

AVENUE

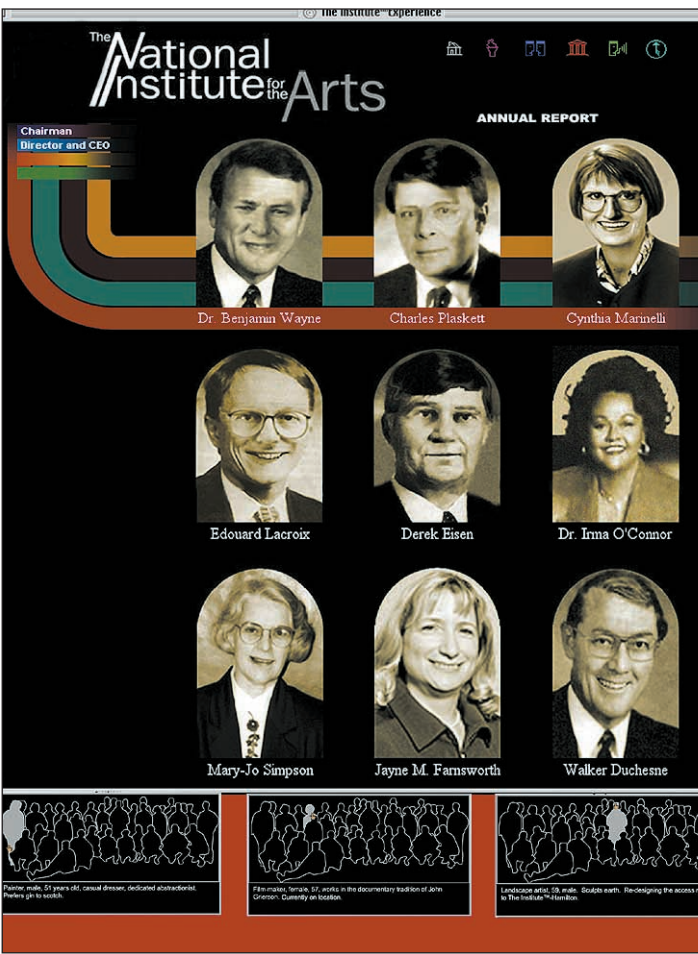
At the Galleries by Julia Dault



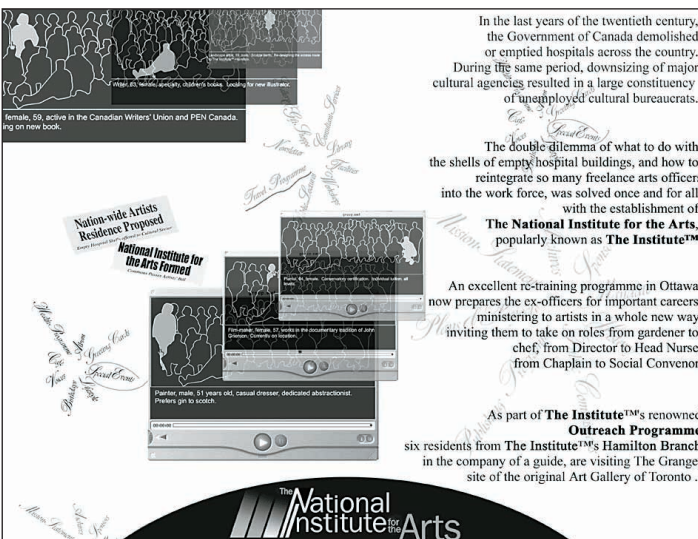
Web site introduction page and welcome message



Sheila Copps dedicating first branch of The Institute



Members of the Board, National Institute for the Arts



An Institute snapshot: newspaper headlines, Web site details



Transfer of gas in process at The Institute



CATHIE COWARD

Vera Frenkel's latest multi-media installation explores our cultural institutions and the role of the artist in society.

TORONTO

FRENKEL'S FAUX WORLD

VERA FRENKEL

The Institute™: Or, What we do for Love

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Hart House
To Dec. 18 and ongoing at www.the-national-institute.org

The Institute™ is typical of internationally renowned multi-media artist Vera Frenkel: vast, complex and damning, curious and other worldly. Her most recent installation explores everything from Canada's buckling health care system to our ineffectual yet cherished cultural institutions (the alphabet soup of CBC, NFB, NAC, etc.) to the role of the artist in society. Frenkel's is a heady pursuit, her results culminating in a fictitious, net-based bureaucracy all her own, The National Institute for the Arts.

When reports of nation wide hospital closures started filtering in, Frenkel decided to force feed government policy makers and health practitioners with a solution to circumvent the high demolition and renovation costs of the abandoned spaces. At the same time, she was also looking for a way to protect the talent of late-career artists — those especially vulnerable to the whims of federal funding agencies and ever-diverted public money.

Her proposal was to create a chain of retirement homes for artists in the empty care facilities. Her reasoning? The close connection between the health care system and the art world, what she considers "two quasi-sacred but frequently disenfranchised constituencies." Not only would the homes make use of unwanted space, they would put artists at their creative prime under one roof, creating a hotbed of intellectual force and cultural treasure.

In the tradition of most red-tape institutions, Frenkel's faux world has everything it should: a board of directors, an annual report, an outreach program, a Web site with contact information, press clippings and internal memos (that we are privy to); it has pictures and profiles of all 40 residences within an interactive interface; it even has a theme song, Frenkel's institute is eerily real; it nears the control and chaos quota of any one of Canada's bureaucratic beasts. The logo is even as out of date as it should be.

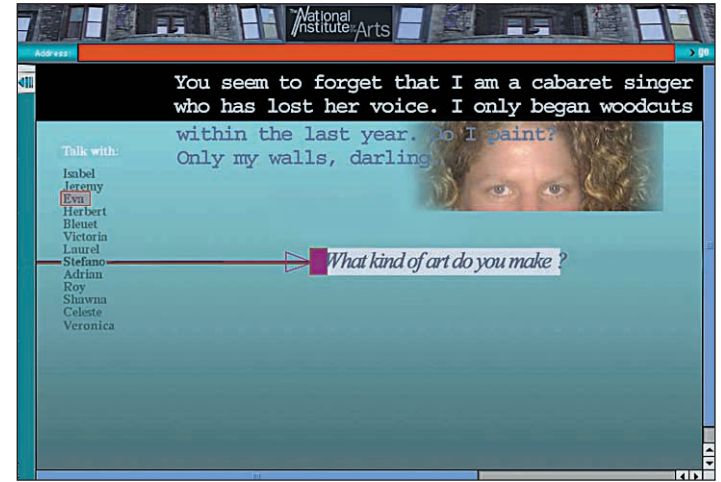
As a commentary on dysfunctionality, *The Institute™* has layer upon layer of information crammed into templates of fiction and documentary. There are characters like Lilly Letourneau, the former librarian of the National Archives who is being retrained to head up The Institute's research centre (rumoured to be the best-equipped in Canada) and the chairman, who says things like, "I am most grateful to have been part of this increasingly splendid achievement," in his notes to staff. There are memos that discuss off-limit parking and forbidden pets ("It is especially galling to have the grounds used as a community potty... the bare-foot dance performance scheduled for Saturday night has been cancelled," reads one furious insert). Then, there's real footage of Ralph Klein muttering on about the role of government and Sheila Copps giggling at the "inauguration" of the Hamilton chapter. Frenkel, too, has created a roster of guest lecturers (some real, some not) at *The Institute™* and has even posted their essays online. They discuss topics like "How to Dress for an Exhibition" and "Hospitals in the Age of Revolution." One essay remarks upon the benefits of Derrida.

The physical results of this gigantic feat, the stuff worth visiting in the space of the gallery, are as varied as the virtual version — black and white half-portraits of residents are crossed with lines of poetry and hung on the wall, a filing cabinet plays music, and two welcoming couches (positioned in front of large screens displaying The Institute's Web site) all draw viewers into this careful, fictitious world.

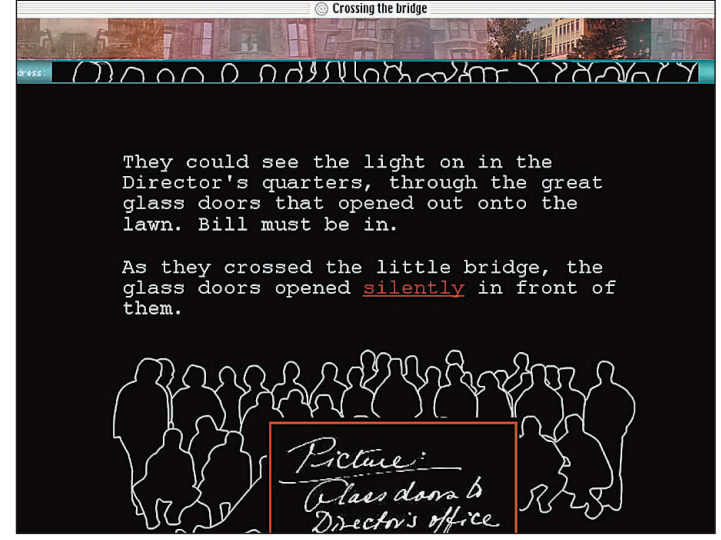
Sifting through the layers of Frenkel's physical and virtual inquiry (something that, at times, takes institutional patience) is a worthwhile education in policy making and cultural renewal. In the end, it's ship-of-fools research is amusing and saddening, dense and disorienting, all at the very same time.

The Justina M. Barnicke Gallery is located at 7 Hart House Circle, Toronto M5S 3H3 416-978-8398. Visit www.the-national-institute.org to view the project

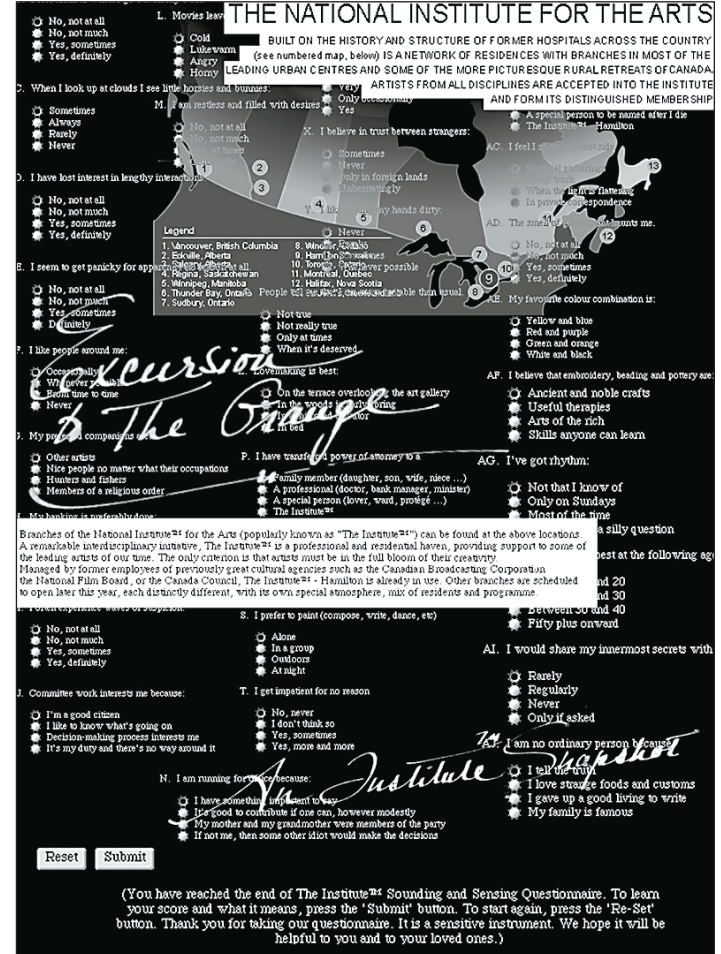
atthegalleries@nationalpost.com



Eva Klemperer, resident, cabaret singer



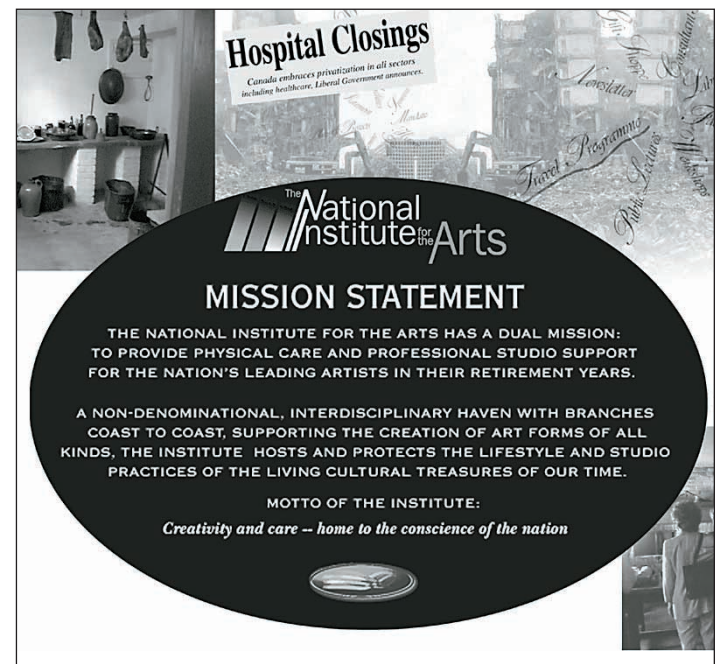
Page from the internal relations level of the Web site



Excursion to the Grange: An Institute snapshot



Molly and the break-in Web page



National Institute of the Arts mission statement