

ephemeral presence

Nina Levitt

*Faculty of Fine Art
York University*

My art practice addresses the ways women have been imaged *and* imagined in our culture. This dialectic is manifested when sanctioned historical documents and popular representations are brought together in the space of an artwork. A strategy that highlights the hierarchy of images, historical “truth” is often regarded as more valid than popular culture. Yet popular culture serves as a repository of undeniably powerful images that often stand in for a cultural memory of events we may not have experienced ourselves.

For the past seven years I have been researching the representations of women who were engaged in a range of espionage activities during World War II. An ongoing project of feminist historical re-vision, *Concealing Nature: The Figure of the Female Spy* also explores the use of interactive technologies in a trilogy of gallery-based artworks.



American (?) poster

c. 1917 or 1918

Special Collections Department
Temple University Libraries

It seems that much of our knowledge of women spies is formed by popular representations, which are often, and intriguingly, full of stereotypes and half-truths. The skilled and heroic contributions by “ordinary” women often pales in comparison to the myths surrounding the more notorious women.

In her introduction to the anthology *Behind the Lines, Gender and the Two World Wars*, American scholar Margaret Higonnet suggests that “[d]uring total war, the discourse of militarism, with its stress on “masculine” qualities, permeates the whole fabric of society, touching both women and men.”¹ Yet paradoxically, she notes, militarism can also allow for circumstantial and temporary disruptions of gender roles. Of particular interest for my research is the historical documentation of this “disruption” in archives and museums of the hundreds of women who worked in elite intelligence gathering organizations including resistance groups and top-secret surveillance operations — certainly a significant deviation from the confining gender roles at the time.

1. Margaret Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, Margaret Weitz eds. *Behind the Lines, Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

During WWII, able-bodied men either enlisted in the military or, in the occupied European countries, were forced to work. As we know from the proliferation of images of “Rosie the Riveter” in American media,² the shortage of men in the labour force allowed women to necessarily be recruited for non-traditional jobs. Women also began to be trained for positions as radio operators, Morse code key operators and for essential clerical work in intelligence departments. In Britain, the use of women for front line military intelligence was highly contentious and was kept secret until after the war. As the war progressed, women began to prove to military brass that feminine skills could be particularly useful in underground work: women had the advantage of being able to move about more freely and were less subject to suspicion. They were good at distracting and deceiving the enemy, they had the ability to act, they could operate alone more easily than men, and they had a strong instinct for danger – a “women’s intuition” – that usually proved trustworthy. Finally, the women who resisted possessed the fundamental quality shared by those of the opposite sex with whom they worked – courage³. In short, women were more likely to conceal their “true” subversive identity through “nature”. Deception was possible because of social invisibility. This paradox is the central kernel from which my research emanates.

The implications of this temporary disruption during World War II and its impact in post-war and contemporary culture are central to my research. How do we understand the “nature” of femininity, or rather the performative “cloak” of femininity, in relation to resistance and clandestine activities? And in what way does popular culture contribute to public memory in relation to the representation of women? The persistent figure of the female spy is endlessly recuperated in popular culture. This dialectic between historical “truth” and popular fiction — between the imaged and the imagined — is the territory of my artistic and scholarly investigation.

2. Such as Norman Rockwell’s cover illustration, *Saturday Evening Post*, May 29, 1943.

3. Saywell, Shelly. *Women in War*, Markham: Penguin, 1989, p 6

Within popular culture, the image of the female spy tends to come to us in the shape of the hyper-feminine seductress in films and novels — the stuff of male fantasy. From time to time, women in espionage have been featured in heroic mainstream films including *Julia*, *Shining Through*, *Charlotte Gray* and *Enigma*. Yet, the depiction of women agents as either duplicitous double agents or *femme fatales* are persistent, eclipsing the lives of “ordinary” women during WWII whose contributions to the war effort might seem insubstantial in comparison to the stereotypes. Without a doubt, women made crucial contributions to the flow of information that led to the Allied victory.



WWII Poster

The National Archives of the UK
ref. INF 3/229

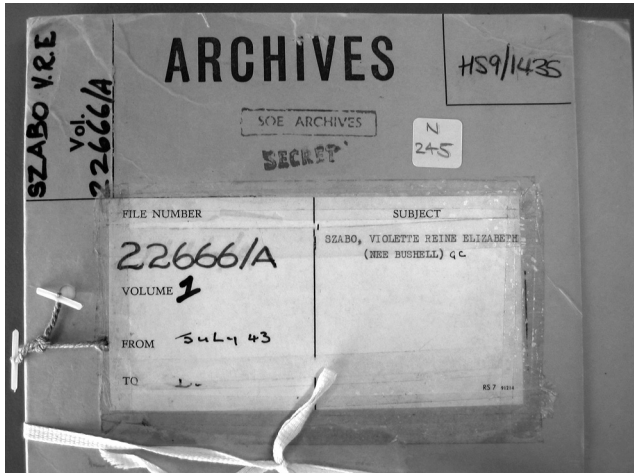
WWII Recruiting Poster

Library of Congress
LC USZC4-1856



While many archive records and documents about intelligence operations are only now being declassified, my ongoing research has yielded a wealth of information about women involved in WWII operations. In Britain alone, there is documentation of a significant number of women who worked as decoders⁴, wireless operators, couriers, saboteurs and, in a few cases, leaders of resistance circuits⁵.

4. At the height of the war over 9,000 people were employed in signals intelligence (interception of German communications) at Bletchley Park in England, three-quarters of whom were civilian and military women (Hill: 2004, 6).
5. Resistance was the clandestine work carried out in the Occupied countries, in particular France, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Italy. Most partisans were civilians often armed, funded and organized by the military.



File cover
Service Records for Agent Violette Szabo
 The National Archives of the UK

Emerging from the cracks between documented histories, are a number of mainstream publications on women agents. Most notable are *The Women Who Live for Danger* (Binney, 2003), a history of British women in the SOE (Special Operations Executive) and the bestselling Ken Follett novel about women saboteurs, *Jack Dawes*. While much of this material is valuable, the books are tinged with sexist references to beautiful “girls.” Allegations of sexual favours in lieu of skill and intelligence permeate many of these texts. Countering the tone of these accounts are many recently published oral histories, including *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS*, *Code Breakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park*, *They Listened in Secret*, *We Kept the Secret: Enigma Stories* and *Behind the Lines: The Oral History of Special Operations in World War II* with important contributions by women.

The production of my first artwork dealing with women in military intelligence began in 2001. *Little Breeze*, an interactive gallery-based installation, examined the ephemeral presence of women spies in Occupied France during World War II. Originally produced as a Banff Centre co-production with technical collaboration by artist Nicholas Stedman, the project was based on research conducted in Toronto area libraries and museums.

The installation featured vintage suitcases rigged with electronics and audio speakers, and a large video projection connected to a computer running interactive software controlling different sequences of videos. Since it was first included in a group show at the Robert McLaughlin Gallery in Oshawa in 2002, *Little Breeze* has now become a multi-media solo exhibition comprised of two installations in distinct spaces and several site-specific components.

This first exhibition on the subject of women in espionage encouraged me to produce two other interactive installations on the subject, and will culminate in the production of an exhibition catalogue, a companion website and an international symposium, funded by a Fine Arts Research/Creation Grant from SSHRC.



Installation View, *Little Breeze*, 2004



Suitcase Detail, *Little Breeze*

The second exhibition in this trilogy, *Thin Air*, is currently in production. The works in this show are inspired by the experiences of two Jewish women who worked for British military intelligence in Europe. Hannah Senesh was a young Hungarian woman who immigrated to Palestine shortly before the war. She volunteered for an elite parachute corps with British intelligence. Her mission, to help create escape routes for downed British pilots and Hungarian Jews (including her mother), resulted in her capture, torture and execution at the age of 23 (Atkinson: 1985, 64). She is perhaps one of the best-known Jewish women involved in military resistance and is a national folk hero in Israel. She left a diary that poignantly described her experiences up until her death in 1944.

**Hannah Senesh****c. 1944**

The National Archives
of the UK,
ref WO208/3401

British intelligence officer Vera Atkins (née Rosenberg, 1908-2000) was the most senior female officer in British intelligence and was responsible for all the agents sent into Occupied France. After the war, she tracked down all but four missing agents, tracing their deaths in prisons and concentration camps. “Miss Money Penny,” a recurring character in Ian Fleming’s James Bond novels, is commonly believed to have been based on Atkins.



Vera Atkins

WAAF Squadron Officer
c. 1946

The works in *Thin Air* create the dichotomy of departure and arrival; many agents were sent behind German lines by parachuting or landing in small airplanes, carrying only a few belongings and a radio transmitter hidden in a suitcase. Final mission briefings were often carried out in makeshift buildings, like a Quonset hut⁶, on the edge of an airfield. Many of these high-risk missions were successful: the women went into the field for several months and returned safely. However, of the fifty-two British women sent to France, twelve women never returned: several were captured immediately on landing, while others were eventually arrested and executed. The works in this show emulate the uncertainties and anxiety that accompanied these departures and arrivals, and implicate a viewer's presence in these experiences.

6. A Quonset hut is a pre-fabricated metal structure developed during WWII in Quonset, Rhode Island. However, some architectural historians credit a Canadian engineer in WWI with developing this type of temporary structure, originally called a Nissen hut. (Chiel, Decker: 2005, 17).



Study for *Thin Air*, 2007

One of several works in *Thin Air* is a regulation size, 24-foot diameter, custom-built parachute inflated by fans that turn on and off every few minutes. The inflation of the parachute, and its deflation, are slow yet evocative kinetic events. Sound and silence are important dimensions of the work as the loud fans turn on and off.

A second work in *Thin Air* consists of a modified Quonset hut with a façade made of white Plexiglas that acts as a screen for a series of video projections. Viewers will enter the gallery and see the hut in the darkened room with light emanating from the cracks and holes in the seams of the hut. Littered around the hut are a dozen vintage suitcases, each fitted with electronics and an audio speaker. The voice of Vera Atkins describing her wartime work are recorded onto microchips in the suitcases. Lifting a suitcase triggers playback of her voice and at the same time, through wireless technology, a waveform of her voice is translated into a video signal and projected inside the hut. All of this activity stops when the suitcase is put down.

A third work intended to unite the two other works is a black and white video listing the dates of the full moon during the war. Flying on either side of the full moon was essential for the transport of agents into occupied countries. As Vera Atkins states in one of the audio clips, "We were very much governed by the moon...moon periods... the time when people were dropped."



Quonset Hut Assembly, artist's studio, 2007

Throughout my artistic practice I have sifted through the archive of popular culture. For me, research can be anything from looking in second hand bookstores, shopping for items on eBay or traveling to archives in Europe. From 2004-2006 I visited museums and public collections including the International Spy Museum, the Library of Congress in Washington, the Imperial War Museum and National Archives in London, the National Archives of Canada, the Canadian War Museum and visited historic sites in Paris and in and around London, including Bletchley Park.

The artwork I have produced was inspired by the materials collected at these institutions; audio recordings, feature films, service records and diaries are all adapted for use in the exhibitions. Historians and war veterans may take issue with my use of research materials. I was told that the curator of the Canadian War Museum said, after seeing *Little Breeze*, "it's all very interesting, but it's not real is it?"

References

- Atkinson, Linda. In *Kindling Flame: The Story of Hannah Senesh, 1921-1944*, New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1985.
- Binney, Marcus. *The Women Who Live for Danger*. New York: Harper Collins, 2003.
- Cheil, Chris and Decker, Julie. *Quonset Hut: Metal Living For The Modern Age*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005.
- Follett, Ken. *Jack Dawes*. New York: Signet/Penguin Books, 1993.
- Helm, Sarah. *A Life in Secrets: The Story of Vera Atkins and the Lost Agents of SOE*, London: Little Brown, 2005.
- Higonnet, Margaret, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, Margaret Weitz eds. *Behind the Lines, Gender and the Two World Wars*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Hill, Marion. *Bletchley Park People: Churchill's Geese that Never Cackled*, London: Sutton Publishing, 2004.
- Hinley and Stripp, *Code Breakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park*, Oxford University Press, 1993.
- McIntosh, Elizabeth. *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS*. New York: Dell, 1998.
- Miller, Russell. *Behind the Lines: The Oral History of Special Operations in World War II*. London: Secker & Warburg, 2002.
- Page, Gwendoline, ed., *They Listened in Secret*, Reeve Ltd, Norfolk, UK, 2003.
- Page, Gwendoline, ed., *We Kept the Secret: Enigma Stories*, Reeve Ltd, Norfolk, UK, 2003.
- Saywell, Shelly. *Women in War*, Markham: Penguin, 1989.