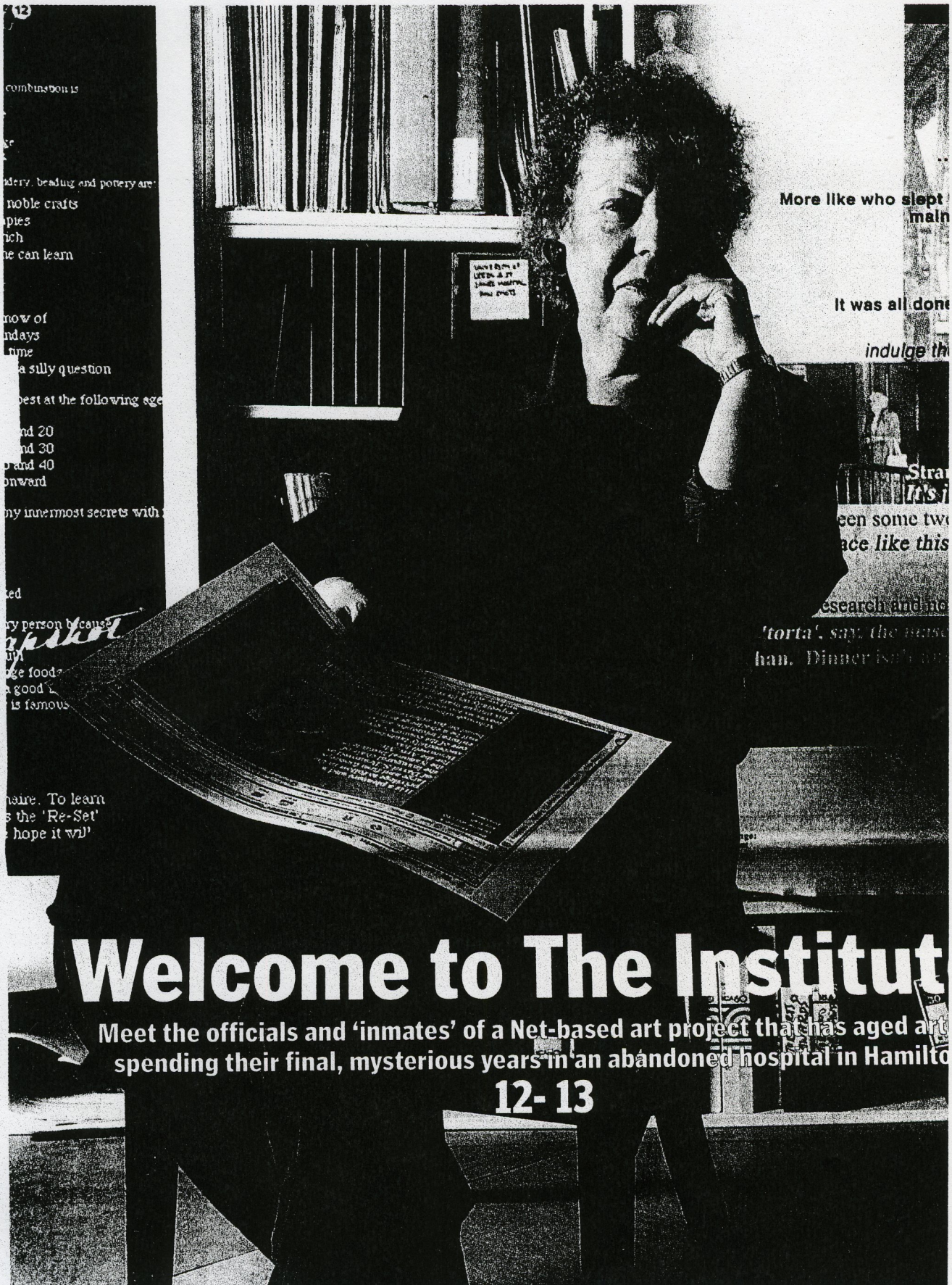


THE MAGAZIN

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Saturday, Septe



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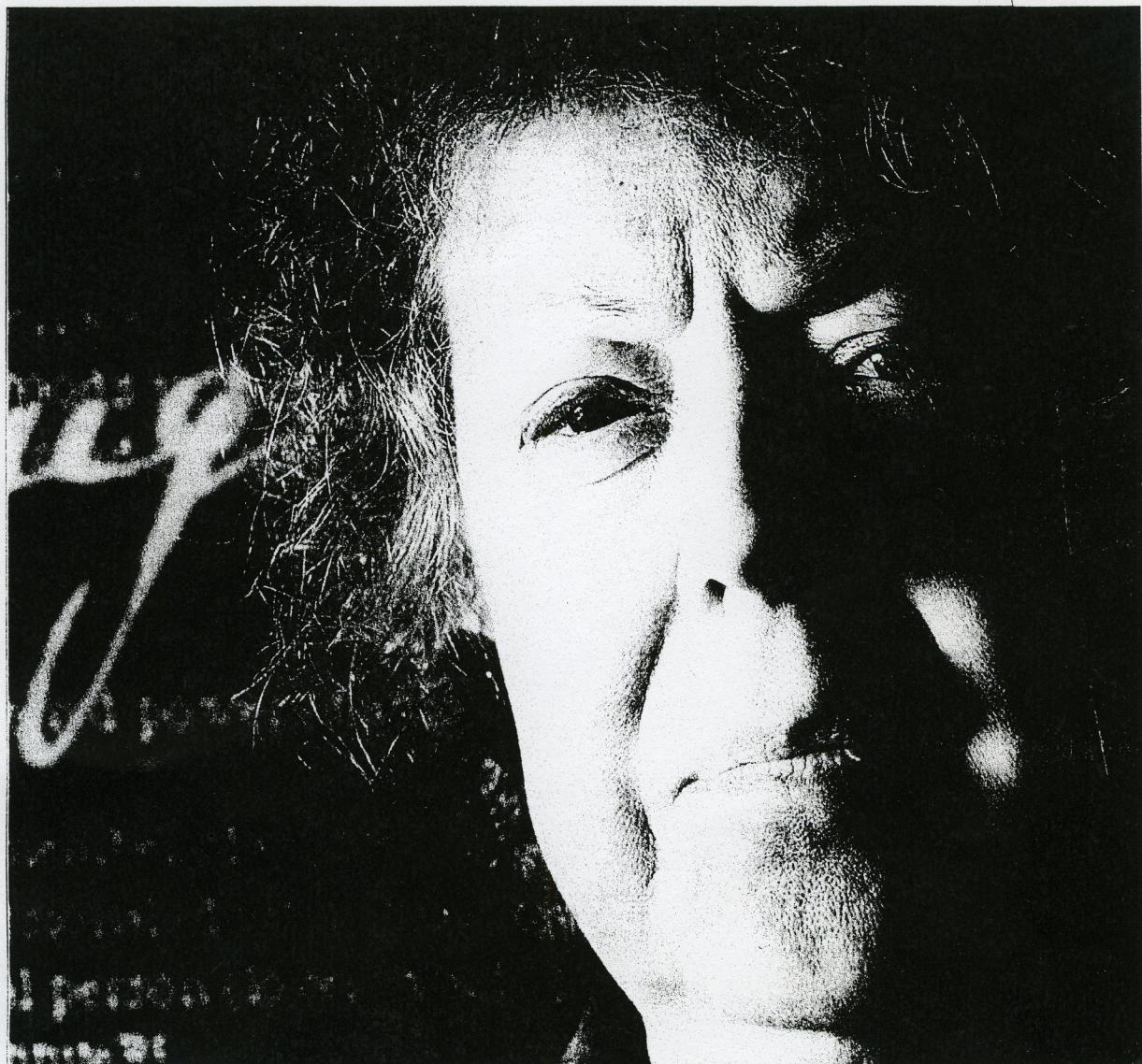
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Welcome to The Institut

Meet the officials and 'inmates' of a Net-based art project that has aged art
spending their final, mysterious years in an abandoned hospital in Hamilton

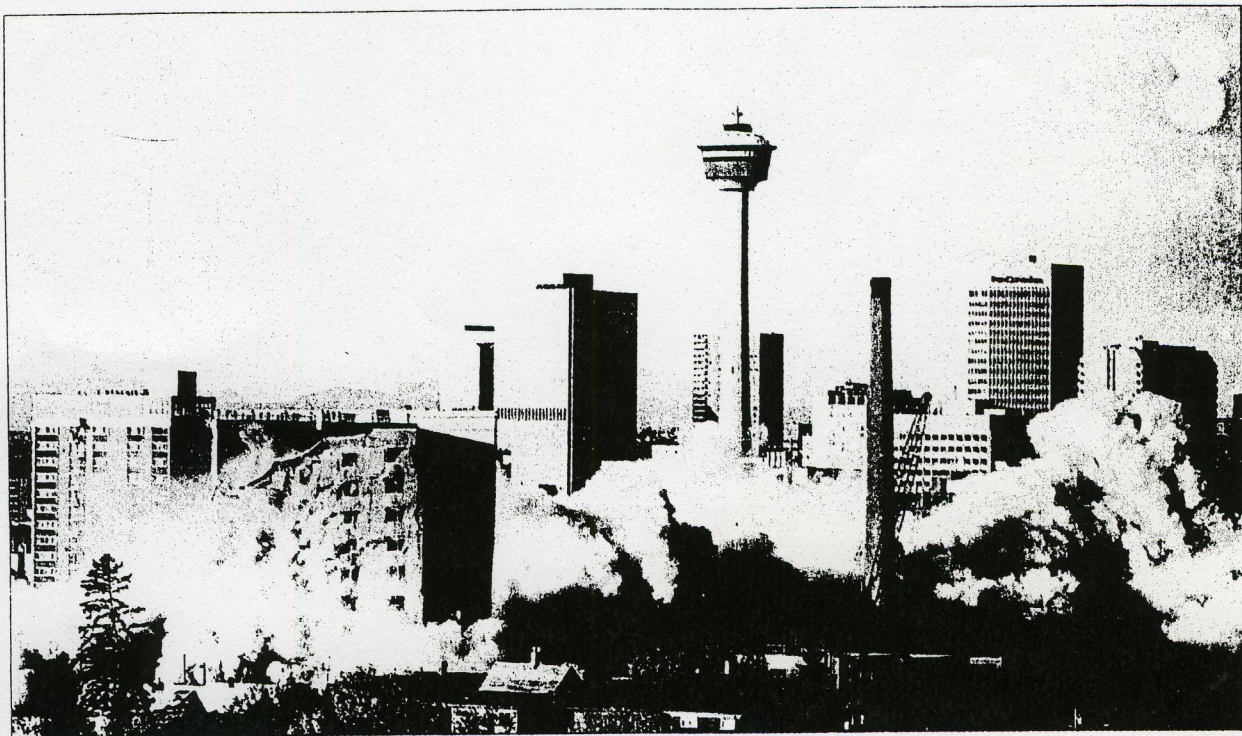
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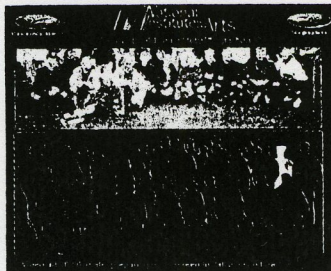
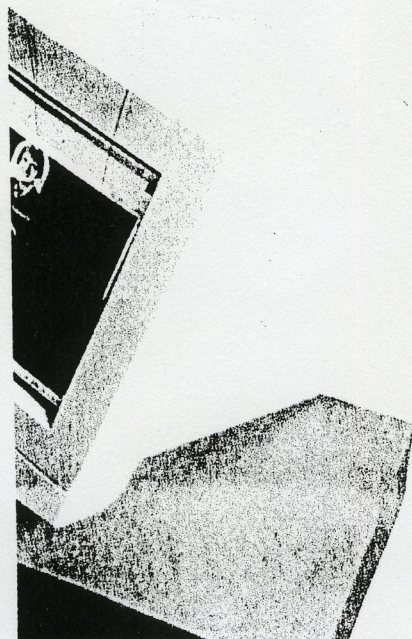
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**Imagine a world
not so far away ...**



THE CANADIAN PRESS

The old Calgary General Hospital crumbles to the ground as it is imploded in 1998.



Vera Frenkel has created a world you can log onto, and its fictional setting is a home for aged artists in an abandoned Hamilton hospital.

ARTIST'S SKETCH

Vera Frenkel is one of Canada's foremost contemporary artists, and her award-winning works of multi-disciplinary art have been shown at such prestigious venues as the Club Media of the Venice Biennale, New York's Museum of Modern Art and Ottawa's National Gallery of Canada.

Much of her work, like *The Institute*, is concerned with how reality is variously constructed, both fictionally and as documentary, by different stakeholders, not the least of them being governments and bureaucracy.

One of the Toronto-based artist's favourite tools is narrative, more particularly, storytelling that is harnessed to "new" media, like the computer.

She was probably the first artist in Canada to experiment with video conferencing, back in 1974, in her piece *String Games: Improvisation for Inter-City Video*.

Her work is often at once chilling, funny and ironic. For instance, *The Last Screening Room: A Valentine* posits a bureaucratic state in which Valentine's Day is the only festival still celebrated.

Some of her best-known works are *The Transit Bar Documentary*; *This Is Your Messiah Speaking*; and *Body Missing*. For a glimpse into Frenkel's Net-based work, check these websites: <http://www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing> (The Body Missing Project) and <http://www.yorku.ca/mam> (Museums after Modernism: Strategies of Engagement).

—J.M.

You can even
carry on a
conversation
with the
colourful
characters who
dwell in
Vera Frenkel's
virtual world of
The Institute.



If you chance to stumble into The National Institute for the Arts in Hamilton, you may feel like a character in a story that could've been co-written by George Orwell and Franz Kafka, had they been Canadian and a little more post-modern.

There's a vague and disquieting sense of political unreality and paranoia about The Institute, as though everyone in the place knows something you don't.

And metaphysically there's a little stutter in the "normal" space-time continuum. Where exactly does this place exist and when?

The Institute — that's what everyone calls it — is located at the site of an abandoned Hamilton hospital. And it is home to some of the country's most talented artists — in retirement.

There's Adrian Bix, editor of the Institute newsletter; retired jazz singer Veronica Allegria del Mar; and cabaret veteran Eva Klempner, to name a few.

Ever heard of them?

Well, they don't exactly exist, though "exist" is such a loaded word, isn't it? Didn't Bill Clinton say in grand jury testimony, "It depends what the meaning of the word is?"

The Institute, a retirement facility for artists, doesn't exactly exist either, unless you conjure it up on a computer.

But once you do conjure it up, it seems to very emphatically exist. It seems more "real," whatever that is, than any so-called "reality" show.

The Institute is a Net-based art project by artist Vera Frenkel, who has the kind of chilling clairvoyance into bureaucratic dystopia that we associate with Orwell and Kafka. Or is that Kafwell and Orka?

Whatever, she is a kindred spirit. Yet, if her Institute bears faint existential echoes of The Castle or one of the ministries in 1984, there is a playfulness, a mischievousness to it, perhaps even a wry optimism, that are uniquely Frenkel's.

The Institute is an idea of hers that has turned into an elaborate interactive website, with video and musical added in, that is a kind of world unto itself.

From that computer meta-space, Frenkel is generating materials, such as panels of prints

and engravings of computer graphics, that will be featured in The Institute's exhibition at the Hart House Art Gallery on the University of Toronto campus from Nov. 18 and to Dec. 18.

There will be computers set up so visitors can make their way through the multi-layered Internet site. There will also be large, three-panelled, wall-mounted prints of website images. These will include stills of hospital buildings crumbling to the ground, balloon graphics with text, such as mission statements, in colour reverse and much more. There will even be songs, such as the ballad No One's In Charge. You will also be able to link up with the Institute exhibition on the Hart House gallery website at www.utoronto.ca/gallery/ starting Nov. 18.

The National Institute of the Arts, as fictionally envisioned on the website, opened recently in Hamilton.

And it is the timely result of putting two related problems together — hospital closures and the slashing of arts funding — to create a single solution.

Two wrongs, in this case, can make a right, with a little imagination.

Artists in our society tend to make very little money and, now even less than they used to, thanks to the scalping of culture budgets by successive governments obsessed with appearing to be fiscal Spartans.

In that same spirit, those governments have slammed their policies into hospitals, in some cases destroying them. What's more, those governments have pitted arts and health care against each other in a "social priorities" sweepstakes.

So on the one hand you have hospital buildings sitting idle and bare. And on the other you have a population of aging artists, with no nest egg, who want to live out their retirement years in a modest degree of comfort and with studio space.

In other words, you have artists wanting closure, but not getting it — and hospitals getting it, but not wanting it.

A natural pairing, right? But no one saw it until Frenkel came along.

Frenkel, from Toronto, is one of Canada's foremost artists, and she works mostly with video and computer. She has had shows in galleries all over the world, including New York's Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery of Canada.

And she has represented Canada at Documenta 9 in Kassel, Germany; had a show at the Freud Museum in London; and was artist in

Signpost

Who: Vera Frenkel

What: The Institute: Or What We Do Love

When: Nov. 18 to Dec. 8. Mondays to days 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays 1 to 4 p.m.

Where: Hart House Art Gallery, University of Toronto, 7 Hart House Circle, Toronto. And in cyber-space, a link to The Institute's exhibition and website will be posted at www.utoronto.ca/gallery/ starting Nov. 18. **Contact:** For information about the exhibition, phone 416-978-8398.

residence at the invitation of the faculty University of Leeds in England.

A busy summer, indeed, but through she continued her work on The Institute she built it — with help, of course — from ground up using the structure of the fugue model, a fugue being a musical composition in which many melodies and vocal parts interweave.

She drew up the floor plans, the power and structure of the Institute, its internal policies and studio practices.

She handpicked the board of director, the chair of the board and the staff, including librarian Lily Letourneau.

Vital to all this careful architecture has been the production work of project co-ordinator Mark Jones and the technical collaboration of many others, including Francis Eanson, Robbins, Steve Morgan, Jean-Christophe Laprat and Jacky Perron.

The work is far from finished. In a sense never will be. The Institute is in evolution, growing and changing all the time.

Currently, there are 40 residents, living in the restored and adapted hospital building that now, with the help of Inescapance, is sited in a glade-like setting in Hamilton.

But the larger plan is to turn abandoned pits right across the country into institutions for artists.

Of course, if you look for the Institute the actual City of Hamilton, you won't find it. For one thing, there is no "abandoned pit building" in Hamilton. Though it well might have been.

That is one of the reasons Hamilton was chosen as the first site of The Institute. When Frenkel conceived the project, it

was much talk of hospital closures in Hamilton, St. Joseph's in particular, though no outright closures have occurred — yet.

Despite the care and detail that Frenkel put into the planning of The Institute, or rather because of it, there are already frictions among the fictional residents and staff.

The tensions are not terribly visible from the surface (though, suspiciously, this very young facility is already on its second board chair).

But poke around the website for awhile and you'll see. Within the meta-space of The Institute, staff and management are often curt with the residents or "inmates," as they are called. Frenkel describes it as the "bureaucratization of experience."

In her new studio/home on Queen Street in Toronto, Frenkel lays out the world of the Institute for a visitor, walking him through the

most as surprised at what she finds as the visitor.

Many of the staff members are downsized former cultural bureaucrats who were offered the choice of a severance package or retraining as an Institute employee, serving as anything from chaplain to cook or social worker or gardener.

On top of that is the collision, inherent in the structure of the place, between the "realities" of the health system and the "realities" of the art world.

And the inmates themselves sometimes clash because their senses of "reality," both artistic/fictive and documentary, often do. Sometimes they seem uncertain of their own "reality."

There are even security issues. Recently, there was a break-in.

As Frenkel says: "The rare combination of talent and vulnerability in the same setting offers an unprecedented arena for considering the place and value of art, artists and caregiving..."

"The Institute is host to the explosive intersection of these concerns as they confront each other in the lives of the 40 residents."

And, of course, the art that the "inmates" do

"So that was the climate. And when I set about actually planning The Institute, I happened to be reading about threats of a lot of hospital closures in Hamilton."

The Institute that one discovers on the website is a place of startling transparency, at least when it comes to the inmates.

There are photographs and biographical information about each of them, and they even answer questions of website visitors through varied inter-active features.

You can ask a resident what she or he thinks of various issues, what they are working on, how they relate to others. Usually they will answer.

And as you make your way through the stages and rooms on the website, certain narratives emerge, some of them quite dramatic.

For instance, there is Molly's story. For hours she goes missing in The Institute after a break-in. She is ultimately found by her ex-lover, deep in the basement, wearing red rubber boots and a wide brim hat. When her ex-lover walks to her side where he can see under her hat, he sees that she's crying.

There are also many "official" elements in the website. Greetings from the chair. News of the day. Mission statements. Organizational

Michael Dault. And McGill University Annmarie Adams who specialises in special structures. And others.

These people, in collusion with puppeteers with their marionettes:

Frenkel says, "What has emerged is a line between fiction and semi-permeable."

Word about the Institute has spread around through Frenkel's wide friends and colleagues, and she received an e-mail from a legitimate her, at the cost of \$1, an old tuberculosis sanatorium in the Laurentians. It is slated for demolition.

Wherever the line between relation begins and ends and however satire might be sliced, The Institute most totally convincing, stunning and insightful exploration of varic logical, socio-political and economic

The Institute compresses more into a "feel" for the gestalt of our times, secret, mysterious spaces than an average find in more conventional "r

A fugue indeed. It weaves genuine stories into a complex fabric of ir

That is one of the reasons Hamilton was chosen as the first site of The Institute

When Frenkel conceived the project, there was much talk of hospital closures in Hamilton

organizational geometry, the maze of relationships, and the knots into which fiction and reality are tied in this work.

From the website menu, she calls up onto the screen actual documentation of the crisis in the arts and the health-care system, putting the origins of The Institute in context. She summons up a group photo of all the facility residents.

She talks about The Institute's library. The deeper she goes into the website, the more specific the characters and narratives become. She uncovers love affairs among the residents, power struggles within the administration.

Frenkel is a bit like the poet Virgil guiding Dante through the layers of heaven and hell, and while she authored this particular cosmos, it has virtually taken on a life of its own, the way characters do in a novel, and she seems al-

in The Institute — covering the whole gamut from painting and pottery to dance, writing and theatre — is subordinate to a larger, collective work of art or narrative: namely, The Institute itself.

But let's get back to beginnings for a minute. Frenkel remembers.

"I was living with the idea of an institute for artists for some time. What tripped it was news that Canada was closing all these hospitals."

"My mom died at the Royal Vic in Montreal, and I spent time with her there during the 1998 ice storm. I learned then that they were closing it down."

"Then they demolished the Calgary Hospital. Seven seconds to destroy eight buildings. At the same time, the cultural sector was being decimated. The Canada Council was under threat.

charts. Historical and archival material. But there are also inter-office memos, some of them candid.

Because of the interactive way Frenkel has set up the website, the inmates can answer random questions.

There are photographs of them. Though, granted, there is something undeniably peculiar about their photographs and those of staff and management.

The faces and features are almost indefinably odd, as though not quite naturally fitting together. That's because the pictures are composites of other photographs, from the kind of promotion and appointment notices that run in newspapers.

The different inmates are partly "projections" of people outside The Institute. Real people like Globe and Mail writer Gary

jiggery-pokery, bureaucratic num political cynicism.

It perfectly comprehends the fiscal meanness of a particular moment, and the deeper, subconscious me society's relationship with its artists

More than that, it intuitively beautiful morously how systems work (inc Net and its conventions), how people in general, how they get along in in and how they both fall apart and fal

"In The Institute," says Frenkel, "sacred but frequently disenfranchised situations — the health system a world — meet and are routinely play each other by the regimes of the day dilemma in Canada and elsewhere."

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