

ERRATICS

MARTHA BAILLIE

MALKA GREENE WITH ALAN RESNICK



April 16 to June 14, 2015

Koffler Gallery

Curator: Mona Filip



June 12, 2012 (386)

it appeared to be waiting for him. When it bounded off, he followed. The hare arrived at an immense rock that was split in two. Three or four powerful leaps carried the hare through the slot between the rock's two halves. The rock stood taller than Heinrich, and was shaped like a rounded hill. The hare emerged out the other side of the passage through the centre of the giant stone.

sniffing the air, it held still, as if waiting for someone or something. Heinrich entered the slit. No sunlight entered with him.

Beside the Weasel River: Buffin Island
July 2010. N. Bailie.

Canada



Nico Rogers

Ont.

CANADA.

MIRROR IMAGES: EXPLORING ERRATICS

Truth is a deceptively simple idea. As a child, I was taught that anything that was not the truth was a lie. There was fiction and reality, memory and imagination, black and white, right and wrong. But the truth, so to speak, is more complicated. In *Erratics*, Martha Baillie and I explore the tensions and spaces between memory, fiction and truth with two multimedia installations rooted in history, family relationships, photography and text.

Using the structure of archives to discover hidden narratives, Martha and I set out from opposite directions but end up in similar places. While Martha creates an archive to convey the fictional account of a young man's journey from a small town in Germany to the Canadian North, I have worked in parallel with Alan Resnick to explore the real history and archive of his father, WWII reconnaissance photographer Dr. Morris Resnick. We are all three asking viewers to consider the nature of their family relationships and what they know – or can never know – about the people in their lives.

The process of unraveling family histories is always challenging – people are fallible and the mind is an impressionable, dynamic machine that constantly assimilates new information. It rationalizes what cannot be understood, and smoothes out the rough edges of memories. Explored in neuropsychology, autobiographical memory is an important part of identity and self-awareness. Two contributing types of this memory are personal incident memory (based on personal experience) and personal semantic memory (intangible details and generic knowledge, such as names of people, or family stories).¹ In her book of essays, *Living, Thinking, Looking*, Siri Hustvedt writes, “Memories aren’t photographs or documentary films. They shift over time, are creatively and actively perceived... They dim and may mutate.”² If one considers autobiographical memory a primary source of information, imagination could be considered a secondary source. We freely acquire information from both of these sources in our active process of remembering, and the details of what we retain are impacted by context, timing, and variable personal conditions. Over time, the lines blur between real memories and fiction.

In *The Schlögel Archive*, Martha has brought her most recent novel, *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel*, into a visual art space, weaving new layers of meaning and methods of narration into her work. The story seeks the truth about a fictional character, Heinrich Schlögel, who travels from Tettang, Germany to Baffin Island, Canada, and mysteriously finds himself lost in time. It is narrated from the perspective of a self-appointed archivist who is meticulous, methodical and uncannily resourceful.

Martha's installation opens with a line of text that introduces us to her archivist and suggests the power images can have: “My search for Heinrich Schlögel began with a photograph.”³ Martha's creation of the installation began with postcards. She acquired them in a variety of ways – purchased, gifted and found – and also created postcards from images borrowed from the National Archives of Canada and other sources, her own photographs of Baffin Island and those taken by her father in Germany shortly before WWII erupted. Over a period of three years, she transposed her manuscript-in-progress onto more than 800 postcards and mailed them to a range of acquaintances. With this gesture, the book transformed from a passively consumed story to one that is actively participated in and explored.

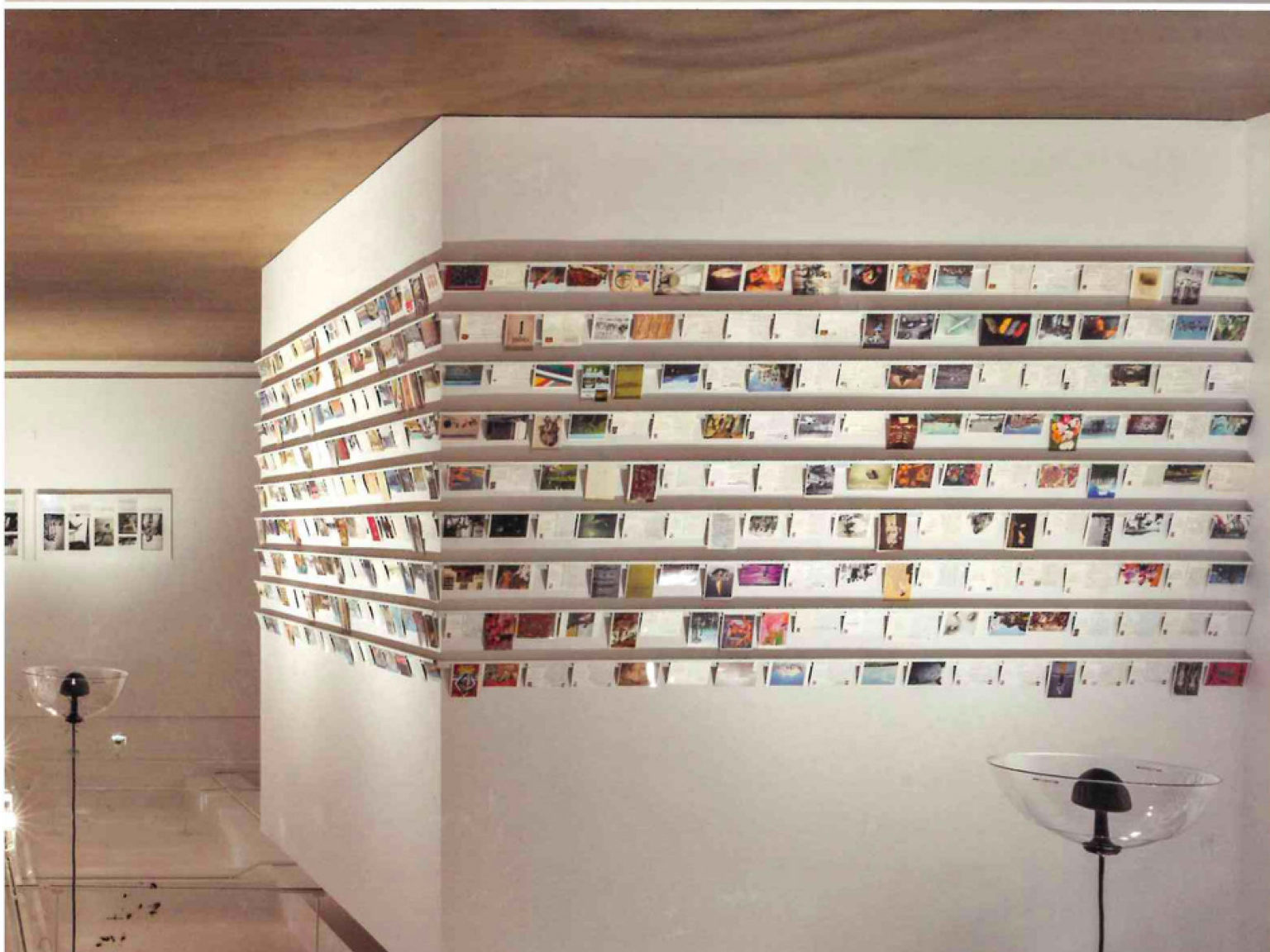
Martha borrowed back hundreds of the disbursed postcards for this exhibition. Arranged in tight rows in the gallery, they are initially overwhelming, but curiosity stirs us to pick them up and read. The purposefully chosen image on the front of each card alters how the accompanying text is interpreted, how it resonates and what emotional response it elicits in the viewer. By assembling her novel in postcards, Martha has us read the narrative in random segments, reflecting the disjointed manner in which stories may be remembered – especially those from the distant past.

Alongside the postcards, audio recordings of many of the postcard recipients reading the texts they received from Martha can be heard from overhead directional speakers.⁴ These disembodied voices add to the “reality transformation” of the work. Each clip has unique characteristics, whether betraying twinges of emotion (#112 – Spring Hurlbut) or taking an authoritative tone (#114 – Sharon Gazely). For card #386, *Beside the Weasel River, Baffin Island* (2010), Nico Rogers reads melodically about an experience of Heinrich’s that sounds like a fable, involving a hare that appears to follow him for some time. The picture is surreal, showing a rock with a clean, precise path cleaved in the middle and a view of mountains in the distance. It is an unsettling landscape, photographed by Martha herself as she followed in Heinrich’s imagined footsteps. If the place is real, and the photograph is real, are we certain that there is no Heinrich?

Almost hidden away at the back of the gallery is a small room that contains an old chair, a small table with three rocks, and a lamp. Its minimalism is intended as relief after the overwhelming sensory experience of postcards, voices and words. All of the objects in the room reference a prior time. The armchair’s fabric is torn, revealing old layers of upholstery, suggesting that, while in the present, we sit in the continuum of history. Music that Martha commissioned from composer Nic Gotham as a response to the novel fills the room. First meditative and melancholic in tone, the composition echoes Heinrich’s journey, blending a quartet of classical instruments and then suddenly taking a more abrupt turn with slightly offbeat sounds and pauses broken by cymbals and a clarinet. Settling into the chair in this low-lit, windowless room, and listening to Gotham’s rolling music, the passage of time feels murky.

By allowing us to capture a moment, photography can help us feel control over time. In her book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag wrote, “As photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure.”⁵ Martha’s use of postcards as a narrative device helps position photography as a mnemonic device. In her installation of *The Schlögel Archive*, postcards and music bring both Heinrich and the archivist into the real world by creating what we may perceive as real records of lived experiences. As we start to believe in them, the lines between reality and fiction soften.

In *His Father Over Time*, I have immersed myself in the story and work of a real person – Alan’s late father, Dr. Morris Resnick. Morris was a reconnaissance photographer with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) in WWII who produced a significant collection of photographs, letters, documents and other ephemera that Alan discovered in 2010. While Alan and his family knew that Morris was an avid photographer, they didn’t know the scope of his talent or the volume of what he produced. This was an exciting find, but the contents – the unknown people, unknown places, and unknowable moments – also raised questions for Alan about his father and his life. There are pictures of Morris with his arms around women other than his future wife,⁶ and images that show him in a light, adventurous posture, such as *Morris Resnick in a German Luftwaffe Airplane* (item #0127). Others are clearly a part of his work in the RCAF, sharing intimate moments between those with whom he served but whose identities are largely unknown to Alan.







Feb 14 1941
 Like this one because
 it portrays a typical
 expression of yours.
 Do I always look
 so scared?
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Using the limited documentation in Morris's notes, information from Alan and from my own research, I emulated an archivist and created an archive of almost 400 items.⁷ I was methodical and, when possible, accurately relayed facts. However, I was aware that the truth can be slippery and can't necessarily be verified or fully known. I sought instead an emotional truth that made sense to me in this universe that was Morris, and while examining this reality, I created an archive filled with a large amount of fiction.

One example is a photograph I titled *Rabbi Sam Mikenberg and Grandchildren* (item #3018). All the information I had was what could be seen in the image itself: a Hasidic-Jewish-looking man sitting on a porch while three small children play near his feet and a woman looks out through the door's window. I knew the scene was likely set in Toronto and began by researching common Jewish names of the 1940s. I then described the scene in an authoritative manner, naming the man Rabbi Mikenberg, and writing, "At his feet, his three grandchildren read an illustrated story. His daughter, Elena Shapiro, looks on through the door to make sure everyone behaves. Rabbi Mikenberg did not approve of the material the children were reading, but was glad to be with them..." Without any facts, I discovered a relatable and emotionally true story and for anyone who sees this work, including me (until I find out otherwise), that man *is* Rabbi Mikenberg.

Martha captured a powerful idea when she wrote, "It is mostly through speculation that we exist for others, and for ourselves."⁸ After spending a few years with Morris's photography and analyzing the images in close detail, I began to feel as if I knew him, even though he passed away in 1995. However, if we exist in a space of speculation, and consider that the photographer's perspective cannot be separated from his or her work, it may be possible for me to know a version of Morris through the lens of his camera. In viewing works such as the *Niagara Series* (items #2002-1; #2002-4; #2002-28) for example, the love that Morris had for his wife is clearly evident. The photographs show her dressed fashionably and always at a flattering angle. She seemed to enjoy posing for him.

Alan has said that the different contexts, expressions and timeframes discovered in this multitude of photographs added new perspectives on his personal history, which he found jarring.⁹ In response, he explores his relationship with his father and family through a series of texts installed in the gallery alongside Morris's photographs. He bridges the gap between his previous understanding of his father and his new perspective in a speculative and poetic space. In *HEADLINE: My Father Shoots My Mother; Nobody Dies*, Alan's writing has a revelatory quality: "My mother is in front of the camera. My mother is in front of my Dad's camera. My mother is in front of my Dad." Alan considers the images with wistfulness and romanticism, writing, "The kind of love love loves." He then alludes to something else, "But love isn't all there is." Offering no explanation, he could be referring to the relationship between his parents, or the toll of time and loss; we simply do not know.

In his piece, *Road to Bislich, Germany* (item #0106), Alan expresses his surprise at learning about his father's travel into Germany: "Germany, Dad? On the road to Bislich, Germany?!" His questions reveal a combination of angst, astonishment and frustration at not having known about this part of his father's life. In *The Discovery*, Alan writes about finding the collection and concludes, "This was not how I had seen him. I wanted to know. More." The weight of the unknown is palpable and delving into the archive with imagination will not satisfy this yearning. The partial truth may be less satisfying than not knowing anything at all.

The works in *Erratics* begin with photography and rely on speculation and archives as story-telling devices. In her essay “Variations on Desire,” Hustvedt writes: “I have always felt intuitively that conscious remembering and imagining are powerfully connected, that they are, in fact, so similar as to be at times difficult to disentangle from each other.”¹⁰ Ruminating on truth and whether or not you have discovered it all is like a never-ending rabbit hole – we may not know what we do not know, or we may knowingly or unwittingly fill in gaps with our own imagination. Perhaps we should face our discomfort instead and accept that the whole truth cannot be known. *The Schlögel Archive* brings a fictional character into reality, while *His Father Over Time* fictionalizes elements from the life of a real person. In the end, they are equally authentic and real, suggesting that emotional truth is more powerful than facts.

Malka Greene

¹ Donna Rose Addis, *Memory of Myself: Autobiographical Memory and Identity in Alzheimer’s Disease* (Auckland: University of Auckland, 2001).

² Siri Hustvedt, “On Reading,” *Living, Thinking, Looking* (New York: Picador, 2012), 136.

³ This line of text also appears in the novel, *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel*.

⁴ Martha Baillie has created a companion digital archive, www.schlogel.ca, which allows for extensive exploration of the postcards and readings.

⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 9.

⁶ This is not to suggest any infidelity. The pictures prompted Alan to consider his father’s early relationships and his parents’ courtship.

⁷ The archive, with captions, is digitally available online at, www.malkagreene.smugmug.com/morris-resnick.

⁸ Martha Baillie, *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel* (St. John’s: Pedlar Press, 2014), 17.

⁹ Amy Grief, “Photo exhibit centres on the notion of memory,” *The Canadian Jewish News* (Toronto, 6 May 2015), <http://www.cjnews.com/arts/photo-exhibit-centres-notion-memory>.

¹⁰ Hustvedt, “Variations on Desire,” 5.

Martha Baillie is the author of five novels, including *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel*, a Globe and Mail Top 100 book for 2014. Her previous novel, *The Incident Report*, was nominated for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, was a Globe and Mail Top 100 book for 2009 and is being adapted into a screenplay. She has written about contemporary visual art for *Brick* magazine and other publications. Baillie studied at the University of Edinburgh, the Sorbonne in Paris and at the University of Toronto. She lives and works in Toronto.

Malka Greene is an artist and independent curator with a particular interest in photography and new media. Her work explores many themes, including history, relationships, connections and the grey areas between the known and the unknowable. Greene’s work is included in several private collections and publications, including *Flava: Wedge Curatorial Projects* (1997-2007) and *Chart* magazine. She holds a BFA (Hons.) in New Media with an English Literature minor from Ryerson University and a Diploma (Hons.) in Applied Photography from Sheridan College. She is on the Board of Directors of Gallery TPW and is based in Toronto.

Alan Resnick is a TV Comedy Writer who has written for live action and animation. He has won three Gemini Awards and was an original writer on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* (CBC). Whether on television or in his literary blog *Welcome to Kafkaville* (*Pop.1*), Resnick explores the nuances of relationship, and themes of love and loss, using off-beat humour and satire. He was born in Ottawa and currently lives and works in Toronto.

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