

# Carol Sawyer plays with fiction, feminism, and art history in The Natalie Brettschneider Archive

by [Robin Laurence](#)

*The Georgia Straight, Vancouver BC. December 19th, 2017*



• Last known photograph of Natalie Brettschneider, Vancouver, 1986

• CAROL SAWYER/NATALIE BRETTSCSCHNEIDER

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## At the Vancouver Art Gallery until February 4, 2018

A fuzzy mop affixed to the top of her head, a giant rhubarb leaf held in front of her face, a jelly mould poised before her like a musical instrument, Natalie Brettschneider has insinuated herself into the history of modern art.

At the Vancouver Art Gallery, the record of Brettschneider's avant-garde performances, from Paris in the 1920s and '30s to Vancouver, Kelowna, Kamloops, and Ottawa in the 1940s and '50s, is laid out for us in a comprehensive way.

Through photographs, documents, explanatory texts, and two short experimental films, that we are dazzled by her inventiveness, ambition, and humour. The evidence of Brettschneider's archive is that this genre-busting artist and singer was all the more outstanding for her Dada-esque play with the ridiculous and the absurd.



Natalie Brettschneider performs Profile Mask, c. 1952  
CAROL SAWYER/NATALIE BRETTSCHEIDER

The same can be said of the show's immensely accomplished creator, Carol Sawyer. A Vancouver-based visual artist and classically trained singer who works across photography, video, installation, and musical improvisation, Sawyer invented the Natalie Brettschneider persona in the late 1990s.

She did so in response to research she had previously undertaken into the histories of interdisciplinary women artists who participated in the Dada and surrealist movements, especially in the cabarets that were the precursors to contemporary performance art. At the time of Sawyer's initial research, very little had been written about these women; unlike their male counterparts, they had been sifted out of their own history. If they appeared at all, Sawyer has noted, it was as models and muses to famous male artists rather than as the full-fledged creators they actually were.

Through the sustained and ongoing production of The Natalie Brettschneider Archive, with its many black-and-white photos riffing on early-modernist forms and strategies, Sawyer amuses and intrigues us. At the same time she draws our attention to how history is constructed and by whom.

As she notes on her website, she also aims to illuminate “the ways in which photographs are used to support cultural assumptions about gender, age, authorship, and art-making”. Throughout the exhibition, Sawyer plays the role of the fictional Brettschneider, photographed with props and costumes sharply attuned to the time and place in which they are set while also “documenting” Brettschneider’s avant-gardism. Man Ray is spoofed in a rayograph-like image of Brettschneider and again in a shot of her posed with an African mask.

As well, Sawyer has ascribed Brettschneider histories to a few found photographs, a particularly funny example being a tiny vintage shot of a group of people, sailors perhaps, clustered around a tent in front of the Paris opera house. The photo is titled “Natalie Brettschneider Demonstrating Antiseptic Throat Gargle, Paris, France, 1915”. (The funny throat-gargle reference is explained in a text panel describing Brettschneider’s time in Paris.)



Natalie Brettschneider and unknown pianist, the Banff Centre for the Arts, c. 1951 CAROL SAWYER/NATALIE BRETTSCHEIDER ARCHIVE

Sawyer’s show is a smart and refreshing antidote to Portrait of the Artist, the Royal Collection exhibition that shares the VAG’s first floor and that is dominated by male artists. Again, Sawyer alerts us to the gendered making of history. For the sake of a more equitable telling of our own age, The Natalie Brettschneider Archive should take its place in the VAG’s permanent collection, alongside all the Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham photos. Sawyer has created a brilliantly conceived and sustained body of work.