Making Up Lost Time: Fiction in Carol Sawyer's
The Natalie Brettschneider Archive and the
Canadian Women Artists History Initiative.

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts (Art History) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 2019

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

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Entitled: Making Up Lost Time: Fiction in Carol Sawyer's *The Natalie Brettschneider Archive* and the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Art History)

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines Vancouver-based contemporary artist Carol Sawyer's *The Natalie Brettschneider Archive* as well as the Concordia-based Canadian Women Artists History Initiative (CWAHI) through the lens of fiction, feminist theory, and counter-archival practices. Sawyer's *Archive* is a series of documents that recount the biography of fictional Surrealist and Dada performance artist Natalie Brettschneider (1896-1986?). CWAHI is a Concordia-based documentation centre that maintains artist files, programming, and publication initiatives. This thesis argues that fiction is an effective tool to address historiographical erasures in women's history. Though both projects emerge from the polarities of fictional art and historical documentation practices, CWAHI and the *Archive* are invested in the plausibilities for feminist interventions veiled within the unknowability of the past. Chapter one explores how the *Archive* renders sensible and actionable a cross-historical dialogue with historical women's art, one that argues for an expanded notion of intertemporal feminist collaboration. Similarly, CWAHI's collaborators craft frameworks that forge communities of participation that generate affective resonances between artists of the past and historians in the present. Chapter two complicates this collapse between historical and contemporary, arguing that Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI sustain tensions at the heart of feminist scholarship between historical women artists and the historians who study them. Both projects recognize that the historian and their subjects of study are entangled across differing contexts. The result are two projects that speak to the variety of experiences across divides of fact and fiction, past and present, as well as life and death, divides that Sawyer's project argues can be partially, but never fully, breached.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary artist Carol Sawyer told me over Skype from Vancouver, where she is based, some of the questions she received while giving tours of *The Natalie Brettschneider Archive* (1998-), a collection of self-portraits and videos by Surrealist and Dada performance artist Natalie Brettschneider (1896-1986) at the Vancouver Art Gallery. One visitor asked her, "Do people tell you that you look like Brettschneider?" Another asked, "She's real, right?"[1] Though these questions may appear odd to ask in a retrospective of a recently re-discovered twentieth-century artist, they are not as far-fetched as they seem. Natalie Brettschneider is not real, and her self-portraits are actually portraits by Sawyer, of Sawyer in the guise of a fictional alter-ego that she invented in 1998.

Sawyer's fiction follows the practice of artists who, since the 1970s, have invented fictional women to critically intervene in history. These inventions question how historians produced and neglected knowledge about women throughout the past century and how one might interpret their stories today despite historiographical gaps. American artists Cheryl Dunye (b. 1966) and Zoe Leonard's (b. 1961) *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993-1996), Jerusalem-born Michael Blum's (b. 1966) *A Tribute to Safiye Behar* (2005), as well as, in Canada, Cree/Sauteaux/Métis artist Lori Blondeau's (b. 1964) fictional stage personas Belle Sauvage, Betty Daybird, and Surfer Squaw (1997-2012), Toronto-based artist Iris Häussler's (b. 1962) *The Sophie La Rosière Project* (2016), Canadian multidisciplinary artist Vera Frenkel's (b. 1938) *The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden* (1979), and Sawyer's *Archive* all bring fictional women — in the roles of artists, activists, and performers — to life.[2] These artists performatively appropriate the tactics of history responsible for the erasure of women's lives and artistic practices. Their art takes the form of "archives," that is, collections of forged documents, exhibitions with

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[1] Carol Sawyer, interview by Doug Dumais, September 6, 2018. Skype.

[2] For more on these artists, consult: Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (2009): 51–84; Matt Richardson, "Our Stories Have Never Been Told: Preliminary Thoughts on Black Lesbian Cultural Production as Historiography in The Watermelon Woman," *Black Camera*, no. 2 (2011): 100-113; Vera Frenkel, Dot Tuer, and Clive Robertson, "The Story Is Always Partial: A Conversation with Vera Frenkel," *Art Journal* 57, no. 4 (1998): 3–15; Carla Taunton, "Lori Blondeau: High-Tech Storytelling for Social Change." (Master's Thesis, Carleton University, 2007).

photographs and paintings they date decades earlier than when the artists actually made them, and performances that fill gallery spaces with stories of real and fictional women.

In this vein, Carol Sawyer invented Natalie Brettschneider and recounts her fictional biography through a variety of media. These include self-portraits, photographic and video documentation of Dada and Surrealist performances, typewritten notes, and sketches that collectively tell Brettschneider's life story.[3] According to these documents, Brettschneider was born in New Westminster, British Columbia in 1896 (occasionally cited as 1984), trained as an opera singer, participated in the Parisian avant-garde from 1913 until 1938, and returned to Canada, where she continued performing across North America until her death, perhaps in 1986 in Point Roberts, Washington. Brettschneider then, according to the fictional narrative, faded into history. Sawyer supposedly later re-discovered Brettschneider's work through archival research.

In its broad strokes, Brettschneider's story resembles those of many under-recognized twentieth-century Dada and Surrealist women artists such as German avant-garde artist and poet Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927), who may have been the actual author of the idea for French-American artist Marcel Duchamp's (1887-1968) infamous *Fountain* (1917),[4] or Hannah Höch (1889-1978), an influential German Dada photocollage artist that her contemporaries effectively erased from Dada's history.[5] At the intersection of feminist history, archival art, and performative fiction, Sawyer positions herself on both sides of feminist historiography: as the artist who nearly faded into oblivion, and the researcher raising women artists' profiles.

For the purposes of the following thesis, I propose to view Sawyer's project as a counter-archive. The 1990s, a moment Kate Eichhorn calls the "archival turn," saw the rise of artistic, grassroots, and academic initiatives in feminist and LGBT2Q+ communities that disseminate women's history and the histories of those who identify as women. These initiatives allow researchers and artists to engage in dialogues across history that mine the past for undetonated

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[3] From here onwards, *The Natalie Brettschneider Archive* will be referred to simply as the *Archive* in italics.

[4] Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity—A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 224.

[5] Godfre Leung, "Revising Dada," *Canadian Art*, accessed January 27, 2019, https://canadianart.ca/features/revising-dada/; Katharina von Ankum, *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 119.

energies that contemporary scholars and artists might draw upon and redeploy in the present.[6]
May Chew, Susan Lord, and Janine Marchessault show that counter-archival practices are
collaborative and mirror the network and non-profit modalities of collective feminist organizing.
They employ non-institutional approaches to document and distribute stories that traditional
archives overlook.[7] Rather than operating along the colonial, gendered, and racialized biases of
traditional archives, some of which value material accumulation above all else,[8] counter-archives
are mischievous, daring, and imaginative attempts to create "an incomplete and unstable
repository, an entity to be contested and expanded through clandestine acts, a space of
impermanence and play."[9]

Counter-archival practices signal an awareness of the archive's potential to affect
discourse, a concept cultural theorist Michel Foucault develops in *The Archaeology of
Knowledge.* Foucault insists that archives are not neutral collections of data and documents, but
rather discursive fields that delineate a culture's way of thinking. Foucault calls the archive "the
first law of what can be said."[10] In other words, the archive is the foundation of what a culture
can write about or engage with, bound up with the power to produce what a society considers
true.[11] The archive contains not just evidence of past events, it lays out who made statements
about these events and what these statements were, the context in which these statements
emerged, how they conflict or interact with other truths across varying contexts, as well as how
these statements endure, transform, or disappear over time.[12] Foucault's methodology of
archaeology takes the historical contingency that archives attest to seriously. He highlights the
discontinuities, ruptures, and accidents central to how historians have produced knowledge, and

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[6] Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2013), 28.

[7] May Chew, Susan Lord, and Janine Marchessault, "Introduction" *Public* 57 (Summer 2018), 9.

[8] Mark V. Campbell, "Hip Hop Archives or an Archive of Hip Hop? A Remix Impulse," *Public* 57 (Summer 2018): 70-71.

[9] Brett Kashmere, "Cache Rules Everything Around Me," *Incite Journal of Experimental Media and Radical Aesthetics* 2 (2010), http://www.incite-online.net/intro2.html.

[10] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge; and, The Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 145.

[11] Jae Emerling, *Photography: History and Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 162.

[12] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 143.

rejects the understanding of history as an ordered, legible, and unbroken linearity.[13] Counter-archives, as incomplete and unstable repositories, employ strategies that echo history's instability. They encourage critique, and alter what can be said, thought, or talked about from society's margins.[14] They disrupt and speak back to official narratives, intervene in public discourse, and disseminate perspectives that traditional archival structures sideline or render invisible.[15]

The Canadian Women Artists History Initiative (CWAHI) follows from this desire to speak back to official narratives by foregrounding the contributions of historical women artists to culture. One cannot consider CWAHI either strictly an archive or a counter-archive, however, since its founders identify it as a documentation centre and database. Based at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada, CWAHI's mandate is to circulate research into "women's contributions to the cultural and material history of Canada" with a focus on the period prior to 1967.[16] Melinda Reinhart, a retired arts librarian at Concordia University, Dr. Janice Anderson, an affiliate professor in Concordia's Department of Art History, and Dr. Kristina Huneault, a professor in the Department of Art History, inaugurated CWAHI in 2008. Their goal was to address historical lacunae in the historiography of Canadian artists and architects: both the lack of a history of women's creative practice "across lines of ethnicity, class, medium, geography, and timeframe" and the lack of a centralized database which assists researchers in the process of understanding the context and artistic fields of their research subjects.[17] CWAHI has three main trajectories: a research documentation centre that houses photocopies of original documents relevant to women artists and architects held in private and public collections across Canada, an

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[13] Emerling, *Photography*, 159.

[14] Campbell, "Hip Hop Archives or an Archive of Hip Hop?," 70.

[15] Michel Foucault, "On the Archaeology of the Sciences: Response to the Epistemology Circle," *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 2,* ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 309, quoted in Emerling, *Photography*, 162.

[16] Kristina Huneault, Janice Anderson, and Melinda Rinehart, "Canadian Women Artists History Initiative," *Canadian Women Artists History Initiative,* October 15, 2007, https://cwahi.concordia.ca/; Janice Anderson, interview by Doug Dumais, September 26, 2018.

[17] Kristina Huneault, "The Canadian Women Artists History Initiative," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 32, no. 2 (June 2011): 139–40.

online women artist database with biographical and bibliographical information, as well as public programming such as conferences, publications, and workshops.[18]

Feminist projects such as Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI concern themselves with the authoring of women artists' biographies in the face of erasure and neglect. They exemplify what Adele Perry calls the "distinctly feminist possibility of biography" to tell transformative stories of marginalized women.[19] Traces left behind by women artists are occasionally too threadbare to weave into cohesive narratives. Therefore, Jennifer Morgan calls for an "expansive methodology deployed in the service of, and open to the possibility of, contingency and the unknowability of the past […]."[20] Refusing the implication that the biographies of marginalized, colonized, and enslaved people are unknowable, Morgan recognizes that all attempts to author biographies of historical women are confrontations with "profound, and profoundly creative, uncertainty."[21] This thesis asks: how do Sawyer and CWAHI respond to the uncertainty of women's art history?

This thesis argues that fiction is an effective tool to address historiographical erasures in women artists' history because it sustains the tension between the uncertainty of the past and one's desire for the past to possess the coherence of fictional narratives. Put differently, fiction is helpful to investigate how Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI acknowledge that feminist scholarship is a balancing act between the intentions of historical women artists and the desires of contemporary interpreters and viewers — whether they are artists, scholars, or the gallery-going public. The *Archive* and CWAHI are points of contact between historical truth and creativity. They underline the conflicts between what little is known about historical women's experiences and those who encounter these women and their art today. This thesis proposes a comparative methodology that projects Sawyer's historiographic interventions and her preoccupations with

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[18] These conferences include *Connections: CWAHI Inaugural Conference*, October 2-4, 2008 at Concordia University; *Imagining History*, May 3-5, 2012 at Concordia University; *The Artist Herself: Broadening Ideas of Self-Portraiture in Canada*, May 8-9, 2015 at Queen's University and the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Kingston. As well as sessions at other conferences such as the Universities Art Association of Canada's Conference at the University of Alberta, October 22-24, 2009.

[19] Adele Perry, "Beyond Biography, Beyond Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (June 2017): 323.

[20] Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 201; quoted in Perry, "Beyond Biography, Beyond Canada," 328.

[21] Ibid., 201.

fiction, onto CWAHI. It may seem that the *Archive's* scope, as an art installation, has no relation to the goals of a documentation centre and database. But this thesis will show, despite the apparent polarities of fiction and fact, both the *Archive* and CWAHI are feminist projects invested in the unknowability of the past and the possibilities veiled within this uncertainty.

This thesis examines Sawyer's *Archive*, CWAHI's published research, as well as interviews conducted with Sawyer and CWAHI's founders through the lens of feminist art history, cultural theories of the archive, and a critical assessment of fiction in art.[22] Chapter one examines the bearing that fiction has on historiography. Historians often succumb to the desire to transform the fragmentary past into narratives that appropriate tropes and plot-lines from fictional stories. Drawing on this tendency, Sawyer uses fiction to craft Brettschneider's life story as one that intersects with the traces that twentieth-century women artists have left behind. This makes the uncertainties of writing women's history apparent, and stages meaningful encounters between viewers of the *Archive* and the artists — historical or fictional — who populate her installation. I then carry Sawyer's engagement with the fictive over to the work of the scholars who engage with CWAHI. This transposition sheds light on how the Initiative and its users create cross-historical connections between historical women and viewers. To complicate this collapse between then and now, Chapter two draws on cultural theories of the archive, Avery Gordon's concept of haunting, and Michel de Certeau's notion of the anti-text to show that Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI resist the closure and finality of narrativity and sustain the open-endedness necessary in researching and writing women artists' history. This thesis aims to show that the *Archive* and CWAHI are spaces of transformative recognition that acknowledge the complex conditions under which contemporary viewers or researchers must engage with the fragmentary stories of how women have contributed to culture through time.

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[22] The interview with Carol Sawyer took place over Skype on September 6, 2018. The interviews with CWAHI founders Dr. Janice Anderson and Dr. Kristina Huneault took place in person at Concordia on September 26, 2018.

CHAPTER ONE

"All stories are fictions": Crafting Art History's Narratives

As Emmanuel Hermange points out, the relationship between fiction and art is not easily pinned down, as it "dissolves or expands past all limits as soon as we try to determine its borders."[23] Perhaps because of its indeterminate quality, fiction emerged as an important category in art and art criticism. This is especially the case since what Mark Nash describes as the "documentary turn" in art in the early twenty-first century.[24] If the archival turn draws out the bearing the past has on the present, the documentary turn, according to Nash, investigates the influence that fiction can have on reality. Fiction in documentary media such as photography, film, and archival practices encourages viewers to think about what social or political realties are proposed through imaginative musings about the past and what bearing these speculations might have on the present and future.[25] Put differently, fictional art considers what historically *could* have been and, by extension, what *could* be.[26] This chapter opens with a definition of fiction and the fictive. Following this, I undertake an analysis of Sawyer's use of fiction, specifically how she produces plausibilities for a feminist art history that offers opportunities for collaboration between artists past and present. This chapter concludes with the act of transposing fiction as it is employed in Sawyer's *Archive* to CWAHI to consider the bearing fiction has on Canadian art history.

My definition of fiction follows early modern historian Natalie Zemon Davis's use of the term, which accounts for the complex relationship between fiction and historiography. Davis uses fiction not in the sense of a falsehood, but in the broader and more widely accepted sense of the Latin root word *fingere*, meaning to form, to shape, or to mold.[27] To craft history is, in a

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[23] Emmanuel Hermange, "The Mirror and the Encyclopedia: Regarding Some Fictions of Knowledge," in *Fiction or Other Accounts of Photography*, ed. Stephen Horne and France Choinière (Montreal: Dazibao, 2000), 30.

[24] Mark Nash, "Reality in the Age of Aesthetics," *Frieze* 114 (April 2008): n.p. Nash claims that this turn was inaugurated at Documenta XI in 2002.

[25] Ibid., n.p.

[26] For more on the documentary turn and the relation of fiction and truth, see Okwui Enwezor, "Documentary/Vérité: Bio-Politics, Human Rights, and the Figure of 'Truth' in Contemporary Art," in *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl, 62–102; and Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian," *October*, no. 120 (Spring 2007): 140–72.

[27] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 3.

sense, to create fictive narratives.[28] Davis here draws on the methodology of literary historian and theorist Hayden White. White maintains that historical reality offers itself to the perception of Western subjects as a discontinuous series of episodic events without narrative, moral, or meaning, closer to how historical annals or chronicles present history: fragmentary accounts in which compilers record some details and neglect others.[29] White demonstrates that historians rarely resist the desire for the past to possess the coherence of narratives found in fictional genres such as fables, legends, myths, novels, or plays.[30] He declares, "Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions."[31] White argues that Leopold von Ranke's ideal of a transparent, value-neutral historical realism that is found and presented as it was lived is nearly impossible.[32] Historians, rather, *emplot* past events into aesthetic and ideological narratives endowed with the closure, substance, and meaning historians find in fictional plot-types such as epics, comedies, tragedies, or satire.[33] White understands history writing as the crafting of narratives, and he thus claims that the use of the fictive is part of the writing of history.

The ideological imposition of conventional narratives influences how *art* historians craft stories as well. Borrowing White's term emplotment, Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson assess how the crafting of artists' biographies leads to exclusive narrative conventions. They write,

> By a rule of correct narration or "emplotment," only those aspects of an author's innumerable wanderings through the world that may be harmonized with the corpus of works will count as relevant, and only a certain number of an author's traces will count as elements of the authorized corpus. The exclusionary moves are mutually supportive, and

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[28] Ibid., 3.

[29] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 23.

[30] Hayden White, "Storytelling: Historical and Ideological," in *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007*, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 290.

[31] Hayden White, *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 9.

[32] Robert Doran, "Introduction," in Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative: Essays on History, Literature, and Theory, 1957-2007*, ed. Robert Doran (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), xxiii.

[33] Hayden White, "Storytelling," 280.

'correct' narration will set up further conventions, which vary from period to period [...].[34]

Just as historians mold events into cohesive narratives, art historians shape the "wanderings" or "traces" (works produced, writings, or ephemera) attributed to an artist into a story of the artist's life that resonates with engrained art historical assumptions. These biographical narratives emerge from and simultaneously *produce* interpretive frameworks for art historians. Further, artworks outlive the time in which they are made and thus exist across many interpretive contexts.[35] Bal and Bryson call for a dynamic approach to the interpretation of signs that acknowledges that cultural value is socially-produced and contextual, as opposed to an illusory unity across geographical and temporal contexts.[36] Bal and Bryson maintain the art historian's task is to highlight the changeability of interpretive conventions, a process which allows for silenced historical narratives to emerge.[37]

History, then, is the crafting of narratives which emerge from context-specific and inherited hegemonic cultural assumptions. Bal and Bryson's formulation adds a feminist dimension to White's theory. Consider the interpretative conventions of the work of women artists in the twentieth century. Some art historians have failed to discuss the work of women artists outside of phallocentric standards of value. This is especially the case in movements with which Sawyer's practice is engaged, such as Dada and Surrealism. This is evident, for example, in Hans Richter's (1888-1976) reduction of Hannah Höch's (1889-1978) contributions to Dada to the "sandwiches, beer and coffee she managed somehow to conjure up despite the shortage of money."[38] As feminist art historian Griselda Pollock notes, in the context of the modernist and male-dominated conventions of the male artist as genius, "Women were not historically significant artists [...] because they did not have the innate nugget of genius (the phallus) which is the natural property of men."[39] Some historians crafted narratives of events, agents, and

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[34] Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73 (June 1991): 181.

[35] Ibid., 179.

[36] Ibid., 191.

[37] Ibid., 191.

[38] von Ankum, *Women in the Metropolis,* 119.

[39] Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 2.

agencies according to ideological assumptions that excluded artists who fell outside of the purview of what they considered historically significant.

For instance, consider the historiography of German artist Emmy Hennings (1885-1948) who, along with her partner, German author and poet Hugo Ball (1886-1927), founded the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, the seat of the Swiss Dada movement. Hennings was an avant-garde singer, dancer, poet, and puppet maker.[40] Hugo Ball often referred to his Dadaist group as a "five-man band", omitting Hennings's role even though the contemporary media lauded her as the star of the group.[41] In 1981, Thomas F. Rugh noted that despite her involvement with the Swiss Dada, historians of the movement like Richard Huelsenbeck (1892-1974), founder of the Berlin Dada group in 1917, did not analyze her work apart from her association with Ball.[42] Rugh gestures towards an interpretation rooted in Hennings's position in and opposition to her affiliation with the Dada movement because "Dada did not provide the sense and meaning she sought."[43] Nevertheless, to this day, historians continue to read Hennings's career according to ideological conventions of women artists as subordinate to male artists. In 2016, Elizabeth Benjamin in her book *Dada and Existentialism* discusses Hennings not in relation to her art but her prostitution, drug use, and time in prison.[44] Additionally, the only reference to Hennings as a co-founder of the Cabaret Voltaire is in parentheses.[45] From Ball and Huelsenbeck's exclusions, to the neglect of her work that endured up to the 1980s, and the consequences of such exclusions

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[40] Robin Laurence, "The Interventionist Archive: Carol Sawyer Invents Art History," *Border Crossings* 37, no. 4 (December 2018): 92.

[41] Mel Gordon, *Dada Performance* (New York: PAJ, 1987), 13. Ball lists himself, Richard Huelsenbeck, Marcel Janco, Tristan Tzara, and Jean Arp.

[42] Jennifer Salahub, "Hannah Maynard: Crafting Professional Identity," in *Rethinking Professionalism: Women and Art in Canada, 1850-1970*, ed. Kristina Huneault and Janice Anderson (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2012), 135.

[43] Thomas F. Rugh, "Emmy Hennings and the Emergence of Zurich Dada," *Woman's Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (1981): 5.

[44] Elizabeth Benjamin, *Dada and Existentialism: The Authenticity of Ambiguity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 31.

[45] Ibid., 186. It is important to note that Elizabeth Benjamin does not dismiss women's contributions to Dada across the board, as the text deals extensively with the work of Céline Arnauld. Further, this neglect has been redressed with books and exhibitions like Ruth Hemus's *Dada's Women* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009).

that remain today, Hennings's story is shrouded by hegemonic assumptions and narrative conventions that persist throughout multiple contexts.

The reasons for Hennings's neglect are not, of course, fully representative of the reasons why art historians have neglected certain twentieth-century women artists. From personal decisions on behalf of the artists themselves, institutional biases, or assumptions about race, gender, and class, the reasons for a woman artist's obscurity are as numerous as there are artists, as multifaceted as the lives each of them led. As the following section demonstrates, Sawyer's *Archive* brings this complexity to a fore, registers the difficulty of telling stories about women artists subject to such historiographic erasures, and turns these erasures into sites of creative, feminist intervention.

Women Artists' History on Shaky Ground: Natalie Brettschneider's Genealogy

Carol Sawyer, in *The Natalie Brettschneider Archive*, uses fragments of women artists' history as starting points to create fictions that open up feminist interpretive plausibilities. Viewers of the *Archive* encounter three categories of documents. First are real women artists' portraits, letters, and works of art. Second are fictional photographs, videos, documents, and live performances that Sawyer produced either alone or collaboratively, and attributes either to Brettschneider or to anonymous photographers and videographers who documented her performances. Third are documents that blur the line between the historical and fictive, due either to their obscure origin or because they are found documents Sawyer modified in Brettschneider's hand. In her artist statement, Sawyer writes, "Brettschneider is fictional, but her story is laced with references to real people and places."[46] Sawyer's "lacework" results in Brettschneider's biography, a complex interplay of fact and fiction, staging encounters between historical artists and Brettschneider, as well as between Brettschneider and viewers.

Sawyer's small but moving work *Natalie Brettschneider performs Nellie Duke's house shake, Kelowna, B.C. (1939)* [fig. 1] engages with the tension between the provisionality of and plausibilities for women's art history. *Nellie Duke's house shake* is a blurry image of a Tudor-style house, within which Brettschneider and Duke sing so loudly that they cause an earthquake

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[46] Carol Sawyer, "Natalie Brettschneider," *Carol Sawyer* artist website, accessed October 23, 2018, http://www.carolsawyer.net/work/natalie-brettschneider/.

which explains the anonymous photographer's shaky hand. Whether it is an image Sawyer took herself or found is unclear.

I must first define provisionality and plausibility before analysing how Sawyer's work engages with these concepts. By provisionality, I refer to the fragmentary nature of women's biographies, either in terms of the limited physical traces of their lives they leave behind or the imprint they make in the memory of a community or a place. Plausibility, on the other hand, refers to the fecundity and constitutive dimension of this very provisionality, as an invitation for what Sarah Nutall calls a "promiscuity of meanings."[47] These two concepts are in tension and co-dependent; provisionality implies that something is temporary and conditional, adopted for the time being until it is replenished or replaced.[48] As discourse about historical women transforms over time, what remains of a woman's life might come to have a significance that it did not have before. This potentiality of reinterpretation and promiscuity of meanings are what I consider the plausibilities of art history.[49] Women's history is provisional in the sense that it lends itself to endless plausible re-visions, re-readings, and re-discoveries.[50] The term plausibility implies ideas or arguments that seem reasonable, probable, or truthful.[51] It does not imply a specific, desirable outcome, nor any prescriptive teleological end goal for the feminist art historical project.

Beyond this, plausibility has a secondary meaning. I follow Carrie Lambert-Beatty's assertion that plausibility in art also encompasses the interactions that occur between the viewer and an artwork, as well as the various horizons of knowledge that viewers approach an artwork with. Plausibility in an encounter with art is both specific and open-ended. It determines, based on a specific viewer, whether an imagined scenario presented by Sawyer in the *Archive* is plausible *to them*.[52] Further, the *Archive* asks viewers open-ended questions that inspires them to

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[47] Sarah Nutall, "Literature and the Archive: The Biography of Texts," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2002), 295.

[48] "Provisional, Adj. and n.," in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed July 24, 2019, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/153485.

[49] Nutall, "Literature and the Archive," 296.

[50] Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 6.

[51] "Plausible, Adj. and n.," in *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed July 24, 2019, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/145466.

[52] Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 72-73.

consider further plausibilities, spurred on by the artist's own imaginative fiction. The term plausibility thus delineates sites of encounters between provisional, half-finished stories that encourages readers to ask, "what happened?" followed by, "what if?" and finally, as I will demonstrate is the case in Sawyer's *Archive*, "what now?"

Nellie Duke's house shake reveals the process of researching the history of women in the twentieth century and the provisional and fragmentary results of this research. When she exhibits in a new location, Sawyer mines local archives and oral histories to create works tied to local history and members of the community. Sawyer includes community members from wherever she exhibits her photographs like *Natalie Brettschneider and unknown music ensemble at the Booth family residence. Ottawa (c. 1947)* [fig. 2], which features affiliates and staff of the Carleton University Art Gallery. If community members are no longer living, their contributions are more implicit, as in *Nellie Duke's house shake*. In 2008, curator Liz Wylie invited Sawyer to travel to Kelowna, British Columbia to research and "discover" new Brettschneider performances. Sawyer interviewed seniors from the area and asked if they remembered any eccentric local women.[53] Recurring in these conversations was Nellie Duke, a British expatriate opera singer, voice teacher, and amateur painter who followed a Canadian soldier to Kelowna from England after the First World War. Upon discovering the soldier was married, Duke bought land and built a home. She made up the design as she went, scavenging wood from building sites and enlisting locals to help with its construction.[54] Sawyer writes,

> The photograph of Duke's house found in the Brettschneider archive, and the accompanying text, honour Ms. Duke's resourcefulness and creativity in building her own house, an impressive durational, site-specific performance. It is exciting to imagine Brettschneider and Duke making the house shake with their powerful operatic voices.[55]

Sawyer's research allowed her to discover enough about Duke's life to craft a fictional narrative that allows Duke to live on beyond the memories of the town's senior citizens. It also allows

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[53] Sawyer, interview by Dumais, September 6, 2018.

[54] Carol Sawyer, "Bringing Forgotten Women Artists Back to Light," *Canadian Art*, January 16, 2016, https://canadianart.ca/features/bringing-forgotten-women-artists-back-to-light/.

[55] Ibid.

Sawyer to produce a narrative of a resourceful, creative, and independent artist, rather than the conventional narrative of an eccentric and idiosyncratic local woman.

The image *Nellie Duke's house shake* is small, blurry, out of focus, and closely cropped. Its blurriness communicates the hazy and uncertain glimpses that any inquiry into the life and work of twentieth-century women affords researchers. Sawyer molds fragments of Duke's story into a humorous narrative that presents Duke and Brettschneider in a performance in progress, a duo of unseen women caught in the act of projecting their voices across time and history, whose voices echo so loudly that the supposedly reliable medium of photography cannot capture their expressions accurately. Sawyer uses Brettschneider as a lens to creatively expand on what remains of Duke's life story. What emerges is a fictive narrative, loosely rooted in truth, that re-interprets Duke's story as one of unrecognized artistic agency. Sawyer imagines the construction of Duke's home and the fictional performances within it as collaborative and site-specific performances.[56] Sawyer says about the work, "it's a kind of radical gesture to take [Duke] seriously and heed her as an interesting performance artist and ask, 'Did she do this site-specific durational performance in this place in which nobody recognizes what she was doing?' If she'd been in Paris maybe she would have been recognized."[57] From an encounter with the conventional narrative of an eccentric early twentieth-century vocal instructor who is fondly remembered by her community, Sawyer forges an *un*conventional narrative of plausibilities, imagining what *could* have been, rooted in the traces of what did occur in Kelowna's history.

Genealogy, as theorized by Wendy Brown, is a helpful framework to discuss *Nellie Duke's house shake* as a work of feminist historiography that signals the value of re-interpreting the past. In Brown's summary of Foucault's concept of genealogy, she states, "genealogy reorients the relationship of history to political possibility: although the present field of political possibility is constrained by its histories, those histories are themselves tales of improbable,

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[56] It is worth noting the similarities between Sawyer's fiction and the historical work of women artists who have worked in "the most difficult, most expensive, most masculine and most political of all artistic domains: monumental sculpture." A particularly relevant example is Niki de Saint-Phalle, and her site-specific sculptural architecture such as *Hon*. *Hon* was a monumental sculpture of a woman lying down, featuring a planetarium in her left breast, and a milk bar in the right breast that viewers entered between her open legs; a work that combines the qualities of performance, spectacle, theatre, and social art. Camille Morineau, "A Pioneer of Monumental Sculpture," in *Niki de Saint Phalle: Outside-In*, ed. Styze Steenstra (Heerlen: Schunck, 2011), 90.

[57] Sawyer, interview by Dumais, September 6, 2018.

uneven, and unsystematic emergence, and thus contain openings for disturbance."[58] Genealogy is a historical methodology and can be a political intervention into the present that traces the accidents, permutations, and haphazard conditions of the past to defamiliarize the assumed naturalness of social and historical conditions.[59] Brown writes, "If everything about us is the effect of historical accident rather than will or design, then we are paradoxically […] more sedimented by history, but also more capable of intervening in our histories."[60]

Nellie Duke's house shake signals that research on historical women artists is a process that relies on "improbable, uneven, and unsystematic" investigation. The unknown origin of the photograph, its blurriness, as well as the narrative that Sawyer constructs around the image are genealogical because, taken as a whole, they recount how Sawyer questions the imprecise process through which narratives about women like Duke make their way to the present. She suggests that history rests upon a foundation of countless similar events that risk being forgotten if no one takes the time to look, and that those that survive often do so tenuously, hanging on by a thread.[61] Duke's story survives through a mixture of Sawyer's skillful research, an unsystematic mining of oral history, and luck. Though the story Sawyer unearths is constrained by the common trope of an independent and idiosyncratic woman as an eccentric, Sawyer locates an opportunity to perform an important criterion of genealogy, which, according to Brown: is the creation of openings for disturbances. Sawyer performs a fictional intervention in this nearly forgotten moment of Kelowna's past by creating or repurposing an image that suggests an alternative reading, asking "what really happened here?" and imagining the answer.

Fiction here serves as an extension of genealogy, as it goes beyond making visible the precarious circumstances of women's history and envisions a plausible way forward out of these conditions. As Brown states,

> genealogy only opens possibilities through which various futures might be pursued. Openings along fault lines and incitements from destabilized (because denaturalized) configurations of the present form the stage of political possibility. But these openings

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[58] Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 103.

[59] Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 8.

[60] Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 102.

[61] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 89, quoted in Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 113.

and incitements dictate neither the terms nor the direction of political possibility, both of which are matters of imagination and invention.[62]

In *Nellie Duke's house shake*, Sawyer literally creates fault lines through an earthquake, out of which the hidden narrative of a historical woman emerges. In showing how close such stories are to being forgotten, Sawyer gestures towards the haphazard conditions through which these stories come to be known today and goes one step further to invent plausibilities that arise from the inherent provisionality of those very narratives.

Sawyer's *Archive* is a genealogical investigation into the limits of research about twentieth-century women, but also an exploration of the creative potential that these limits engender. *Nellie Duke's house shake* draws attention to the ways that history, or the writing of history, is subject to restrictive ideological conventions, and reliant upon traces women artists leave behind. Reading Duke's construction of her house as a site-specific performance, Sawyer uses fiction to re-interpret the narrative of a local woman in a way that links her to the tradition of site-specific monumental sculpture of the late-twentieth-century. *Nellie Duke's house shake* shows that historiography, particularly that of women artists, is founded on shaky ground. Sawyer shakes the structures of historiography and reveals cracks in the foundations that she exploits for new interpretive frameworks to emerge. I propose a view of Sawyer's work as a critical, feminist, genealogical practice. Her work establishes the fictiveness of the historiography in which she intervenes, directs her creative energy into opportunities for feminist action, and produces alternative feminist plausibilities of interpretation. The following section will examine the effects of these interventions.

Unknow*ability*: Feminist Plausibilities as Feminist Action
Sawyer's use of fictive narratives is a political and feminist act that gestures towards collaborative and cross-historical relations. This use of the term "political" relies on Chantal Mouffe's distinction between politics and the political, the former being institutions intended to settle conflicts like police forces while the latter are the dimensions of conflicts, public and private, within which social life is constructed.[63] In Bal's reading of Mouffe, even intimate and

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[62] Brown, *Politics Out of History,* 104.

[63] Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 9.

private moments pertain to the political.[64] Carrie Lambert-Beatty discusses the intersection of the political and "parafictional" art. Parafiction refers to the work of artists who seek to deceive viewers into thinking fictional individuals, places, or events are real. These artists disseminate believable hoaxes through art galleries or other platforms the public invests with authority such as news networks or corporate structures.[65] Parafiction "at once reveals the way things are and makes sensible the way we want them to be; [it] offers experiences of both skepticism and belief."[66] Viewers who fall for the hoax and then realize they were tricked, according to Lambert-Beatty, come away armed with a skepticism they carry forward into future encounters with art, information, and culture.

Lambert-Beatty here draws on what Jacques Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible." To distribute sensibilities is to intervene into the system of inclusions and exclusions that outline the common sense about what can be said, thought, seen, felt, as well as who can say, think, see, and feel it.[67] It is to put forward a new sense of what one believes is possible to think or do within one's political, social, and cultural context.[68] Parafictional art has the capacity to turn what was previously unthinkable into a plausibility within the viewer's mind, and transform the viewer's opinion of what it is possible to do, say, and think. For instance, the work of the culture jamming activist duo comprised of Jacques Servin and Igor Vamos, also known as The Yes Men is an example of parafictional art. In one of their performances, posing as World Trade Organization (WTO) representatives at the Certified Practicing Accountants Association of Australia, they gave a speech guided by new WTO principles they made up that would "help people instead of businesses."[69] The position of authority The Yes Men invested themselves with as representatives of the WTO had an impact on some of the attendees, who expressed their support and even suggested ideas for making this proposal a reality. The Yes Men's parafiction

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[64] Mieke Bal, "In Your Face: Migratory Aesthetics," in *The Culture of Migration: Politics, Aesthetics and Histories*, edited by Sten Pultz Moslund, Anne Ring Peterson, and Moritz Schramm (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 166.

[65] Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 56.

[66] Ibid., 83.

[67] Ibid., 64.

[68] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004), 63, quoted in Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 64.

[69] Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 63.

led to a group of accountants seeing the value of realigning world trade to benefit Indigenous people and the global poor, thus distributing, at least temporarily, a new sensibility.[70] Though such changes happen in the mind of those who fell for the hoax, they are unquestionably political, as viewers of parafictional art become more inclined to act towards making these new sensibilities a reality.

The *Archive* is not, strictly speaking, a parafiction. Viewers can be tricked into believing that Brettschneider is real, but this is not Sawyer's end goal. At the Carleton University Art Gallery, where Heather Anderson curated an iteration of the *Archive* (January 18 to April 19, 2016), the curator's introductory wall text makes no mention of Brettschneider's fiction. It is up to the viewer to deduce this themselves. On the other hand, at the show Bruce Grenville curated at the Vancouver Art Gallery (October 28, 2017 to February 4, 2018), a panel outside the installation indicates that Brettschneider is fictional, but the rest of the exhibition maintains the illusion of her veracity.[71] Brettschneider's existence is believable, to a certain extent, but there are details in the show that allow for the penny to drop: an artwork with conflicting dates, one's friend or colleague might appear in a photograph or video, or perhaps viewers simply realize that Brettschneider is too good to be true.[72] Sawyer clarifies, "I chose [fiction] because I thought it would help people understand my intention. Other than that, I'm not trying to build a hoax. Fiction also has the connotation of pleasure and of willing participation."[73] Though one cannot classify the *Archive* as a parafiction, Lambert-Beatty's assertion of the political potency of fictional art still applies.

The *Archive* renders sensible *and* actionable a collaborative and cross-historical form of engagement with historical women's art, one that enacts a transformative change in the viewer's social and political experience of what they might consider a community.[74] This collaboration is enacted in the *Archive* on three levels: within the artworks themselves, in an intertemporal matrilineal community, and in an expanded notion of viewer participation. First, Sawyer suffuses the images in the *Archive* with a sense of collaboration. For instance, *Natalie Brettschneider with*

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[70] Ibid., 64.

[71] Sawyer, interview by Dumais, September 6, 2018.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 64.

friends Lori Weidenhammer and Soressa Gardner (1951) [fig. 3] shows a trio of women backstage, preparing to perform music with pots, pans, cake molds, and kitchen utensils as instruments. The artwork shows the women's genuine laughter and glee, and it is a clear indication of the collaboration at the heart of Sawyer's actual and Brettschneider's fictive artistic output.

Second, images like *Natalie Brettschneider with friends* produce the plausibility for matrilineal collaborations across generations. Most photographs in the *Archive* contain intertextual references to twentieth-century art, extending the community in the installation beyond the images to an intertemporal community of women artists. For example, *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Mirror*, Paris (1938)* [fig. 4] visually quotes German photographer Ilse Bing's (1899-1998) *Self Portrait with Leica* (1931, printed 1941) [fig. 5] while *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Burnt Tree, *Kamloops, B.C. (1949)* [fig. 6] bears a striking resemblance to Canadian artist Françoise Sullivan's (b. 1925) *Danse dans la neige* (1948) [fig. 7], though in this instance, according to Sawyer, the similarity was unintentional.[75]

Aside from references to French surrealist composer Pierre Schaeffer's (1910-1955) *Étude aux casseroles* (1948), made with sounds of rattling saucepans, *Natalie Brettschneider with friends* is an intertextual nod to American artist Martha Rosler's (b. 1943) film *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975). In it, Rosler wields kitchen utensils as instruments and weapons [fig. 8]. Rosler claimed, "It was intended to look like some kind of strange set with a strange woman doing strange things that hopefully would make you laugh."[76] These two works overlap in both their refusal of womanhood as a sign for the production of food and the subversive power of laughter.[77]

These intertextualities evoke philosopher Luce Irigaray's notion of maternity as a metaphor for generational exchange of knowledge between women across time.[78] *Natalie Brettschneider with friends* invites viewers to consider creative possibilities for matrilineal

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[75] Sawyer, interview by Dumais, September 6, 2018.

[76] Martha Rosler, "Semiotics of the Kitchen," YouTube Video, 1975, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDUDzSDA8q0.

[77] "Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975," MoMA, 2010, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/88937.

[78] Luce Irigaray, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother," in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 43, quoted in Pollock, *Differencing the Canon,* 231.

connections and feminist collaborations across generations. The work thus makes sensible a community-based practice that collapses temporal barriers across women's creative practices. This is, of course, not a new sensibility, but one that Sawyer allows to emerge through intertextual references to women artists.

Third, Sawyer extends the communities in *Natalie Brettschneider and friends* to include viewers of the exhibition. Sawyer makes sensible a community of participants that subverts the traditional author-reception paradigm. The *Archive* is not meant to trick viewers. It is meant to encourage willing participation in the pleasure of feminist narrative plausibilities. Sawyer states,

> When the piece functions well, it functions partly as this kind of invitation into a kind of pleasure in narrative and inviting the viewer to invest their own desires into the piece. I have frequently been asked "Do you think Natalie Brettschneider ever did X or Y?" It has to do with the kind of desires of that person, which is fun![79]

Sawyer here provides insight into how viewers engage with and accept Brettschneider's fiction. She creates an open invitation to implicate viewers within the plausibilities for art history. Aside from the transient community the work produces — the community of viewers "in" on the joke and aware of Brettschneider's fictitiousness — Sawyer's *Archive* provokes engaged responses from viewers. The *Archive* invites active participation through viewers' imaginative questionings of what the past could be. Sawyer's imaginative pursuit for the latent plausibilities in women artists' history is thus infectious.

The *Archive* aligns with Jae Emerling's definition of documentary photographs and texts, which sit at the intersection of knowledge-production and affect, at once intelligible and sensible.[80] Okwui Enwezor examines how a documentary text "makes the reader wish to carry further the act of writing, encouraging the imitation of the act of writing […]. [I]t encourages all kinds of acts of *wanting* to further the work of documenting, creating new narratives of the real world, adding, as it were, to the vast body of evidence."[81] Sawyer's work is an invitation for viewers to carry further the act of questioning the past and, imagining its plausibilities, to tell

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[79] Sawyer, interview by Dumais, September 6, 2018. Emphasis mine.

[80] Emerling, *Photography*, 82.

[81] Enwezor, "Documentary/Vérité," 95.

stories of what one wishes to see reflected back at them when looking at neglected fragments of history.

The viewer's participation within the *Archive* echoes the concept of mimesis as discussed by architectural historian Cynthia Hammond, who builds on the work of Irigaray. For Hammond, "mimesis contains within it the potential to disturb, distort, and even disengage, perhaps only slightly, from convention, and, in so doing, to enter into the possibility of a questioning or critical distance."[82] Sawyer makes room for viewers to enact this process of mimesis, rendering them capable, as Irigaray claims, to "convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it."[83] The *Archive* serves as an invitation to question, from the critical position of fiction, how history — more specifically women artists' history — is fictive. Sawyer then invites viewers to further her acts of fictionalizing to question hegemonic assumptions that led to the neglect of women's contributions to culture, and to carry forth this critique to other fictive narratives. Such is the genealogical impetus of the *Archive*: it distributes the sensibility that history is fictive, but Sawyer acknowledges this with an attitude of profound optimism. The curtain of history is pulled back to reveal a stage set for playful, imaginative, and political re-interpretations of the past. Sawyer's fiction makes sensible an active form of viewership, armed with an understanding and skepticism of how certain narratives come down to the present.

Fiction helps Sawyer transform fragments of women's history into playful narratives of potential collaboration, expanding the definition of collaboration to include engagement with historical women artists. Sawyer's positioning of her source material — the traces of historical women — allows her to show that women artists' history is occasionally as hazy and uncertain as the photograph of Nellie Duke's house, and as speculative as Sawyer's narrative of Duke as a participant in the tradition of monumental site-specific sculpture. Sawyer re-imagines social bonds across time, collapses the distinction between past and present, and shows the potential for the uncertainty of the past as sites of intervention. Fiction in the *Archive* is not simply a means to draw out neglected stories of women's art history. By coming across the fragments of Duke's

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[82] Cynthia Hammond, "'I Weep for Us Women': Modernism, Feminism, and Suburbia in the Canadian Home Journal's Home '53 Design Competition," in *Rethinking Professionalism: Women and Art in Canada, 1850-1970*, ed. Kristina Huneault and Janice Anderson (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2012), 206.

[83] Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), 71, quoted in Hammond, "I Weep for us Women," 206.

story, and imagining a narrative told with a blurry image of unclear origins, fiction allows Sawyer to enact a critical, genealogical look at how these narratives come down to the present, and the improbable, accidental, and unsystematic means via which those narratives are either salvaged or effaced. She subsequently forges meaningful relations across time, be it between Brettschneider and historical women, Sawyer and historical artists, or Brettschneider/Sawyer and viewers. The *Archive* shows the influence that contemporary artists have in altering how one perceives the past, and makes sensible plausibilities for remedying historiographic exclusions. Sawyer's approach to telling stories reveals the precariousness of the history of women artists, which is always a small earthquake away from causing ripples that can affect political and social change.

Canadian Women Artists History Initiative: Plausibilities from Provisionality

This thesis will now turn to how the fictive is at work in the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative. This section will treat how CWAHI's founders, collaborators, and users create plausibilities for women artists' history with a community-based approach. The texts that CWAHI's founders edit and publish feature essays by scholars from a range of academic backgrounds. These publications are concerned with altering how art historians engage with women as artists. CWAHI's collaborators use the material available in the documentation centre to craft new interpretive frameworks to discuss the work and lives of women artists. As such, in the section that follows, I argue that the collective historiographic approach of CWAHI's collaborators creatively and critically deploys the discourse of the fictive.

The way CWAHI collects and disseminates information is key to understand how it combats the dearth of information on women artists. Kristina Huneault, CWAHI's co-founder, thinks of CWAHI primarily as a tool to be used in the building of a more representative picture of the artistic field.[84] Rather than researchers having to travel to archives across the country, the documentation centre is a centralized resource with photocopies of original files located in collections spread out across North America. The documentation centre takes up most of Janice Anderson's office in Concordia's Engineering, Computer Science and Visual Arts Integrated Complex, with large filing cabinets lining the walls alphabetized by artists' last names, and a

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[84] Kristina Huneault, interview by Doug Dumais, September 26, 2018.

second large cabinet that holds the architects' files. All artist files include a checklist of the archives and collections that returned results for that particular artist, which helps researchers narrow their search, and photocopies of documents within those archives. CWAHI's documentation centre is easily accessible in person or from afar, as any files can be scanned and e-mailed upon request. Their online database contains biographical and bibliographical information on women artists. Collectively, the documentation centre and database are tools for researchers to access and produce scholarship, some of which appears in the conferences or publications that CWAHI organizes. In the following section I argue that it is within CWAHI's publications that feminist plausibilities are most evident, and explore this idea through the lens of the fictive.

Kirk Niergarth's essay on New-Brunswick painter Julia Crawford (1896-1968), included in a special issue of the *Journal of Canadian Art History*, guest edited by CWAHI founders Huneault and Anderson, critically engages with the fictive conventions of women artists' history, and the production of alternative narratives. On how art historians might be inclined to add Crawford to the canon, Niergarth notes, "To make the case for Crawford's 'importance' — in the sense [feminist art historian Linda] Nochlin uses the term — might succeed in expanding this canon but would not challenge its basic assumptions, assumptions that did not serve Crawford well in her lifetime."[85] In other words, to restrict the interpretation of Crawford's practice to standards of artistic success held at the time of her life, such as the male artist as genius, would be detrimental to an understanding of her career that resonates with her intentions. Drawing on documentation found in public and private collections, Niergarth highlights two of the many conventional narratives available to art historians. One could craft the story of the heroine, who fought against social expectations of women artists to gain a foothold in an artistic field predisposed to dismiss her work, or the tragic heroine, subject to gendered social injustices that prevented her from achieving autonomy, success, and fame.[86]

These are two interpretations of Crawford's career that are both true based on the facts of her career. Both interpretations, however, are steeped in hegemonic and patriarchal notions of cultural value, as well as tropes of either the artist as hero or as a tragic, marginalized figure.

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[85] Kirk Niergarth, "Julia Crawford and the Rules of the Game," *Journal of Canadian Art History* 34, no. 2 (June 2013): 49.

[86] Ibid., 51-53.

These two narratives, Niergarth argues, do not resonate with Crawford's views of her own practice.[87] Instead of reading Crawford's career as that of either a successful or failed artist, Niergarth establishes a different convention to tell her story. He reads her defeats and failures in the art world as refusals that speak to Crawford's own standards of artistic success.[88] This reading considers Crawford's own intentions as an artist, weary of the competition and hierarchy of the art market, an artist who approached her career on her own terms by refusing to work with an art dealer, satisfied with her local success.[89] Niergarth thus re-orders the art historical interpretation of Crawford's career.

This practice is what Griselda Pollock terms the "differencing" of art's histories. In *Differencing the Canon*, Pollock calls for new approaches to the interpretation of artist biographies that do more than graft marginalized artists onto existing frameworks.[90] Pollock argues that feminist art history is not an attempt at writing a parallel canon of women artists. She puts into practice a discursive approach to historiography that allows for multiple occupancies, where art historians might interpret racialized, classed, and marginalized historical voices in opposition to the phallocentric logic that positions women artists and feminist scholarship between the Scylla and Charybdis of assimilation in or exclusion from art historical conventions.[91] Niergarth employs the documentation of Crawford's career to develop a methodology that affords a new interpretive framework rooted in her agency. Niergarth's approach signals a creative response to the unknowability of the past, an attempt to fill the gaps by crafting a new framework to tell her story, as well as a methodology that historians can apply

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[87] Ibid., 50. Perhaps even more interesting is Niergarth's question: "Does agency apply only to resistance and not to complicity?" What he means by this is that a dichotomy between these two narratives of heroism or tragedy sets up an ahistorical, dichotomous imposition of contemporary feminist values on historical artists. The woman artist as rebellious heroine appeals to feminist scholars today because of her willingness to defy convention, with these actions appearing to be her own will and volition, while unappealing decisions such as conformism to narratives and conventions of the art world are seen as false impositions of patriarchal consciousness. This dichotomy risks reifying a narrative that women only enacted agency if they resisted patriarchal consciousness, rendering the acts of women who complied, reinforced, or internalized values today seen as problematic as having no agency, acting according to the will of others.

[88] Ibid., 58.

[89] Ibid., 68, 73.

[90] Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, 102.

[91] Ibid., 11.

to other women artists. Out of the provisionality of what is known about Crawford's career, the plausibility emerges for biographical interpretations that ascribe value not to long-held assumptions of artistic success but the artist's own vision and agency.

Through their publications, CWAHI invites scholars like Niergarth to contribute to the dissemination of knowledge about women artists and put into practice a collaborative approach to telling art's histories. CWAHI is structured, according to Huneault, as a "network that has no membership list or dues; it's just people who come in and out at any point as their research crosses paths with our declared scope of interest."[92] CWAHI is a tool that gathers fragmentary traces of women's artistic production in Canada, in one place, and it is proud to serve as a means by which a community of scholars can re-assemble those traces in ways that dismantle long-held interpretive assumption. CWAHI realizes what Sawyer's *Archive* seeks to make sensible: a community in constant flux that pushes the boundaries of how one can write the biographies of women artists.

CWAHI's collaborators thus enact processes at work in Sawyer's *Archive*. Both initiatives create communities of participation that generate affective resonances between artists of the past and historians in the present. In other words, some of CWAHI's collaborators use the source material found in CWAHI to read the work of historical artists through new frameworks that are more relevant to present concepts of artistic agency and dynamic art historical interpretation. On this topic, Huneault states, "you have to make [women's history] meaningful for people by re-activating it today and I don't think you can re-activate it just by trying to recreate the past […]."[93] "Meaningful", here, as I read it, relates to this thesis' discussion of the fictive. Art historians craft narratives from the raw material of history that create relational links across time. Feminist scholars create alternative readings of women artists not as background characters belonging to exclusionary narratives of subordination or failed artistry. Instead, they craft narratives with women's subjectivity and agency at the forefront.

The fictive has a bearing on Canadian art history. Both Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI enact the plausibilities for a collaborative historiographic sensibility. In both cases, artists and scholars unearth and re-arrange the source material of the past to offer opportunities for visceral

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[92] Huneault, interview by Dumais, September 26, 2018.

[93] Ibid.

encounters with the present. As Huneault and Anderson state in their chapter in *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*, this look towards the past is not an attempt at a neutral telling of what occurred but an active enabling of other futures yet to be imagined.[94] Drawing on the work of Joan Scott and Drucilla Cornell, they assert that "feminist history takes place in the future anterior — that the task is not to authoritatively state *what was* but to open a window to that which *will be seen to have been* from the perspective of a still uncertain future."[95] History, in both the *Archive* and CWAHI, are reformulations of nearly-forgotten narratives that come to life in ways that resonate with today's audiences. In this way, both Sawyer and CWAHI assert that the most effective way to tell stories about women artists, historical or contemporary, is to work with them in a form of intertemporal collaboration. These are actualizations of a definition of the social that includes scholars, artists, and women both alive and long since passed. This thesis will now complicate this collapse between past and present. I will argue that through a feminist deployment of the fictive, Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI are sensitive to the tensions that one must acknowledge when one bridges the gap between historical women and the present.

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[94] Kristina Huneault and Janice Anderson, "A Past as Rich as Our Futures Allow: A Genealogy of Feminist Art in Canada," in *Desire Change: Contemporary Feminist Art in Canada*, ed. Heather Davis (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 46.

[95] Ibid., 45. Here they refer to Elizabeth Grosz's "Histories of the Present and Future: Feminism, Power, Bodies," in *Thinking the Limits of the Body,* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003).

CHAPTER TWO

(un)Limited Archives

Chapter one of this thesis argued that Carol Sawyer's *The Natalie Brettschneider Archive* and the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative offer opportunities for a creative collaboration between historical women and contemporary viewers or art historians. Both generate narratives that are attentive to women's agency and that create spaces of collaboration across generational divides. This chapter delves into the implications of such a collapse and asks: what is at stake in the production of biographies that recognize the agency of women artists, no matter how provisional the traces of that agency may appear in archives? As mutable, community-based, and participatory depositories for heterogeneous media and materials that challenge the assumed fixity of history, Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI sustain tensions at the heart of feminist scholarship between historical women artists and historians or artists who study them today.[96] Sawyer and CWAHI disseminate information about women artists in ways that help viewers of the *Archive* and users of CWAHI recognize that feminist history must mediate between what occurred and what feminist art historians want the past, present, or future to be. Both Sawyer and CWAHI do this by criss-crossing back and forth between the facts of history and the open-endedness of feminist interpretation.

This chapter demonstrates that Sawyer's *Archive* exists between the limits and plausibilities for women artists' history. Analysing photographs in the *Archive* through the lens of archival theory and theories of cultural haunting, I argue that Sawyer acknowledges the interactions of the desires of historical artists and those who encounter them in research or in an art gallery as viewers of archival art. These photographs manifest the tensions at work in archives between the agency of women artists and feminist interpretations of these traces. This chapter then examines CWAHI according to how Huneault defines it, as a map of the terrain of women artists' history. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's theory of maps as evidence of the tension between representation of spaces and how individuals navigate them, I argue that CWAHI recognizes the interplay of past and present agents by serving as a flexible repository for both the source material of history and the endless reformulations that these materials allow.

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[96] Kashmere, "Cache Rules Everything Around Me," quoted in Campbell, "Hip Hop Archives or an Archive of Hip Hop?," 71.

History's Missing Centre: Reading *Natalie Brettschneider Performs Profile Mask c. 1952*

Sawyer's *Natalie Brettschneider Performs Profile Mask c. 1952* [fig. 9] engages with the materiality of archives. It is a black and white photograph of Brettschneider in a simple black jacket, her torso facing forward. She holds up a white sheet of paper diagonally in front of her face. The paper is rigid, but it bows ever so slightly under its own weight. Brettschneider's face partly emerges from a hole in the shape of her profile cut out from the paper's centre. Her visible eye looks at the viewer through the hole at an angle perpendicular to her face, her expression unreadable. *Profile Mask* recalls masks employed by Surrealist and Dada artists like Kati Horna (1912-2000) who photographed Remedios Varo (1908-1963) in a mask by Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) [fig. 10], or Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889-1943), who performed in Marcel Janco's (1895-1984) masks at the Cabaret Voltaire [fig. 11]. Paper is a reoccurring symbol in the *Archive*. Brettschneider uses a book as a mask in *Natalie Brettschneider performs "Moche Warrior," 1949* [fig. 12], and turns paper into a musical instrument in *Natalie Brettschneider and unknown pianist, the Banff Centre for the Arts, c. 1951* [fig. 13]. Elsewhere, viewers find sketches on paper and typewritten notes. Paper is the raw material of Western European history. It is pervasive in archives. It is the material upon which books, newspapers, maps, political speeches, and photographs that have shaped history are printed. *Profile Mask* suggests that even a blank piece of paper with a missing centre can speak volumes.

Photographs and archives inspire a fictive impulse: the desire to craft narratives from what one finds within them. Sven Spieker, in *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*, shows that photographs, like archives, cannot afford their viewers or users a "glimpse of the past purged of narrative and representation."[97] Spieker asserts that photographs and archives are sites in which individuals, cultures, or institutions attempt to hold on to memories that are always at risk of fading away.[98] Spieker draws on an example by theorist Siegfried Kracauer (1889-1966) to illustrate how narrativity prevents the contents of a photograph or an archive from fading into oblivion. His example is a photograph of someone's grandmother. If there are no living relatives who might recognize her, Kracauer states "[t]he photograph gathers fragments around a

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[97] Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008), 143.

[98] Ibid., 143.

nothing."[99] The content of photographs or archives are either relational, or they have what Spieker calls a "missing centre,"[100] unrecognizable to present concerns and at risk of disappearing irretrievably.[101] A photograph or archive's meaning arises from "a reflexive mental operation [...]," or concatenations that viewers of photographs or users of archives make.[102] An archive's "centre," arises not from archival objects themselves but from the dialogic encounter between the source materials of archives and scholars, artists, or art historians who shape them into narratives with immediate and relevant concerns. In sum, the archive says little on its own but provides the necessary materials to help others make it speak.[103]

Profile Mask serves as a visual metaphor for the dialogic encounter between historical women artists and art historians that occurs in archival research. Brettschneider's face, a cipher for historical women, signifies, in my reading, the partial agency of women artists one finds in archives due to their marginal position in history. According to Mieke Bal, "facing" implies an intertemporal encounter between the subject and the subject's interlocutor. Bal writes, "No longer the site of representation and expression, the face has become an agent of action: what can faces *do*, rather than how to do things with faces. The face is the subject of action; the source of performativity."[104] To stage a face to face encounter in art is to aid in the viewer's recognition of the instability of selfhood that Bal considers a form of empowerment and agency.[105] Brettschneider only partially faces viewers of *Profile Mask*, suggesting that only a fragment of her potential agency is visible. As feminist art historians know all too well, partial glimpses of women's agency often define the nature of feminist archival research.

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[99] Sigfried Kracauer, "Photography," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 56, quoted in Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 144.

[100] Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 144.

[101] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255, quoted in Giovanna Zapperi, "Woman's Reappearance: Rethinking the Archive in Contemporary Art—Feminist Perspectives," *Feminist Review* 105 (2013): 25.

[102] Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 140.

[103] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault,* trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 34, quoted in Emerling, *Photography*, 164.

[104] Mieke Bal, "In Your Face: Migratory Aesthetics," 164.

[105] Ibid., 159.

To locate a marginalized artist's agency within contingent webs of repressive social forces is certainly a challenge.[106] While many women artists wrote extensively, the agency of other artists is often difficult for researchers to locate. In our interview, CWAHI co-founder Janice Anderson recounted her research on painter Mary Hiester Reid (1854-1921) for a solo exhibition she co-curated with Brian Foss in 2000.[107] Despite the fact that Hiester Reid was one of the best-known Canadian women artists at the turn of the twentieth-century, Anderson only ever found one piece of paper with Hiester Reid's handwriting: the signature on her will. Anderson recalls, "I don't know what she thought about anything. I don't know if she was pro-suffrage, I don't know anything about her."[108] Confronted with the lack of direct links into Hiester Reid's thought through traditional archival materials like letters, diaries, or sketchbooks, Anderson relied on Hiester Reid's paintings and her own interpretation as an art historian. Anderson states, "I kind of loved the creation of the narrative of her life even though I didn't really have any information […]."[109] This recollection exemplifies the tension between discontinuities in women artists' history and the responses to such discontinuities in creative feminist research. It is this interplay of subjectivities within archives that Sawyer draws attention to in *Profile Mask*.

Profile Mask visualizes this dialogic encounter between subject of study and researcher because it is both Brettschneider *and* Sawyer's faces that occupy the paper's missing centre. As Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson assert, "The art historian is always present in the construction she or he produces."[110] One might thus also read Brettschneider's partial agency as Sawyer's parallel agency as an artist and historian. Sawyer imposes her own desires on Brettschneider's fictional story and other women in the *Archive*'s factual narratives. Sawyer states, the *Archive* is "an extreme form of projecting my desire for precedent into this past because I want to identify with somebody who can then sort of fulfill some of the desires I have for what's possible for me as an

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[106] Niergarth, "Julia Crawford and the Rules of the Game," 51.

[107] The show, *Quiet Harmony: The Art of Mary Hiester Reid*, ran from November 1, 2000 to February 4, 2001 at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

[108] Janice Anderson, interview by Doug Dumais, September 26, 2018.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Bal and Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," 175.

artist."[111] *Profile Mask* alludes to the negotiation of desires at work in the construction of feminist art history. The piece of paper Brettschneider/Sawyer holds is a cipher for archival documents that attest, no matter how provisionally, to the agency of historical women artists. Sawyer's face, which also fills the missing centre, metonymically refers to historians who mold archival traces into narratives that postpone, at least temporarily, the loss of women artists' historical significance. *Profile Mask* signals the back and forth of agencies at the heart of archival research into historical women. It visually articulates Spieker's proposition that an archive's meaning arises not from its materials but from the results of the encounters between the contemporary artist-as-historian and their subjects of study.

There is another layer of encounter between artists and interpreters in *Profile Mask* that extends beyond the relationship between historical artists and Sawyer. This second encounter occurs between Sawyer's image and its viewers. Brettschneider's forward-facing posture, the simple, black blazer, the monotone grey background and the piece of paper in *Profile Mask* create an overall effect of flatness that transforms the image into a screen viewers project upon as if it was ready to be filled.[112] Sawyer states,

> A common thing about the show, people will ask, 'Oh, do you think she ever did this, or that?' That question is always invested with their desires. When people do that I feel like the show is working, to a certain extent, because they are projecting their desires onto the narrative. Participating in their own identification with how they see themselves in that narrative."[113]

Profile Mask's flatness and the blank surface of the page serves as an invitation for viewers to fill gaps they identify. Sawyer projects her own desires onto history to draw out plausibilities from its excisions, filling its missing centre. *Profile Mask* then extends these projections outward, implicating viewers.

Profile Mask is not an empty site of projection, however. The image simultaneously repudiates the viewer's total projection onto the work. Brettschneider/Sawyer deliberately holds up the paper to partially cover her face(s). Further, the artist gazes out directly at the viewer,

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[111] Sawyer, interview by Dumais, September 6, 2018.

[112] Mieke Bal, *Reading "Rembrandt": Beyond the Word-Image Opposition: The Northrop Frye Lectures in Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 98.

[113] Sawyer, interview by Dumais, September 6, 2018.

staging a face to face confrontation that insists on her recognition not as a muse to inspire the viewer's creativity, but as an active agent. Sawyer is cautious of narrative tropes of art history. The purpose is not to open up the *Archive* to any and all plausible concatenations viewers might make, but to make viewers aware that such projections occur. In response to the common question from viewers if Brettschneider had any lovers, Sawyer answers "Nope! Not that we know of. There are refusals of common well-worn tracks that come up in these kinds of narratives. But I like it when people, at least, have those desires. If they could be aware of why they might have that desire for the narrative that would be a good thing."[114] *Profile Mask* thus serves as a *mise en abîme* of recurring plausibilities for encounters between artists and those who interpret their work, of the dual agency present in encounters between historical women artists and Sawyer, as well as Sawyer and viewers.

  Profile Mask challenges viewers and researchers, including the author of this thesis, to acknowledge the contingency of reading, as well as how interpreters are implicated in the production of narratives of art history.[115] *Profile Mask* contends that the interpretation of women's art is a balancing act of agencies, a process of negotiation between how historical artists might have seen their own life and work, and the contingency of how one might interpret these facts in light of contemporary concerns, feminist or otherwise. *Profile Mask* is a recognition of the reflexive mental operation that takes place when historians undertake archival research, and the investment in or projection of their identity upon their subjects of study. With *Profile Mask*, Sawyer proposes that the divide between historical artists and contemporary interpreters is paper thin. The proximity between researcher and subject of study is not presented within the *Archive* as wholly negative; it is a means to help viewers recognize the active presence of the historian in drawing historical narratives forward into close proximity with the present. The following section explores the results of the proximity, and how viewers may come away from the encounters staged within the *Archive* haunted and thereby changed.

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[114] Ibid.

[115] Amelia Jones, "Tracing the Subject with Cindy Sherman," in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective*, ed. Amanda Cruz and Elizabeth A. T. Smith (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 49.

Ghostly Encounters: Inserting the *Archive's* Ghosts into Time

Though the *Archive* draws fictional and historical women into the present, demonstrating the proximity of artists and interpreters, it does not erase contextual differences between then and now. It instead recognizes that feminist interpretation is contextual or provisional, and serves as a form of resistance to the closure historians might wish to impose upon the biographies of women. An example of such closure is the wave theory of feminism, which divides the movement into three distinct eras. Wave theory, according to Clare Hemmings, calcifies a notion of feminism as generationally distinct, prescribes hostile cross-generational relationships between women, and privileges a notion of time over context.[116] This theory rarely acknowledges the "possibility of feminist spaces of friendship, desire, affiliation, and productivity that produce variegated historical accounts whose subjects (of any age) shuttle back and forth between their own and others' memories, representations, and fantasies of past, present, and future."[117] The wave theory closes off possibilities for temporal affiliation across generations, and forecloses the reality of how feminists engage with the history of the movement within which they participated. To reject wave theory is not to argue for an ahistorical model of feminism but rather to signal that context is more significant than arbitrary lines that cut across a chronological timeline.

With a focus on Sawyer's *Last Known Photograph of Natalie Brettschneider, Vancouver (1986)* [fig. 14], this section argues that the *Archive* forges affective links across time without stripping the past and present of their respective contexts. Sawyer signals the irretrievability of historical women's complex lives through an effect of haunting. Haunting allows the exhibition to meander back and forth across divides of then and now, life and death, as well as fact and fiction. The result is that Sawyer gives both sides of each divide equal weight and presence within the installation. As such, rather than a complete erasure of the distinction between these supposed oppositions, the *Archive* registers that the past and present are always in tension.

Last Known Photograph is a black and white image showing Brettschneider/Sawyer in a backyard garden, sitting upright in an armchair, holding a rhubarb leaf in front of her face

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[116] Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 148, quoted in Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 77.

[117] Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 149, quoted in Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 55-56.

through which she peers out at viewers through two eyeholes. The image is whimsical, and from a practical point of view, covering her face is an effective way to suggest Brettschneider's age without resorting to prosthetics or make-up. The leaf's shape and eyeholes evoke the Western cultural symbol and last-minute Halloween costume of the ghost covered in a sheet.

Since it is the "last known" image of Brettschneider, the image invokes the thematic proximity of photography and death, a relationship that photography theorists have developed throughout the twentieth century. From French novelist and songwriter Pierre Mac Orlan, to American theorist Susan Sontag, and French literary theorist Roland Barthes, to name a few, photography and death are closely intertwined because a photograph freezes the present and renders it a record of passing time. In photographs, a living subject transforms into a surface or "spectrum" according to Barthes, relating it to the word spectre, which "adds to [photography] that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead."[118] This is not to suggest that subjects of photographs become lifeless. Photographs rather posit a confrontation with the dead, who return when one gazes at a portrait, allowing the subject of a photograph to come alive. Alternatively, they force an encounter with the spectre within oneself. According to Robert Sobieszek in *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul, 1850-2000*, the human face in a photograph "encompasses and reveals the unnameable ghost(s) residing within each of us."[119] Though Brettschneider/Sawyer hide their face(s) in *Last Known Photograph*, a ghost literally resides within Sawyer through her co-presence with Brettschneider in every self-portrait throughout the exhibition.

From Victorian death portraits to documentary photography of war zones, photography and death are entangled in practice as well. One of the first staged photographs ever taken is uncannily similar to *Last Known Photograph* as it represents the fictional death of the

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[118] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 9. French novelist and songwriter Pierre Mac Orlan claimed in nineteen thirty that "the power of photography consists in creating sudden death […]." Pierre Mac Orlan, "Preface to Atget: Photographe de Paris," in *Photography in the Modern Era: European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. Christopher Phillips, trans. Robert Erich Wolf (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Aperture, 1989), 41–49. While Susan Sontag states that "Photography also converts the whole world into a cemetery." Susan Sontag, "Introduction," in Peter Hujar, *Portraits in Life and Death* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976).

[119] Robert A. Sobieszek, *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul, 1850-2000* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 13, as quoted in Rafael Goldchain, *I Am My Family: Photographic Memories and Fictions* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008), 22.

photographer. Hippolyte Bayard's *Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man* (1840) [fig. 15] features Bayard himself posed as if he were dead, his face and hands artificially swollen. Bayard writes in the third person on the reverse side of the photograph that he committed suicide as a result of the widespread acclaim for Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre's progress in developing photography and the failure of the French authorities to recognize Bayard's own contributions to the field.[120] According to Geoffrey Batchen, Bayard presents himself "as both subject and object of the photograph, as acting even while acted upon, as a representation that is also real, as self and other, present and absent, dead but also alive […]. In this sense, Bayard's ghost haunts not only photography but the whole of Western metaphysics."[121] One can say the same of *Last Known Photograph*, as Sawyer also crosses back and forth across the boundaries Batchen describes.

Bayard's image haunts photography while Sawyer's *Last Known Photograph* haunts the *Archive*. What is particularly haunting about the image and the *Archive* is that it draws ghosts, fictional and historical, into the present, while also disclosing the irretrievability of certain details of historical women artists' lives. To clarify how images can haunt the viewer, this section relies on Avery Gordon's work on the subject. Gordon writes, "Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition."[122] Gordon argues that haunting is transformative because one's response occurs somewhere between a pure emotional reaction and a rational acquisition of knowledge. Defining what she means by "transformative recognition", Gordon writes, "Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and re-fashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look."[123] Art's capacity to haunt resides in the act of giving life to traces that the dead have left behind. In Sawyer's case, these traces are those of fictional and historical individuals who populate the *Archive*.

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[120] Michal Sapir, "The Impossible Photograph: Hippolyte Bayard's Self-Portrait as a Drowned Man," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 40, no. 3 (September 1, 1994): 619.

[121] Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1999), 171-173, quoted in Emerling, *Photography*, 88.

[122] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

[123] Ibid., 22.

Expanding on Gordon's points, Jack Halberstam asserts that encounters between the living and dead — as Halberstam stages in his text on Brandon Teena, a trans man who was murdered in Humboldt, Nebraska, and whose life was the subject of many books as well as the 1999 Academy Award-winning film *Boys Don't Cry* — should not merely fascinate or provoke readers and viewers, but challenge and transform them.[124] To be haunted is not just to come into proximity with the dead to satisfy curiosity; it is to recognize that the dead are subjects with complex personhood. Gordon clarifies, "complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning."[125] A haunting encounter should evoke the dead's presence enough for them to enter what Gordon calls "the dense site where history and subjectivity make social life."[126] A text, film, or photograph haunts by conferring life upon the dead to the point where they are inserted into relational time, where they pass from an object of knowledge to a complex subject that influences the social and affective sphere of the present.

As the following paragraphs demonstrate, Sawyer's *Last Known Photograph* and the *Archive* as a whole do not just "bring the past to life;" they acknowledge the complexity of the lives of women, fictional and historical, who occupy the installation. While Sawyer revels in flights of fancy that the gaps in women's history afford, at the intersection of affect and knowledge, of fiction and fact, the *Archive* enables viewers to be transformed, and to recognize that the historical women in the installation have complex lives that are only partly knowable. Sawyer at once impresses upon viewers these ghostly co-presences as complex persons *and* as distant and irretrievable historical subjects who lived in contexts separate from the viewer's own.

A typical haunting is a criss-crossing back and forth across affect and reason. For instance, one hears a bump in the night, freezes, and wonders if it could have been a ghost. This emotional response is followed-up by reason. Of course not, one tells oneself, it was probably the cat, the wind, or the house settling. As Jacques Derrida articulates, "[…] it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the spectre. There is something

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[124] Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 58.

[125] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 5, quoted in Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 74.

[126] Ibid., 8, quoted in Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 59.

disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reapparition of the departed."[127] Derrida here argues that spectres are always already fading in their very apparition, as is the case in Sawyer's installation, which constantly shuffles back and forth across the boundaries of life and death, fact and fiction, and past and present.

Upon my visit to Sawyer's *Archive* at the Carleton University Art Gallery, for a brief moment I, and many others, thought Brettschneider was real. The show is convincing enough. Recall the viewer who asked Sawyer "She's real, right?" while Sawyer herself gave a tour. Eventually, for a number of reasons, Brettschneider's fictitiousness becomes clear. Brettschneider shifts from factual to fictive, from existence to non-existence, a death that reoccurs at the end of the installation when viewers see *Last Known Photograph*. Brettschneider's death does not render her an object of knowledge; she remains an active subject through Sawyer. Brettschneider enters the social sphere of the present through the artist who invented her, who occupies the same space and face in all Brettschneider's apparitions. Brettschneider is not dead, per se, because her fate remains open-ended. Brettschneider can actively continue making art *via* Sawyer. When I asked if Brettschneider's story will ever be done, Sawyer answered, "as long as people ask me interesting questions that I'm interested in looking into she seems to stay alive."[128] It is within this complex back and forth across life and death that Sawyer's *Archive* is transformative. Brettschneider's ghost, which haunts images like *Last Known Photograph*, enters into the viewer's social space through Sawyer, but her fictional death re-occurs throughout the *Archive* whenever viewers are reminded of her fictional status.

This back and forth across the divide of life and death, or fact and fiction, also occurs in the interactions between Brettschneider and historical women artists that Sawyer interweaves throughout the exhibition. Next to Sawyer's photographs are original artworks by, portraits of, and documents relating to real people. *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Triangles*, c. 1933* [fig. 16], for instance, creates the fiction that this photograph of Brettschneider "suggest[s] a possible link" with W. Molyneux-Seel's (dates n.a.) sculpture titled *Triangles* (1934) and may have

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[127] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge Classics, 2006), 5.

[128] Sawyer, interview by Dumais, September 6, 2018.

served as a study for the (now lost) sculpture.[129] Sawyer notes in her article for *Canadian Art* that "it would be difficult to verify this" connection between the two artists.[130] Molyneux-Seel was a real Parisian sculptor whose subjects include artist Ilse Bing and many prominent politicians. Few details remain about W. Molyneux-Seel's life, however, and according to Sawyer, she "vanished from the annals of art history without leaving a trace."[131] Alongside *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Triangles, *c. 1933* is a collection of original archival documents related to Molyneux-Seel. There is an invitation to an exhibition of her sculptures at the prestigious MM. Bernheim-Jeune Galleries in Paris, as well as a newspaper clipping of an image of her sculpting a bust of Sir George Clerk (1874-1951), the British Ambassador to France [fig. 17]. Aside from these documents, Sawyer found no other information on Molyneux-Seel. The newspaper photograph of Molyneux-Seel is the sculptor's own last known photograph. Sawyer brings Molyneux-Seel to life, using only the traces that remain, highlighting how precariously some women's memories hang in the balance.

Sawyer only forges loose links between Brettschneider and real artists like Molyneux-Seel in the *Archive*, however. This allows for the viewers' transformative recognition of these artists' open-ended and complex personhoods to occur. Like ghosts, these women are already disappearing the moment of their apparition. In the wall texts beside photographs, and in her other writings, Sawyer only ever suggests "possible," "likely," and "unclear" connections between Brettschneider and historical women.[132] Sawyer maintains the complex subjectivity of these women because their interactions with Brettschneider offer no closure nor prescriptive impositions. Sawyer suggests they merely entered into proximity with one another through means that are difficult to verify (even though she made them up), and does not suggest that

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[129] Wall text for *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Triangles, *c. 1933* by Carol Sawyer. *Carol Sawyer: The Natalie Brettschneider Archive*, January 18 to April 19, 2016, Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa.

[130] Sawyer, "Bringing Forgotten Women Artists Back to Light."

[131] Ibid.

[132] This language is taken from Sawyer's article "Bringing Forgotten Women Artists Back to Light" in *Canadian Art*. Similar language is repeated in wall text for various artworks throughout the exhibition. Brettschneider's loose connection to artists of the Parisian avant-garde is most clearly expressed in the Wall text for *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Nancy Cunard's Hat*, Paris (c. 1925)*, which reads "Brettschneider's growing engagement with Parisian avant-garde artistic circles during the 1920s and 1930s is evident in several images that document various performances, for which no other record has been uncovered to date."

encounters with Brettschneider altered these women's lives. Sawyer considers Brettschneider an "alibi" that affords historical women artists — whose work is no longer extant, whose biographical accounts are too barebones, or whose work falls outside the gendered biases of archives and galleries — a haunting presence in gallery spaces.[133]

These ghosts haunt the installation because Sawyer alludes to their complex personhoods and their biographies' open-endedness, yet maintains their distance as historical subjects acting within the limits of their context and in spite of hegemonic assumptions that marginalized their presence in art history. As Marianne Hirsch notes, "Photography's relation to loss and death is not to mediate the process of individual and collective memory but to bring the past back in the form of a ghostly revenant, emphasizing, at the same time, its immutable and irreversible pastness and irretrievability."[134] Sawyer's inclusion of Molyneux-Seel in the *Archive* pointedly invokes both her memory and her irretrievability. The haunting tension between life and loss in *Last Known Photograph* also takes place in the interactions between Brettschneider and historical artists in the *Archive.* Sawyer's installation serves as a threshold between the orders of life and death. It signals the complex and unknowable lives of women artists and the historiographic conventions that limit what one might know about them, ultimately recognizing that some women's biographies may forever remain patchworks of fragments.

The fictional and historical ghosts that haunt *Last Known Photograph* and the *Archive* help viewers recognize that the details of some women's lives will only ever be partly known. In certain cases, such as *Nellie Duke's house shake*, the lack of detail on Duke's life provide plausibilities for creative intervention. Elsewhere in the installation, such as in the story of Molyneux-Seel, the dearth of knowledge about certain women artists is wistful. The exhibition allows for the recognition that some of women's lives will remain for the most part unknowable. The *Archive* is therefore not a shallow statement that the past is co-existent with the present. It challenges and transforms viewers. It serves as an opportunity for viewers to recognize that historical women led complex lives that, like ghosts, are constantly shifting and impossible to pin down. Though Sawyer demonstrates that the gaps in women's lives afford opportunities for imaginative speculation, she leaves some of their stories incomplete, suggesting that it is

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[133] Sawyer, interview by Dumais, September 6, 2018.

[134] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 20.

occasionally more ethical to leave their stories open and thus full of potentiality. Sawyer here points to the limits of knowledge, and accentuates the distance and irretrievability of these subjects whose context-specific situations resulted in their near complete erasure.

The *Archive* signals the tightrope that feminist artists and historians navigate when they recount stories about women artists whose lives come down to the present as fragments. The balancing act of historiography manifests in the interactions between the surviving glimpses of historical women artists' subjectivities and the artists or historians who transform these stories into narratives today, who craft their own interpretation and inevitably project their own values and desires retroactively onto the past. The oscillating movement between Brettschneider and Sawyer in *Profile Mask* recognizes the historian's role in locating women's agencies, while the shuffling back and forth across life and death or fiction in fact in the haunting *Last Known Photograph* exemplifies the tension that undergirds encounters between contemporary and historical subjects in archives, art galleries, and photographs.

All of Sawyer's moves towards inserting historical women artists in relational time also include a repudiation that accentuates the distance and discontinuities at the heart of such encounters. The *Archive* makes visible how history is partial and fictive in nature, and thus susceptible to intervention. In turn, it underscores the caution with which such interventions must be made, so as to not undermine the specific contextual experiences of historical women whose biographies are limited by hegemonic structures that marginalized them. Sawyer does so by recounting Brettschneider's fictional biography through deliberately incomplete traces: blurry images, partially covered faces, indefinite assertions of plausible collaborations, and stories she claims are difficult to verify. The *Archive* thus gestures towards an ethical approach to the production of biographies of women artists that upholds the complexity, irretrievability, and open-endedness of their life stories, as well as the specificity of historical women's agencies, their positionality within their respective contexts, and their subjectivities, even if nothing more than a few fragments of their lives remain.

Navigating the Terrain of Canadian Women Artists History
The founders, collaborators, contributors, volunteers, and other individuals affiliated with the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative work through similar tensions between past and present in the research and programming that the initiative produces. Relying on interviews

conducted with CWAHI's founders, the following section carries Sawyer's concerns with creating ethical biographies of women artists over to the Initiative. This comparison highlights that both projects draw attention to how contemporary interpreters navigate the discontinuities of women artists' biographies. Through its structure, CWAHI actively recognizes the tension between the factual, or the available historical information, and the fictive, or the narratives CWAHI's users craft about women artists. CWAHI also sustains the necessary open-endedness of feminist interpretation by remaining flexible in relation to the material traces of women artists' history that it collects.

Though Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI overlap in intent and result, they are different in significant ways. The key difference is that CWAHI is not an archive, nor a fictional archive. The theoretical groundwork of the above interpretation of Sawyer's work is therefore only partially applicable. As CWAHI co-founder Kristina Huneault states,

> […] we're not an archive because we don't have original documents, we have photocopies. Secondly, we do not follow the rules of archival practice in terms of organizing things by fonds, in terms of maintaining within the file the order in which its collector established it. There are all kinds of operative rules for archival institutions, and we don't follow any of them, nor do we aspire to.[135]

This is not to suggest that CWAHI's founders are renegades in relation to archival practice. The demands of an archival institution are beyond CWAHI's capacity due to its budget and staff constraints. If CWAHI is not an archive, but rather a documentation centre, database, and initiative with public-facing programming, what is the most productive way to consider its relationship to the art historical past?

In our interview, Huneault articulated a metaphor for CWAHI's artist files as a topographical map. She states, "I would say another metaphor for the files especially, would be one of a map; an effort to map a terrain. If you don't know what the terrain was you cannot write about it […]."[136] If a researcher sought information on a woman artist, they could easily find artworks in private and public collections. CWAHI instead serves as a helpful starting point to establish an artist's context. The material in CWAHI, according to Huneault, is "the raw data the

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[135] Huneault, interview by Dumais, September 26, 2018.

[136] Ibid.

geographer would need to accumulate where they then go on to make the map […] they need information and this is a place where they can get it."[137] The "raw data" one finds in CWAHI's artist files includes the artist's biography, a list of memberships that the artist held, archives and collections where one can find original documents relevant to the artist, academic texts, as well as photocopies of related exhibition pamphlets, newspaper clippings, pages from books, and magazine articles that help flesh out an artist's cultural milieu.

Researchers use CWAHI alongside other documentation centres as a starting point to establish the context of women artists' work, but it also helps them identify elements of women artists' lives that remain unmapped. Sandra Paikowsky, for instance, in her essay published in *Rethinking Professionalism* on the women of the geometric abstraction movement in 1950s and 1960s Quebec, points out that journalists writing about women abstract painters Rita Letendre (b. 1928) and Henriette Fauteux-Massé (1925-2005) were "bewildered" by this non-figurative work.[138] These journalists struggled to describe their paintings without comparing them to those of their male contemporaries.[139] Paikowsky reveals the situation of women artists in the context of post-war Quebec. She observes that women did not have the same access to the Automatiste concepts of absolute freedom as male artists, specifically those described in the *Refus global*. Women artists necessarily had a different social and political concept of freedom. Journalists' comparison of women artists to their male colleagues thus did not reflect these women's experiences. Paikowsky notes, "Geometric abstraction implied a position of control and authority that hardly spoke to the secondary position that women painters navigated and occupied both in Quebec and in the wider Canadian art milieu."[140] Paikowsky uses artist files found in CWAHI and elsewhere to establish the terrain of post-war Quebec, and then elaborate how women

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[137] Ibid.

[138] Sandra Paikowsky, "The Girls and the Grid: Montreal Women Abstract Painters in the 1950s and Early 1960s," in *Rethinking Professionalism: Women and Art in Canada*, 1850-1970, ed. Kristina Huneault and Janice Anderson (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2012), 260. Paikowsky appears to borrow this language from an article in Marcelle Ferron's artist file in CWAHI: D. B. Macfarlane, "Exhibition of Abstract Art Bewildering to Reporter," *Montreal Daily Star*, December 9, 1949. Marcelle Ferron Artist File, Canadian Women Artists History Initiative, Concordia University.

[139] Paikowsky, "The Girls and the Grid," 260.

[140] Ibid., 260.

abstractionists navigated the pictorial grid in ways specific to their position as women living in post-war Quebec.[141]

In this vein, Huneault asserts that, "I see the project of CWAHI as collecting all of that fact-based, historical information — at least as much of it as you can find — in order to let you *do* something with it."[142] One can consider CWAHI's reliance on verifiable facts and material documentation a feminist act. According to Elin Diamond, "feminism, whose empirical, historical project continues to be the recovery of women's texts and activities, has a stake in truth — in contributing to the accumulation and organization of knowledge by which a culture values or forgets its past, attends to the divergences of the present."[143] CWAHI collects and disseminates material traces that attest to the lived experiences of women artists. This accumulation of historical documents helps scholars map the terrain, but, as Huneault points out, this map is only a starting place or a springboard for action.

Extending the metaphor of CWAHI as a map, Michel de Certeau's notion of the "anti-text" he explores in his essay "Walking in the City" is helpful to understand how CWAHI and its users navigate the line between historical information and interpretation.[144] De Certeau argues that maps reveal a tension between two poles of representation: the top-down bird's eye view and the invisible, embodied experience of its "walkers." De Certeau writes, "[t]he ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below.' Below the thresholds at which visibility begins […] they are walkers, […] whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write

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[141] Though Paikowsky did not explicitly mention if she used material found in CWAHI for her research, photocopies of sources she explicitly draws on are available in CWAHI's artist files. In her footnotes, Paikowsky writes, "For detailed information on the women artists cited in this discussion, see the artist files at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the National Gallery of Canada, and elsewhere …." Ibid., 279, n. 1. Throughout the article, Paikowsky refers to the writings of Rodolphe and Françoise de Repentigny, as well as Robert Ayre. Ibid., 174. Though Paikowsky does not cite where she consulted these documents, one can find copies of these critics' writings in the CWAHI artist files of Marcelle Ferron, Rita Letendre, Henriette Fauteux-Massé, Marian Scott, and others.

[142] Huneault, interview by Dumais, September 26, 2018.

[143] Elin Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry, and the 'True-Real,'" in *Acting out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 364.

[144] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

without being able to read it."[145] De Certeau claims that spaces like cities exist in tension between their representation on maps and the city's dwellers' unrepresentable use of the mapped place. He continues, "[i]t is true that the operations of walking can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths […] and their trajectories […]. But these thick or thin curves only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by."[146] De Certeau asserts that there are forms of experience that escape representation on maps. He refers to this unseen agency at work in maps as "anti-texts." City dwellers' movements are "articulated by lacunae. Within the structured space of the text, they thus produce anti-texts […]."[147] If CWAHI's artist files are the map, or texts, the unlimited narratives that researchers might craft with its materials are the anti-texts.

The tension between historical materials found at CWAHI and researchers' interpretations of those materials is a tension similar to that which exists between the agency of historical women artists and the interpreter evident in Sawyer's *Profile Mask*. Researchers use the raw data of history in CWAHI to map out women artists' experience. Due to the dearth of information on many women, this map is often full of holes. Scholars must navigate it and fill the gaps they discover. Researchers thus produce both the maps, or an artist's context, as well as the anti-text, or their interpretation. Huneault asserts that even if CWAHI's artist files occasionally attest to the lack of information about particular women artists, as is often the case with Indigenous women, for example, CWAHI is "not a hole, so much as it's a whole: not a memorial to the blank spaces that mark the victory of patriarchy past so much as a whole wall of files, with all kinds of stuff that you can get into and use."[148] In her own research, Huneault wants to "insist on treading that line, between the hole and the potential to fill it."[149] Just as Sawyer represents the gaps in women artists' history with the hole in the piece of paper in *Profile Mask*, and then fills it with her own and Brettschneider's face and agency, so too does CWAHI reveal the missing pieces of Canadian women artists' history and helps researchers fill it by offering points of departure for intervention. *Profile Mask* reveals the paper-thin line between

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[145] Ibid., 93.

[146] Ibid., 97.

[147] Ibid., 107.

[148] Huneault, interview by Dumais, September 26, 2018.

[149] Ibid.

the agencies of researchers and their subjects of study. CWAHI, as a documentation centre and an initiative that disseminates scholarship about what researchers find within its artist files, is a manifestation of this same tension.

CWAHI allows its users to create convincing resonances between the subjectivities of historical women artists and those of historians. Huneault discusses this clash between present and past desires as an echo, quoting Joan Scott, who "describes an 'echo effect' that attends to our labour: a sending forth and picking up of sounds, past and present, in a recursive process that raises questions around 'the distinction between the original sound and its resonances and the role of time in the distortions heard'."[150] Through close readings of historical materials available in CWAHI and elsewhere, scholars who work with CWAHI seek to create resonances between the echoes of the past that appear in the form of verifiable historical documentation, oral histories, and their own voices. The same tension de Certeau identifies in maps, and the tension found in Sawyer's examinations on the intertwining agency of subject of study and the artist-as-historian, thus occurs in CWAHI. There is a dialogue between the supposedly objective map-makers bird's eye view, in CWAHI's case the traces of women artists found in the artists files, and the untraceable and subjective wanderings of scholars, who produce anti-texts: fictive interpretations based on what materials they find.

CWAHI's potential for unlimited anti-texts reflects its overall open-endedness. Through its flexibility as a collection, CWAHI maintains historical women artists' simultaneous presence and irretrievability, a tension at work in Sawyer's haunting *Archive*. In our interview, I asked Anderson and Huneault if a part of CWAHI's work would ever be finished. Anderson responded, "There's no way to finish it. We'll just keep moving the date forward. It has no finish. Not that I can see."[151] Huneault responded, "It only finishes when people stop being interested."[152] At stake here are two different concerns. Anderson states that one way to work through the volume of women artists still to be discovered or understood in greater depth is to continually push back the initiative's cut-off date of women artists. Originally, CWAHI only included artists born before

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[150] Joan W. Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 53; quoted in Kristina Huneault, *I'm Not Myself at All: Women, Art, and Subjectivity in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018). 19.

[151] Anderson, interview by Dumais, September 26, 2018.

[152] Huneault, interview by Dumais, September 26, 2018.

1925. This remains flexible. Anderson recalls that "artists who are very interesting, but who are born in 1926 we started giving it a flexible birth date […]. With the donation of the architect's files, we realized that we couldn't keep the 1925 birth date anymore because […] women couldn't become private architects […]."[153] CWAHI is thus open-ended as its collection's scope is in constant flux, expanding to meet the changing needs of its collection and the evolving interests of its researchers.

What Huneault's answer reveals is a concern with the initiative's continuing relevance. CWAHI's artist files are spaces of encounters with the vestiges of what women artists leave behind. If, according to Avery Gordon, contact with ghosts means inserting life where only vague traces remain, it follows that a documentation centre that deals with precarious subject matter would itself be in a constant state of flux.[154] While CWAHI is a repository for documentation, its loose parameters for the scope of its collections reflects the changing scope of present and future feminisms. This flexibility is important for the continual re-insertion of women artists into relational time. CWAHI ultimately allows its users, from a variety of backgrounds and critical vantage points, to create anti-texts, to take positions, however provisional, and to make claims, no matter how flexible, on women artists' history.[155] CWAHI's flexible and open-ended approach to collecting and disseminating information mirrors its subject matter. Its collection is as fluid as the stories that scholars and researchers craft from its contents.

The similar push and pull between past and present in Sawyer's *Archive* are actively at work in CWAHI. CWAHI exists in tension between its role as a tool for gathering facts and as a resource to speak back to official narratives and produce feminist alternatives to those narratives. In CWAHI, as in Sawyer's *Archive*, historical artists and contemporary researchers are equally implicated in writing feminist history and biographies. While Sawyer works through discontinuities in history by drawing on its plausibilities, CWAHI's open-ended structure, with its constantly shifting parameters of inclusion and its openness to critique, allows for resonances between the material traces of the past and what they might mean today. Both Sawyer and CWAHI's network of collaborators approach historiography in a way that draws on the fictive.

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[153] Anderson, interview by Dumais, September 26, 2018.

[154] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 22.

[155] Diamond, "Mimesis, Mimicry, and the 'True-Real'," 365.

They use the same source material: the discontinuous historiography of women artists, and bring these fragmentary stories to life. They do so while recognizing that the interpretations they make are merely a telling of events, that a significant amount will remain unknown, and that women artists' history is always merely a narrative, perpetually subject to change.

This thesis has argued that the fictive is a useful tool to frame the contingency and open-endedness that one must recognize and employ when authoring the biographies of historical women. Sawyer and CWAHI's approaches are ethical attempts at biographies, as both recognize that certain details about women artists' lives are occasionally too vague for historians or artists to make definitive assertions, and that the interpretations they offer are part of an ever-evolving discourse. To understand narratives artists and art historians tell about women artists as fictive, in both contexts as an archival art installation as well as a documentation centre and database, is to recognize that historical artists and those who interpret their lives today are active, complex, and contingent subjects in dialogue, whose co-presences speak to the variety of experience across the divides of context, truth and fiction, and life and death. Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI are both distinctly feminist attempts at women artists' biographies, open to the unknowability of the past, and drawing on history's discontinuities to tell transformative stories of women's experiences, indirectly answering, in part, Jennifer Morgan's call for methodologies of biography that acknowledge and address the contingency and uncertainty of marginalized women's lives.

CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of Carol Sawyer's *The Natalie Brettschneider Archive* and the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative, this thesis has demonstrated that the fictive, which in this thesis refers to the crafting of narratives, applies not only to the work of artists that make things up. When historians tell stories or write biographies, particularly about women artists, whether they wrote a century ago or in the last decade, their source materials and the work they produce are always constructed narratives. Narratives about women artists come down to the present filtered through hegemonic conventions, deeply-rooted cultural biases, and the material limitations of what survives. Writing on the archive, Sarah Nutall states that archives have been "composed, by someone, from certain objects and not others. […] it is also always a process that will be based on a set of exclusions."[156] This applies to cultural texts, whether they take the form of photographs, databases, maps, or documentation centres, as well as the texts written about them.

Sawyer seeks to remedy history's exclusions through fiction, while CWAHI approaches the same problem through collecting facts and disseminating historians' interpretations of said fact. The projects are distinct. Yet, this thesis has argued that what unites these projects is that they both recognize the creative energy that the provisionality of knowledge affords. Carrie Lambert-Beatty understands the term provisionality as not only meaning "subject to alteration," but also encompassing the term "provisions."[157] She underscores the fact that fiction is one of the provisions contemporary artists or scholars might employ to speak within or against cultural texts. Lambert-Beatty calls for the creation of artworks and publications that "expect and allow amendment," adapting to history's provisionality.[158] This thesis has argued that Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI are projects that encourage and act upon the plausibility for amendments to history.

Working with Brettschneider's biography, Sawyer amends art history with a fictional twentieth-century Dada and Surrealist artist who serves as a thread that ties historical women to viewers in the present. CWAHI, on the other hand, amends art history by helping scholars craft

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[156] Nutall, "Literature and the Archive," 295.

[157] Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe," 84.

[158] Ibid., 84.

new frameworks of interpretation through which historians might re-read the lives of Canadian women artists. Both Sawyer and CWAHI allow for collaborative forms of feminist practice across temporal divides, encouraging the emergence of intergenerational discourses. Both acknowledge that women artists' history is subject to change due to exclusive conventions that restrict what information on these artists remains. And both register that such exclusions may be sources of creative energy that allow for transformative fictive interventions.

This thesis has shown that Sawyer and CWAHI gesture towards an ethics of women artists' biographies. Sawyer's *Archive* and CWAHI fill gaps in this history without erasing tensions that undergird historiographic work on artists subject to marginalization. Photographs in Sawyer's *Archive* register the dialogic and co-present agencies of contemporary historians and their subjects of study. The *Archive* also forges haunting and affective connections across divides of past and present, life and death, and fact and fiction. Sawyer does so without stripping the past and present of their respective contexts. The result is that Sawyer's *Archive* allows for the complex personhood of historical women to emerge while acknowledging the push and pull of this history, teetering on the verge of affective presence and slipping back into the irretrievable past.

This thesis then explored CWAHI through Kristina Huneault's metaphor of the artist files and database as a topographical map, as well as how its users navigate terrain that CWAHI and other documentation centres help them to establish. Due to CWAHI's flexibility as a collection, and its users' capacity to endlessly re-interpret the materials it collects, CWAHI is a space where the Initiative's founders, as well as scholars, researchers, students, and the public, work through the tension between the facts of women artists and their relative, continuing absence from the historical record today. In both the *Archive* and in CWAHI, historical women remain "alive." Sawyer allows Brettschneider's biography to remain open to amendment. CWAHI, on the other hand, brings traces of women artists to life through its collaborators' contributions to knowledge and critical perspectives about women as necessary contributors to cultural history.

Considering the overlap between these projects, I propose a further amendment to conclude this thesis: what if CWAHI were to add Natalie Brettschneider to its database and artist files? I believe that adding a fictional artist to the initiative's database and artist files would partially renew the feminist struggle against historiographical gaps and accomplish three goals. First, it would further extend CWAHI's flexible approach to documenting. Such an action would

cast the initiative's net even wider, and recognize its status not only as a documentation centre but as a theory of cultural relevance in practice, a space where collective memory is constructed, and a complex volume where the contradictions of women artists' history, as both a hole and a whole, collect.[159] Second, it would be a creative way to recognize the role of the fictive in art historiography, generally. This would open the door to include additional fictional art projects by women artists that address historical lacunae, offering the chance for contemporary artists to speak back to narratives of historiographic exclusion by making up lost time, and allowing for stories and biographies, though fictional, to occupy blank spaces in Canadian art history resulting from systematic sexism, racism, or colonialism. Third, it is an opportunity to do now for living women artists like Carol Sawyer and other artists working with fiction what historians can only do retroactively for women in the past: write them into history.[160] This inclusion would recognize the dual agencies at play in institutions such as CWAHI, since behind every artist file and database entry in CWAHI is an individual who ensured that the artist's legacy lives on.

During my interviews with Sawyer and CWAHI's founders, I brought up the prospect of including Natalie Brettschneider in CWAHI. If this inclusion where to take place, it would be important for both Sawyer and CWAHI's founders that there be no confusion about Brettschneider's fiction, and to prevent the possibility that users of CWAHI might believe that she was real. To avoid signalling Brettschneider's fiction would be unfaithful to Sawyer's wishes and potentially cast doubt on CWAHI's commitment to collecting fact-based accounts of women's contributions to culture. As Sawyer told me,

> The success of the project wouldn't lie with people believing she was real. I think the success of the project would lie with people knowing she's fictional but wanting her to be real. […] I think if Natalie Brettschneider was included as an artist within this database, that it would lessen how the project was received by removing that layer and […] it would seem like I was trying to give a legitimacy and a realness to her that I don't think I want to. […] I would only be comfortable if it was acknowledged that she is fictional.

To include Brettschneider in CWAHI, in my view, could lead to further visibility of projects that mine historiographical gaps for feminist intervention, something that CWAHI has been committed to since its beginnings, and perhaps encourage more artists to approach the past

[159] Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 19.

[160] Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 15.

through the lens of fiction, a distinctly feminist and ethical approach to biography that sees the provisionality of women artists' history not as a site of mourning or loss, but of enduring and limitless opportunity.

Figure 1.
Carol Sawyer. *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Nellie Duke's house shake*, Kelowna, B.C. (1939*). 2008. Digital ink-jet print from original negative. 4.5 x 5 in. © Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive.

Figure 2.
Carol Sawyer. *Natalie Brettschneider and unknown music ensemble at the Booth family residence. Ottawa (c. 1947)*. 2015. Digital ink-jet print from original negative. 16 x 20 in. © Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive.

Figure 3.
Carol Sawyer. *Natalie Brettschneider with friends Lori Weidenhammer and Soressa Gardner (1951).* Date unknown. Archival ink-jet print from digitized original contact sheet. 8 x 10 in. ©
Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive.

Figure 4.
Carol Sawyer. *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Mirror, *Paris (1938)*. Date unknown. Silver gelatin print. Dimensions unavailable. © Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive.

Figure 5.
Ilse Bing. *Self Portrait with Leica*. 1931 printed 1941. Gelatin silver photograph, 26.7 x 31.2 cm. Alistair McAlpine Photography Fund © Ilse Bing Estate. Courtesy Edwynn Houk Gallery, New York.

Figure 6.
Carol Sawyer. *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Burnt Tree, *Kamloops, B.C. (1949)*. Date unknown. Archival ink-jet print from original negative. Dimensions unavailable. © Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive.

Figure 7.
Françoise Sullivan. *Danse dans la neige.* 1948. Performance, photographie de Maurice Perron. Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Québec.

Figure 8.
Martha Rosler. Still from *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. 1975. Film. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 9.
Carol Sawyer. *Natalie Brettschneider Performs Profile Mask (c. 1952)*. Date unknown. Archival
ink-jet print from original negative. Dimensions unavailable. © Carol Sawyer/Natalie
Brettschneider Archive.

Figure 10.
Kati Horna. *Remedios Varo in a Mask by Leonora Carrington*. 1957. Gelatin silver print. 10 ½ x 9 7/8 in. Courtesy of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Figure 11.
Photographer unknown. *Sophie Taeuber-Arp in mask by Marcel Janco*. 1916/1917. Dimensions unavailable. Courtesy of Stiftung Hans Arp und Sophie Taeuber-Arp.

Figure 12.
Carol Sawyer. *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Moche Warrior *(c. 1949)*. Date unknown.
Archival ink-jet print from original negative. Dimensions unavailable. © Carol Sawyer/Natalie
Brettschneider Archive.

Figure 13.
Carol Sawyer. *Natalie Brettschneider and unknown Pianist, the Banff Centre for the Arts, (c. 1951).* Archival ink-jet print from original negative. Dimensions unavailable. © Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive.

Figure 14.
Carol Sawyer. *Last Known Photograph of Natalie Brettschneider, Vancouver (1986)*. Archival ink-jet print from original negative. 15 x 15 in. © Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive.
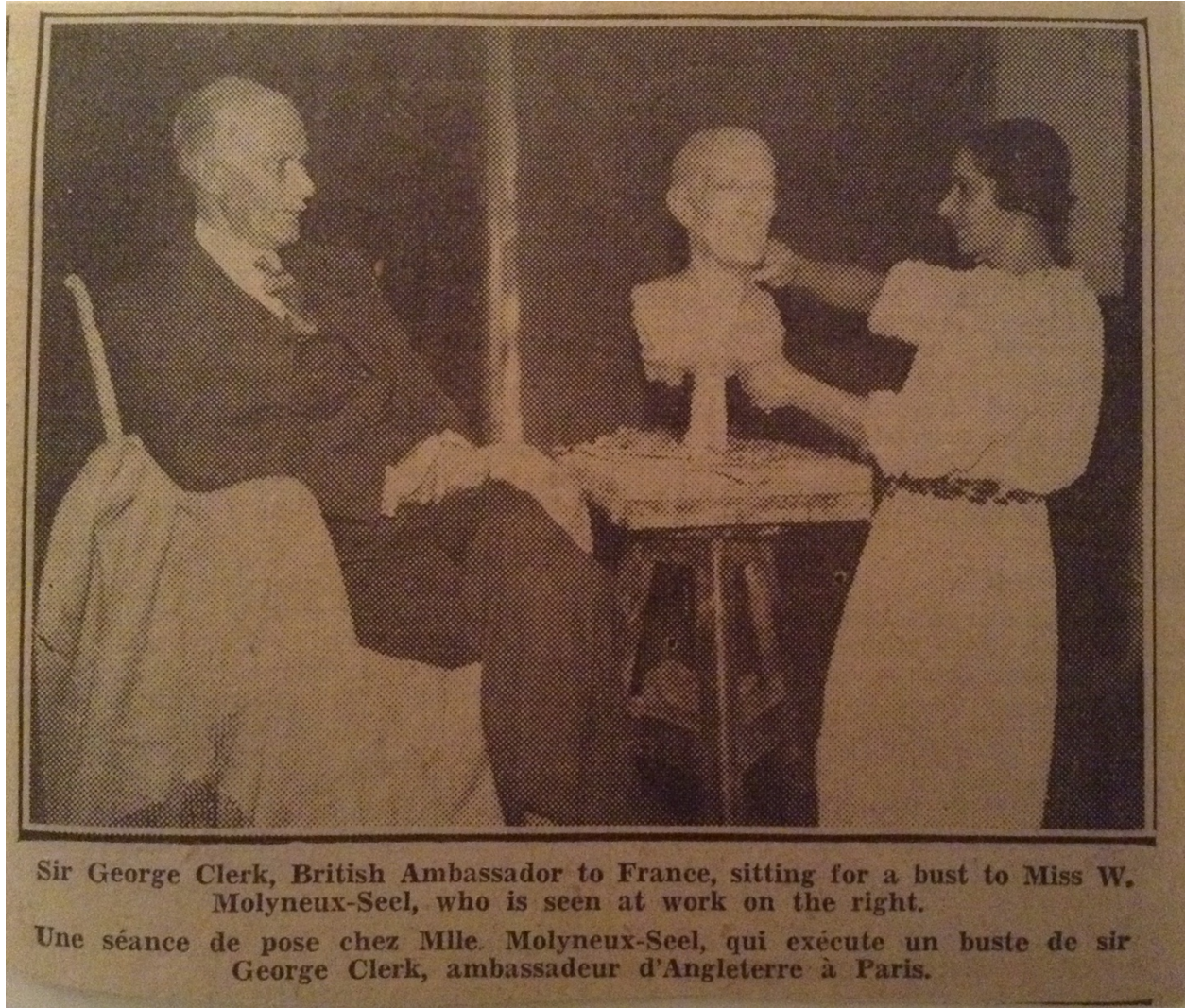
Figure 15.
Hippolyte Bayard. *Self Portrait as a Drowned Man*. 1840. Direct positive print. Dimensions unavailable. © Public domain.

Figure 16.
Carol Sawyer. *Natalie Brettschneider performs* Triangles *c. 1933*. Archival ink-jet print from original negative. 5 x 7 in. © Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive.

Sir George Clerk, British Ambassador to France, sitting for a bust to Miss W. Molyneux-Seel, who is seen at work on the right.

Une séance de pose chez Mlle. Molyneux-Seel, qui exécute un buste de sir George Clerk, ambassadeur d'Angleterre à Paris.

Figure 17.
Archival newspaper clipping of an image of W. Molyneux-Seel. Unidentified serial. c. 1934.

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