

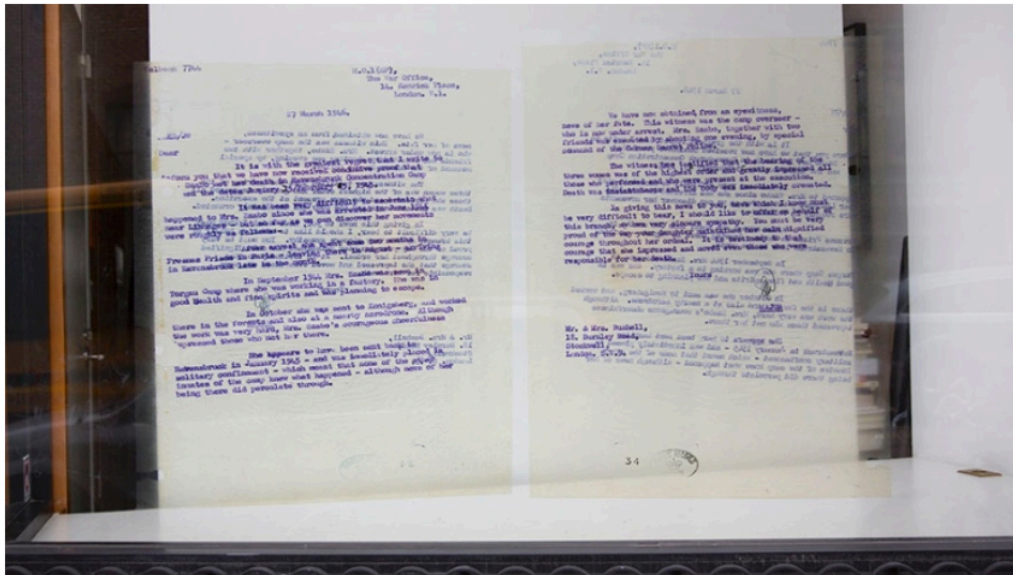
Nina Levitt's installation about a WW II-era female spy is breaking Torontonians' hearts

Onionskin reproduction hangs at street level in the city's west end



RM Vaughan · CBC Arts

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Nina Levitt. Dear/Yours, 27 March 1946. 2016, installation. (Public Window Gallery)

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[Nina Levitt](#) loves an archive. Over the years, the Toronto-based multimedia artist has dug deep into the lives of female spies in the Second World War, long gone "spinster" teachers, popular culture's representations of nurses, the easily-thwarted authority of cooking shows and her own curly family tree.

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"Women spies were kept hush-hush until after the war. There was a fear there would be a huge uproar over putting women in harm's way.

- Nina Levitt, Toronto artist

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[Levitt's latest work](#) — a wall-sized recreation of a death notice sent to the parents of a British Special Operations agent — sits in the street level front window of Public Studio, waiting to alarm and to break the hearts of passers-by. The subject of the letter, [Violette Szabo \(born Bushell\)](#), was a British widow who was recruited by British Intelligence when she was only 23, after her French husband had been killed in action fighting for the French Resistance. She was murdered at the Nazi death camp [Ravensbrück](#).

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The actual letter sourced by Levitt is a delicate, [onionskin paper](#) carbon copy. Levitt chose to emphasize the fragile nature of the document (and, of course, of history itself, especially overlooked histories) by replicating it on layers of transparent, fluttery vinyl; thus creating shadows and layers, ghostly visions. Adding to the eeriness, the letter is dated exactly 70 years prior to the day Levitt installed her version — March 27, 1946.

Chatting with Levitt is always a joy. Her respect for her subjects, and her delight in accumulating information about them, is contagious.

How did you become interested in Violette Szabo?

This piece is part of an ongoing body of work about women spies during the Second World War, a subject I've been obsessed with for about 15 years. In general, most of my work is about recovering and re-presenting images of women that have been relegated to archives, rarely seeing the light of day. I'm interested in patterns in women's history — what is included or saved, and what is absent.

I found this carbon copy of a two-page letter on the first of my several research trips to [the U.K. National Archives](#). I was looking through Violette Szabo's meagre service record. Much of the material is banal — memos, and letters regarding her estate and death benefit payments. There were only two letters in the file that were more personal, both written to her parents. This letter is the only official account of Szabo's arrest and execution that I could find.



Dear/Yours, 27 March 1946. Nina Levitt. 2016, installation. (Public Window Gallery)

How does this history fold into your larger practice?

I am drawn to the history of women spies for a few reasons — their relatively young age, that fact that they had to pass as French when working undercover and the bald courage it took. The contributions of women spies were kept hush-hush until after the war. There was a fear there would be a huge uproar over putting women in harm's way.

Why did you choose to reproduce the work on material we associate with transparency and even disposability?

By printing the letter on transparent vinyl, the quality of the original paper — with its folds and wrinkles — is evident. Curiously, whoever typed the original letter [it is unsigned] used the front and back of one sheet of paper for the carbon copy.

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One friend wrote to me that the effect is that the viewer "starts out just wanting to decipher the text, and then you want to see how it all turns out, although knowing the whole time it won't be happy."

But I also like [the look of the work] because it requires someone to stop and read, it is not 140 characters on a phone, and it is [a broad sheet hung] at street level, much like how [news used to be disseminated](#).

[Nina Levitt, Dear/Yours, 27 March 1946. Public Studio, 1575 Dundas Street W., Toronto. To Jun. 30](#)



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