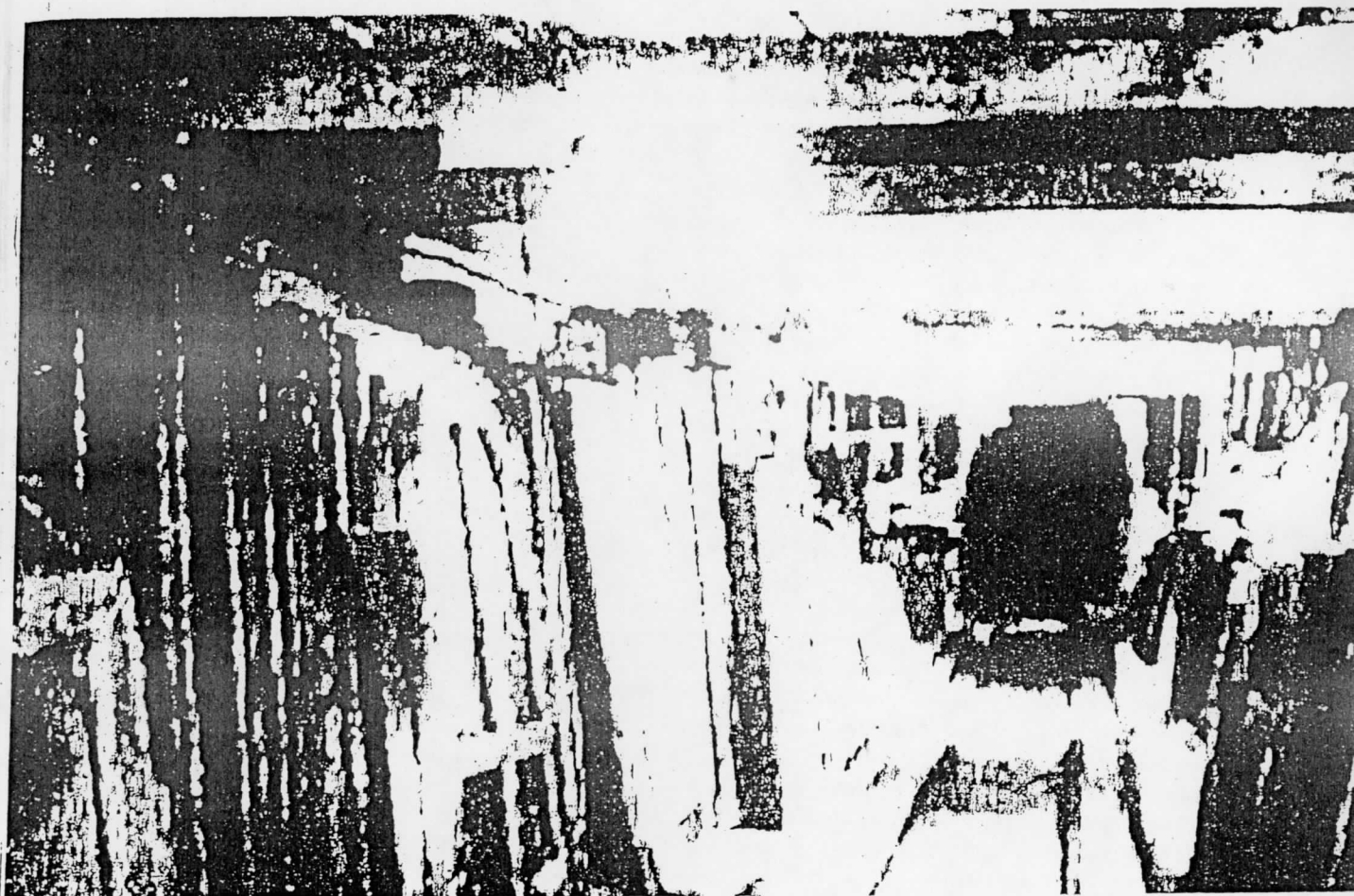


Gottfried Fliedl

Vera Frenkel's Body Missing

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Salzbergwerk in Aussee / salt mine in Aussee

In 1948, Eve Tucker, an employee of the department Reparation, Deliveries and Restitution of the US-army, predicted that "the gigantic search for their lost legacy that the European nations have been carrying out over the last three years... will continue over the next fifty years." "Body Missing", a media installation of the Canadian artist Vera Frenkel is also a search for the 'lost legacy' but one whose goal is not primarily the verification or restitution of cultural artifacts but rather the reflection on the dialectics of loss and desire. To this extent it is, as Vera Frenkel says, a 'never-ending project' that travels from place to place, expanding its search ever more, differentiating and weaving it into an ever denser fabric.

One central focus of the project and a motivation for Vera Frenkel's preoccupation with the NS art looting and its still virulent aftereffects was a scene that appears legendary but is also based on historical evidence: Hitler's preoccupation with an architectural model – the model of a museum – in the final hours prior to his suicide.

He had thousands of paintings purchased, confiscated, stolen, aryanized for this "Fuehrer museum". This museum that he had planned for Linz was to have an art collection that would surpass all of the most famous European museums. Towards the end of the world war this collection of artworks disappeared in more or less secure depositories, the most famous of which was the salt mine in Aussee. Subsequently, these objects were stored at collecting points, various depots, museums or were dispersed.

This dispersed collection that comprises several thousands of paintings and artworks has left traces to this very day. For a long time these traces, though visible, remained unread. In Austria, in particular, the extent and significance, and more importantly, the political circumstances and motives of this looting were largely unknown. Only when the art and cultural assets that had been stored for decades at the monastery of Mauerbach in Lower Austria were auctioned off in 1996 did the public at large become vaguely aware of the criminal

and violent nature of NS-art politics. The stylization of the Christies auction at the Museum of Applied Arts as a grand social event and the euphemistic use of words that transformed the looting into the 'treasures of Mauerbach' helped to obscure the events that led up to the auction and even let the auction appear to be a charitable act of reparation.

If it had not been for a consequential coincidence, only a small number of experts would know about the political and social dimension that the NS art looting assumed before and after 1945. Through the confiscation of two paintings by Egon Schiele from an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York organized by the art collector and foundation director Leopold an initially hardly visible trace of the NS-art theft in Austrian museums became visible. The shock-like reflex of the collector, his speakers, the responsible ministry and the so-called culturally interested public tended to confuse cause and effect. The legal action taken by the New York authorities was, without further scrutiny, interpreted as an act directed against the tabooing of art as museum art and as violating international exhibition practices, while the confiscation was seen as amounting to almost a theft of national wealth.

Informed by a surprisingly keen and obstinate media, it quickly became visible to the public what extent and with what generosity and with what often extremely questionable means museums in Austria have made use of the circulating collection after 1945. Events such as the discovery of 'Nazi-gold' in Swiss banks, the pressing reparation payments to be made to the victims of forced labor, the sensibilization of a larger public for the deep involvement of industry, insurances and banks in the NS system and their annihilation machinery clearly revealed the effects and the aftershocks of NS-art policy within its political context. A serious, systematic preoccupation and elaboration became imperative; commissions were established, laws were passed, the processing of individual museums launched and first steps taken to return individual artworks to their legal owners.

When Vera Frenkel began working on "Body Missing" in the nineties, she was not aware of the processing of the artworks stored in the depot in Mauerbach and of the intense repercussions of the NS art looting on Austria's culture and museum politics. The expanded installation of "Body Missing" offers an opportunity to shift the focus of the debates on "looted art" from their mainly everyday and legal-administrative context to the more general issues of memory and the ability to commemorate. The selection of the Freud Museum as a site underlines an unarguably major quality of the project, namely, the fact that it provokes general questions on the structuring and the work of memory as a social process. The dense network of video and internet installation with the special commemorative site 'Berggasse 19' transforms "Body Missing" over a certain period of time into an archeological study of the abysses of Austrian political and social unconscious.

Gottfried Fliedl studied art history and archaeology at the University of Vienna as well as art history, archaeology, modern German literature and ethnology at the University of Marburg an der Lahn (Germany). Since 1977 he has been a lecturer at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, at the University of Vienna, the German Academy for postgraduate studies in cultural work at Wolfenbüttel as well as at the University of Basle (post-graduate study of museology). In 1991/92 he conceived and organized an exhibition at the memorial of the former concentration camp at Melk, together with Bertrand Perz.

Gottfried Fliedl works as free-lance museologist and art historian.

Note

¹ Vera Frenkel was born in Czechoslovakia. She fled the Nazis with her parents and moved to England. Today she lives and works in Toronto, Canada. Before she decided to dedicate herself exclusively to art and writing, she had a professorship at the Interdisciplinary Studio of the Department of Visual Arts at New York University. In addition to a number of lectures at universities and museums in Europe and North America Vera Frenkel was adjunct lecturer and guest at the Slade School of Art in London, the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, the School of the Chicago Art Institute, at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and at the Newcastle Polytechnic and the Banff Centre of Fine Arts.

In 1989 and in 1993 she received two of the most important awards for Canadian artists: the Canada Council Molson Prize and the Gershon Iskowitz Prize.