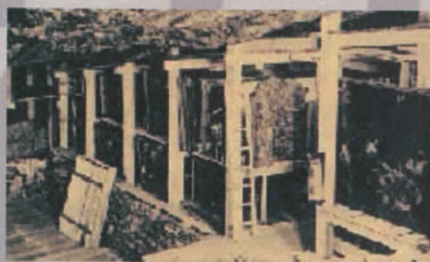


Of Loss and Leaving

Opening a door onto twentieth-century history, artist Vera Frenkel tallies its costs with her website *Body Missing* and with ...*from the Transit Bar*. Elizabeth Legge offers a guide

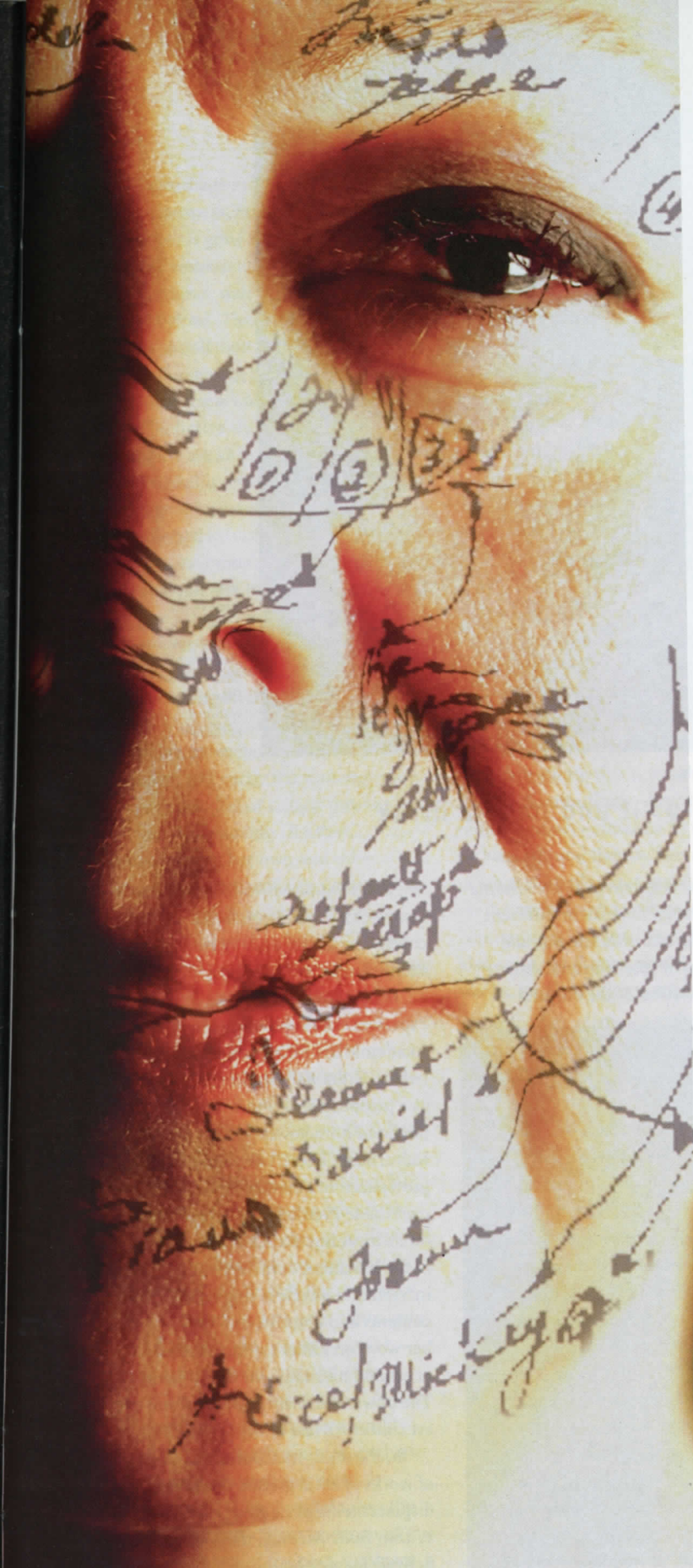
Vera's Story:

"They meet at the bar where I work. At least two of them are artists. One of the women is quite old. Somebody said she was Paula Scholl (Polly), the brilliant art restorer.



"Our other regular patrons are the local taxi drivers. We're too far from the station to be their main meeting place. But for the foreign drivers especially, the Transit Bar is a favourite mid-town hangout. They know everything about those political meetings: where they're held, when, who attends, for how long...

'Nights when I'm on duty alone, I can work my way from one side of the bar where the talk is of suspicious late-night meetings, to the other side and rumours of art originally destined for the unrealized Hitlermuseum. The same story, sort of.'



There is a quality to Vera Frenkel's work that makes it seem like everything has something to do with it. On the day I went to the National Gallery to see her celebrated installation ... from *the Transit Bar* and the new computer website, *Body Missing*, Ottawa, theme park and company town, was completely bandaged with flags for Canada Day: on buildings, wrapped around people like beach towels, and, with bureaucratic panache, rubber-stamped onto your hand for a dollar. Once inside the National Gallery, Frenkel's exhibition seemed wonderfully relevant to the issues of nationalism and identity raised by the Canada Day celebrations, and to issues of art monuments, raised by the National Gallery itself. This is not surprising, since her work begins to seem to be about all major cultural issues, issues which she treats with gravity and wit.

... from *the Transit Bar* combines the slickness of an airport bar and the crudeness of a school-play production of *Casablanca*, it is both a real bar and a work of art, a disconcerting place to sit and have a drink. Six video monitors show talking heads delivering monologues dubbed into languages most viewers cannot understand (Yiddish and Polish) with subtitles in the standard Euro-languages, English, German and French. The speakers talk about experiencing the anxieties of immigration, racism, loss of cultural identity and exclusion, as if a sports bar had turned into a psychoanalytic bar.

And there is more disorientation. *Where are we?* Is it 1941, at the edge of a war zone, where everyone is trying to get identification papers and exit visas? Or is it 1996, in a downtown bar, with people engrossed in current and fashionable intellectual issues? Frenkel toys with the blandness of TV soundbites and the illusory comprehensibility of broadcast documentaries.



Vera Frenkel
View of the
installation...from the
Transit Bar, National
Gallery of Canada,
Ottawa 1986,
Photo: Charles Hupé,
National Gallery
of Canada,
Courtesy the artist

... it is a disconcerting place to sit and have a drink

Her installation reminds us of the insidious forces of war and forced emigration that underline so much of the country's settlement and which continue to work within society. The *Transit Bar*, with its temporary and illusory respite, stands for the temporary art installation and stares down the institution it occupies and the Canada Day celebration outside.

... from the *Transit Bar* is also installed within Frenkel's website, *Body Missing*, in which she imagines that *Transit Bar* regulars have become members of a kind of cultural resistance movement, with special knowledge of Hitler's plan to build an art museum bigger than the Louvre in his childhood home of Linz, Austria. On the website we discover that throughout the war thousands of Hitler-approved works of art, confiscated from all over Europe, were transported and hidden, and that up to 6,000 were stored in salt mines at Alt Aussee, Austria. In the aftermath of the war, many of these caches were raided and hundreds of works disappeared onto the black market. So

the *Transit Bar* regulars in *Body Missing* are simultaneously at work in different eras: during the war, after the war and now: at a time of international debate about appropriation of the cultural properties of other countries and cultures, repatriation laws, and Unesco Conventions.

The apotheosis of ... from the *Transit Bar* into an internet site is partly the product of Frenkel's interest in charismatic figures and their varied promises of "bliss." In an 1987 piece, *Trust Me It's Bliss*, she compared Hugh Hefner with Richard Wagner. Frenkel has also dealt with the bliss of consumerism, making an electronic billboard work in Piccadilly Circus that took commercial advertising rhetoric to its logical conclusion by showing a signboard reading: "This is your Messiah speaking, instructing you to shop. No one will force you to do anything you don't want to do..." Now, Frenkel takes on that most terrifying of historical blissmongers, Hitler. She is aware that all the *loci* of these promises of bliss (the Playboy Mansion, Bayreuth, Berchtesgaden)

implicitly frame works of art: the perfect centrefold, the Ring cycle, the masterpieces coveted by Hitler, and, by extension, Frenkel's own website.

Body Missing also arises out of Frenkel's experiences as artist-in-residence at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna (where Hitler had been rejected twice as a prospective art student) and in Hitler's boyhood hometown, Linz, at the Offenes Kulturhaus. There, her young assistant's professions of boredom about the Nazi past made Frenkel meditate once again on its meaning. Struck by the crates in the basement corridors at the Akademie in Vienna—a crate is suggestive of both contents and emptiness—Frenkel focused her work on Hitler's massive acquisition of art and his mania for monuments. The power fetishism of Nazism and the art collector's lust inform each other.

So the theft, transportation, and loss of works of art is grafted onto the human displacements of ... from the *Transit Bar*. Within *Body Missing*, the *Transit Bar* is fictively located on the ground floor of the

Offenes Kulturhaus in Linz (although with typical deviousness, Frenkel tells us that the transit bar is gone now, replaced by a vegetarian restaurant, and that its work goes on in rooms, stairwells, and corridors above and below). This imaginary, all-infiltrating installation of the *Bar* is given special reinforcement by the fact the Offenes Kulturhaus was once a Wehrmacht prison. The fictive times and spaces of the website are all layered and haunted.

Vera Frenkel is present within *Body Missing* as the bartender persona slyly established in... from the *Transit Bar*: privy to everyone's stories, she uses the information to run a network of artists/resistance-workers/art-restorers/spies. She is both controlling author and disingenuous not-author, a narrator issuing disclaimers (such as, she never listens in "on purpose"). In this, she is partly a character from le Carré or Deighton, and partly the contemporary intellectual, mindful of critical theory, who disowns authorship (Barthes, Derrida), weaving her own and other memories, histories, realities, fictions, lies and exaggerations from the position or assumption of neutral authority: "I write down everything just as I hear it.... I hope you will excuse me if I remind you that what you are about to read is true."

In *Body Missing*, Frenkel raises questions and doubts, yet turns accusing fingers around so that they spin like weathervanes in the Internet wind. Where do we stand? What did we do? What do we do now? Frenkel's piece obliges us to occupy a time and space in which our participation and knowledge can influence the course of events. Frenkel, specifically, invites... from the *Transit Bar* regulars—all the artists and writers who contribute to *Body Missing*—to reconstruct the works of art that went missing after the war. This does not mean copies (which would imply that something lost could be replaced), but simply some empathetic gesture toward "an earlier artist and an absent work." Here, Frenkel raises the question of our capacity to understand any cultural object of the past, a subject

of great importance in current art theory, both for art historians and art restorers. Is our empathy or comprehension of historical works of art distorted by projection of our current cultural values? Frenkel's recognition of this theory acknowledges the ways in which both... from the *Transit Bar* and *Body Missing* are about the past and about our own time.

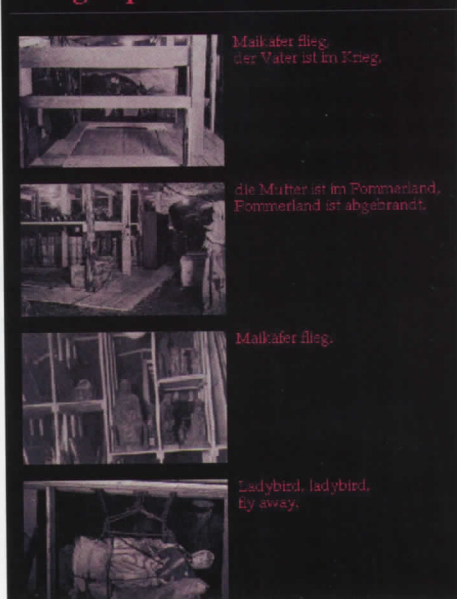
The contributions of the bar regulars range from Judith Schwarz's enigmatic image of hands squaring off a picture of a lightning storm, to Jeanne Randolph's Möbius-strip poem that plays on psychoanalysis' revelation of slips and losses in languages, to Daniel Olson's evocation of the never quite believed grandfather's tales of the war. Mickey Meads and Alice Mansell take on the psychosexual anxieties underlying Hitler's choice of Courbet's pilfered *Psyche pursuing Venus* for his bunker under the chancellery; this is weighed against the official meanings—health, sport, reproduction—attached to the nude by Nazi cultural theory. This consideration of what cultural values may be inscribed on the nude body equally stakes out contemporary issues. Mansell and Meads also raise the matter of why some works, and not others, are considered

masterpieces? Bernie Miller, similarly, in considering the nature of monuments, draws attention to the "other" body of artwork, the modernist "decadent art" that was destroyed, or sold off by the Nazis to raise money to buy the pure "masterpieces" intended for the Linz museum. This raises another issue of current museum practice—the values that determine what works may be de-accessioned to raise money for more desirable works. Critical and intellectual standards are queried by their travesty in Nazi purges of 'Decadent' art, and equally, in the mix of masterpieces and kitsch intended for the Fuhrermuseum. ("Do we have to do the kitsch as well?" laments one of Frenkel's bar regulars, an art restorer.)

As a culmination of all this conjured space and time, Frenkel's website is, ironically, the final site of collapse of the unrealized Linz Fuhrermuseum. One hotlink drops us into a passage from Hitler's private will dealing with the distribution of his art collection. Written in the face of his defeat, it is an astonishing, cringing, reverse House-that-Jack-Built: "All I own...if any of it is of value—belongs to the Party, and if the latter should no longer exist, it belongs to the state, and if the latter should be destroyed as well, no further decision on my part is needed."

Body Missing builds itself around an absence (the lost works of art and the museum that was intended to house them). Loss and absence are central interests in contemporary intellectual thought partly through the influence of Jacques Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis, which holds that all representations—images, paintings, poems—derive from a failure to represent that which was actually desired or intended. So, it follows that any art object can only

Storage Spaces



Vera Frenkel
"Storage Spaces"
screen capture
from *Body Missing*
website 1995/96
and on going
Courtesy the artist

There is a real body in *Body Missing*: the body of lost art

be a substitute for the desired thing that could not fully be obtained or attained. The art object, of the collector's mania, is understood as a loss. It is characteristic of Frenkel's wry intelligence that she takes a tangible loss (the works of art for the Linz museum) and makes it represent metaphors of loss permeating our intellectual life. Frenkel has observed, "To say we live in invented reality is a way of saying that we live in metaphor, but it's an invention that's just air without the evidence of the body, and that evidence in turn, concrete as it seems, has no meaning without metaphor."

There is a real body in *Body Missing*: the body of lost art, the corridors of art crates in the Vienna Academy may be understood as standing for the piles of confiscated suitcases, the dead, the Holocaust. In fact, Frenkel investigated the surviving Jewish communities in Kassel, Germany, when ... *from the Transit Bar* was exhibited there in documenta IX, in 1992, and then again in Linz. She discovered only a handful of people, a number of whom were Germans or Austrians living as Jews (the principal of substitution and displacement strangely and actively at work). Frenkel also met an administrator at documenta, who had worked on a commemorative project, and had found documentary evidence—texts, documents, photographs, a name—to commemorate each of the quarter-million Jews of that region who lost their lives.

But there is the paradoxical caution in Frenkel's work against sealing the lost artworks and lost people into a closed metaphorical loop; such closure is too limited and too trivial. "Loss," like the "other" is not one homogeneous thing. Frenkel, more subtly, multiplies the possibilities and shifting categories of loss. While each may project the shadow of another disappearance, losses are not equivalents.

The categories of loss within *Body Missing* take the form of lists. In this, modern art's love of documentation and its emulation of scholarly retrieval and objective evidence are uneasily quoted

and inverted by Frenkel, who examined uncatalogued plans and documents in the Linz archives. Most startling of the art-related lists is the "master list" assembled by Frenkel, the list of lists. As the various art caches were looted after the war, lists circulated on the black market of what art works might be available. One middleman would lead to another middleman with a list, and so on—perhaps ultimately leading to an actual work of art. The master list of categories is a litany:

"what was collected;
what was stolen;
what was hidden;
what can only be shown privately;
what is heirless;
what is still in dispute in the courts;
what was unsuccessfully claimed;
what is still missing..."

This list of lists of losses and the attendant regiment of middlemen is almost comically illustrative of Lacanian principles of endless deferral of the desired object.

Betty Spackman and Anja Westerfrolke's contribution contains savagely ironic lists of horrifying disproportions and absurdities: a list of theories about Auschwitz (denial of Auschwitz, Auschwitz as product of chance, as heroic work of art, thou shalt not make theories about Auschwitz, etc.) and its parody, a list of "what makes an artist" (having a crush on Warhol, taking art-history courses, being male, being female). All of these lists mutually distort, and all lead back to Hitler as master of genocide, failed artist and would-be curator.

If we find *Body Missing* the site where the works of art intended for Hitler's Linz museum still flicker as unstable simulacra, it is also the museum at large, the mythic museum of our times, available in infinite photo reproduction: from Malraux's "museum without walls" to Benjamin's "art in the age of mechanical reproduction," to current projects to digitize all major art museum collections. Taking form as a computer within the museum, *Body Missing* raises a number of issues related to the status of art objects.

Does the physical work of art need to exist as a material referent anymore? *Body Missing* is not precisely a material object, as its title suggests. And, interestingly, Frenkel envisages its computer terminal as lodged in a foyer, or other transient museum space, where it would register as an ambiguous terminal, instead of in a gallery, where it would sit with some incongruity as a work of art.

In various ways *Body Missing* both celebrates and questions claims made for the world wide web as an international, earth-spanning, boundary-crossing materialization of information available to everyone—the McLuhanist version of blissful promise, the Global Village. On the dark side of these utopian claims, the pornography, hate literature and holocaust denial so readily retrieved from the Internet has recently caused debate about censorship. Frenkel has long rejected the simple censorship solution, arguing that it is in collusion with pornography. Her ... *from the Transit Bar* texts repeatedly raise the matter of the "truth" of stories: and we are cautioned in *Body Missing* that "the truth is always partial." This makes her choice of material dealing with Nazi cultural programmes brave and persuasive. We are obliged to critically weigh the stories, memories, drawings, and documents and fictions, rather than merely consume "information."

There is a story in ... *from the Transit Bar* told by a woman who went back to her family home after the war to retrieve a hidden suitcase of family papers and photographs. "Where will you put them all?" the new owner asked. "In my heart," she answered. "Where are they now?" the *Transit Bar* bartender asks her. Again she answers, "In my heart." If the *Body Missing* website sets itself up as a metaphorical, all-encompassing heart, it does so without sentimentality, without condescending to the enormities of the subject matter. The work brilliantly deploys its own hazards as a work of art. And, most especially, it reminds us that the heart of things is that which is often not there. ■