

## The Salt Mine's Art Treasures

English translation of article by Ulla Arnell at: <http://ueforum.se/17/175/175varld1.html>

**When World War II ended, the outside world was amazed by the art found in the salt mines of Altaussee, Austria. The bombs placed at the entrance to the mine never came to detonate and the art could be rescued. Ulla Arnell has visited Altaussee and met a strong exhibition in its right environment.**

On the way from Linz, the city that Hitler called his hometown and wanted to make Europe's and the whole world's cultural centre, I pass Attersee, one of Austria's turquoise clear alp lakes where Klint spent his summers painting the sparkling landscape, and Mahler took inspiration for his second and third symphony. The journey continues towards Salzkammergut and turns by the popular spa and resort of Bad Ischl, where the Habsburgers had their summer residence during the 18th century, then a meeting place for the superpowers' diplomatic deliberations. It was here, after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, that Emperor Franz Josef signed the declaration of war with Serbia, which triggered World War I. The road becomes increasingly curvy and winds up and down the outskirts of the Austrian Alps. The landscape is beautiful and idyllic as in the Sound of Music, green sloping meadows and houses with flower arrangements on their balconies and porches.

Everyone who knows the Nazis' art thefts knows that Altaussee is a symbolically loaded place with a very special relation to art, to the Third Reich, to war, to ethics and to morals. The contrast between the scenic landscape and the knowledge of what happened around the rural alp village during the last years of the war feels strange. A place contaminated by its history as someone said.

### PHOTO 1

Caption: *"Betreten strengstens verboten"*. The door that has been closed since the stolen artworks were taken away was opened for Vera Frenkel's video work *Body Missing*.

Photo credit: Peter Brandstätter

It was in the salt mines that the National Socialists hid and stored the greater part of the artworks, more than 6,000, which they stole, robbed or acquired in questionable ways from museums, private homes and collections throughout Germany and the occupied territories. An unprecedented, ruthless and systematic robbery of art collections that would manifest the superiority and purity of the German people

Countless art treasures had been hidden in many places around Germany. The most valuable were brought to the mines of the Altaussee in the final stage of the war to escape the air raids. The works of art were intended for the Führermuseum that Hitler since the mid 1920s had planned for Linz, a grand dream of creating a museum that would surpass both the Uffizi and the Louvre. The dream lived until the end. Speer testified that *"even in this his last time, in April 1945, I sat at times with Hitler in the bunker bent over construction plans for Linz and we watched in silence our former dreams"* (quote from *The Looters. How the Nazis Stole Europe's Art Treasures*, Anders Rydell).

Today salt is still being extracted. The mines have been in use since the 1100s and the mine in Altaussee is the largest active salt mine in Austria. They are now attractive tourist destinations that offer guided spectacular tours on different themes in certain areas of the seemingly endless and windy corridors. But what makes me come here is a very special exhibition opening.

It is the video work *Body Missing*, by the Canadian artist Vera Frenkel, one of the international multimedia art pioneers, the work now installed in some of the abandoned mountain chambers where the stolen art was previously hidden. I am to meet the work again after the exhibition tour 1997 – 98, conducted by Riksställningar, the Swedish Travelling Exhibitions.

My former colleague Tom Sandqvist had seen the artist's work ...*from the Transit Bar*, a full functioning piano bar with pianist and bartender at documenta IX. He proposed a tour that, in addition to the piano bar, included the video work *Body Missing* (1994) and its development on the internet [www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing](http://www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing) (1995-96).

*Body Missing* was created as a site-specific installation for the Offenes Kulturhaus in Linz when the artist was invited to participate in the theme exhibition *Andere Körper* and realized how little was known in public about the art thefts and the Nazi cultural policy. At the time this was not at all as compelling as the Soviet trophy brigades, but the discussion was there under the surface of ...*from the Transit Bar*, in the video narratives and in conversations between regulars discretely overheard by the bartender.

## PHOTO 2

Caption: Transport vehicles, trolleys and work tables as remaining traces of handling the art works in the mine. Photo credit: Peter Brandstätter

In stairways, halls and windows of the former Ursuline convent in Linz used by the Nazis as a military prison, the installation was built in six stations with video tapes shown on six monitors and light boxes with illuminated photo transparencies reminding the viewer of transport crates. The narrative moves around the stolen art, works destroyed or disappeared, about those not found and still missing. Visitors get acquainted with traces of fragments, memories, a blend of fiction, historical documentation, of individual experiences and official memory culture. The countless lists for each piece of art coded in detail with numbers and letters are present elements in the stations, in pictures and through the narrator's voice. The story is based on archival material, written documents, drawings and photos representing architectural models and buildings that all testify to the Nazi plans of rebuilding the city of Linz.

Seven hundred meters into the sparsely lit tunnel with solid salt walls, walking on the narrow tracks into the mountain, the tramping of our footsteps evokes thoughts of leaving, of escape, of thousands of war refugees. Passing several of the openings that lead further into the mine's mazes we surprisingly end up in the chapel dedicated to patron Saint Barbara, built by the Catholic miners in the mid 30s. We get fascinated by the radiant light from the red and orange salt and limestone rock walls. As walking goes on I recognize the sounds of ringing church bells and of the song *Maikäfer flieg, dein Vater ist im Krieg...* familiar from the places of the Riksställningar tour and now a sign that we are approaching *Body Missing*.

The rooms have not been open and available since the doors were closed when the art was transported to Munich for documentation, restoration and restitution. The chambers are cramped with coarse hewn planking on the floor and walls, shelves and wooden frames left, stacked with sturdy logs and with the original markings, rough-cut crates marked "*Vorsicht. Marmor. Nicht stürzen*" containing dud bombs. Time has stood still.

It is touching and strange to find oneself here with all facts on hand. History and present come close in pictures of the jubilant human mass at the Hauptmarkt in Linz, willing collaborators committed to guarding the artworks and transporting them to the salt mines, feet walking on marble floors along stairs, down in basements and corridors, extracts from inventory lists while listening to the news reports of the interrogation protocol with Baldur von Schirach in the Spandau prison denying his involvement in what took place, even going so far as to deny the existence of the looted art.

On the following day there was a panel discussion between the artist herself, Sigrid Schade, professor and art historian at the Institute for Cultural Studies in the Arts, Zurich, who has followed Vera Frenkel's practice, together with Birgit Schwartz, researcher in Nazi art theft and museum policy at the Department of Art History, University of Vienna. One interesting topic was the process of restitution of artworks to the legitimate owners. New facts have been gained with the findings of the deceased art dealer Hildebrandt Gurlitt and his son Cornelius who died shortly after in 2013. The art collections found in their homes in Munich and Salzburg give provenance researchers access to new material, and museums in Switzerland and Austria are now investigating their collections to trace art works acquired in doubtful ways.

*Body Missing* has been shown in many places in the world and the conversation centred in great part about the strong impression the work arouses at this very special location in Altaussee, how it gives further meaning and raises new questions, including a picture of a time easy to recognize today when borders close, when nationalism and racism again make progress in Europe.

Back in Linz and at the Lentos Art Museum I read the label of Oscar Kokoschka's painting *Die Freunde*, 1917; "Oil auf Leinwand. Provenienz 1919 National Gallery Berlin, 1933 aus der Schausammlung entfernt, 1937 als 'entartet' beschlagnahmt 1941 bei der Nachversteigerung in der Galerie Fischer Luzern durch den Kunsthändler Böhmer verkauft, dort von Wolfgang Gurlitt erworben."

Deemed decadent, just one of all the art works that did not fit into the Nazi art policy.