

# THE INTERVENTIONIST ARCHIVE

## Carol Sawyer Invents Art History

by Robin Laurence

Last winter, a sold-out crowd attended an enthralling performance of improvised music at the Vancouver Art Gallery (VAG). Described in the program as a “Musical Repertoire inspired by Natalie Brettschneider and her contemporaries,” it featured the interdisciplinary artist and singer Carol Sawyer along with pianist Lisa Cay Miller, percussionist Elisa Thorn and harpist Katie Rife. As the ensemble’s vocalist, Sawyer sang, sighed, whispered, tossed out rhyming couplets and emitted a playful array of sounds, from extravagantly rolled r’s and rusty-hinge squeaks to anguished ai-ai-ai’s, operatic yodels and nonsense words along the lines of “sibbity-sibbity-sibbity.” Inserting notes of historical reflection into the event, Sawyer also read and recited, in German and English, quotes from early 20th-century avant-gardists, including Mina Loy, Emmy Hennings and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhaven. At the climax of the performance, Sawyer tore up the notes she had been riffing from, scattered the pieces and took a noisy bite from a large red apple.

This recital was the perfect accompaniment to Sawyer’s VAG exhibition at the time, “The Natalie Brettschneider Archive,” which was itself the perfect antidote to “Portrait of the Artist,” the big-ticket show



Natalie Brettschneider performs *Profile Mask*, c. 1952, archival inkjet print from original negative. Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive. Acquired with the assistance of Nathleen Taylor, 2015. Images courtesy Vancouver Art Gallery

with which it shared the gallery's first floor. Drawn from the Royal Collection, "Portrait of the Artist" surveyed portraits and self-portraits of artists from across five centuries of British and European history. It was—and who could pretend surprise—dominated by men. Men as creators, men as collectors, men as arbiters of taste, models of success and writers of histories. "The Natalie Brettschneider Archive," which is comprised of original photographs, texts, films, videos, drawings and musical performances along with found images and documents, is an ongoing

and ever-expanding project of investigation and invention. It is, Sawyer states succinctly, "a feminist critique of art historical narrative conventions." By creating the interdisciplinary Canadian artist Natalie Brettschneider, transporting her to Paris and inserting her into the annals of early modernism, initially and most particularly into accounts of dadaist and surrealist cabarets, Sawyer questions who constructs the canon, along with the why and the how. She assumes the Brettschneider persona in photographs that mimic, mock or reconfigure avant-garde works



of the time and that also challenge hierarchical boundaries between “high art” and other photographic forms. In so doing, Sawyer also examines, she says, the role photography has played in supporting “cultural assumptions about gender, age, authorship, and art-making.”

While “The Natalie Brettschneider Archive” is Sawyer’s best-known and most widely published work, it is just one aspect of an impressive and expansive practice that includes performance, photography, film, video, installation and improvised music. A recent, extraordinary achievement—formally and technically complex, aurally and visually mesmerizing—is the video *I attempt from love’s sickness to fly, in vain*. In it, performances based on an aria from a baroque opera by Henry Purcell were shot with two vertically oriented 5K cameras simultaneously, so that eight channels of video could be composited side by side. The cameras’ panning and tracking movements, Sawyer explains, “make the architecture appear to fold, stretch, and morph.” The performers—professional actors and opera singers—are richly and colourfully dressed, made up and bewigged, and the resulting artwork makes for an almost psychedelic experience. Musicality and theatricality, beauty and grotesquerie, expanding and contracting space, and the hopeless “sickness” of love run kaleidoscopically, all play through our consciousness.

Born in Washington, DC, Sawyer moved to Vancouver with her family at the age of 13, when her art historian father assumed an academic appointment at the University of British Columbia. From an

early age, she was a singer and inventor of stories, which she also enacted in a way that intuitively combined narrative with movement. Through high school, she studied classical voice and took courses in theatre and art. However, when she spoke to a guidance counsellor at UBC about her post-secondary education aspirations, saying she wanted to study “something that combined music, dance, theatre and art,” she was told, “You can’t do that. That’s called being a dilettante.” She replied, “I know what a dilettante is and that’s not what I want.” He was joking, he assured her, but the bureaucratic reality was that, at the time, Sawyer could not pursue interdisciplinary studies at UBC. Instead, she enrolled at the Vancouver School of Art, which became Emily Carr College of Art and Design while she was there and is now Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Although she had to reduce (at least temporarily) the breadth of her ambitions, she found creative satisfaction in photography, studying with Marian Penner Bancroft, Randy Bradley, Jim Breukelman and Nina Raginsky. “I was really in love with the relationship between photography and what’s ‘real,’” she says. “Photography is so compellingly realistic that it became a great place to make things up.”

This fictional aspect of the medium finds full and exquisite expression in “The Natalie Brettschneider Archive.” Early on, however, Sawyer’s concept-driven photographic and video projects took a more documentary tone and focused on processes of transformation, including that of a vacant lot near her East Vancouver home as it was stripped of vegetation

1. Natalie Brettschneider and unknown pianist, the Banff Centre for the Arts, c. 1951, archival inkjet print from original negative, Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive. Acquired with the assistance of Sarah Fahn, Banff Centre, 2012.

2. Last known photograph of Natalie Brettschneider, Vancouver, 1986, archival inkjet print from original negative, Carol Sawyer/Natalie Brettschneider Archive. Acquired with the assistance of Erika Heininger Sawyer, 2002.

(and the wild creatures and homeless people it had harboured) and then covered with gravel and artificial turf. She also used her camera to depict the interiors of old houses in her neighbourhood, as they underwent renovation. The former, which took photographic form in *Every Day* and was also realized in the video *Vacant Lot*, served as a vehicle, Sawyer says, for examining ideas about "nature versus culture, utopia versus dystopia, and the absurdities of capitalism." The latter project, *Flux*, which she sees as archaeological in nature, provokes "questions about our relationship to domestic space and décor: as an extension of our identities, as protective shell, as site of creative expression."

Sawyer's 2008 exhibition, "Trace Ingredients," featured a series of works produced during a year-long residency at the main branch of the Vancouver Public Library. It included *Book Stack Poems*, seven photographs of stacked books whose forms function as sculpture and whose cumulative titles create found poetry. It also included three videos, one of them a music video that consists, she says, of words taken from the titles of music books she found in the library and then edited "into a rhythmic sequence based on a standard pop song structure." During the run of the show, Sawyer also performed improvised songs and stories with her band, ion Zoo.



Performance-based videos such as *Proscenium* and *Shadow Puppet* began to manifest the interdisciplinary education Sawyer was eventually able to receive when, nearly 15 years after she graduated from Emily Carr, she enrolled in the MFA program at Simon Fraser University's School for the Contemporary Arts. "That was amazing to me because I was able to do what I'd intended, which was to take classes in acting and theatre-making and music composition, music performance, electro-acoustic music, musical theory, and studio art." During her studies at Simon Fraser, she was introduced to improvised music by composer Rodney Sharman and discovered a form of expression that suited her previous voice training and her enduring sense of playfulness and inventiveness.

Sawyer graduated with her MFA in 1998, the same year she invented Natalie Brett Schneider. As Sawyer has revealed in a number of interviews, she was researching historical precedents for her interdisciplinary practice: that is, women involved in early 20th-century avant-garde activities, especially as they combined singing and visual art. Opening book after book purporting to cover the period, especially the dadaist and surrealist cabarets of Zurich and Paris, she encountered, well, almost less than a patronizing nothing. What was written into the record, in both contemporary accounts by the likes of Tristan Tzara and later art histories, characterized the women of the dada and surrealist movements as models, muses or mates to famous male artists, rather than as the fully realized creators and innovators they actually were. In deploring their consignment to obscurity, Sawyer cites Sophie Taeuber, Céline Arnaud and Emmy Hennings.

Hennings, who co-founded the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich with Hugo Ball and whose avant-garde practice included singing, dancing, writing poetry and making extraordinary puppets, was of particular interest to Sawyer. Hennings had been involved in expressionist poetry circles and was an established actress and cabaret performer well before meeting Ball, Sawyer says, and her name was used on posters advertising the Cabaret Voltaire because she could draw an audience. But, again, she had been sifted out of the art historical record, her primary mention in the canon of white male genius being her role as Ball's "mistress" and eventual wife. (There also seemed to be a prurient interest in her sex life.)

Sawyer's answer to this condition of erasure—which, she emphasizes, has since been redressed in a few books and exhibitions, including *Dada's Women* by Ruth Hemus, published in 2009—was to create Natalie Brett Schneider, whom she debuted at the "Re-inventing the Diva Festival" at Vancouver's Western Front, again in 1998. Curated by Lori Weidenhammer, the festival aimed to "take the diva, who is often used in the vernacular to talk about a

difficult, egotistical woman, and to re-appropriate her as a figure of feminine power," Sawyer says. She began to construct Brett Schneider's biography and to inflect it with seriousness and absurdity, banality and provocation: her birth in New Westminster, BC, in 1896 and training as an opera singer; her relocation to Paris in 1913 to continue her studies (her scholarship predicated on her willingness to demonstrate her benefactor's line of antiseptic throat gargle) and her "growing engagement" with Parisian avant-garde artists in the 1920s and '30s; her return to Canada in 1938; and her subsequent advancement of modernism and performance-based practices during the 1940s and '50s.

Significantly, Sawyer nailed down Brett Schneider's history with photographs and accompanying text, having decided that everything her alter ego was photographed doing—whether mimicking other artists, modelling stylish hats or wearing absurdly large headdresses of feathers or branches or strips of rolled paper—would be defined as a performance. Early images in the archive are formally based on "iconic" works by Man Ray and other early modernists; at the same time, they trouble notions of authorship. "In her performance *masque africain*, Brett Schneider appears to reference Man Ray's 1926 photograph *Noir et Blanche*," Sawyer writes in the exhibition label, then adds, "without knowing the date, the reverse is also possible."

The photos representing Brett Schneider's performance series "Hats" reveal not only Sawyer's knowledge of (and fondness for) vintage clothing and accessories, but also her understanding of

1. & 2. Installation view, "Carol Sawyer: The Natalie Brett Schneider Archive," 2018, Vancouver Art Gallery. Photos: Rachel Topham, Vancouver Art Gallery.





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fashion photography of the 1920s, '30s and '40s. Although initially this work seems a bit of a segue from the Brettschneider archive project, it is exactly the opposite, drawing our attention to the construction of femininity within the context of the lives of women artists, contemporary and historic. "I devour everything I can from the era," Sawyer says about the fashion plates, "but I was really interested, too, in the discussion about femininity itself as being a masquerade, a performance."

In recent years, invitations to exhibit her archive and perform related repertoire in a number of Canadian galleries and museums have provided a framework by which Natalie Brettschneider could return home (in 1938, to care for her sick mother), and to engage in modernist and avant-garde musical events in Kelowna, Kamloops, Ottawa and Victoria (after her mother had recovered). In turn, these expanded venues provided Sawyer with the opportunity to research overlooked or little-known Canadian artists and musicians—often but not always women—to integrate their lives and careers into Brettschneider's and, again and delightfully, to smudge the lines between fact and fiction. Echoing the work of feminist scholars who have retrieved avant-garde European women artists from obscurity, Sawyer

has uncovered hidden histories in our own nation. Installed beside and among the Brettschneider images and documents in the VAG show last winter were paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, letters and newspaper clippings produced by or relating to the fictional artist's real-life peers: that is, to other Canadian artists, designers, poets, composers and singers whose place and time overlapped with hers. Additionally, paintings by Vera Weatherbie, Irene Hoffar Reid and other women graduates of the Vancouver School of Decorative and Applied Arts in the 1920s and '30s were on display, revealing how accomplished they were.

"I feel like the Natalie Brettschneider project brings together everything I wanted to do since I was really little," Sawyer says. "It's been a luxury to work on it for so long.... I put everything I love into it and I think people pick up on that pleasure when they look at it." And, yes, she's right. Pleasure and play and improvisation and wonderful dollops of absurdity, not coating but fully woven into the serious fabric of art historical critique. ■

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