

## ***The Institute™: Or, What We Do for Love***

Vera Frenkel

<http://www.the-national-institute.org>  
<http://www.the-national-institute.org/Tour>

*"The Institute™ compresses more information and "feel" for the gestalt of our times into its secret, mysterious spaces than anything one might find in more conventional "reality".*  
Jeff Mahoney, Hamilton Spectator, 27 IX 03

### **Introductory note:**

***The Institute™: Or, What We Do for Love***, Vera Frenkel's net-based project on the inner life of a dysfunctional cultural institution, is an innovative multidisciplinary work combining documentary and fictional modes to trace the special relationships between artists on the one hand and government policy-makers on the other.

The setting for this highly charged milieu is **The National Institute for the Arts**, known informally as *The Institute™*, a chain of artists' residences occupying vacant hospital buildings across the country, with *The Institute™–Hamilton* as its first test branch.

Using a quasi-fictional structure and compelling documentary content Frenkel has devised an instrument that engages both conscience and desire; a ship-of-fools situation where we as co-conspirators can be amused by and alerted to the private and public dilemmas that unfold. Two quasi-sacred but frequently disenfranchised constituencies, the health system and the art world, routinely played against each other by regimes of the day, meet in this work.

Moving freely between the real and the imaginary, the visitor is invited to meet the artists who live and work at *The Institute™*, and to observe the conduct of the former cultural bureaucrats who have been retrained under a government programme and are now the cooks, gardeners, social workers and administrators of this new residence. Via web site, photo collages, songs, prints and plaques, aspects of the internal life of this institution are explored, especially the relations between its staff of re-trained arts officers and the gifted and feisty residents.

The art world often provides a finely calibrated lens through which to consider the customs of its host culture, and word has arrived that a dozen or so Ministers of Health and Culture from around the world are regarding the Canadian experiment with interest.

Currently bi-lingual, *The Institute™* is now being restructured to accommodate additional languages.

## **Framing narrative:**

### Part one of the story:

**THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA IS CLOSING HOSPITALS ACROSS THE COUNTRY. CITIZENS ARE ALARMED.**

Following the controversial 1998 destruction of the Calgary General Hospital, and given the huge costs of either demolition or renovation, it was proposed to resolve the fate of other decommissioned medical facilities across the country by creating an entity called the **National Institute for the Arts** (known popularly as *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>)

**Abandoned care facilities nation-wide, equipped to support studio practices in all disciplines, would now constitute a chain of residences for artists.**

***The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> was founded.**

### Part two of the story:

**THE SAME PERIOD OF SEVERE GOVERNMENT CUTBACKS IS THREATENING KEY ARTS AGENCIES AS WELL; BUDGETS ARE SLASHED, POLICIES CALLED INTO QUESTION.**

Members of a whole generation of unemployed cultural bureaucrats are now offered the choice of either taking a severance package, or being re-trained as *Institute*<sup>TM</sup> staff members, serving the arts in a whole new capacity, from chaplain to cook, from social worker to director, from gardener to librarian ...

**This combination of talent and vulnerability in the same setting offers an unprecedented arena for considering the place and value of art, artists and care-giving as these reflect and implicate the larger milieu. *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> is host to the explosive intersection of these concerns as they confront each other in the lives of the forty residents of the first branch of the new nation-wide network. Hamilton, home constituency of the previous Minister of Culture, Sheila Copps, was selected as the site of the inaugural branch. (Please see Mission Statement plaque)**

Designed as an instrument of combined questioning and pleasure, *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> braids together serial narratives and scholarly presentations, images and animations, ideas and dreams, all moving through an environment to which artists, real and invented, contribute their thoughts and their work. Tensions between interwoven fictional and documentary 'realities' invite reconsideration of received ideas and raise questions regarding moral, aesthetic, and socio-political issues of the day.

## **Production background:**

**As with any project using new media, much of the work involved is invisible and should be. Backstage tasks include computer programming, web design, writing, composing and image creation or selection. The working relationships among the team members have as much to do with the final experience provided to the viewer as does the original concept for the project.**

A multidisciplinary team of artists, programmers, writers, hospital architects and social scientists has been gathered to help realize this project.

**Conceived by an artist with a track record for combining popular culture and so-called high art, *The Institute*<sup>™</sup>, using fairly simple means and a content-driven, relatively low-tech approach, is both research instrument and work of art, featuring a fiction/documentary approach which shapes, Moebius-strip fashion, a socially-engaged, complex work.**

**As well as exploring the facilities and listening to and reading the various narratives that bear witness to life in *The Institute*<sup>™</sup>, the visitor will have the option of ‘conversing’ with some of the famous residents via a Question and Answer interface. The data base serves as an accessible nexus between the conceptual and technical aspects of the project.**

A rudimentary mapping out of the website, based on fugue structure provides a metaphorical framework for different levels of the inmates’ encounters and their studio practices. These encounters, both real and fictive, carry the inherent critique of the bureaucratization of experience that animates the humour.

It is interesting to note that the term “fugue state” also refers to a condition of severe disorientation and numbness. Both meanings of the word ‘fugue’ can be said to resonate with the content of this work. Features of typical institutional systems and practices contextualize the layered narratives and the A.I. aspects of the project.

**A grown-up interventionist work, yet with a strong sense of play, *The Institute*<sup>™</sup>’s moral core and ease of access provide an armature for the growing debate around increasingly prevalent institutional dysfunctionality. The current version will also serve as infrastructure for an intended series of future works exploring this thematic material, whether CD-ROM, game or installation.**

## **History:**

**Media artist, producer and educator, Ron Wakkary, curator of the respected Stadium@DIA Kunsthalle, invited *The Institute*<sup>™</sup> to be among the important**

**works already hosted there, and served as co-producer. Following the inaugural Hart House exhibition, *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> toured in 2004 to the Carleton University Art Gallery in Ottawa and to the Art Gallery of Sudbury, among other venues. A travelling version has been developed for the proposed second phase of the tour.**

A CCII production grant provided the opportunity to do preliminary work on the site's infrastructure, and this was carried out at the Banff Centre, with the assistance of work-study and support staff Ryan Johnston and Sean McDermid there, and artist-technicians Steev Morgan and Kartz Ucci in Toronto. Dormant for a time due to lack of funds, the project received encouragement and support via a 2002 Canada Council Media Arts Grant, and was able to move towards a satisfying level of completion.

In reality this is a work that can unfold indefinitely. New residents will arrive and older ones leave or die; changes in the cultural and health care sectors will be noted. Relationships within *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> will no doubt blossom in unexpected ways

### **Multidisciplinary content and approach:**

*The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> is multidisciplinary not only in its content and the range of expertise committed to the project, but also through the several forms in which that content has been developed and presented: interactive web site, radio broadcast, gallery installation, song cycle and publication.

**Yet, despite all the more technically intriguing options available, this project reflects a certain modesty. It is centred on making an accessible work that is both engaging and conceptually challenging, designed by its semi-permeable structure to serve the expressive needs of a wide range of participants, and using technology not as a grail but as a useful and necessary vehicle to achieve some welcome shifts in awareness.**

In both form and content, *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>'s multi-layered, poly-serial structure will allow the roster of cultural treasures who are its residents to become engaging conversation partners for the viewer; guides to the processes of discovery the site makes possible.

### **An Ongoing Work:**

**As described above, *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> offers a fictional framework for ongoing documentary content, its infrastructure resembling that of a fugue, with contrapuntal harmonies and dissonances reflecting the network of ambivalences that constitute institutional life.**

Four separate but related site maps are found on the preliminary working site, one for each layer of ‘reality’ in the institution:

**Governance & Structure**

**Facilities & Programmes**

**Internal Relations**

**Studio Practices**

A fifth layer, unannounced and encountered as if by chance through a fugitive doorway, is **The Production Archive** now in progress on the making of the work itself, featuring correspondence and other documentation regarding key technical and aesthetic decisions arrived at along the way.

The changing worlds of social and cultural safety-net issues are engaged through *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>'s structure, ranging from its Annual Report to its Outreach Programme (excursions, special events, lectures, publications); from its growing facilities (rehearsal spaces, studios, cafeterias, library, auditorium) to its internal and external administrative relationships (among Board Members, C.E.O., residents and staff, representatives of Ministries of Culture and Health and so on.)

A kind of socio-cultural cosmos, *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> offers lay-people and professionals alike, through its AI exchanges, Visiting Lecturers' Programme, and Archive, a forum for observation, analysis and commentary on issues including, among others, copyright, health and law questions, hospital design, as well as inquiries centering on art collecting, cultural politics and studio practices.

**As with previous projects by Vera Frenkel, *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> offers a context for the work and thought of other artists, writers and scholars who will bring to the site the benefit of their experience and expertise. A dozen AI personae have been developed by some of the leading artists and writers in the country, and texts from four visiting lecturers are already posted on the site, with a number of others ready for inclusion.**

Hamilton, as home constituency of the previous Minister of Culture and Heritage in the Chrétien government, was seen as the most suitable venue for *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>'s inaugural branch. Other NIA branches are scheduled for those cities where former hospitals were situated, with interesting relationships between branches anticipated.

The work is structured to permit many kinds of exploration and mischief, humour being a good friend to insight. One instance of this is a cycle of commentaries on workplace experience in the form of quasi-cabaret songs on bureaucracy and its impact. The first three of these ('No One's in Charge', 'It's a Job, That's All', 'Weird Language'), were produced with the help of arrangements by Rohan Staton of Massive Music, and vocals by the 'Mad Love' trio (sisters Audrey, Linda and Wanda vanderStoop). These can be heard both on the web site and on the CBC programme 'Art on the Web', with four more songs ready for studio recording as resources permit.

## Short project summary

***The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>: *Or, What We Do for Love* is an interactive video-web project with planned extensions into print, installation, radio, performance and publication.**

**Initial versions of the project introduce the first test branch in Hamilton of The National Institute for the Arts, a proposed government-run chain of artists' residences scheduled to occupy abandoned hospital buildings across the country.**

**Staffed by carefully retrained former cultural bureaucrats who are now the gardeners, librarians, nurses and cooks, *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>-Hamilton is home to forty artists, writers, musicians, choreographers and film-makers.**

Traversing the interface of documentary and fictional realities, this work raises questions regarding the troubled healthcare and cultural sectors and their relationships. Its structure, its mandate and the nature of its residents open *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> to several kinds of exploration and engagement, inviting the shifting of received ideas and the reconsideration of embedded assumptions.

(Inst project decription\_NGC)

*The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>: *Or, What We Do for Love*

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The site itself

The touring site