegant hope.90

Borges’ vision of an idea of order emerging from seeming chaos reflects a profound hope about the Babel of recorded human knowledge. In a more mundane sense—and this is my own inference from the quotation, since Frenkel’s comments were oblique and minimal—it could be seen as a redemptive vision for a chaotic studio.

Taxonomy is another aspect of archives and recordkeeping that has intrigued Frenkel from early days. Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook made a great impression on the artist while she was a student:

… Did you ever read The Golden Notebook? Doris Lessing? […] She has four notebooks that she describes. One is personal, one is professional, one is I forget what. And I think it’s a novel that every archivist should read. And her experience of documenting her own life in these four different ways with whatever overlaps occurred was fascinating. I mean… the process is not without its challenges and its crises. But that impressed me when—I was a student when I read the novel and I read it for other reasons, she was like the great iconic, she wasn’t a card-carrying feminist but she was a wonderful writer and a brave woman. That has affected the way I do things. I do keep different notebooks of different things; mind you they do overlap. You know, sooner or later I can’t find the one that I need and I write in the other one.91

89 Vera Frenkel to Amy Furness, ‘Re: Borges’, August 9, 2011.


Lessing’s notebooks represent an imperfect taxonomy that is nonetheless attractive as an approach to representing a life. The protagonist records her life in four different-coloured notebooks, representing aspects of her fractured psyche. In a fifth, golden-coloured notebook, she finally begins to pull the various aspects of her life together. As a metaphor for recordkeeping, *The Golden Notebook* is intriguing: it implies the incompleteness of any single strand of evidence. Each of the four notebooks is inadequate on its own, simultaneously a true and a distorted account of the author’s life. Frenkel’s preoccupation with the relationship between truth and fiction, as discussed in Chapter 4, may have one of its sources here.

The subject of *The Golden Notebook* arose in connection with Frenkel’s recollection of her encounter with the Canadian archaeologist Alexander MacGillivray at the British School of Athens outpost in Crete in the early 1980s. MacGillivray had been given privileged access to the sacks of archaeological evidence gathered by Sir Arthur Evans, on which Evans’ system of dates for Minoan civilization—then definitive—had been based. Evans had used three tables to sort the artifacts, resulting in the chronological classifications of Early, Middle, and Late Minoan. MacGillivray, for his part, had secured seven tables to do his re-sorting of the same material, and found that the resulting permutations of classification had a transformative effect on his understanding of Minoan chronology. Frenkel happened to meet MacGillivray when this revelation was still new. The incident resonated with her, and she has referred to it in subsequent writings: “Space literally became time, altering existing understandings of what happened when.”92 As in *The Golden Notebook*, the way in which a representation of the past is structured can have a profound impact on our understanding. Frenkel remarked in her introduction to a panel session at the Experimental Media Congress in 2010: “[The encounter with Alexander MacGillivray] changed my thinking from then on, serving to remind me that all is in flux and that the choice of or the designing of the lens—in this case seven tables—determines that day’s reality and, as we know from the increasingly rapid change of new media,

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we must prepare for the revision that tomorrow’s instruments will bring about.”93 Archives, for Frenkel, are fluid entities, changing in meaning according to the context from which they are viewed.

Prompted by my questions, and with the patterns of MacGillivray and Lessing in mind, Frenkel imagined an ideal mode of sorting of her own archives:

I would start by assigning a different table to—I’d have to invent the taxonomy, you know, just speculatively: correspondence, journals, sketches, notes, and e-mail—you know the more transient, although more and more serious stuff gets done by e-mail but nevertheless—and … writings, you know, material that I’ve written for publication, … drafts and so on, I mean they would be enough to keep seven tables busy and I’d have to keep one clear to do the actual labelling. And I think I would enjoy that … if I gave myself the time. I’ve often thought I should take some time off anyway just to slow down and take stock, and decide how to use the rest of my life. So describing that to you I realize that’s an activity I would enjoy.94

The scenario, and its attendant pleasure, is an abstraction that presupposes infinite space and time, or perhaps another lifetime. It was presented partly as an alternative to the vision of Home backing up the truck to the studio door, or receiving everything in green plastic bags and having free rein to appraise and arrange it. Frenkel could see that her dream of the ideal taxonomic process was at odds with the realities of records in the studio, and with her desire to see her archives established at QUA in a timely way. The establishment of the archives at QUA will form the focus of the next chapter.


Chapter 6
In the Archives

...[T]his seeming chaos, but quasi-order, will seem much more organic... and confused than what you'll find at Queen’s. You'll find that a layer of someone else’s consciousness and someone else's professionalism will change this into that.¹

This chapter will describe the institutional transformation of the Vera Frenkel fonds in terms of the traditional functions of the archives: acquisition, appraisal, arrangement, and description. Not every aspect of the transformation can be accounted for according to this framework, however. I will consider the question of visible aspects of change before returning to look more closely at the boundary between the personal and institutional spheres.

Acquisition

The pairing of an archival creator and archival institution may have significant implications for the fonds as acquired. Regardless of common frameworks of professional standards and practice, each institution is unique. I was therefore interested to know the background to the acquisition of the Vera Frenkel fonds by Queen’s University Archives.

The selection of Vera Frenkel

Queen’s University Archives (QUA) has a broad acquisition mandate, not limited to the records of the university and individuals associated with it. It has characteristics of both a major university archives and a regional archives: its holdings include the records of the City of Kingston and a wide variety of private manuscript fonds and collections, in such categories as literary papers, public affairs (including the records of two prime ministers), business papers, architectural plans, and fine arts. Many, but by no means all, of the private creators of these

¹ Frenkel, interview November 30, 2009.
holdings are associated with the university and the Kingston region. From this perspective, Vera Frenkel would not be an obvious target for acquisition: she never attended or taught at Queen’s, although she has had successful exhibitions with the university’s art museum, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (AEAC, which now holds seven of her works), and held an artistic residency in 2006. On the other hand, Frenkel’s life and work have unfolded in Montreal and Toronto, equidistant and a few hours’ drive from Kingston; and the records of a leading Canadian artist would not be at all out of place at QUA.

Heather Home confirms that the initial idea for the acquisition came from the AEAC, which had found that the matter of archives was hard to separate from Frenkel’s art: “they were in the midst of buying, I think, Cornelia Lumsden, and in discussions with her, things around the archive had come up. You know, like what to do with the piece was archival, and what went with the piece.” Home initially went along with one of the curators to visit Frenkel and advise on a suitable home for her archives, but the outcome of the discussions was that QUA itself would be the repository.

**The selection of Queen’s University Archives**

The pairing of an archival creator with a repository is seldom a one-way courtship. To examine the origins of the relationship from the artist’s perspective, it is necessary to back up a bit: Frenkel’s relationship with archival institutions significantly predates her association with QUA. Around 1990, she was contacted by Bruce Whiteman, then head of the rare books department at McGill University Library. Whiteman was building the Library’s collections of contemporary Canadian literary and artistic manuscript material, and he approached Frenkel as an acquisition prospect. Judging from Frenkel’s account, it was a canny and well-timed proposition; through his own connections, Whiteman had heard about a flood in Frenkel’s studio, and he knew she was preparing to throw things away. He immediately travelled to Toronto to pay her a visit:

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2 Heather Home, interview by Amy Furness, May 19, 2010.
And he said, “Well, let it all dry, but send me everything. I won’t open the boxes, I know you’re visiting your parents”—my parents lived in Montreal— “and just come to the rare book room, come to the stacks and we’ll set you up with a table and you can sort through the things in Montreal. And you have no obligation to donate them to McGill.” He was very clever.

Whiteman continued to take an accommodating approach in his pursuit of Frenkel’s archives, giving her the opportunity to sort through the materials whenever she was in Montreal.

So I would spend a day or two, or three depending on how much time I had in the stacks, or in the bowels of the rare book room, and they would set me up with a table and pencils and scraps of paper and these seventeen boxes, or at least one at a time. … I didn’t remove anything, so there may be lots of things there that are trivial, but from Sylvie’s recent visit to Queen’s where the McGill fonds has ended up, there’s stuff there that is interesting and I’m glad. So I don’t regret having been sort of catapulted into doing this.

The acquisition strategy was generous and ultimately successful: the donation was formalized in 1991. Whiteman’s approach was only one factor in Frenkel’s decision to accept McGill as the repository for her records; the university was where she had taken her undergraduate and graduate degrees, and Montreal was, for all intents and purposes, her home town. There was a good logical and emotional fit between donor and institution. But the apparent ease of the donation process was surely due to Whiteman’s savvy willingness to let Frenkel work out the details of selection and personal records arrangement in her own time.

The relationship between Frenkel and McGill began to fade after Whiteman’s departure. The new head of the rare book department, coping with budgetary restraints, implied that a monetary donation from Frenkel might facilitate the production of a long-promised exhibition of material from the archives. Then, when the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) was acquiring “…from the Transit Bar” in 1997, Frenkel gathered all of the documentation necessary to the future reinstallation of the work, forming a discrete Transit Bar archive. Initially she offered the material to McGill, but the librarian suggested that NGC would be a more appropriate repository. Frenkel then offered the archive to NGC, but the NGC archivist, aware of the

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Frenkel fonds at McGill and reluctant to split the fonds, declined the gift. McGill claimed to have wanted the material all along. Frenkel felt betrayed by McGill and sidelined by the entire process, deciding that NGC was the best place for the Transit Bar archive after all. NGC accepted the gift, but by this point Frenkel was disenchanted with both institutions.

The initial overtures from Queen’s were thus well timed. Ted Rettig, a sculptor and a faculty member in the Department of Art, wrote an initial letter expressing interest in having Frenkel’s archives at Queen’s. Meanwhile, Frenkel continued to enjoy a rapport with the Chief Curator of the AEAC, Jan Allen. Allen was at the “Museums After Modernism” conference, where Frenkel spoke in April 2002. She proved to be an intuitive and careful curator of Frenkel’s work in her acquisition and installation of *Her Room in Paris* at the AEAC (realized in 2003), done largely through documents and communication at a distance. Allen brought Home to pay a visit to Frenkel’s studio. In return, Frenkel visited the facilities at QUA, and found the collections and the atmosphere inspiring:

…In terms of Queen’s, I was very impressed by what I discovered there. …The chief archivist [Don Richan], who’s no longer alive, was a lovely man and he had done a catalogue raisonné of their holdings and he gave me, it’s a two-volume publication, hardcover and I was just thrilled. …They have all the CBC stuff, or significant swatches of it. They have papers from most of the Prime Ministers and many other political figures and civil servants; they also have remarkable photographs from the early years of photography on up, and they […] would open up these wonderful map cabinets […]. And they had audio archives, and they had video archives, and they had...kilometres of shelving of PhD theses and I just thought I could bring my sleeping bag and live here. It was just the energy that came out of all of that.5

The energy of the archives recalled the serendipity of the stacks at McGill University Library. Frenkel also mentions the presence of the Master of Art Conservation program as being part of the overall “gestalt” of Queen’s: the presence of expert conservators and students would help to ensure that the extensive audiovisual component of the archives would be well looked after. Although not mentioned by Frenkel as a factor, QUA was able to access a university fund (the Chancellor Richardson Memorial Fund) to support the acquisition of the fonds. Frenkel’s

decision to place her archives at Queen’s was based on a combination of practical, interpersonal, and aesthetic factors.

Heather Home describes Frenkel’s visit to QUA in similar terms. She said that the artist paid the archives a visit almost as if to examine it for an adoption placement, which is actually an apt analogy. Frenkel visited the reading room and the vaults, taking pictures of the facilities, the collections and the staff. She looked at finding aids and talked to the staff conservator. Home feels that the research setting was an important part of the archives passing muster, that Frenkel found the idea of her records forming part of the collections at a research institution appealing. Although at its heart the assessment was a serious matter, Home found the experience of the visit “fun,” which suggests that, if the matching of artist with institution was a kind of courtship, Frenkel was successfully holding up her side of the negotiations. Nudged by Home, and with the full cooperation of McGill, Frenkel agreed to have her fonds at McGill transferred to Queen’s. This process was fully realized in 2010, uniting the entire Vera Frenkel fonds at QUA.

Home has been the central personality in Frenkel’s dealings with QUA. In addition to her duties as Public Services Archivist, Home is involved in the acquisition and processing of literary and artistic private archives. Her approach to acquisition could be characterized as highly personable, open-minded, and persuasive. Frenkel described the process of beginning to choose material for the first accession to QUA:

She had to help me overcome my resistance both to sorting the stuff and parting with it. And then she did that with … great grace and charm and some humour, and it was fun working with her. And it was really her vision of what archiving is about that interested me. I really appreciated her idealism and her view of things, and she still says to this day why don’t I just, you know, back up the truck and just take everything. …

The rapport between Home and Frenkel appears to be based on mutual intellectual respect as well as personal qualities. At an early stage in the acquisition process, Home recognized the complexity of the archives and their important relationship to the future installation of the artist’s work. She sought a grant from the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and

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Technology (DLF), Montreal, to fund an investigation of the archives in the studio. Although the application was unsuccessful, the connection with the DLF grew into an invitation for QUA to participate in the Documentation and Conservation of the Media Arts Heritage project (DOCAM), an ambitious research project launched in 2005 and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Home served as a member of the Documentation and Archival Management Committee of DOCAM, and the Vera Frenkel fonds formed a documentation case study for the Committee. In this way, Home was able to investigate the crucial question of the degree to which archival documents could suffice as an information source for installing or preserving a work by Frenkel, and the degree to which the artist needed to be consulted directly. In her keynote address at the 2006 DOCAM Summit, Frenkel referred to Home as “the Queen’s University archivist who’s become my conscience.”

Archival appraisal

Beyond the identification of Frenkel as a candidate for archival acquisition, it is nearly impossible to separate archival appraisal from archival arrangement. The first traces of the institutional appraisal and potential arrangement of the Frenkel fonds are found in three documents dating from the summer and fall of 2002, in which Home and Frenkel recorded their initial thoughts for the scope of an institutionalized fonds. The first of these, dated August 13, is a two-page “general list of visual and written materials to consider,” under the headings of visual material, videotapes, audio materials, written material, published material, photographs, teaching materials, and service. These headings are mainly categories of media, with the last two representing functions or activities. The list resembles a more developed version of the kind of general lists put forward by archival associations or repositories to guide donors in identifying

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material for donation.\textsuperscript{8} Home clarifies that archival arrangement was not part of its purpose, particularly since it predates any close encounter on her part with the actual records.\textsuperscript{9}

The second document, dated September 23, is addressed from Frenkel to Home and goes into greater detail, at three pages. It is clearly the product of some thought and analysis, but still a work-in-progress; in the preamble, Frenkel sets the list in context: “The following maps out the general terrain but shouldn’t be construed as definitive. … There will likely be some overlap resulting from taxonomic hiccups.”\textsuperscript{10} The scope of the list is more or less the documentation of artistic projects and professional activities, plus journals and personal/general correspondence: it includes no overtly personal categories of records. The list begins to address the question of the separation of documentation from finished art works, with a note in the preamble of Frenkel’s assumption that “the archive would consist of the ‘backstage’ correspondence, notes, sketches, footage, and so on, which marked the development of final art works.”\textsuperscript{11} In the list, “working or preparatory materials” (documentation of the creative process) is a separate category from “working papers for projects” (administrative records of projects), each fleshed out in some detail with types of documents in various media. The list reflects the breadth and productivity of Frenkel’s career, with additional headings—each well populated with examples—for transcripts and translations, speeches and conference papers, artistic residencies, published texts, teaching materials, associations and memberships, community service (participation in arts juries, fundraisers, and boards of directors), and honours and awards.

The third appraisal document, “based on preliminary discussion taking place November 4,” appears to have been written by a student or assistant, with an emphasis on moving forward: setting priorities for Frenkel’s work on identifying material for transfer, establishing the scope of

\textsuperscript{8} See, for example, Society of American Archivists, ‘A Guide to Donating Your Personal or Family Papers to a Repository’ (Society of American Archivists), http://www.archivists.org/publications/donating-familyrecs.asp.

\textsuperscript{9} Personal conversation, November 25, 2011.

\textsuperscript{10} Vera Frenkel and Queen’s University Archives, ‘[Unpublished Administrative Documents, Vera Frenkel Fonds]’, 2002.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
material to be reviewed (“100 boxes”) and naming a tentative deadline of March 1, 2003. There is also a small list of “important points to keep in mind” as a reminder from Heather Home, that most notably includes maintaining the “implicit order that the artist has elaborated,” refraining from imposing a taxonomy, and maintaining the existing names of files. In addition to the categories of records described in the second list, this final list includes more personal headings such as “home front,” “private notes/personal correspondence,” “condominium” and “Christmas cards.” There is a note at the beginning of the document that existing approaches to filing include chronological and alphabetical, with textual and non-textual material coinciding within most categories.12

The process suggested by the three iterations of the scope document is a preliminary analysis of the archival records in the studio and a negotiation for a more inclusive fonds. The three-month time span among the documents suggests iterative planning, working towards a guiding document that could be used by the artist and her assistant to carry out the physical task of selecting material for the archives in the absence of the archivist. Frenkel was clearly putting careful thought into the structure as well as the content of the fonds, although it’s not clear to what extent the proposed categories of records reflect a conceptual file plan and to what extent they are based on actual recordkeeping practices. She later described the development of the scope document as evolving from a few sessions with Home that were similar to our guided tour, “kind of anthropologically grazing” through the studio to examine the records in situ.13

Addressing the subject of the archival appraisal of the Frenkel fonds from an institutional perspective, Home describes the selection criteria as holistic and inclusive; she observes that Frenkel’s work arises out of her life, and the documentation of that life is therefore important. There were also practical factors that informed the initial selection: Frenkel’s move to her new studio meant that everything had to be packed into boxes, which resulted in a kind of “map of what she does and who she is,” in Home’s words.14 Queen’s University’s involvement in the

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Home, interview.
DOCAM project, which solidified around the time that the Frenkel fonds was being acquired, also played a role in the selection of material for acquisition. The selection of Frenkel’s work “…from the Transit Bar” as a case study for the DOCAM Documentation and Archival Management Committee was important, because archival material surrounding the work was essential to the study. The selection of material for acquisition by QUA was thus a highly situated process in terms of the artist’s practice and the passage of time:

…what material formed part of the first acquisition had to do with what wasn’t needed. Vera’s practice is very, I don’t know what’s the word, really, iterative, and so trying to even identify records which weren’t needed by her for use in creating other works…and trying to find records which were inactive was sort of the idea of the first accrual…15

Apart from the agreement that inactive records and records needed for DOCAM research were a priority, the selection of the textual records was left almost entirely up to the artist. Because of the gradual process of the acquisition, Home has been unwilling to comb through the material to make detailed selection decisions, not knowing what related records may arrive in a future accrual. General cautions were issued to the artist: avoid including any student records with personal information, for example. Frenkel’s piecemeal, detailed selection process has had an effect on the arrangement of the fonds, as will be discussed below.

A different approach was taken to the appraisal of the video series, which is extensive (ca. 450 items) and more challenging in terms of preservation than the textual materials.16 QUA funded a student assistant to work with Frenkel in her studio to inventory the video materials for archival acquisition. This task was made easier because of the recent compilation of several of Frenkel’s video works into a published DVD set, which had entailed bringing together and digitizing many of her video masters.17 Following the provisional transfer of the videos to QUA,

15 Ibid. The “first accrual” is QUA accession no. 2006-071, and arrived at the archives in December 2006.
16 The video materials formed a separate accession, no. 2006-008, which arrived at the archives in February 2006.
17 Frenkel, Of Memory and Displacement: Vera Frenkel: Collected Works.
Home selected about 15% of the items for non-retention, mainly because they were duplicates of existing items.

**Archival arrangement**

The file list of the textual material that was eventually donated to QUA in 2006 does not reflect the structure proposed by Frenkel or her assistant.\(^{18}\) Instead, the contents of the boxes of textual records have a slightly random order to them. Small groupings of material have related functional origins (for example, a dozen or so files related to “...from the Transit Bar” in boxes 8 and 9), and a few boxes contain files from a unified, narrow range of dates. There are short sequences of file titles in alphabetical order: box 3, for example, runs from “Parachute—Performance Pieces” to “Joyce Zemans,” but most of the material is much less predictable. In box 10, to take the extreme example, the date range is 1968–2000, the sequence is in no way alphabetical or chronological, and the file titles reflect diverse categories of material which includes (using Frenkel’s proposed categories) working papers, working or preparatory materials, published text documentation, and personal and general correspondence.

In general, the complexity of Frenkel’s art making and the richness of her recordkeeping are evident from the file titles. For example, there are at least two separate sequences of files around “…from the Transit Bar” from its first presentation at the exhibition Documenta IX alone, resulting from the number of collaborators involved in the realization of the work. This kind of intricacy would be difficult to represent through a standardized approach to archival arrangement. Although the *Rules for Archival Description* theoretically permit infinite levels of arrangement, the enactment of a complex arrangement structure is hampered by unwieldy terminology (one sequence of Transit Bar files might be something like a sub-sub-series), and it is generally discouraged by institutional practices, which favour simpler, flatter approaches to arrangement. Home confirmed that although QUA has no policy about arrangement levels, the institution’s descriptive software cannot represent archival hierarchies, with the consequence

\(^{18}\) Vera Frenkel and Queen’s University Archives, “[Unpublished Finding Aid to the Vera Frenkel Fonds]”, 2009.
being that any description below the fonds level is relegated to text-based finding aids appended to the fonds-level descriptions. In this technical environment, it would be challenging to represent fully the intricate structure of the Frenkel fonds.

One can imagine the order of the box contents resulting from the circumstances of the packing method described earlier: material was selected as encountered by Frenkel in the studio and presumably omitted from the archival transfer if it was still wanted or needed for future work. Skimming over the file titles in the file list produces a fragmented, slightly skewed impression of Frenkel’s career, weighted a little heavily towards the Transit Bar and performance projects of the 1970s. A researcher approaching this material with a specific topic in mind would probably have to read closely through the entire box listing in order to identify all materials of interest. There are only 17 boxes in the file list as I received it (the matter of versions of the file list will be discussed in more detail below under “Archival description”). It’s impossible to know what proportion of the eventual Vera Frenkel fonds these 17 boxes represent, but an estimate of 20% might be reasonable.

As of the spring of 2010, the provisional arrangement of the fonds was a somewhat vexed topic for both the artist and the archives. Because of the research for the DOCAM project, which made extensive use of the fonds, Home made the decision not to disturb the original order of the box contents for the duration of the project research; despite the element of chaos, folders could be listed and retrieved from their specific place within a box with relative ease, and concurrent archival processing would have been awkward and confusing. Beyond that immediate consideration—which was significant only until 2007–08, when the DOCAM-related research was completed—Home felt some reluctance to impose an archival arrangement on the first accrual. She expected that the eventual arrangement structure would be based around the different roles played by Frenkel, and would follow the lines of different projects, but was reluctant to go further than that in working on the archival arrangement. In part, her hesitation had to do with the nature of the material in relationship to the potential Vera Frenkel fonds, in the sense that the first accrual was a relatively small proportion of an eventual body of material, and that the process by which it was selected meant it was in no way a discrete section of the whole of the records, in terms of the proposed structure and contents of that future fonds.
Home also mentioned her awareness of the archival significance of the donor-driven selection process as an aspect of the original order of the fonds. The boxes, as packed by Frenkel and her assistant, are a step away from the order of the studio, but are still very much a product of the archival creator: “I find a certain interest in the way that it’s arranged now … as with any kind of arrangement structure … it does reveal additional information about the donor that isn’t apparent from the information that’s actually in the record.”

Home mused about the possibilities of a virtual approach to archival arrangement, in which the box contents would remain physically as they were, but the finding aid would be structured to reflect Frenkel’s plan. Certainly she planned to retain the original file lists as part of the documentation of the archival process.

An additional challenge was posed by the interrelationship of Frenkel’s artistic projects; for example, “… from the Transit Bar” became integrally related to Body Missing, which meant that the records related to the two works would overlap to some extent. The relationship could be expressed conceptually as a Venn diagram, or, to use Home’s own analogy, something like a colour blindness test in which a field of small coloured dots contains a figure that is visible only to viewers with normal colour perception. In theory, files could be located in more than one series. In reality, it would be a challenge to enact an overlapping taxonomy using existing archival standards and tools, particularly considering that the records at QUA were only a minority of the whole. Home admitted to being daunted by the challenge of devising an arrangement structure that would represent Frenkel’s iterative pattern of records use and reuse, and the complex relationship among different facets of the artist’s life.

Meanwhile, Frenkel was becoming impatient to see Home create a finding aid reflecting her proposed taxonomy: “She doesn’t want to shape the archive before all of it’s there. But all of it’s never going to be there until I’m dead, and I want to see a finding aid before I die. Maybe that’s eccentric, but I would like it to be made available for researchers. …”

Of course, the fonds was available to a significant extent for researchers: the DOCAM project had proceeded, curator

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19 Home, interview.

20 Frenkel, interview.
Sylvie Lacerte’s research for her Mapping a Practice exhibition was largely complete, and I had been able to examine the fonds in February of 2010. Home mentioned that a number of academics and curators had used the fonds since its transfer to QUA—that it was receiving “fairly steady” use, despite the institution’s standard policies about restricting access to unprocessed material.21

On the other hand, Frenkel understood that the delay in seeing a finding aid was partly due to Home’s awareness of the mediating effects of archival arrangement and description, as well as her unwillingness to shape the fonds too heavily: “I really have to respect that she’s not going to make a finding aid until more is gathered and there’s more information both from me and about me, because she doesn’t want to impose her view.”22 As of the spring of 2010, Frenkel saw the fonds at QUA as quiescent, but ready for future work that would involve her participation: “right now it all seems quite dormant, and although it’s not dormant in the sense that Sylvie’s working with it and you’re working with it, but in terms of a final form it’s not anywhere near it yet and I’m assuming that if I’m alive I’ll be part of that process.”23

For her part, Home emphasized that the case of the Frenkel fonds was an exception to QUA’s standard mode of proceeding with acquisitions. The normal pattern includes a large, inclusive first accrual, “more along the lines of … backing up the truck,” to use Home’s phrase.24 The product of this more holistic acquisition is more amenable to archival arrangement, and future accruals (when these occur) can be slotted into the existing arrangement structure. Home stressed that it is not QUA’s usual practice to allow research access to collections before they are fully processed. Full processing also results in a standardized approach to access restrictions.

21 Home, interview.

22 Frenkel, interview. With respect to the finding aid, I was aware of my position in the middle between archival creator and archivist, and it’s possible that my dual role as researcher and archivist was a liability in this instance.

23 Ibid.

24 Home, interview.
Because restrictions had not yet been decided upon for the Frenkel fonds, restrictions were still being decided on by the artist on a case-by-case basis.25

In contrast to the organic, unresolved order of the textual records, at least one aspect of the archives at Queen’s received a detailed archival arrangement structure. The retained video materials were placed into 15 sub-series, most of which are based around individual art works, the exceptions being sub-series for resource material (source material for various projects), documentation (interviews, exhibitions, installations, teaching, and other professional activities), and material created by other artists. Factors driving this work included the urgency of preserving video materials and the special requirements of CCPERB with regard to the certification of audio-visual archives. In contrast to their challenging nature in terms of preservation, video materials are relatively straightforward to arrange: their status as discrete items makes classification less complicated than it might be with complex accretions of textual materials.

To a basic extent, media formats had played a role in the arrangement of the records in both the personal sphere and the archival sphere. Frenkel had pointed out the video materials remaining in her studio, indicating that they had been brought together for viewing and assessment purposes. The time-sensitivity of the assessment, the special equipment required, and the time involved in viewing were all logical reasons for grouping video materials together. These factors were similar to the considerations that had gone into the creation and arrangement of the video series at QUA.

Notably, few photographs were present in the material transferred to QUA. Photographs could be found occasionally throughout the files, in the recordkeeping context in which they had

25 It is interesting to note that the records transferred from McGill in 2010 were in a similar state to the unprocessed Frenkel records at QUA, in that they “had no arrangement structure either,” to quote Home. To Home, the disorder of McGill’s Frenkel records resembled the organic order of the material acquired directly from the artist, and reinforced her feeling of caution about imposing an archival arrangement structure on either body of material.
originally been used. Recalling Frenkel’s account of the records in her studio, the “Master Photo Archive” and the slide cabinet(s) emerged as the core of a centralized repository for photographic materials. The centralization in the personal sphere was based on the utility of these records in reconstituting art works and publishing or exhibiting anything about the artist’s work. The “Master Photo Archive,” the grandly named repository of photo prints, had been brought together by a scholar with Frenkel’s consent. The archival value of these photographs is unquestionable, but clearly their continued utility means that they would probably remain in the studio as long as Frenkel is working. Thus they have already been arranged on the basis of medium or format, isolated from textual records and reserved as a vital series in the future Frenkel fonds.

Archival description

It is an unspoken assumption in archival theory that archival description is a practice that lies squarely within the institutional sphere. Personal archival appraisal is understood to happen on an ongoing basis in the personal sphere until archives are transferred to a repository, and personal archival arrangement is increasingly understood in a similar way. In practice, it is not unheard-of for accruals of personal archives to arrive at the institution with an accompanying inventory, but such inventories seem not to have received any scholarly attention. In the case of the Vera Frenkel fonds, however, the archival description could be said to lie somewhere between the personal and institutional spheres. As of the fall of 2009, the archival transfer was at an in-between stage, with archival arrangement and terms of access yet to be finalized. In these circumstances, Frenkel played an unusual authorial role in the finding aid to her own fonds.

The fonds- and sub-series-level descriptions

As of the fall of 2009, Home had authored a RAD-compliant fonds-level description for the Vera Frenkel fonds that was available through the institution’s online Fonds & Collections.

26 See, for example, Meehan, ‘Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records’. 
During this intermediate stage in the processing of the Frenkel Fonds, the fonds-level description was, in a sense, isolated from both the actual records and the file list. It signalled the presence of the Fonds in the QUA holdings for any researcher who approached the institution via its website and databases. However, a researcher could readily access the Fonds via direct contact with the artist or the staff of the archives, without encountering the description at all. Conversely, the path from the Fonds description to accessing the records themselves would necessarily involve interactions with the archivist responsible, and the archival creator herself. The fonds-level description included a standard note that “finding aids [are] available in the repository,” without providing a link to any such document. As a representation of the Fonds, the description thus had a limited role and limited utility.

The fonds description is RAD-compliant, including a biographical sketch of about 350 words. The first paragraph encapsulates Frenkel’s life, characterizing her work in terms of the institutions at which it has been featured, and the major themes of her oeuvre:

Vera Frenkel (b. 1938, Bratislava, Czechoslovakia) is an internationally-recognized [sic] multidisciplinary artist. Her videos, drawings, audio works, installations and new media projects have been seen at documenta IX (Kassel, Germany); the Offenes Kulturhaus (Linz, Austria); the Setagaya Museum (Tokyo); the National Gallery of Canada; MoMA (New York); and the Venice Biennale among others. Frenkel’s videotapes, drawings, audio works, installations, photographs, writings and new media projects explore the forces at work in human migration, experiences of displacement and deracination, the learning and unlearning of cultural memory that results, and the increasing bureaucratization of everyday life.

The biography goes on to list Frenkel’s artistic residencies, major art prizes, and journals in which her writing has appeared. These are the standard terms in which her life has tended to be represented; some of it is very close to text on the artist’s own website, www.verafrenkel.com, and other details reflect information available on Frenkel’s CV, which is also published on her website.

27 Queen’s University Archives, ‘Vera Frenkel Fonds [archival Description]’.

28 Ibid.
The description’s scope and content note begins by stating that “the fonds consists of material relating to both the private and public life of the artist,” clearly indicating the presence of the personal element in the archives. It is a brief scope description, at 140 words, outlining the artist’s activities that have given rise to records creation, and listing the document formats or genres found in the fonds. The constituent series are listed as, “Teaching; Projects; Artistic activities; and Personal.” This series list does not correspond closely to any iteration of the original scope document, nor—as will be discussed below—is it borne out in the file list. Home confirmed that the series list was provisional and subject to change as the fonds continued to take shape at the institution.29

There are a few items of interest in the notes fields of the description. These notes are standard statements in standardized language, unremarkable except for their incongruity with the actual circumstances of the donation. The first is the brief arrangement note: “The material has been arranged by the archivist in consultation with the donor,” which is a very brief—and not entirely accurate—summary of the process of arrangement as I understood it, since the matter of archival arrangement was still unresolved. The second is the “Restrictions on Access” note, which states generally that “Some material is restricted” without specification. Indeed, since the matter of access restrictions was still to be determined, and was still effectively in the hands of Frenkel, it would have been difficult to state anything more specific in this field. Finally, finding aids are noted as being “available in the repository.” Again, this note is a standard statement to indicate the existence of finding aids that are not directly linked from the description. In fact, a researcher who contacted QUA for further information would have needed Frenkel’s clearance to receive the file list, and its completeness might depend on the researcher and her/his purpose. Indirectly, finding aids were available through the repository.

The fonds-level description, clearly, is a standardized, de-personalized document for public consumption. It tends to normalize the idiosyncrasies that are intrinsic to the archival records, as well as the idiosyncrasies of the acquisition and arrangement processes of this particular fonds. It is also important to recall the intermediate state of the selection, arrangement, and

29 Personal conversation, November 25, 2011.
description of the fonds, and the fact that the records described are those of an actively involved archival creator. For these reasons, it would be both inappropriate and premature to provide in the archival description a candid account of the arrangement of the fonds. Of note, Heather Home’s name does not appear on the fonds-level description. It is a very institutional, de-personalized representation of the Frenkel fonds.

In addition to the fonds-level description, Home provided me with RAD-compliant archival descriptions, written by her, of the 15 sub-series into which the video material had been arranged. The descriptions were gathered into one five-page word-processed document that lacked a title or other contextualizing information. Although the text of the descriptions was polished, the document itself was in a provisional state, with the text awaiting incorporation into a future finding aid: its main use thus far had been in administering the acquisition of the video material. As such, the sub-series descriptions were somewhat isolated from other elements of the description and file list.

As already mentioned, most of the sub-series were based on individual art works, with additional series for “Resource” material, “Documentation” and “Other Artists.” The physical description of each sub-series was thorough, with the quantity of each item exactly cited and the wide variety of video formats carefully specified. Scope and content notes were thorough, explaining the technical components and narrative aspects of each work, both of which, in the case of Frenkel, tend to be complex. The subseries for *The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story (Parts I and II)*, for example, contains “25 ¾” Umatic videocassettes, 2 VHS videocassettes, 2 Betacam SP videocassettes, 1 DV Pro videocassette.” This particular artwork had a long active lifespan (the date range of the subseries is 1978–1984) and was acquired by the AEAC in 2006, which explains the variety of video formats. Its two-part narrative is outlined in the scope and content note, which also explains that the video component includes “video components, masters, source tapes and resource material.”
The file list

As described above, the fonds-level description included a standard note that “finding aids [are] available in the repository.” In fact, this standard language masked a more complex situation. The “finding aid” was actually the interim file list, authored by a student working for QUA, that reflected the un-arranged order in which the first deposit had been received. Until a more finished finding aid could be written, reflecting both the archival arrangement and the finalized access restrictions, Home and Frenkel had agreed that access to the archives should be managed on a case-by-case basis by Frenkel. This approach would allow the artist to consider access restrictions on an individualized basis. For this reason, Vera Frenkel herself provided me with the file list to her fonds. She had edited it slightly, an unusual circumstance that placed the authorship of the file list somewhere in between the personal and institutional spheres.

Because of Frenkel’s interventions, the file list I received was a somewhat more personal document than the fonds-level description in terms of authorship and intended audience. It was titled “TEXTUAL RECORD (SCHEDULE A) TO AMY, 28 IX 2009,” reflecting Frenkel’s efforts to contextualize its contents. The file list was a simple listing of titles and date ranges for each file. Square brackets were used sparingly throughout to denote supplied titles, implying that most titles had been transcribed verbatim from the actual files. A few peculiarities were immediately apparent: the numerical sequence of boxes and folders made clear that not every file was listed. Box 3, for example, lacked entries for folders 3, 7, and 15. Box 11 had been omitted altogether. These gaps turned out to be Frenkel’s method of dealing with privacy: she deleted restricted file titles altogether from the file list, letting Home know which folders and boxes to hold back from a particular researcher. Because of the organic, intermediate order of the box contents, there were few contextual clues from the file titles surrounding the absent files as to the nature of the omissions. When I queried her about the omitted files and boxes some months later, Frenkel said she imagined the omissions were material that was “either very personal or financial.” She had yet to decide about the eventual terms of access to these files.

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30 Frenkel, interview.
The file list was prefaced with a brief explanatory note from Frenkel: “Reading just the titles of the files, some are very evocative, still related to my working life; others are more distant and less charged with meaning for me. I’ve corrected some of the typos, numbered the pages (11) and I see that there are duplicate files, e.g. Marian Engel; Short Bios., which will be fixed.”

This comment made it apparent from the outset that not only the records, but the file list itself was still somewhat connected to the personal sphere. Frenkel, as archival creator, was framing the archives and their representation in terms of her present perceptions, and perhaps simultaneously distancing herself from the file list and the material it represented. The file list—despite the inadequacies of the archival arrangement (or lack thereof) on which it was based—was still, to her, a work in progress: something that bore fixing.

The peculiarities of the file list were compounded by my examination of the actual records in February 2010. There was a general correlation between actual and listed files, including the absence of the files (and box) omitted from the file list. However, files were sometimes in a different order from that in which they had been listed, and unexpectedly, there were additional files present in many of the boxes. Box 2, for example, actually contained 27 files, in contrast to the 20 that were listed. The additional files were interspersed among the others, and their titles did not correspond to file titles anywhere else in the file list, from which I concluded that they had been created since the file list was written, and not just misfiled. The “new” files tended to be acid-free, archives-issued folder stock, and the writing on them was clearly in Frenkel’s hand. It appeared that the arrangement of the material, at a detailed level, had been revised since the file list was written. The clearest piece of evidence for this activity was a folder in Box 2 entitled “Correspondence, 1979–81 (Lumsden material filed separately) (3 VI 08).” Not represented in the file list, this folder reflected an attempt to bring together records of a certain form within a certain date range, with a clear exception being drawn for correspondence related to one of Frenkel’s major projects during that time period. The refiling effort was clearly indicated by the date at which it had been made, June 3, 2008.

31 Frenkel and Queen’s University Archives, ‘[Unpublished Finding Aid to the Vera Frenkel Fonds]’. 
Box 3, in a related vein, contained almost entirely new file folders with Frenkel's handwriting, including one titled, “Lumsden corresp. [1979–1980],” which was not listed in the file list. The contents and date range of Box 3 were relatively homogeneous, and the file titles corresponded relatively closely to the file list. An interesting feature of the folder titles in this box was their length and thoroughness relative to the listed titles in the file list. The careful use of square brackets to denote supplied titles in the file list suggests that actual titles were transcribed directly. The discrepancy suggested that the titles written on the folders had been edited—improved upon—as part of the later refoldering effort.

The intermediate status of the archival arrangement was evident; as described, there were traces of original order and traces of what might be described as the attempt to improve on original order, in the selective refoldering and reordering of files. The result was not obviously “more” arranged or better arranged, but rather differently arranged, a work in progress. The files related to a given work tended to be scattered among more than one box; correspondence for certain years seemed to have been brought together, but not exhaustively, and correspondence as a whole was scattered among several different boxes. It would be impossible to make “correspondence” a single comprehensive series containing all correspondence anyway, without doing violence to numerous project files; sometimes correspondence seemed to have been filed together originally, and sometimes it had formed part of a broader activity and been filed with the other records that pertained to that activity. All of these characteristics are quite normal recordkeeping practice, but the evident efforts to fix or edit the order of files were related to an effort to improve upon original order (if such a thing really exists).

**Visible change**

The visual transformation of archival material from the context of creation to the repository is obvious and unavoidable. In my encounter, the term “repository” in a conceptual sense must be extended to include the City of Toronto Archives, which hosted the 17 boxes of the Frenkel fonds for one week to facilitate my research. An empty office and an archives cart thus form the backdrop to the image of the archives in the institutional sphere (Figure 40).
The records were in temporary boxes, most of which were narrow, brown corrugated cardboard banker’s boxes with minimal labelling (“VF Box 1” is characteristic). Only “VF Box 10” showed any visible signs of having originated from Frenkel’s studio; notations on its exterior (“9 of 15 Frenkel,” “Bottom Left File,” and on the lid “ref. material/cargo cult/S. Pacific/I Ching”) appeared to have originated from personal storage or the process of moving house, or at least didn’t correspond obviously to the current contents of the box. From a casual peek inside a few boxes, there seemed to be a mix of predominantly original file folders and a few acid-free archives-supplied folders. Unexpectedly, the latter tended to bear Frenkel’s distinctive
handwriting. There was little sign of archival processing having gone on, except for the archives-issued boxes and folders. Folders were only occasionally labelled with numbers to correspond with the file list.

Traces of “original” order were perceptible in small sections throughout the files, which was sometimes clear only because the majority of files still bore their original labels and handwritten file titles. These visual, physical clues made it obvious when someone other than Frenkel—a studio assistant, typically—had had a hand in the filing. For example, in Box 9 there was a sequence of 31 files in brown manila folders with matching red and white labels, written in an unfamiliar hand. Their contents revealed the presence of an assistant who was helping to compile a number of grant applications and support the installation of “… from the Transit Bar” at various galleries, notably at the Power Plant in Toronto. She and Frenkel kept track of her efforts through periodic “update” lists, a genre of document not apparent elsewhere in the records.

At other times, the sequence of file titles suggested a fragment of alphabetical order, despite the variety in the physical appearance of the files. Box 14, for example, had file titles starting with B and A, as if it had been packed from the same filing cabinet drawer. The visual aspect of the folders was somewhat diverse, but they were similar enough to have a plausible unity. A less certain impression of similar order could be found in Box 13, with F-G-J-K-L-M followed by D and E. It seemed like the kind of order that could result from packing a file drawer into a box with slight inconsistency—or perhaps from an alphabetical sequence of files being carelessly handled by a researcher. Indeed, it was quite possible that some idiosyncrasies in the order of files may have resulted from research use of the archives.

It was visually apparent that the boxes contained overwhelmingly textual material in folders. This seemingly banal aspect of the fonds is notable when one considers the diverse array of media in which Frenkel has worked; textual records would clearly be only one facet of their documentation, in addition to photographs and video materials. For example, in box 10, folder “Vancouver Art Gallery show/texts for publication” there is a set of documents (April 1978) with detailed textual descriptions of early works (String Games, About Castles, and The Detective: A
Fiction), intended for the catalogue of an important exhibition at the VAG. Because the works themselves survive incompletely, due to the careless housekeeping actions of the video curator at the time, these texts have taken on an importance that exceeds their original significance.

In the setting of QUA, when I visited in May 2010, there was an obvious contextual transformation. Because of the in-process status of the Frenkel fonds at that date, the boxes sat together in a temporary location in the archives’ processing room, away from the QUA vaults and remainder of the collections. Another 11 boxes of records, more recently acquired and with no finding aid, sat together with 17 of the boxes from the first accrual. An additional box (box 11, apparently frequently restricted) was stored in the archivist’s office, together with a temporary box containing files pulled from the other boxes for reasons of access restrictions. The state of limbo of the records in process was visibly reflected in their location in the archives. They would, in the future when their contents were fully processed and accessible, be brought together in the vaults. In fact, the 18 cartons of Frenkel’s archival records from McGill had been transferred to QUA and had already taken their place in the vaults.

**Concluding thoughts**

Until my encounter with the Vera Frenkel fonds, I had not questioned my assumption that the transfer of archives to the repository represents a fairly clear, unidirectional shift. The negotiation of the terms of a deed of gift may involve some give and take between donor and institution, but the change in custody tends to be unambiguous. In the case of the Frenkel fonds, some ambiguity remained around the transfer.

**The archivist in the studio**

The integration of records management and archives functions in many corporate and government settings means that it is fairly normal for an archival institution to have some form of pre-custodial involvement in corporate or government recordkeeping. It is less normal in the case of personal archives, where the assumption is often that the idiosyncrasies of personal
recordkeeping methods are part of the context of records creation and ought to be left alone. The question of pre-custodial involvement had certainly occurred to me as early as my pilot study as an important question to investigate.

Apart from working with Frenkel on the initial appraisal and arrangement framework, Home has been very reluctant to give the artist any guidelines for future records management. She sees personal recordkeeping methods, including appraisal decisions, as integral to the artist’s mode of working: “I don’t want to set a precedent that she then just follows, … that interferes with actually the way that she works with the records, because I know from seeing them now how she works with the records and I think that … something might be lost if … I provide her with a records schedule as to what should be tossed.” Home has observed the artist’s interest in recordkeeping and placing things in order, and fears that an archives-issued records schedule would be “tempting” for Frenkel to use. She has tried to limit her recordkeeping advice to general preservation topics—such as what to do about emails—and to affirming the importance to the archives of particular categories of records as they arise in discussions. She feels that negative appraisal decisions—that is, decisions to exclude particular records—happen best in the archives, following initial selection, when the archivist has had a chance to review the material. The proactive exclusion of categories of records carries a risk of excluding too much.

Frenkel had viewed sample finding aids at QUA as part of her initial visit to assess the archives. She had not asked Home for sample finding aids explicitly to use as a template for how records should be kept, or arranged, although she clearly had something in mind as a “finding aid” that exceeded the textual record finding aid with which I worked. There was an expectation of categorization, perhaps of chronological or alphabetical ordering. These things were implicit in the way Frenkel spoke of her frustrations with the lack of a finding aid in the spring of 2010.

32 See, for example, Adrian Cunningham, ‘Beyond the Pale? The “Flinty” Relationship Between Archivists Who Collect the Private Records of Individuals and the Rest of the Archival Profession’, Archives and Manuscripts 24, no. 1 (1996): 20–26; also mentioned by McKemmish, ‘Evidence of Me’.

33 Home, interview.
The artist in the archives

In the case of Vera Frenkel, many of the changes in her archival records that have taken place following the transfer to Queen’s are the work of the artist herself. In 2008, Frenkel paid a two-day visit to QUA in order to review the material for the purpose of designating research access restrictions. As she worked through the folders, she became interested in correcting inaccuracies in the file list, and transferring material from its existing folders into acid-free folders. There was not enough time to go through all of the files at this level of detail, and so the matter of general access restrictions remained unresolved. The notations on certain folders, described above under “The file list,” reflect the work of this visit.

In our interview, Home emphasized that the way the Frenkel fonds was being processed was atypical of procedures at QUA. The in-between status of the fonds, which allowed for controlled researcher access before archival arrangement and description had been completed, and which permitted the artist some involvement in working with the material post-acquisition, was unusual. Home felt that the exception was important to Frenkel’s particular case, because the artist’s mode of working meant that her records were intimately tied up in her continuing artistic practice. As a general principle, Home feels that an archival creator must be comfortable with the process of acquisition. The unorthodoxies of the process in the case of Vera Frenkel could thus be justified as part of maintaining Frenkel’s comfort with the acquisition. They were particular to the relationship between QUA and Frenkel, an intricate and carefully maintained interpersonal connection that was intended to optimize the resulting Frenkel fonds.

The post-transfer alterations of the fonds are entirely associated with processes of acquisition, appraisal and arrangement, but Frenkel’s authorship of these changes troubled and destabilized the institutional sphere. It is as if the transfer of the archives to the institution were a kind of publication of the archives: the archives thus were being treated as a manuscript being edited for public consumption. The more apt metaphor may be that the archives are like a work of art being prepared for exhibition, or institutional acquisition. Particularly in the new media

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34 Ibid.
environment, an artist’s role in conserving his or her work is unlikely to end with institutional transfer. In fact, the artist’s ongoing involvement is a pillar of the Variable Media Network approach, one of the leading research projects into the preservation of new media art; in the words of Jon Ippolito, “the variable media approach asks creators to play the central role in deciding how their work should evolve over time, with archivists and technicians offering choices rather than prescribing them.”

I will return to the implications of the artist’s emergence in the archival sphere in the next chapter.

Chapter 7

Discussion

This final chapter is devoted to making sense of my findings, proposing answers to my research questions and taking stock of my project as a whole. Before turning to those important tasks, I need to make a brief excursion into a recent development in Vera Frenkel’s thinking about archives.

Mapping a Practice

In October 2010, just after I had begun the phase of data analysis and writing this dissertation, the Vera Frenkel: Cartographie d’une pratique/Mapping a Practice exhibition opened. The thesis of the show was that Frenkel’s archives are a key to her oeuvre, as worthy of exhibition and examination as the works themselves. The exhibition consisted almost entirely of archival documents centred around three of Frenkel’s major works: String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video (Montréal–Toronto, 1974); “… from the Transit Bar”; and ONCE NEAR WATER: Notes from the Scaffolding Archive (this last work was also featured in its entirety as a digital video projection). The catalogue to the exhibition includes brief essays by exhibition curator Sylvie Lacerte; Alain Depocas, director of the DOCAM project; Anne Bénichou, who has written so incisively about artists, archives, and Frenkel’s work; Heather Home; and Vera Frenkel herself. In short, Mapping a Practice was a remarkable parallel to my own project; conceived virtually at the same time, its aims significantly overlapped my own, and its catalogue contained commentary on Frenkel’s archives from virtually everyone from whom I would most want to hear. As unconventional as it may be to introduce a new item of bibliography in a concluding chapter, this does seem to be the best place to write about the publication; the catalogue essays are closely related to my concluding discussion, drawing together a range of perspectives on art and archives, and centring on the Vera Frenkel fonds.

1 Cartographie d’une pratique/Mapping a Practice, SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Montreal, October 2–December 4, 2010, curated by Sylvie Lacerte.
In her introductory essay, Lacerte—whose PhD thesis on the mediation of contemporary art was published in 2007—explains how she met Frenkel through the DOCAM project and was inspired by her work. Expressing a wariness of jumping on the bandwagon of “archival” art exhibitions, she explains that her aims are different: to “illuminate the background and the backstage of Frenkel’s creative work, following the thread that may allow us to trace the contours of an abundant and complex creative process.” The three works in the exhibition are intended as filaments in this thematic thread, rather than as representative pieces of a retrospective endeavour. Depocas, in his essay, briefly describes the aptness of the Frenkel fonds as a DOCAM case study, noting that the fonds is enmeshed with the artist’s oeuvre, and that it furnishes vital documentation of technical and aesthetic aspects, and the role of collaborators in the artist’s work.

Anne Bénichou observes Frenkel’s long period of resistance to having her works acquired by institutions, which she sees as having begun to change with the acquisition of “… from the Transit Bar” by the National Gallery of Canada in 1997. Key acquisitions of Frenkel works by the Agnes Etherington Art Centre confirmed the shift in the artist’s relationship with institutions, followed by the acquisition of the Frenkel fonds by QUA. Bénichou sees the proximity of art and archives in their institutional context at Queen’s as significant, because the multimedia documentation in the archives will permit the future renewal of Frenkel’s art work. Such renewal is a challenge because the artist has not made explicit which components of her works are materially essential and which can be migrated to new technologies or reinvented with new materials. Bénichou sees a challenge attending the acquisition of the archives and their institutionalization: “In this process of re-housing the archives [“redomiciliation”], the patterns

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and internal logic of the creative process are often undone and reconfigured, and with them, the meaning and usage of the artist’s living archives are lost.”

In a different vein, Heather Home’s essay distills the archivist’s perspective on the Frenkel fonds, explaining the institutional aim of capturing the records of both art and life as inextricable parts of a dynamic whole. Home offers an important reminder to readers unfamiliar with archival studies that a fonds cannot fully be explained as the product of deliberate decisions:

What eventually ends up constituting an “archive” is driven by a host of factors, internal and external. Not everything survives to become part of an archive. It will be dependent on factors both personal and practical. Papers are ephemeral and can be lost; digital files can be corrupted and overwritten; emotionally motivated actions such as self-censorship, embarrassment, sensitivity or discretion can lead to the wilful destruction of some items; while neglect, forgetfulness, and disinterest can lead to the expected natural loss of others.

At the same time, Home suggests that the ultimate significance of the archives is their elucidation of the creative process: “In working with the artist and her papers over the past number of years, I have come to believe that her artistic work is enmeshed and interwoven with the archival endeavour.” Home sees the exhibition as a unique opportunity for viewers to discover the rich web of connections between archives and art.

Finally, Frenkel’s essay “The Pleasures of Uncertainty…” is a unique counterpart to her comments in the guided tour, addressing as it does the experience of having her archives investigated and opened up in the process of preparing for the exhibition. As articulate as the


6 Ibid., 26.
artist certainly was in our interviews, her written words naturally are the product of more reflection and editorial refinement, and are intended for a different audience. She shared the essay with me in advance of the catalogue’s publication, acknowledging the special interest this text would have for my research.

Frenkel found that facilitating Lacerte’s research for the exhibition prompted a certain kind of introspection. Her description of the experience sounded as if it could also apply to the process of my own research into her archives: “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.” 7 The research process occasioned introspection and deep contemplation of the nature of archives and the relationship of the fonds to Frenkel’s own identity. Lacerte’s investigations revealed intimate—perhaps even synecdochic, or genetic—connections between documentary traces and the artist’s oeuvre: “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. …” 8

A large part of Frenkel’s essay is concerned with the artist’s view of the nature of archives, which she acknowledges has substantially evolved away from preconceptions of dry, dusty, static collections. In contrast, she weaves a series of metaphors that acknowledge the mysterious, dynamic, and playful characteristics of archives. She arrives at a lyrical image that acknowledges both the structured and fluid aspects of archival interpretation:

… [I]tems in a fonds, like scattered rocks in a riverbed, [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 … 9

8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 54.
The “truth” of archives thus lies partly in their capacity to be reinterpreted and renewed by the work of a thoughtful researcher such as Lacerte; archives have an essential core of meaning that is renewed by the work of translation. This heart of the archives is a space for intimate reflection on the part of the archival creator: “The archive … 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.” For Frenkel, these meditations on the nature of her archives have a powerful and moving impact on her sense of self:

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.

The word “unreliability” recalls for me Frenkel’s observation during the guided tour about “the unreliability of archives in general,” referring to the tendency of archival research to take a path of least resistance through a body of documentation, arriving often at misleading conclusions. In her essay, Frenkel seems to acknowledge that archival research can achieve better than this, and can actually—cumulatively—help to sustain the flow of meaning, or “truths,” from the archival fonds. This re-estimation of the archives by Frenkel is important, and needs to be taken into consideration as I form my own conclusions about my research.

**Owning my research**

Deliberately or not, Frenkel managed to destabilize my research project by leaving on it the imprint of her own creative force. The idea of complementary data sources in different media (the mix of interview, mapping and photography) was certainly mine, and it predated our first interview meetings, but I believe it was agreeable to the artist. By taking charge of the bird’s-eye

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10 Ibid., 59.
11 Ibid.
12 Frenkel, interview.
maps and the photographs, however, Frenkel introduced her own authorial voice on two separate tracks, not to mention the central presence of her words in the interviews. It should be evident that Frenkel’s spoken words are supremely quotable—she is not the kind of interview subject whose speech requires paraphrasing and tidying. As a further disturbance of my authorial role, her delay in furnishing the photographs increased the subjectivity of the resulting images, rendering them more mysterious in terms of what has been included and excluded from the viewfinder. They have the “look” of Frenkel photographs, as well, with the result that my Chapter 5 has something of the look of Frenkel about it.

The fundamental question that arises from this situation is whether Frenkel’s assertive presence overwhelms my own purposes, rendering the research weak or even invalid. I have a few reasons for believing it does not:

1. I had a plan: the conventions of social science required me to articulate my research purpose and design far in advance; I had thought about artists’ archives, constructed most of my literature review, and laid out criteria for case selection long in advance of my first encounter with the artist;

2. The conceptual apparatus of life narrative permits me to contextualize and frame the artist’s statements: since I have outlined that everything to do with Frenkel’s archives, including her account of them, can be seen as a complex mode of self-representation, I am equipped to listen critically to her statements and omissions;

3. I have named the problem: it seems best to me to be up front about the strength of Frenkel’s voice, rather than leave readers to wonder whether I was aware of it; and

4. This is my opportunity to have the last word: the purpose of this chapter is to present my final thoughts about my research findings, and complete the conceptual frame through which I see the research. By framing Frenkel’s contributions, I can enlist them for my own purposes.
At a doctoral student research presentation in the spring of 2011, I was asked whether, in light of Frenkel’s multilayered mode of creative expression and her elusive position on truth versus fiction, I could trust the artist as a research subject. My answer is that trust is beside the point: my data gathering elicited strands of Frenkel’s testimony, and the artist’s work and published commentary give me ample contextual background about her own views of testimony. I believe, conversely, that the more significant factor is that in offering me intimate access to her studio and her thoughts around her archives, Frenkel had to trust me to contextualize the text of the interviews, the photographs, and the studio maps.

**Addressing my research questions**

By *addressing* my research questions, I mean first of all to consider whether, in the light of my findings and analysis, they are still good questions. Research questions frame the underlying research problem in a particular way. Findings and analysis can yield answers to the questions, obviously, but they can also prompt a refinement, readjustment, or broadening of the questions themselves. One way of dealing with these readjustments is simply to amend the stated research questions and pretend they had been framed that way from the beginning, but this route seems inconsistent to me with my attempt to be transparent about the evolution of my methods and thoughts alongside my research discoveries. It is interesting to consider why questions don’t fit the resulting findings, and in this section I will address these problems as I offer some answers.

**Research Question 1: What are the significant characteristics of an individual visual artist’s personal archives in the personal sphere?**

The use of the word “archives” in this question is problematic, and in retrospect I should have posed this question in a way that included records and recordkeeping activity. I had a preconception that the archives would be *there* in the studio, discernible and somehow discrete and available for observation by the archivist. In many artists’ studios that I have encountered in my professional life, there is a body of records set apart in filing cabinets or boxes that is more or less ready for archival transfer. This is how the fonds gets established in the institution, usually with an agreement about future transfers when the artist is ready. Approaching artists’ archives as an archivist, I had little experience with artistic *recordkeeping* as an active practice
bound up in the daily activity of the studio, except as an activity that kept certain documents in active play and thus marked for future archival accruals. In the case of Vera Frenkel, the most significant characteristics of her “archives”—really records—in her studio had to do with their active integration into her artistic practice. These characteristics I will summarize below.

The personal elements of my first research question are also problematic in retrospect. In Chapter 2, I cited the archival studies literature on personal archives as one basis for my research project: there is a demonstrable need for more empirical studies of personal archives. An artist, representing a significant population of archival creators, would be a good subject for such a study. The language of my research questions is shaped by this background; the term “personal” is partly an artefact of one of the justifications for the value of the research. It functions to define my broader area of interest as personal—not organizational or corporate—archives. In retrospect, I would omit the word “personal” from “visual artist’s personal archives.” In Frenkel’s archives, the personal is only one inextricable element of recordkeeping, which in turn is deeply enmeshed with the artist’s oeuvre. Through the guided tour, I had a privileged close encounter with the artist’s archives, but it amounted to only a very situated impression of the person at their heart. I was able to achieve an in-depth exploration of the archives in the studio, and to arrive at a reasonable answer to my research questions, without approaching the artist’s purely personal domestic space. Indeed, the personal space of the studio was off-limits to the tour, as was the most personal recordkeeping activity. My notion of the “personal sphere” was meant to distinguish the artist’s recordkeeping spaces from the sphere of the archival institution. This two-part conception is clearly inadequate, and the element which it lacks is the idea of the artist’s studio as a distinct phenomenon, a physical or virtual arena of creation that is unique in its relationship to the rest of the art world. The nuances of the studio are not adequately captured by my notion of the personal sphere. I encountered the relatively new bibliography of writing on the studio after I had launched into my research, and although these readings came to bear on my understanding of Frenkel’s studio, they did not prompt me to revisit my research questions.
In proposing answers to Research Question 1, then, I am answering a slightly modified question: “What are the significant characteristics of an individual visual artist’s personal records, recordkeeping, and archives in the studio?”

**Recordkeeping is integral to the artistic process**

In the case of Vera Frenkel, the most significant characteristic of her recordkeeping and her archives is that they are essential to her artistic practice. They are a constant element in her life, providing continuity among the several studios the artist has maintained over her career. Indeed, if the studio is conceived of as an activity or a portable practice (“a virtual condition of personal artistic reflection or ‘studious activity,’” in the words of Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice), Frenkel’s recordkeeping can be understood as the enduring embodiment of her studio. The artist’s records offer her the possibility of creative recycling, which is essential to the character of her work. The possibility of motifs and characters recurring, the multilayered métissage of voices and media, and perhaps even the artist’s engagement with themes of memory and evidence all depend on her continued access to the traces of past artistic activity in her studio. I would posit that part of the difficulty Frenkel experiences with classification is related to the externality of recordkeeping. A less subtle person than the artist, one prone to clear-cut distinctions, might not hesitate to file things. Frenkel sees the implications of classification: the placement of a document in a fixed category diminishes its potential to shift and move with context as a living record. Neglecting her filing allows the artist to keep the records at play.

**Records and non-records are bound up together in the studio**

Records in the studio are difficult to separate entirely from elements that will not be considered records or archives by the institution. These include items of furniture—such as the artist’s central work-table and slide cabinets—that are closely related to aspects of recordkeeping in the studio by way of their current or intended function. More mundanely, items of stationery and office equipment distributed throughout the studio hold the promise of more organized

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recordkeeping at a future date. The artist’s personal library fulfills a role in her practice that is related to that of her records, in that it serves partly to represent Frenkel’s projects, ideas and relationships; and can be browsed for inspiration in a way similar to the re-encountering of records in the studio space. Finished works of art, in prominent visible storage in the studio space, serve partly as a record of past accomplishment. Potentially, they are available for browsing and creative re-encountering in the same way as records and books. In the studio space, furniture, stationery, books, and artwork enter into Frenkel’s account of her recordkeeping because of their physical integration into the studio and their practical integration into the artist’s ongoing studio practice. The living aspect of these items, of course, is impossible to translate into the institution. Their physical disposition can be documented to some extent through photography and mapping, as it was in our guided tour.

**Records and archives are a complex mode of self-representation**

As Alfred Gell articulates in *Art and Agency*, thinking can take place outside a person, through the involvement of the traces of past activity. Frenkel’s records are her externalized thoughts. As interesting as this phenomenon may be to any scholar, critic, or fan of the artist who wishes to view the resulting traces, the situation is not necessarily comfortable for Frenkel herself:

> I think we’ve become far more dependent upon external record keeping than is healthy. I think … people that trust their memories and have reason to cultivate their memories and their intuitions and their understandings of the world, and I mean this may be my pastoral fantasy raising its head again, but I think we’ve lost a lot of insight by externalizing things, and part of scholarly activity is to get it back, is to somehow get the mind around all that external stuff, bring it back inside the mind and the … heart and the soul and the body so that you’re one with the material again.¹⁴

Frenkel’s records in her studio are not like any other kind of self-representation. They have an extremely intimate relationship to the artist, in the sense that they have a metonymic aspect, serving as a kind of externalized self by virtue of their function as externalized thought or memory. There are also involuntary, accidental, and collaborative aspects of records which complicate their nature as self-representations. The many voices in the archives, captured in

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different moments and by different media, are like Lionnet’s notion of métissage, and thus like the indefinite interdisciplinary voices at play in one of Frenkel’s art works. In a sense, the authenticity of Frenkel’s records as a representation of self depends on a combination of these factors: their utility as externalized thought, and the interplay of multiple layers of time and different voices.

**The performance of recordkeeping**

In the personal sphere, Frenkel’s records exist for her own use. As I found when I attempted to apprehend the studio independently, her records are mute without the “oral scaffolding” of her guiding narrative, to use Martha Langford’s term from her analysis of photograph albums. Artistic inspiration—as a process, or a moment—is difficult, or perhaps impossible, for outside eyes to perceive. Of course, the oral scaffolding as I experienced it was in some sense a performance by Frenkel: the narration of her records was another mode of life narrative.

As the visiting researcher and archivist, I played the role of a coaxer in this narrative. I was interested in a very quotidian behaviour of the artist and in its physical manifestations, neither of which Frenkel would have had any prior occasion to say much about. At the same time, she would have been becoming aware of the potential wider interest in her archives through the process of transferring her archives to QUA, and particularly through Lacerte’s archival investigations, which were geared towards a public exhibition. Adding to my role as coaxer was the weight of my background: my association with the Art Gallery of Ontario and my experience with the archives of several of Frenkel’s colleagues and peers may have added a veil of institutional authority to my presence, no matter how much I downplayed it.

The archives in the studio can only be known through Frenkel, either through controlled access or through her telling. As Smith and Watson describe, there is a revelation of self and concealment of self in any life narrative, and this aspect is perceptible both in Frenkel’s archives and in the guided tour. The controlling self of the artist rules her self-representation. The

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“true” Vera Frenkel is ultimately unknowable, visible in glimpses through her choice of anecdote and commentary, but impossible to pin down. As the artist herself wrote with reference to the accumulations in her studio in 1979, “the truth is always in the interstices between things. A piece of evidence is always a manifest ambiguity; what is stated masks what isn’t.”

**Intangible characteristics of records in the studio**

There are aspects of my experience of Frenkel’s studio that are difficult to pin down, that are linked to the atmosphere of the space. It could be argued that an element like atmosphere is highly subjective, but the studio creates room for this kind of subjective experience. My own feeling as I recorded my independent take on the studio was that the studio and the records it contains are like Frenkel’s shadow, not alive but animated by her life. Frenkel’s studio is a bit *unheimlich* or uncanny, to mention again a term that comes up in Sven Spieker’s distillation of the nature of archives. The hum of computers is one aspect of the atmosphere, conveying quiet, latent energy. The dim light cast by the skylight is another: a sunny space with a wall of windows would have a very different feel to it. The impression of suspended activity—piles of papers reflecting past action to which the artist will return—is one aspect of the atmosphere. This is the element that Frenkel herself referred to as “Miss Havisham’s wedding,” in a potent literary allusion.

In their respective essays for *Mapping a Practice*, Frenkel and Lacerte both express regret that they were not able to work the theme of “mischief” into the exhibition (“the ways in which humour and irony became, over the years, cherished instruments for building scepticism,” to use Frenkel’s phrase.) Mischief is certainly present in the studio. It is at the heart of Frenkel’s delight in serendipitous juxtapositions, a feeling she expressed most clearly around her bookshelves, where she suspects herself of placing books half-consciously in humorous

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combinations for future rediscovery. It is also implicit in her notebook-making habit, where she
creates fertile ground for similar juxtapositions by repurposing older documents as a surface for
future notations. These intangible characteristics seem to defy archival acquisition.

Research Question 2: What is the nature of the changes in structure and content
of an artist's archives associated with their acquisition, appraisal, arrangement,
and description by an institution?

Research question 2 is difficult to answer, or at least the answers are different in nature from my
initial expectations. As I described in Chapter 3: Research Design, I had expected the
movement of records into the institution to represent a reasonably clear-cut before-and-after
situation. While it is true that a portion of the materials constituting the future Vera Frenkel
fonds had been acquired by QUA, and while these materials could be contrasted with the
records still in the artist’s studio, the processes of acquisition, appraisal, arrangement and
description were in a sense still in progress at the time of my research. Frenkel's interventions
into the records at QUA included the imposition of provisional access restrictions that
effectively made certain records disappear into unlisted boxes, amounting to a kind of appraisal
decision. Home, seeing the integral, tangled relationship between the materials in the first
accrual and the records still in Frenkel’s studio, was delaying the process of archival arrangement
and description, hoping that it could be postponed until a bulk of the records had been acquired.
The fonds-level description and file list with which I worked therefore amounted to interim
descriptive tools. These circumstances make it difficult to address Research Question 2 with any
kind of finality.

On the other hand, the interim situation had the unexpected benefit of mitigating one
problematic aspect of my research. I had initially been concerned about the comparative aspect
implicit in the before vs. after relationship between my two research questions. Because my
study was not longitudinal, I was examining two different entities—one set of records and
archives in the studio, and an entirely separate set of archives in the institution—and attempting
to reach conclusions about their differences. The blurring of “before” and “after” by Frenkel's
interventions and QUA’s deferrals made the boundary between the personal and institutional
spheres much less distinct than I had imagined. By implication, I was now looking at a process rather than two discrete entities.

In terms of the focus of Research Question 2 itself, there are significant aspects of my findings that are outside its scope. Specifically, there are aspects of institutionalization that are not captured in the question as phrased. Having considered the role of Frenkel’s recordkeeping activities and her narration of her own records in animating the records in the personal sphere, it seemed important also to look at the animating forces of the institution. The institution, after all, is not a sealed vault. Its own mandates, the energy of its staff, and the mediating role of staff in facilitating access to the records all have their impacts on the way the Frenkel fonds is encountered by the public.

My answers to Research Question 2 therefore reflect an expanded scope of this question:
“What is the nature of the changes in structure, content, and presentation of an artist’s archives associated with their acquisition, appraisal, arrangement, description, and programming by an institution?”

*Physical, tangible change resulting from acquisition*

The most obvious impact of acquisition on Frenkel’s archives is spatial and visible: the packing of papers, files, and video recordings, formerly diffused throughout the studio, into the compact, linear, and finite space of archival boxes. This much is evident from contrasting the photographs of the studio (throughout Chapter 5) with that of QUA’s Frenkel fonds (Figure 40, in Chapter 6). As discussed above under “Records and non-records are bound up together in the studio,” books, furniture, stationery, and artworks form part of the landscape of recordkeeping in the studio. As objects, most of these items are excluded for various reasons from archival acquisition, with tangible consequences. Books will be selectively accommodated in the archives if they document Frenkel’s career, but the artist’s personal library will not be
acquired. Furniture is out of bounds for the archives for both practical and theoretical reasons.\textsuperscript{19} In terms of archival acquisition, stationery is almost devoid of interest as an artifact once it is removed from the context of recordkeeping practice. Finished artworks tend not to be available to the archives, even if an archivist might find a rationale for their theoretical place in a fonds. In the tradition of collecting by institutions and private collectors, the value—aesthetic, cultural, monetary—of works of art tends to dictate that they be treated as individual items rather than as a holistic group. The artist’s archives in the institution are thus divorced from their original physical context, including the objects which shared the space of the studio.

\textit{Intangible change resulting from acquisition}

In the course of my literature review I mentioned conceptual artist Lucas Samaras’ reconstruction of his studio in a gallery setting. In a recent blog post, artist Tamarin Norwood takes issue with Samaras’ statement that the exhibition of his studio was “the most personal thing that any artist could do,” arguing instead that:

\begin{quote}
What is presented in the gallery is intimacy suspended, intimacy in inverted commas, intimacy under display—and under display, the replication of casual disorder presents the dead weight of deliberateness. Here the physical business of packing, shipping and unpacking literally isolates the room from the surrounding ground with which it was once continuous: the original building, the man’s life, the daily passing of time.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

This observation, without referring to archives or archival institutions, nonetheless gets to the heart of one of the changes that takes place when a personal fonds is acquired. No matter how faithfully the archivist manages to reflect the original order of the fonds, her efforts are still a representation. There is an aspect of the “personal sphere”—or the studio—that is animated by life itself. As Brien Brothman argues, “the most basic disruption of original order, of course, is

\textsuperscript{19} The “recordness” of diverse kinds of objects can be argued for by an open-minded archivist, but the informational and evidential value of most items of furniture would generally be too low to warrant archival acquisition. In practical terms, furniture exceeds the storage capacity of most archival institutions.

the removal of the records from the originating site of provenance and their placement in archives.”

This transformation is readily apparent in the case of Vera Frenkel. The living disorder of the studio is impossible to replicate in archival boxes. For the sake of argument, even an archaeological recreation of the studio, in the mode of Francis Bacon’s studio at The Hugh Lane gallery in Dublin, would fail to get at its essence (apart from making research virtually impossible). In the studio, the relationships among documents are indeterminate, distributed, and potential. In the institution, a certain amount of chaos remains, but the relationships among documents are static and linear. Less tangibly, the atmosphere of Frenkel’s studio—the muted light, the hum of computer equipment, the powerful presence of the artist—cannot survive institutional transfer.

**Appraisal and selection**

The Frenkel fonds at QUA is fundamentally shaped by the earliest appraisal decisions by Home, notably her inclusive attitude towards the scope of the fonds as comprehending documentation of the artist’s whole life: “the mother-in-law and the grocery list, and the whatever,” in Frenkel’s phrase. Without the archivist’s decree of this holistic approach, Frenkel’s existing notion of the fonds as consisting just of the documentation surrounding her art works might have prevailed, and the fonds would have been dramatically different. As it is, the institutionalized fonds includes a much wider range of the records in the personal sphere.

The actual process of enacting appraisal and selection has a particular effect on the institutionalized fonds in its interim state because it is careful and gradual. The three iterations of the document in which Frenkel and Home negotiated the scope and broad arrangement of the archival material to be acquired speak to the seriousness with which Frenkel approached the preparations for the transfer. Her painstaking work on selecting material to go to QUA involves

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the review and repacking of individual files, resulting in a certain amount of reconfiguration of the archival bond as files formerly maintained together may have different dispositions. The scope of material at QUA reflects the current state of Frenkel’s practice, because only the documentation of projects with which she currently feels she is finished is selected for transfer.

Eventually, if all goes according to the current plan, all of the records which Frenkel feels have archival value will end up together at the archives. The effects of the selection process may then be difficult to decipher, or they may have a permanent impact on the physical sequence of the files, if they are maintained in the order in which they are received. Home is alert to the possibility that meaning accrues to the order of the archives as received, because this order reflects the artist’s situated process of archival selection.

**Arrangement and description**

As a challenge for archival arrangement, the Frenkel fonds illustrates a weakness of the archival concept of original order of the kind described by Jennifer Meehan.23 As Home recognizes, the order in which files are selected and packed by the artist for archival transfer unavoidably bears little resemblance to the original order of records in the studio. That original order defies replication in the archives, as discussed above under the heading of intangible change. Home perceives a kind of archival bond among the files in boxes as they are received by the archives, and intends somehow to preserve that order, if only by preserving the box-file list that records it.

Overall, the effect of arrangement and description on the Frenkel fonds is still difficult to assess. This is mostly because arrangement had not yet taken place to a major extent at the time of my research. The interim order of the Frenkel fonds is clearly related to the process of selection, rather than shaped by choices made by the archivist. It is intrinsically difficult to assess the effect of an interpretive framework and text (arrangement and description) on subsequent interpretations of a fonds, because the fonds itself is a large and complex text. Frenkel hints at

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23 Meehan, ‘Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records’.
the future impact of arrangement in description in her Mapping a Practice essay, stating, “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.”24 The notion that an “accounting” takes place in the archives is an interesting take on the impact of archival acquisition. In this vision, the institutionalization of the archives imposes a final, authoritative structure on their contents, fixing the relationships among the constituent documents. This accounting, although privileged, is not necessarily correct in the artist’s view.

Reference help as mediation

In framing my original research questions, I imagined the effect of acquisition on the fonds as being limited to aspects of archival processing. There is a further impact, somewhat independent of processing, that has the potential to shape the direction of researchers’ journeys through the fonds: the reference assistance of archives staff. Particularly while the fonds is in an interim state of organic disorder, with access restrictions still negotiated case by case, Home will play a role in assisting and guiding researchers. In our interviews, Frenkel commented on Home’s interpretive role in providing access to the fonds:

[In developing an overall structure for the archives at Queen’s] I had to think about what … I do and what I’ve done, and what the evidence is of that. So she [Home] had all those categories and then filing folders that were labelled, and I think she has put them—keeping those categories in mind—I think she’s put the files in that kind of order as she understands them. Whether I would understand them the same way is not clear because I know from students that have gone to my archive and Heather has guided them with great enthusiasm … and attentiveness; I would have guided them somewhat differently. But that’s the nature of the process and … that’s her take on the archive. And I have to remain modest … and retreat.25

The artist already perceives that Home’s guidance to researchers is different to the direction that she herself would have provided, with a resulting impact on the interpretation of the fonds by these researchers.


The institution has its own momentum and its own potential

It would be a mistake to over-state the static aspects of archives in their institutional setting. An institutionalized fonds is ripe with potential for future reanimation by researchers in a way that records in the studio are unlikely to be. Although researchers at the archives are constrained to follow and maintain the physical order of the fonds, intellectually they have free rein to re-narrate its contents according to their own research questions. This aspect is difficult to observe; my own examination of the institutionalized Frenkel fonds brought a set of questions to the files and boxes that was very static, in a sense, since it was focused on their past and their intrinsic qualities in a way that few researchers’ investigations would be. *Mapping a Practice* offered an unusual example of re-narration, focused as it was on the nature of the archives themselves. The curatorial voice in the exhibition was understated, but the power of the exhibition to animate the archives was considerable, bringing many viewers into their own encounters with the fonds and resulting in reflective commentary in the form of the catalogue essays. Over time, different voices will take their inspiration from the archives, spinning new narratives.

In the institutional setting, archives become a part of that institution’s relationship with other institutions. QUA, notably, has a strong proximity to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. Home has collaborated on exhibitions there in the past, and has a good working relationship with its staff. The AEAC, of course, has acquired and exhibited key works by Frenkel. Home’s dual role as acquisitions archivist and Public Services Archivist means that her focus extends outside the boundaries of the institution; she had an integral role in facilitating *Mapping a Practice*, for example, which brought the Frenkel fonds into the different institutional setting of Galerie SBC.

Making sense of the fonds in the institution

I found that there are aspects of the institutionalized fonds that cannot fully be explained with reference to the personal sphere or the institution alone, perhaps because they hover in the background to both. These broader considerations are findings that do not fit the original
research questions. This lack of alignment could be seen as a limitation of my original conceptualization of my research, or as a signal of the breadth of my eventual findings.

**The creator brings a host of preconceptions to the construction of her archives**

Recordkeeping, for Frenkel, seems to happen instinctually and integrally to the creation of her work. Archives are different; she admitted, in the guided tour, to not really thinking of her own records in those terms yet. There are literary and metaphorical inspirations for her way of thinking about archives: the multiple narrative strands of *The Golden Notebook*; Sandy MacGillivray’s seven tables for re-sorting archaeological evidence; Borges’ Library; the memory of the undergraduate experience of library stacks as seeming infinitude. Frenkel has explored the idea of archives throughout her oeuvre, seeing in them an institutional solemnity that invites the poking of fun (as in the Cornelia Lumsden works), a symbol of bureaucratic evils (as in *Body Missing*) or somewhere in between (*The Institute™*). In her most recent work, *ONCE NEAR WATER*, archives take on a more positive aspect as subversive, hopeful testimony. The various ideas of archives that Frenkel brings to her eventual construction of her fonds can be seen in a dialectical relationship: there is an idea of institutional standards, bureaucracy, and power against which to react, and an evolving notion of archives as a fluid merging of testimony, fluidity, and heteroglossia. The *Mapping a Practice* essay makes it clear that the artist is thinking deeply about archives and their role in her practice. How exactly these ideas play out in Frenkel’s decisions around her own fonds remains mysterious—it may be too soon to evaluate this aspect, because the fonds is still very much in the midst of becoming.

**The institutionalized fonds as life narrative**

If the Vera Frenkel fonds at QUA is considered as a life narrative, it is obviously the product of diverse authorial factors that can be located in the personal sphere, the institutional sphere and beyond. A fonds is a complex entity, and a challenging subject for analysis as a life narrative. The narrating “I” of a fonds, to use Smith and Watson’s terminology, is hard to pin down because his or her voice is typically fragmented among the myriad individual records that make up the fonds. Layered on top of the problem of fragmentation are the overarching authorial
acts of maintaining records, deciding to transfer them to a repository, and selecting materials for transfer, none of which necessarily forms any kind of legible statement on the part of the narrator about what he or she is doing. The narrated “I” is similarly elusive because of the complexity of the fonds; the subject of a fonds, in terms of life narrative, can only be perceived through the same multiplicity of fragments. If a fonds can be accepted as a life narrative, it is only with the qualification that the narrating and narrated “I” of the fonds may be as elusive as the real historical “I.” The truth and reliability of the Vera Frenkel fonds as a life narrative are, as expected, difficult to assess from the internal evidence of the fonds itself. Of course, Frenkel has provided a kind of meta-narrative to her fonds in the form of the guided tour, and her *Mapping a Practice* essay. Each of these could be thought of as its own discrete autobiographical statement, with its own specific context and audience. Simultaneously, each is also a commentary on the Frenkel fonds, adding a gloss to its complexity as a life narrative.

The notion of “cultural scripts” as a factor in shaping life narratives could be seen to be at play in the literary antecedents and preconceptions discussed above. The cultural script(s) for a contemporary artist building her archives is hard to delineate, given a number of factors including the diversity in contemporary artistic practice, the rapid evolution of notions of archives and “the archive,” and the relatively recent development of institutional collecting of artists’ archives. Frenkel has clearly thought about the sources of her idea of archives, and has offered a number of titles and personal encounters for consideration. She is aware of other artists and the way that they keep records, and of what becomes of their archives. But her account of her studio also includes the statement that she does not yet think of her own records as archives. Perhaps she is beginning to see them in those terms, judging from her reflections in her *Mapping a Practice* essay.

In considering the institutionalized fonds as life narrative, there are numerous actors in the role of “coaxer.” Bruce Whiteman at McGill was particularly persuasive in this role, providing the artist’s first encounter with institutional acquisition. By providing a helpful, low-pressure staging ground for Frenkel to review her flood-damaged records, he eased the artist over the threshold of archival transfer, probably achieving a more inclusive and spontaneous fonds as a result. At Queen’s, Ted Rettig literally coaxed Frenkel to consider QUA as an archival repository, while
Jan Allen formed a significant part of the appeal of the institutional setting. Heather Home has played an enormous coaxing role. Her insistence that the fonds include a holistic representation of every aspect of Frenkel’s life has fundamentally altered the character of the fonds away from Frenkel’s initial conception of an artwork-centred body of documentation. It is a much more personal self-representation as a result. Home’s rapport with Frenkel, her willingness to accommodate the artist’s decision making in the appraisal and acquisition process, and her dedication to facilitating research and exhibitions are all elements in her role as coaxer. In a small way, I may have played a role as a coaxer of the archives as well, encouraging Frenkel through my research project to reflect on recordkeeping and archives and on the significance of her archival appraisal efforts.

Finally, it is fitting that métissage is a useful concept for making sense of the institutional fonds and its braiding together of diverse voices. It is a concept that forms part of the wider cultural context for Frenkel’s art making and archival activity, and which also underlies autobiographical studies. Frenkel’s deep engagement with ideas of archives is surely related to her vision of interdisciplinarity, and her commitment to the blurred boundary between truth and fiction. The Vera Frenkel fonds is, as the artist observed about her studio in 1979, “like the most elaborate version of [her] most elaborate work,” layered, fragmented, organic, and ripe for future transformation. In its institutional setting, another set of voices has been layered on top of the existing layers of the fonds. The archivist may point to favoured documents, as may previous researchers through their exhibitions and publications. These prompts may tend to skew the research path of a malleable researcher. Intangibly, the character of QUA as an archival institution—its other holdings, its procedures, setting and culture—will form a part of the experience of the fonds for every future researcher. The fonds is the ultimate self-representation by Frenkel because of its inherent nature. No other statement, individual, or material trace offers the same possibility to mimic Frenkel’s interdisciplinary multiplicity of voices. An archival fonds is a “heteroglossic euphony” of voices, to use Home’s phrase; each strand of evidence is thrown into relief by another, perhaps contradicted by yet another, but the fonds as a whole has a peculiar unity and stability.
Conclusions: Archives, posterity and the time-based media artist

In her keynote address to the 2006 DOCAM Summit, Vera Frenkel commented on the place of absence and loss in her work, not only as a fundamental theme, but an inherent quality of the media in which she has worked:

You’ll see when we start looking at [my] 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.26

She quoted these comments in her Mapping a Practice essay, making the link between the role of absence in her work and the role of her archives in delineating and perhaps resolving aspects of absence.

The Vera Frenkel fonds will be used by curators and art historians in the future to reconstruct the artist’s work and engage critically with that work. If, as Bénichou suggests, Frenkel resists formal documentation of her artwork in the mode of the Variable Media Questionnaire, if she does not appoint a trusted assistant to be her surrogate and extend her creative reach at least a number of years after her death, then archival research will be a vital avenue for curators engaged in the continued exhibition of her work. Frenkel, who steadfastly maintains the ambiguity of her authorial voice, would have a difficult time setting out definitive statements about how to realize her own work. Indeed, if she did, an intuitive curator might feel a responsibility to approach such a statement with doubt. Frenkel herself acknowledges that her work is destined to be a “puzzle to [her] successors.”

In a time-based media environment, the relationship between art and archives has changed. The notion of a discrete, finished work of art is no longer valid (if indeed it ever was), and the

institution’s role in preserving art works has shifted into a greater emphasis on documentation than physical intervention. The artist’s archives are part of an imperfect solution to the challenge of time-based media art, one that will place an even greater emphasis on the curator’s role as an interpreter or performer of the work of art. The Vera Frenkel fonds is the artist’s best hope at a particular kind of immortality.

Moving forward

There are a number of reasons to return to Vera Frenkel and her fonds in future years. My research project engaged with the artist during a brief span of years when the archival donation was well underway, but far from complete. Frenkel’s ideas about archives were being developed and refined even as I was in the final stages of my project. Revisiting my “case” in a few years’ time would be an opportunity to observe the continuing growth of the fonds, including the work of the archival institution to accommodate new accruals that have a complex relationship to existing holdings; to examine the ongoing relationship between artist, archivist, and archival institution; and to look at the development of the role of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. I am also confident that Frenkel has not finished thinking about archives; her newest exhibition project, tentatively scheduled as I write, is titled Archival Dialogues. There is future work to be done in looking at the artist’s evolving idea of archives. To take another angle, the availability of the Frenkel fonds at QUA may give rise to new exhibitions and scholarship on the artist in the next several years, projects that would be interesting to review in terms of the role played by the fonds. Further in the future, it would be intriguing to look at the “completed” fonds after the artist has passed on, and begin to evaluate how it actually functions as a record of process and ideas in relationship to art works for which imaginative mediation may be the key to their continued life.

In the meantime, this case contributes a foundation on which future studies of artists’ archives can be built. Similar studies in the future could probably benefit from considering some of the quirks of my methodology. These may point to the advisability of reconnaissance work in advance of designing this kind of study: perhaps one or more preliminary interviews in which the researcher asks the artist about the general parameters of recordkeeping and artistic practice,
and permissible modes of data collection, or asks the archivist about the usual and unusual aspects of the acquisition. I’m not sure, though, that the unique aspects of a case can always be foreseen. For me, the process of understanding what my research was about and even how it was actually being accomplished was only possible through immersion in Frenkel’s practice, her studio, her ideas of archives, and her growing sense of her own archives.

The limitation of the single case is, of course, that it is only a single case. I have argued for the crucial importance of Vera Frenkel’s archives: their integral role (as records) in the artist’s practice; their intimate, almost inextricable relationship to the artist’s finished oeuvre of work; and their integral role in the future mediation of her work. This importance is a compelling reason to study the archives of other artists, to discover the nature of the bond between artist, archives and art, and the role of the institution, in different instances. Obviously, each will be unique. Together, different cases may support a more widespread awareness—on the part of archivists, curators, scholars, or administrators—of the complex nature of artists’ archives and their place in contemporary art.
Bibliography


Tuer, Dot. ‘Threads of Memory and Exile: Examining the Art of Storytelling in the Work of Vera Frenkel’. In Images Festival of Independent Film and Video, 40–43. Toronto: Northern Visions/The Images Festival of Independent Film and Video, 1997.


Appendix A
Research Ethics Submission Documents
ETHICS REVIEW PROTOCOL SUBMISSION FORM FOR
SUPERVISED AND SPONSORED RESEARCHERS
(For use by graduate students, post-docs and visiting professors and researchers)

SECTION A – GENERAL INFORMATION

1. TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT

Toward a definition of visual artists’ archives: Vera Frenkel’s archives as a case study

2. INVESTIGATOR INFORMATION

Investigator:
Title: Ms. Name: Amy Furness
Department: Faculty of Information
Mailing address: 150 Borden Street, Toronto, M5S 2N3
Phone: 416-536-5426 Fax: (416) 978-5762 Email: amy.furness@utoronto.ca

Level of Project
Faculty Research □
Post-Doctoral Research □
Student Research: Doctoral ☑ Masters □ Student Number 009855681

Faculty Supervisor/Sponsor:
Title: Dr. Name: Barbara Craig
Department: Faculty of Information
Mailing address: 140 St. George Street, Toronto, M5S 3G6
Phone: 416-978-7093 Fax: 416-971-1399 Email: barbara.craig@utoronto.ca

Co-Investigators:
Are co-investigators involved? Yes □ No ☑
Title: Name:
Department:
Mailing address:
Phone: Fax: Email:

Title: Name:
Department:
Mailing address:
Phone: Fax: Email:

Please append additional pages if necessary.

3. UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD
Health Sciences ☐  Education ☐  Social Science & Humanities ☒
Please consult http://www.research.utoronto.ca/ethics/eh_rebs.html to determine which Research Ethics Board your proposal should be submitted to.

4. LOCATION(S) WHERE THE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED:

If the research is to be conducted at a site requiring administrative approval/consent (e.g. in a school), please include all draft administrative consent letters. It is the responsibility of the researcher to determine what other means of approval are required, and to obtain approval prior to starting the project.

University of Toronto ☐
Hospital ☐  specify site(s)
School board or community agency ☐  specify site(s)
Community within the GTA ☐  (Private studio of Vera Frenkel, Toronto)
International ☐  specify site(s)
Other ☒  (Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario)

The University of Toronto has recently reached an agreement with the University-Attached Teaching Hospitals, regarding ethics review of hospital-based research. Based on this agreement, certain hospital-based research is now exempt from ethics review at the University of Toronto. If your research is based at a University-Attached Teaching Hospital please consult the following document to determine whether or not your research requires review at the University of Toronto http://www.research.utoronto.ca/ethics/eh_where_tahsn.html.

5. OTHER RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL(S)

(a) Does the research involve another institution or site?   Yes ☐  No ☒
(b) Has any other REB approved this project?   Yes ☒  No ☐
   If Yes please provide a copy of the approval letter upon submission of this application.
   If No, will any other REB be asked for approval?  Yes ☐  (please specify which REB)  No ☒

6. FUNDING OF THE PROJECT

(a) Please check one:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Funded ☐</th>
<th>Agency:</th>
<th>Fund #:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Applied for funding ☐</td>
<td>Agency:</td>
<td>Submission date:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unfunded ☒</td>
<td>Agency:</td>
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If one protocol is to cover more than one grant, please include all fund numbers.

(b) If waiting for funding, do you wish to postdate ethics approval to the release of funds?   Yes ☐  No ☒

(c) For funded research, will more than one protocol be submitted to cover all research funded by the respective grant?   Yes ☐  No ☒
   If Yes, this is # of

7. CONTRACTS
Is there a funding or non-funded agreement associated with the research?

Yes ☐ No ☒

If Yes, please include 3 copies upon submission of this application.

8. PROJECT START AND END DATES

Estimated start date for this project: May 1, 2009
Estimated completion date for this project: May 1, 2010

9. SCHOLARLY REVIEW

Please check one:

☒ The research has been approved by a thesis committee, or equivalent (required for thesis research)
☐ The research has undergone scholarly review prior to this submission for ethical review
  (specify review committee)
☐ The research will undergo scholarly review prior to funding
  (specify review committee)
☐ The research will not undergo scholarly review apart from this ethics review

10. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

(a) Will the researcher(s), members of the research team, and/or their partners or immediate family members:

(i) Receive any personal benefits (e.g. financial benefit such as remuneration, intellectual property rights, rights of employment, consultancies, board membership, share ownership, stock options, etc.) as a result of or in connection to this study? Yes ☐ No ☒

(ii) If Yes, please describe the benefits below. (Do not include conference and travel expense coverage, or other benefits which are standard to the conduct of research.)

(b) Describe any restrictions regarding access to or disclosure of information (during or at the end of the study) that has been placed on the investigator(s). This includes controls placed by sponsor, advisory or steering committee.

No restrictions.

(c) Where relevant, please explain any pre-existing relationship between the researcher(s) and the researched (e.g. instructor-student; manager-employee; minister-congregant).

N/A
SECTION B – SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

Please include a list of appendices for all additional materials submitted.

11. RATIONALE

Describe the purpose and background rationale for the proposed project, and, if relevant, the hypotheses/research questions to be examined.

The project is a case study which will investigate the archives (records and documents) of visual artist Vera Frenkel, comparing those materials kept by the artist in her studio to those which have already been acquired by an archival repository. The effect of archival management processes on these archives will be examined. Because no existing research on this topic has been identified, the study will be exploratory in nature and will deal with a single case. Vera Frenkel has been selected as the subject of the project because she is a notable Canadian artist and meets certain practical criteria (seniority of career; geographic proximity; a portion of her archives has recently been acquired by Queen’s University Archives).

The research questions to be examined are as follows:

RQ1. What are the significant characteristics of an individual visual artist’s personal archives in the personal sphere?

RQ2. What is the nature of the changes in structure and content of these archives associated with their acquisition, appraisal, and arrangement by an institution?

12. METHODS
Please describe all formal and informal procedures to be used, settings and types of information to be involved, as well as how data will be analyzed.

Attach a copy of all questionnaires, interview guides or other non-standard test instruments.

There is no use of deception, placebo, or experimental intervention in this research.

The research will take a qualitative case study approach, within which semi-structured interviews and document analysis techniques will be used. Research will begin in Vera Frenkel’s studio (the personal recordkeeping environment) and then move to Queen’s University Archives (QUA; the institutional environment).

**Semi-structured interviews:**

Interviews will be conducted at three stages of the research:

- At the outset, a semi-structured interview with Vera Frenkel concerning her recordkeeping practices. The topic will be limited to Ms. Frenkel’s documentation of her artistic career and will not include sensitive topics such as health, finances or personal relationships. This interview will take the form of a “guided tour” through the artist’s studio. Its structure will be determined by encountering records and archives in their natural setting, so will not involve a traditional interview guide. Data will be collected by audio recording and transcription, photography of the studio, and the creation of a bird’s-eye map of the location of archival material in the studio.

- A semi-structured interview with the archivist responsible for acquiring and processing the Vera Frenkel archives at Queen’s University Archives (QUA), concerning her professional experiences with this acquisition. An interview guide (Appendix A) is attached; certain additional questions will be contingent on preceding stages of the research. Data will be collected by audio recording and transcription.

- A semi-structured wrap-up interview with Vera Frenkel, concerning any outstanding questions raised by the preceding stages of the research. The topic will be limited to Ms. Frenkel’s documentation of her artistic career and will not include sensitive topics such as health, finances or personal relationships. Specific questions will depend upon preceding stages of the research, but the subject of the questions will necessarily be confined to the elaboration of questions from the initial interview with Ms. Frenkel, and the contents of the archival collection at QUA. Data will be collected by audio-recording and transcription.

**Document analysis:**

The analysis of documents will consist of the following four activities:

- Detailed examination of Vera Frenkel’s archives in her studio, under the general supervision of Ms. Frenkel, in order to contextualize and complete the artist’s overview of the records/archives gained through the “guided tour” interview. The examination will be limited to Ms. Frenkel’s documentation of her artistic career and will not include sensitive topics such as health, finances or personal relationships. Data will be collected by note-taking.

- Examination of QUA’s accession files and other administrative records pertaining to the acquisition and management of the Vera Frenkel archives. Access to these files will be governed by the Ontario Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) and will be contingent on the written permission of Vera Frenkel. The subject of the examination will be limited to QUA’s decision-making processes around the acquisition of the archives. Financial data will not be taken into consideration and will not be recorded. Data will be collected by note-taking.
- Examination of QUA's finding aid (inventory / catalogue) to the Vera Frenkel archives. This document is publicly available and contains no personal information. Data will be collected by note-taking.

- Examination of the Vera Frenkel fonds (archival collection at QUA). These archives are a publicly available collection. Data will be collected by note-taking.

**Data analysis**

At each stage of the research, interview transcripts and notes (plus photographs and diagrams, where applicable) will be reviewed in order to identify emergent themes in the data. At the conclusion of data gathering, data from each stage of the research will be examined as a whole, with the particular aim of identifying differences between the personal and institutional spheres of recordkeeping.

It is not expected that qualitative analysis software — i.e. formal data coding techniques — will be useful in making sense of the data, since the case involves a single research subject and offers little scope for internal comparisons. The method for analyzing photographic data described by Collier and Collier (Visual anthropology: photography as a research method. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986) is expected to be helpful in making sense of photographs of the artist’s personal recordkeeping environment.

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13. **PARTICIPANTS OR DATA SUBJECTS**

Describe the participants that will be recruited, or the subjects about whom personal information will be collected. Where active recruitment is required, please describe inclusion and exclusion criteria. Where the research involves extraction or collection of personal information, please describe from whom the information will be obtained and what it will include.

The primary participant will be Vera Frenkel, who is also the subject of the research.

A considerable amount of information about Ms. Frenkel’s career will be collected through interviews and the consultation of her archives. Because the artist is a public personality and has placed her archives in a public institution, the vast majority of this information is already publicly accessible.

However, during the examination of the artist’s archives in her studio, and the examination of administrative files at Queen’s University Archives (see question 12, above), it is possible that personal information (for
example, financial data) will be accidentally encountered by the researcher. It is important to note that such personal information will not be recorded as research data in the researcher’s notes, and will not be extracted through interviews. To address the possibility that the researcher’s understanding of sensitive personal information differs from that of the artist, Vera Frenkel will be given the opportunity to review all research notes and photographs. At her request, any problematic data will be destroyed and will not be factored into data analysis or disclosed in any way. These terms are set out in the Information Letter / Consent Form with Ms. Frenkel.

The archivist responsible for the acquisition of the Vera Frenkel archives at Queen’s University Archives, Heather Home, will be a secondary participant, but will be consulted only in her professional, public capacity, consistent with her regular employment duties. No personal information about this participant will be sought.

14. EXPERIENCE

For projects that involve collection of sensitive data, methods that pose greater than minimal risk to participants, or involves a vulnerable population, please provide a brief description of the researcher’s/research team’s experience with this type of research.

The researcher has been employed as Special Collections Archivist at the Art Gallery of Ontario since 2001, and in the course of her work there has had responsibility for the acquisition and/or management of the personal archives of dozens of visual artists. She has made collections available to researchers according to terms agreed upon by donors, balancing privacy and access requirements according to professional archival standards. Although this experience has not involved research in a formal, academic sense, it has given the researcher an excellent familiarity with the types of sensitive information typically found in personal archives and a track record of handling such information with discretion.

15. RECRUITMENT

Where there is formal recruitment, please describe how and from where the participants will be recruited. Where participant observation is to be used, please explain the form of insertion of the researcher into the research setting (e.g. living in a community, visiting on a bi-weekly basis, attending organized functions).

Attach a copy of any posters, advertisements, flyers, letters, or telephone scripts to be used for recruitment.

N/A
16. COMPENSATION

(a) Will participants receive compensation for participation?

- Financial
  - Yes ☒
  - No ☒

- In-kind
  - Yes ☒
  - No ☒

- Other
  - Yes ☒
  - No ☒

(b) If Yes, please provide details.

N/A

(c) Where there is a withdrawal clause in the research procedure, if participants choose to withdraw, how will you deal with compensation?

N/A

SECTION C – DESCRIPTION OF THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

17. POSSIBLE RISKS

1. Indicate if the participants as individuals or as part of an identifiable group or community might experience any of the following risks by being part of this research project:

   (a) Physical risks (including any bodily contact or administration of any substance)? Yes ☒ No ☒

   (b) Psychological/emotional risks (feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, anxious or upset)? Yes ☒ No ☒

   (c) Social risks (including possible loss of status, privacy and/or reputation)? Yes ☒ No ☒

   (d) Is there any deception involved? (See Debriefing, #21) Yes ☒ No ☒

2. If you answered Yes to any of the above, please explain the risks, and describe how they will be managed and/or minimized.

N/A
18. POSSIBLE BENEFITS
Discuss any potential direct benefits to the participants from their involvement in the project. Comment on the (potential) benefits to the scientific/scholarly community or society that would justify involvement of participants in this study.

Vera Frenkel has indicated that she finds the proposed project interesting and worthwhile. She considers the transfer of her archives to an institution to be an important project, worthy of scholarly consideration, and welcomes the proposed examination of this process. Generally, it is a matter of prestige for an artist to be the subject of doctoral-level study.

In broader terms, artistic and other personal archives are of interest to scholars in archival studies, art history and other humanistic disciplines, yet there is no existing study of the effect of archival management on such collections. The proposed study has the potential to enrich understanding of personal archival collections for scholars and practising archivists.

Finally, numerous Canadian repositories are engaged in the acquisition of archival collections, representing a significant aspect of regional and national heritage collection-building (in 2006-2007, the combined value of the 208 archival donations certified as Canadian Cultural Property was estimated at $25,266,758 [http://www.ph.gc.ca/pom/bcm-mcp/publicn/rpt/rpt06-07-eng.pdf, accessed 12 February 2009]). Yet the effect of archival management processes on these collections has received almost no scholarly attention.

SECTION D – THE INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS

19. THE CONSENT PROCESS
Describe the process that the investigator(s) will be using to obtain informed consent. Please include the experience of the team member with this participant population and/or training that this person will receive prior to recruitment. If there will be no written consent form, please explain (e.g. discipline, cultural appropriateness, etc.). Please note, it is the quality of the consent, not the format that is important. If the research involves extraction or collection of personal information from a data subject, please describe how consent from the individuals or authorization from the custodian will be obtained.

For information about the required elements in the information letter and consent form, please refer to http://www.research.utoronto.ca/ethics/eh_best.html.

Where applicable, please attach a copy of the Information Letter/Consent Form, the content of any telephone script, letters of administrative consent or authorization and/or any other material which will be used in the informed consent process.

The investigator will meet with Vera Frenkel to describe the study, deliver the Information Letter / Consent Form, and answer questions. The investigator has 8 years’ experience working with visual artists in connection with their personal archives, in her professional capacity as Special Collections Archivist at the E.P. Taylor Research Library and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario. The Information Letter / Consent Form with Ms. Frenkel is attached (Appendix B).
The investigator will meet with Heather Home, the archivist at Queen’s University Archives to describe the study, deliver the Information Letter / Consent Form, and answer questions. The Information Letter / Consent Form with Ms. Home, the archivist at Queen’s, is attached (Appendix C).

20. CONSENT BY AN AUTHORIZED PARTY

If the participants are children, or are not competent to consent, describe the proposed alternate source of consent, including any permission/information letter to be provided to the person(s) providing the alternate consent as well as the assent process for participants.

N/A

21. DEBRIEFING
(a) If deception will be used in the research study, please explain what information/feedback will be provided to participants after participation in the project.

Please provide a copy of the written debriefing form, if applicable.

N/A

(b) How will participants be informed of study results?

A copy of the eventual dissertation will be supplied to Vera Frenkel. At the conclusion of the research process (i.e., when the eventual dissertation has been successfully defended), all research data will be offered to Ms. Frenkel.

22. PARTICIPANT WITHDRAWAL

(a) Where applicable, please describe how the participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project. Outline the procedures which will be followed to allow them to exercise this right.

Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw in the information letters / consent forms for this project. Each will be requested to communicate her wish to withdraw in writing to the researcher.

(b) Indicate what will be done with the participant’s data and any consequences which withdrawal may have on the participant.

Upon withdrawal, all data will be delivered to the participant for her own retention or disposal. There will be no consequences to the participant, except of course that she will no longer be the subject of the research project.

(c) If participants will not have the right to withdraw from the project at all, or beyond a certain point, please explain.

N/A
SECTION E --CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY

23. CONFIDENTIALITY

(a) Will the data be treated as confidential? Yes ☒ No ☐

(b) Describe the procedures to be used to ensure anonymity of participants or informants, where applicable, or the confidentiality of data during the conduct of research and dissemination of results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The primary participant will be clearly identified as the subject of the research, as indicated by the project title, so anonymity is not applicable. Because Vera Frenkel will have the opportunity to review research data and require the deletion of any sensitive personal information (see question 13, above), data will only be treated as confidential until such time as this review has taken place. Until that time, data will be secured as described below.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(c) Explain how written records, video/audio tapes and questionnaires will be secured, how long they will be retained, and provide details of their final disposal or storage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pending review by Vera Frenkel, written notes will be locked in a secure filing cabinet at the Faculty of Information, and digital photographs will be stored on a secure server at the Faculty of Information. Following review by Ms. Frenkel, any notes and photographs deemed sensitive will be destroyed. Remaining notes and photographs, together with audio tapes and transcriptions, will be retained until such time as the dissertation has been successfully defended. At that time, all such materials will be offered to Ms. Frenkel for retention or disposal as she sees fit.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

(d) If participant anonymity or confidentiality is not appropriate to this research project, please explain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anonymity is not appropriate: this research is a case study of an identifiable, public individual and would lose much of its meaning if the participant were anonymous; this is made clear in the information letter / consent form.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

24. PRIVACY REGULATIONS

For research involving extraction or collection of personal information, provincial, national and/or international laws may apply. My signature as Principal Investigator, in Section G of this protocol form, confirms that I understand and will comply with all relevant laws governing the collection and use of personal information in research.
SECTION F – CONTINUING REVIEW OF ONGOING RESEARCH

RISK MATRIX: REVIEW TYPE BY GROUP VULNERABILITY AND RESEARCH RISK – check one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Vulnerability</th>
<th>Research Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

See the Instructions for Ethics Review Protocol Submission Form for detailed information about the Risk Matrix.

Briefly explain/justify the level of risk and group vulnerability reported above (max 100 words):

The participant has no pre-existing vulnerabilities associated with the proposed research: she is a professional artist at an advanced stage of her career, and has many years’ experience as a public personality and a subject of scholarly research. The level of risk involved in the research is negligible: the proposed research techniques of interviewing the participant and examining her archives are minimally invasive and are subject to the participant’s ongoing consent. The subject will be given the opportunity to review personal information gathered as part of the research, including photographs, and to withhold her consent to its retention and dissemination.

Review Type

Based on the level of risk, please submit the appropriate number of copies of the Protocol Submission Form for Review Type:

Risk level = 1: Expedited Review    Risk level = 2 or 3: Full Review

Information about individual REBs, including the number of copies required for each review type, can be found here: www.research.utoronto.ca/ethics/eh_rebs.html

Please note that the final determination of Review Type and program of Continuing Review will be made by the University of Toronto REB and the Ethics Review Office.

SECTION G – SIGNATURES

All researchers and their respective Departmental Chair/Dean or designate must sign below:

UT Ethics Review Office – Protocol Submission Form for Supervised and Sponsored Researchers
Version Date: February 1, 2007
As the Investigator on this project, my signature confirms that I will ensure that all procedures performed under the project will be conducted in accordance with all relevant University, provincial, national and international policies and regulations that govern research involving human participants. Any deviation from the project as originally approved will be submitted to the Research Ethics Board for approval prior to its implementation.

For student researchers, my signature confirms that I am a registered student in good standing with the University of Toronto. My project has been reviewed and approved by my advisory committee (where applicable). If my status as a student changes, I will inform the Ethics Review Office.

Signature of Investigator:  
Date:

For Graduate Students the signature of the Faculty Supervisor is required. For Post-Doctoral Fellows and Visiting Professors or Researchers, the signature of the Faculty Sponsor is required.

As the Faculty Supervisor of this project, my signature confirms that I have reviewed and approve the scientific merit of the research project and this ethics protocol submission. I will provide the necessary supervision to the student researcher throughout the project, to ensure that all procedures performed under the research project will be conducted in accordance with relevant University, provincial, national or international policies and regulations that govern research involving human subjects. This includes ensuring that the level of risk inherent to the project is managed by the level of research experience that the student has, combined with the extent of oversight that will be provided by the Faculty Supervisor and/or On-site Supervisor.

As the Faculty Sponsor for this project, my signature confirms that I have reviewed and approve of the research project and will assume responsibility, as the University representative, for this research project. I will ensure that all procedures performed under the project will be conducted in accordance with all relevant University, provincial, national or international policies and regulations that govern research involving human participants.

Signature of Faculty Supervisor/Sponsor:  
Date:

As the Departmental Chair/Dean, my signature confirms that I am aware of the proposed activity. My administrative unit will follow guidelines and procedures which ensure compliance with all relevant University, provincial, national or international policies and regulations that govern research involving human subjects. My signature also reflects the willingness of the department, faculty or division to administer the research funds, if there are any, in accordance with University, regulatory agency and sponsor agency policies.

Name of Departmental Chair/Dean (or designate):

Signature of Departmental Chair/Dean (or designate):  
Date:
Appendix A: Preliminary Interview schedule (Heather Home, Queen’s University Archives)

- Please provide a brief narrative of the acquisition of the Vera Frenkel archives and your role in it, including:
  - Timeline
  - Decision-making process or criteria for appraisal / selection of material to be acquired
  - Physical transfer
  - Instructions to the artist with reference to the transfer process?
  - Agreements with the artist (e.g. access, privacy, schedule for future accruals, conservation)

- Please describe the process of arranging the archives: how were series distinctions arrived at?
  - To what extent do you feel that the original order of the archives was adhered to?
  - To what extent do you feel that [perceived] researcher needs determined arrangement decisions?
  - To what extent do you feel that material or conservation concerns determined arrangement decisions?
  - Please comment on the unity of the archives: are there potentially other parties’ archives present, or extraneous series?

- Please describe the process of describing the archives / writing the finding aid [this question should be elaborated upon, based on the preceding examination of the finding aid]

- Please describe any conservation measures carried out on the archives, including re-housing and reformatting

- Please discuss any budgetary (or other resource) constraints with reference to the acquisition and processing of the archives

- [Other questions arising from examination of administrative files, finding aid and archives; and from preliminary analysis of data]
Appendix B: Information letter and consent form (Vera Frenkel)

[INSTITUTIONAL LETTERHEAD, FACULTY OF INFORMATION]

Vera Frenkel
1088 Queen Street West
Toronto, Ontario M6J 1H8

April 2009

Dear Vera,

I am writing to invite you to participate in my doctoral dissertation research on visual artists’ archives. My project is a case study which will compare the archives (records and documents) kept by you in your studio to those which have already been acquired by Queen’s University Archives. The effect of archival management processes on these archives will be examined. I am eager to make you the subject of my research because of your stature as an artist, your ongoing creative interest in archives, and the current status of your archival donation at Queen’s, which represents an interesting distribution of material between the private and institutional domains. You will be the sole subject of this research, and will be identified in the dissertation by name.

Your participation will consist of the following activities: an interview conducted as a “guided tour” through your studio (maximum 5 hours in total); general supervision of my examination of archival material in your studio (maximum 8 hours); and a follow-up interview at the conclusion of my research (maximum 2 hours). Each of these will be scheduled at your convenience, and can be divided into multiple sessions if you prefer. The interviews with you will be audio taped and transcribed, subject to your consent below. Your participation is entirely voluntary; you may refuse to participate, may withdraw at any time without negative consequences, and may decline to answer any question or participate in any part of the procedures.

In my own time, I will be consulting your archives at Queen’s University Archives. With your permission, to be negotiated in a separate agreement with Queen’s, I would like to consult the Archives’ administration files concerning the donation of your archives. I will also be interviewing Heather Home on the topic of the acquisition and processing of your archives.

There are no risks associated with your participation in this research, and no direct benefits, apart from the satisfaction I hope you will derive from your participation. There will be no payment or other compensation for your participation.

My research data will consist of audio recordings and transcripts of interviews, digital photographs of your studio, notes on my consultation of your archives (in the studio and at Queen’s), and Queen’s administrative files. This data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the Faculty of Information and will not be accessed by anyone except myself. You will have the opportunity to review my research notes and photographs and require deletion and non-disclosure of any personal information contained therein. Following the successful defense of the dissertation, I will offer you all of my research data for your own retention or disposal.

As a doctoral dissertation (if successful), the product of this research will be made publicly available through the University of Toronto. I will undertake to provide you with your own copy of the dissertation.

...2

Ethics Protocol Submission: Amy Furness

Appendices, page 2 of 5
...2

You may keep a copy of this letter for your own reference.

Sincerely,

Amy Furness
Doctoral Candidate
Faculty of Information
University of Toronto

Please sign below if you agree with all of the following statements:

1. I understand the nature of this study and my requested participation in it. I have had a chance to have my questions answered, and know I may contact the investigator and/or supervisor shown below to ask questions at any time;

2. I consent to the audio taping and transcription of interviews;

3. I understand that data concerning finances, health, and personal relationships will not be recorded by the investigator. I understand that I will have the opportunity to review research notes and photographs created in the process of this study, and will be able to require deletion and non-disclosure of any sensitive personal information contained therein;

4. I acknowledge that the researcher will apply to Queen's University Archives (QUA) for access to the administration files concerning the donation of my archives. Access to these files is not granted by signing below, but will be subject to a separate agreement with QUA;

5. I am aware that I have the right to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without any repercussions or consequences. I will communicate my wish to discontinue participation to the investigator in writing.

Signature: __________________________________________

Date: ______________________________________________

Investigator:
Amy Furness, Doctoral Candidate
Tel: 416-536-5426
Email: amy.furness@utoronto.ca

Supervisor:
Barbara Craig, Professor
Tel: 416-978-7093
Email: barbara.craig@utoronto.ca

You may contact either person above with any questions you may have.
You can also contact the Office of Research Ethics (ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273) if you have questions about your rights as a research participant.

Ethics Protocol Submission: Amy Furness

Appendices, page 3 of 5
Appendix C: Information letter and consent form (Heather Home, Queen's University Archives)

[INSTITUTIONAL LETTERHEAD, FACULTY OF INFORMATION]

Heather Home  
Public Services Archivist  
Queen's University Archives  
Kathleen Ryan Hall  
Kingston, Ontario K7L 3N6  

April 2009  

Dear Heather,  

I am writing to invite you to participate in my doctoral dissertation research on visual artists' archives. My project is a case study which will compare the archives (records and documents) kept by Vera Frenkel in her studio to those which have already been acquired by Queen's University Archives. The effect of archival management processes on these archives will be examined. Your perspective, as the archivist responsible for the acquisition and processing of the Frenkel archives, would be an invaluable part of my research.

Your participation will consist of an interview with me concerning your experiences working with the Frenkel archives (maximum 3 hours; to be scheduled at your convenience and divided over multiple sessions if you prefer). The topic of this interview will be consistent with your regular employment duties. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed, subject to your consent below. Your participation is entirely voluntary; you may refuse to participate, may withdraw at any time without negative consequences, and may decline to answer any question or participate in any part of the procedures.

There are no risks associated with your participation in this research, and no direct benefits, apart from the satisfaction I hope you will derive from your participation. There will be no payment or other compensation for your participation.

As a doctoral dissertation (if successful), the product of this research will be made publicly available through the University of Toronto. I will undertake to provide Queen's University Archives with a copy of the dissertation.

You may keep a copy of this letter for your own reference.

Sincerely,

Amy Furness  
Doctoral Candidate  
Faculty of Information  
University of Toronto

Please sign below if you agree with all of the following statements:

1. I understand the nature of this study and my requested participation in it. I have had a chance to have my questions answered, and know I may contact the investigator and/or supervisor shown below to ask questions at any time;

2. I consent to the audio taping and transcription of interviews;

Ethics Protocol Submission: Amy Furness
3. I am aware that I have the right to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without any repercussions or consequences. I will communicate my wish to discontinue participation to the investigator in writing.

Signature: __________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________

Investigator:
Amy Furness, Doctoral Candidate
Tel: 416-536-5426
Email: amy.furness@utoronto.ca

Supervisor:
Barbara Craig, Professor
Tel: 416-978-7093
Email: barbara.craig@utoronto.ca

You may contact either person above with any questions you may have.
You can also contact the Office of Research Ethics (ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273) if you have questions about your rights as a research participant.
Appendix B
Research Ethics Approval Documents
University of Toronto
Office of the Vice-President, Research
Office of Research Ethics

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 23974

April 13, 2009

Dr. Barbara Craig
Faculty of Information
University of Toronto
140 St. George St.
Toronto, ON M5S 3G6

Ms. Amy Furness
Faculty of Information
University of Toronto
140 St. George St.
Toronto, ON M5S 3G6

Dear Dr. Craig and Ms. Furness:

Re: Your research protocol entitled “Toward a definition of visual artists’ archives: Vera Frenkel’s archives as a case study”

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: April 13, 2009
Expiry Date: April 12, 2010
Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that a member of the Social Sciences, Humanities & Education Research Ethics Board has granted approval to the above-named research study, for a period of one year, under the REB’s expedited review process. Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report at least 30 days prior to the expiry date of your study.

The following consent documents (received March 30, 2009) have been approved for use in this study: Information letters and consent forms (Vera Frenkel and Heather Home, Queen’s University Archives).

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

If your research has funding attached, please contact the relevant Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Yours sincerely,

Dean Sharpe, Ph.D.
Research Ethics Officer—Social Sciences and Humanities
PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 23974
April 20, 2010
Dr. Barbara Craig
Faculty of Information
University of Toronto
140 St. George St.
Toronto, ON M5S 3G6

Ms. Amy Furness
Faculty of Information
University of Toronto
140 St. George St.
Toronto, ON M5S 3G6

Dear Dr. Craig and Ms. Furness:

Re: Your research protocol entitled, “Toward a definition of visual artists’ archives: Vera Frenkel’s archives as a case study” by Dr. B. Craig (supervisor), Ms. A. Furness (PhD candidate)

ETHICS APPROVAL
Original Approval Date: April 13, 2009
Expiry Date: April 12, 2011
Continuing Review Level: 1*
Renewal: 1 of 4

We are writing to advise you that you have been granted annual renewal of ethics approval to the above-referenced research study through the REB’s delegated process. Please note that all protocols involving ongoing data collection or interaction with human participants are subject to re-evaluation after 5 years. Ongoing projects must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your study. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry, as per federal and international policies.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible. If your research has funding attached, please contact the relevant Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Yours sincerely,

Mariana Richardson
Research Ethics Coordinator

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 23974
April 8, 2011

Dr. Barbara Craig
Faculty of Information
University of Toronto
140 St. George St.
Toronto, ON M5S 3G6

Ms. Amy Furness
Faculty of Information
University of Toronto
140 St. George St.
Toronto, ON M5S 3G6

Dear Dr. Craig and Ms. Furness:

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "Toward a definition of visual artists’ archives: Vera Frenkel’s archives as a case study" by Dr. B. Craig (supervisor), Ms. A. Furness (PhD candidate)

ETHICS APPROVAL

Original Approval Date: April 13, 2009
Expiry Date: April 12, 2012
Continuing Review Level: 1
Renewal 2 of 4

We are writing to advise you that you have been granted annual renewal of ethics approval to the above-referenced research study through the REB’s delegated process. Please note that all protocols involving ongoing data collection or interaction with human participants are subject to re-evaluation after 5 years. Ongoing projects must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your study. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry as per our guidelines.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible. If your research has funding attached, please contact the relevant Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your project.

Yours sincerely,

Mariana Richardson
Research Ethics Coordinator

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS
McMurrich Building, 12 Queen's Park Crescent West, 2nd Floor, Toronto, ON M5S 1S8 Canada
Tel: +1 416 946-3273 • Fax: +1 416 946-5763 • ethics.review@utoronto.ca • http://wwwresearch.utoronto.ca/for-researchers/administration/ethics/
Appendix C
List of Terms Used in Analysis

Agnes Etherington
Analog vs. digital (artwork)
archival transfer would prevent potential work
Archives as dry vs animated
Archives, perception of own records as
Archivists
Art vs archives ambiguity
Artefacts from art works
Assistants
awaiting review
basement
Big thoughts about the studio
Body Missing
Boxes, ubiquitous
change and change
Charlotte Townsend-Gault
Communal archives
Continued work with Queen's material
Crete
Deliberate concealment
Dissatisfaction with archives (at Queen's)
Domestic storage
Early archival attitudes
electronic recordkeeping
Emotional difficulty of reviewing records
equipment
external factors
External recordkeeping vs. memory
Filing = burial (challenge of retrieval)
Forgotten records
From the Transit Bar
Furniture, significant
Goals or ideals for own studio
Great quotations
Heather Home
ideals of recordkeeping
impact of research project on recordkeeping
Interdisciplinarity
Interesting, unresolved quotations
Jan Allen
lack of resources affecting recordkeeping
lack of time
Life without records
Loss of control with institutional transfer
maps of studio, inadequacy of
Master's thesis research
Master Photo Archive
McGill
mischief
Mobility
Morgue
Move, the
National Gallery
Notebooks (handmade)
Objects or records sparking personal narratives
Other people's archives
Others' perceptions of VF's records
Personae
Personal library
Physical aspects of records media
Planning for estate
Pleasure
Posthumous role of archives
Pride in recordkeeping
proximity to work space
Publications (about VF's work)
Queen's archives - transfer process
Random-access
Recordkeeping as pleasure (guilt maybe implied)
recordkeeping method
records adhering to specific artwork (effect on disposition)
records appraisal
Records as reason for living
records location as personal display
Relationship with archivists
Restrictions in the archives
Role of records in realizing installations
sentimental value
slide cabinets
stamina
Stationery and art supplies
storage
Sylvie Lacerte
Taxonomy
technological equipment or environment
Technological obsolescence
The Golden Notebook / Doris L..
The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden
the unreliability of archives ..
Third party efforts in studio
third party records
To-do list
Transfer to archives as release
Unimportance of recordkeeping (relatively)
Unknown contents (records)
Upstairs
Use of archives in art work
Vulnerability of archives
Watercolours and Haiku
Wife
Work space vs living space
Work surfaces, defeated by accumulations
Working library
Working method
Worktable (the central table)
Appendix D
Vera Frenkel: Short Biography

Vera Frenkel / Short biography

Rooted in an interrogation of the abuses of power and their consequences, projects by multidisciplinary artist Vera Frenkel have been seen at documenta IX, Kassel; the Offenes Kulturhaus, Linz; the Setagaya Museum, Tokyo; the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the Biennale di Venezia (Club Media, 1997; Head Start, 2001) among other important venues.

Frenkel’s videotapes, drawings, audio works, installations, photographs, writings and new media projects explore the forces at work in human migration, experiences of displacement and deracination, the learning and unlearning of cultural memory that results, and the increasing bureaucratization of everyday life.

One of the most influential and respected artists in the country, Frenkel is recipient of some of Canada’s major prizes awarded to a living artist. These include the Canada Council Molson Prize, 1989; the Toronto Arts Foundation Visual Arts Award, 1994; the Gershon Iskowitz Prize, 1995; and the Bell Canada Award for Video Art, 2001. She holds honorary doctorates from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1996) and the Emily Carr Institute (2004), and is a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts. The CCCA (Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art) ‘Untitled’ Art Award for ‘Best Exhibition or Project in Virtual Space’ was presented to Frenkel at a gala ceremony in Toronto in March, 2005, and the artist has just been nominated for the prestigious 2006 Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts.


While maintaining the continuing on-line presence of The Institute™ web site (www.the-national-institute.org) for which a German version is now in production, the artist is preparing a new travelling version of the project for the next phase of its tour. A Senior Canada Council Media Arts Award in 2002 made possible the programming for and multi-museum installation of this prizewinning work.

Solo exhibitions also include major installations at Video Art Plastique, Centre d’Art Contemporain Basse-Normandie, 1998; the Riksutställningar tour of the artist’s work through Scandinavia and Poland, 1997-98; the National Gallery of Canada, 1996; and, in the same year, exhibitions and international conferences on her work at the Offenes Kulturhaus, Linz, and the Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst (GAK) Bremen.

Group and two-person exhibitions featuring Vera Frenkel works include the current Telling Stories, Secret Lives exhibition, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston; This Must Be the Place, InterAccess, Toronto, 2005; My Generation, LEA, London, 2001; Not On Any Map: Travel and Identities of Displacement, The Film Center, Art Institute of Chicago, 1999; Fragile Electrons, National Gallery of Canada, 1998 & ongoing; Deep Storage, Haus der Kunst, Munich.

Frenkel’s video-photo-web project on art theft as cultural policy, Body Missing, installed most recently at the Freud Museum, London, 2003, was the focus of From Theft to Virtuality, an international conference on the artist’s work organized at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London, by art historian, Griselda Pollock. The conference papers, edited by Pollock, will form the basis for the first published anthology on Vera Frenkel’s work.

A mid-career survey of Frenkel’s video works, the Spotlight Programme of the Images Festival of Film, Video and New Media, curated by Dot Tuer, provided the core selection to which new material was added for Of Memory and Displacement / Vera Frenkel: Collected Works, a four-disc DVD/CD-ROM boxed set, launched in April 2005.

Until her 1995 decision to focus fully on her practice, Vera Frenkel was professor in the Interdisciplinary Studio Programme which she helped to establish at the Faculty of Fine Arts, York University, Toronto.

Much in demand as visiting professor and artist-in-residence, Frenkel has been the Barker Fairley Distinguished Visitor, University College, University of Toronto, 1994-95, and the Leverhulme Professor at the School of Fine Arts, Leeds University, 2003-4, among others. In February 2006, she was the Michael and Sonja Koerner Artist Resident artist at Queen’s University, Kingston.

Artist-in-residence invitations have also taken Vera Frenkel to the Slade School of Art, London; the School of the Chicago Art Institute; the Akademie der Bildenden Künste, Vienna; the McLuhan Programme in Culture and Technology, Toronto; the Royal University, Stockholm; the University of British Columbia and the Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History (CentreCATH) at the University of Leeds, among others.

The artist has also lectured and screened work at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Musée d’Art Contemporain, Montréal, the OK Centrum für Gegenwartskunft, Linz; the Academy of Fine Arts, Stockholm; and at symposia such as Konfigurationen - Zwischen Kunst und Media, Kassel, 1998, Museums after Modernism, Toronto (2002) and Urban Interventions, Toronto (2005). During her centrepiece exhibition at Videoculture 2000, Detroit, Frenkel was one of two artists invited to speak at the related symposium, and one of three international presenters at the 2001 World Wide Video and New Media Festival, Amsterdam.

Frenkel’s writings have been anthologized in several key publications including Archive et Mémoire (Musée d’art contemporain, Montréal, 2000); Capital Culture (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000); and Penser l’indiscipline: Interdisciplinary Practices in Canadian Art (Concordia/Optica, Montreal 2001). Her image-text work ‘Strands from the Archive-Rhizome’ appeared in Alphabet City’s “Lost in the Archives” issue, Fall, 2003. With permission of the Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna, her catalogue text, ‘A Narrative of Absence and Return’, was published in the first issue of Zaesuren/césures/incisions, the international journal of cultural theory and politics. Current and forthcoming articles include: “A Place for Uncertainty: Towards a
New Kind of Museum” in Museums after Modernism, (Ed. Griselda Pollock), and “Metropolitan Chords and Discords”, in the arts and activism journal, Public: The Visible Cities Issue (Ed. Janine Marchessault). The next issue of the interdisciplinary journal, Intermédialités, on the theme of ‘Rémédiation’ will feature a 36-page dossier on Vera Frenkel’s work.

The artist’s presentations during the Queen’s University Koerner Foundation residency coincided with the installation at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston, of “Her Room in Paris”, a key work, now in the AE collection, on the life, work and fate of the brilliant artist in exile, Cornelia Lumsden.

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http://www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing [The Body Missing Project]