

Interview with Cathy Busby

Griffin Art Projects What did you make of Garry's collection when you first encountered it?

Cathy Busby It was a natural extension of Garry and his unique, wide-ranging and extensive output. It was about who he was/is and who he knew and where life had taken him over his long career as artist, art instigator and maverick educator/administrator. This was his "stuff": artworks, letters, postcards and ephemera, the things that had stuck with him. It's what he'd acquired and was continuing to gather over the course of his life. It was the by-product of being a serious artist, art leader and friend to many artists.

Over the past 20 years that we've been together, we've never separated our work from other artists' work when it comes to storage and display. I think that's an indication of our attitude of being part of a community of artists. For us, this collection is alive, and part of, as Garry often says, "keeping it going."

Griffin As an artist and educator you have a long history of research in relation to archives and collections. Can you tell us a bit about your background and how it relates to this collection?

CB I've always valued collections as a way of talking about more important, bigger things than the individual collected items might suggest. In the mid-1980s I amassed a collection of linoleum flooring from the 1920s to 60s taken from homes under renovation. I was drawn to these big, dirty pieces of flooring for their range of patterning, design and signs of wear. It provided a kind of urban archeology. In the 1990s, while working on ideas about representations of pain, I collected hundreds of 20th-century self-help books to provide an archive of ways of thinking about formulaic and less steps-and-stages ways of thinking about pain and its relief (*Where Does It Hurt?*). In the early 2000s I collected public apologies as they were beginning to be more frequently made by politicians, CEOs, sport stars and others (*Sorry*).

I've also worked in the public art gallery world, running the Anna Leonowens Gallery at NSCAD during the 1980s and later working at the National Gallery of Canada in the late 1990s, early 2000s. In these contexts I was thinking about the networks of interests that determine the validation and institutionalization of particular art and artists.

As Garry and my lives became more intertwined, we gradually made it a project to look after the "stuff." We'd have things framed and put them up. Garry enjoyed placing work, I enjoyed keeping track of it and we both enjoyed sharing it with guests. We hosted a lot of house parties in our Halifax years.

Griffin What makes Garry's collection particular and unique from your perspective?

CB What we're calling a collection is a life history in art and correspondence. It's an archive that documents his life and times with other artists, a number of whom have since become contemporary art icons. Because of these relationships, the collection not only has artworks, like the *Intuition Box* by Joseph Beuys, but also napkins that he sketched on over dinner conversation with Garry. There are posters and cards by Lawrence Weiner, as well as the birthday gift to Garry of a maquette for his poster book, published by the Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). There are close to 100 postcards sent to Garry from Kasper Koenig since the 1970s. Kasper was the first editor of the Press of NSCAD and went on to be an important force in the international contemporary art scene as curator, educator and innovator. At the same time, the collection has work by a number of lesser-known artists who Garry worked with in some capacity. Garry has always been a clear visionary, able to discriminate between what's interesting and what's not. I think in total, this range of work, this collection, can be seen as a time capsule, making a profound and original statement about contemporary and conceptual art, particularly in the 1970s.

Griffin Often out of necessity artists are self-archivists and need to keep track of what they do, document their work and where the exhibit is, as well as maintain an inventory of their production. Does Garry's own history as an artist align with and fit into this paradigm?

CB Garry has always done what he's needed to do as a serious contemporary artist and part of that scene. Part of being "serious" requires good documentation, keeping track of work, keeping up relationships with like-minded artists, having shows and producing publications. Garry has always had a nose and mind for what is essential to his vision of what is good when it comes to art, and what is extraneous. He avoids the latter. Having the work of other artists is a natural extension of keeping on course with his vision. While he was president of NSCAD, he had built-in administrative support, so records of his travels and exhibitions were filed for him. There is probably a lot of material that was saved because of this support and some of the letters that we've brought forward come from those files.

Griffin How does this collection extend and/or speak to Garry's life-long conceptual practice, and how does (and perhaps as well, in what unique or surprising ways does) it reflect the relationships he has nurtured and cultivated over his career?

CB There's a continuum between art and life for Garry that he's practised over the decades. He solves problems in art and in life with the same intensity, getting to the essentials of a material or situation and unpacking/revealing how things work, and when it comes to art-making, using a system and rules that he invents and sticks to as a guide.

The collection/archive shows who and what art has been important to him. It's interesting that Garry's been "remembering names" as an art practice on and off since 1969. Relationships are essential. He's also consistently aligned himself with the visions of artists he's worked with and respects: Dan Graham, Lawrence Weiner, Martha Wilson, Emmett Williams among them. And then there are letters and notes from June Leaf, Robert Frank, Dorit Cypis, Sol Lewitt, among many others.

The collection bolsters Garry's art/life orientation, surrounded by his friends and colleagues' works. His work and mine are there, too, interspersed with everyone else's. This gathering of artworks and ephemera is also a place of solace and joy for Garry now, in his later years. They are reminders of his connections to people and events.

Griffin When you and Garry made the decision to leave Halifax and move to Vancouver in 2014, how did your relationship to this collection change?

CB It became more of a "collection" because everything had to be amassed from several locations and packed to be moved. We used an entire huge roll of bubble wrap that barely fit in the front door of our house, along with the help of a number of friends to complete this task. I stepped up my labelling and list-making regime. The move was a chance to consolidate.

Now we see it more as a collection than we ever have before. Our space for looking at it is different, from a 19th-century row house in Halifax to a contemporary condo in Vancouver. People see different things in the work in the different contexts and reference points of Vancouver and Halifax. We started by hanging the work in the condo's main hallway, our "great hall," as we nicknamed it, focusing on the art that Rachel Wallace and Petrina Ng had interviewed Garry about in 2013. They thought they'd show this work in Toronto, but it didn't work out. At first we thought we'd change what was on view every few months, but so far we keep adding more in various nooks and crannies. Now with our second condo upstairs in our building, we're able to bring out a lot more work. There, we emphasize Garry's art, interspersed with mine and a few pieces by other artists.

How and where works are placed can change the memories they evoke. Each work has some kind of a story connected to it: Who's the artist? How did Garry know them? What's the work about? How did it come to be Garry's? We often enjoy conversations with guests as we look at the work together. Sometimes those conversations spark other memories and there's a deep pleasure in that kind of remembering.