



Vera Frenkel **Body Missing**

Freud Museum, London, March 19 to April 27, 2003

"No visual artist working today has thought more carefully about the moral issues surrounding Kunstraub (art theft) or made more engaging art about them, than artist Vera Frenkel."

John Bentley Mays, *National Post*, Toronto, November, 2001



Front cover:
Vera Frenkel, *Body Missing*:
Six-channel video-web
installation, Freud Museum,
London.
Detail: entrance to 20 Maresfield
Gardens, Station 1:
"Reconciliation with the Dead"

Vera Frenkel, *Body Missing*:
Freud Museum, London.
Detail: the study, Station 2:
"Recalling the Benign World
of Things"

Introduction

Vera Frenkel's extraordinary work, *Body Missing*, has, with great acclaim, transited the world, but few places resonate so powerfully with it than the Freud Museum in London. Here we discover two parallel universes now enmeshed, but not for the first time.

The Freud Museum encompasses Freud's Museum, Sigmund Freud's extensive collection of over 2000 objects, the fragments of lost civilisations, gathered together over decades of passionate collecting. These objects, crammed together in Freud's study, are the crucible of his thought, and the inspiration to a clutch of distinguished contemporary artists.

Enthralled by the discoveries of archaeology, Freud used the process of excavation as one of his favourite metaphors for the process of psychoanalysis. Vera Frenkel has, in a similar process of search and excavation, uncovered the evidence for the accumulation and theft of art intended for Adolf Hitler's Führermuseum in his childhood home in Linz. Freud's collection contains items taken from archaeological sites, now regarded as looted from their archaeological context. Hitler's collection was looted from individuals and museums from the territories conquered by the Nazis, but here the similarities end. Perhaps the most poignant contrast is that Freud's objects followed their owner into exile. They now give us a glimpse of the sources for the complex intellectual life of 19th century Vienna, the civilisation that Nazism destroyed. Despite all the perils they encountered, this collection remains. The looted items for Hitler's museum are once again dispersed, containing the traces of their lost owners, mute testimony to a period of unparalleled destructiveness in European history.

The Freud Museum, London is delighted to show Vera Frenkel's powerful work in Sigmund Freud's study, and in the rooms which formed the domestic environment of the extended Freud family. We are hugely grateful to Vera for her enthusiasm for, and generosity in, showing at the Museum, and to Michael Regan for his tireless support in bringing this project to fruition. We could not have installed the show in such a short time without the skill and dedication of Dallas Seitz, Alex Bento and Francisco da Silva and without the help and support of Nicci Obholzer.

Erica Davies, Director, The Freud Museum, London

The Work: *Body Missing*

excerpts from written descriptions

Taking the Kunstraub (art theft) project of the Third Reich as a point of departure for considering a range of issues, from collective madness to the nature of memory, Frenkel's *Body Missing* project has taken a number of different forms, yet its basic elements remain a cycle of six short videotapes, now in DVD format; a group of window-sized images on translucent film drawn from the tapes or their sources (originally set into the windows of the three-storey facade of the Offenes Kulturhaus in Linz); two old chairs at each video station, and a governing narrative posted on the wall at station one.

In positioning the viewer between still and moving images, documentary and fictional realities, physical and virtual spaces, Frenkel's *Body Missing* sets off a continuous perceptual oscillation that invites inquiry into both the uses of new media and the themes addressed in the work.



Vera Frenkel, *Body Missing*:
Freud Museum, London.
Detail: the study, Station 2:
"Recalling the Benign World
of Things"

From the wall text, we learn that the Transit Bar, an earlier multi-channel work in the form of a functional piano bar, has now been moved fictively to Linz. The bartender tells of overhearing a group of artists and writers at their *Stammtisch*, speculating on the fate of the body of art discovered to be missing when the Allies opened the salt mines at Alt Aussee, the main depot for circa 6,000 artworks destined for the proposed Hitler Museum.

The fictional account suggests that these artists were considering the possibility not so much of reconstructing the missing art, but of creating a kind of homage or bridge to an absent artist and a missing work. The task was to discover which of the works stolen under Hitler's clandestine *Sonderauftrag* (special assignment) Linz had disappeared. There were so many lists: Lists of artworks, collections, truck numbers, insurance policies, storage spaces and depots. The bartender, tired after a day's work, finds a list of lists suggesting the scope of what is known and unknown regarding the whereabouts of these works, and pastes it in the notebook where she keeps bar ephemera she finds at closing time.

"As with much of my work" says Vera Frenkel, "*Body Missing* walks the edge between documentary and fictional realities, and as sometimes happens when an artwork tilts in an unexpected direction, what began as the fiction heard on the videotapes became a reality in the context of the website which followed the Linz project." Some of the artists that were in the *Andere Koerper* exhibition where *Body Missing* was first shown wanted to take on the challenge of making a work in relation to a piece of lost art. Other artists and writers have joined them since, and the website now includes a dozen homages to missing art, meditations on loss or revisitings of history, with the website itself figuring in

the next series of installations. To make it possible to transport the work to the Setagaya Museum in Tokyo, the large transparencies were placed in rudimentary crate-like boxes, described by one viewer as somewhere between a coffin and an art crate, and dispersed throughout the work along with actual art crates salvaged from each particular site.

By the time *Body Missing* was installed in Detroit, it included a set of six 40" x 60" photo panels, one for each video station, offering a history of the work and its issues, integrating frame captures from the tapes, website pages, archival imagery and details of earlier installations of the work.

In 1994, the matter of a body of stolen art works missing from the Alt Aussee salt mines was of little interest. Frenkel's assignment as artist-in-residence was to respond to the city of Linz and its context. The questions surrounding the proposed but unrealized Hitlermuseum seemed to her of greater interest than the charms of *Linzertorte* (the famous pastry) or of the Linz-born composer Bruckner. It was only later that the issue of stolen art found itself at the vexed fulcrum of international debate.

In the Spring 2000 issue of its house magazine, the Sigmund Freud Museum in Vienna published a text by museologist Gottfried Fliedl, to accompany the installation of *Body Missing* which Dr. Fliedl had planned to install there. For a number of reasons, including perhaps the impact of the hauntings of history, the Vienna exhibition did not take place in the apartments where Freud spent 47 years of his life prior to his exile, and instead will open in the house where he spent the last year of his life; but the text remains a valuable commentary and sheds light equally well on the current London exhibition.

Gottfried Fliedl:

"In 1948, Eve Tucker, an employee of the department of 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."

After succinctly mapping out the relevant events that took place between 1996 and 2000, from the Swiss banks scandal to the Swedish iron-for-gold collusion, disclosing the exact nature of their 'neutrality', and a terse analysis of the confiscation by the Museum of Modern Art in New York of two Egon Schiele paintings from the Leopold Collection, Fliedl continues: "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 that it provokes questions on the structuring and the work of memory as a social process. The dense network of the video and internet installation (interacting) with the special commemorative site (now read 20 Maresfield Gardens) transforms *Body Missing* ... into an archaeological study of the abysses of Austrian political and social unconscious."

Sigrid Schade, in her significant early essay in the GAK, Bremen exhibition catalogue, 1996, has written:

"Frenkel's video installation tells many superimposed

stories ... These are the commentaries within which the underlying story unfolds, based on notes made by a female barkeeper at the Transit Bar, a repetition of her own reconstruction of fragments of information... With the intertwining of fiction and historical documentation, of individual memory and public commemorative ritual, of different narrative levels and various media, Vera Frenkel suggests a way of remembering the art theft and other National Socialist crimes.

A form which acknowledges itself as a distortion, as the memory of an absence, as a reconstruction tracing a trace, opening a reading of a story which has no end. That which is absent becomes the motif of a construction in which it remains present as something absent, a construction, however, which itself takes on real form. For – and this is part of the sequel – the fictive artists' projects in *Body Missing* subsequently become reality in the media networks of the world wide web."

Art historian **Elizabeth Legge**, in her *Canadian Art* text, *Of Loss and Leaving*, has commented:

"... from the *Transit Bar* and *Body Missing* also derive from Frenkel's longstanding interest in charismatic figures, and their various promises of "bliss". This first took shape in 1987 when Frenkel was an artist-in-residence at the Chicago Art Institute, and was billeted in Hefner Hall, formerly the Playboy Mansion. Amongst the ghosts of bunnies past, Frenkel began to consider the synthetic sexual bliss offered by Hefner. The work that came out of this, *TRUST ME IT'S BLISS: the Richard Wagner/Hugh Hefner Connection*, was based on an analogy between Hugh Hefner and another master of totalizing vision, Richard Wagner. From this exploration of relative aesthetic bliss Frenkel turned to consumer



Vera Frenkel, *Body Missing*:
Freud Museum, London.
Detail: mezzanine



Vera Frenkel, *Body Missing*:
Freud Museum, London.
Partial view: dining room,
Station 3: "Trail of Fragments"

bliss. As an extension of an installation dealing with a new shopping centre in Newcastle upon Tyne, Frenkel, working with Artangel, installed an electronic text on a billboard in Piccadilly Circus, beginning: "This is your Messiah speaking, instructing you to shop...". From the high and low blisses of Hefner, Wagner, and the shopping messiah, Frenkel has moved to address that most terrifying of modern blissmongers, Hitler....

... *Body Missing* also comes out of Frenkel's experiences as artist-in-residence in Austria: at the Akademie der Bildende Kuenste in Vienna (where Hitler had been twice rejected as a prospective art student, and where Nazi sympathizers on its staff later collaborated with Hitler's art theft policies); and at the Offenes Kulturhaus in Hitler's hometown, Linz. Struck by the basement corridors of crates at the Akademie, Frenkel began to consider Hitler's massive acquisition of art, and his mania for monuments. The ostensible subject of *Body Missing* is the great Kunstraub, the complex and secret wartime transportation of thousands of confiscated and stolen works of art. Those destined for the great unrealized Linz museum, under the operation known as *Sonderauftrag Linz*, were hidden in the nearby salt mines at Alt Aussee in Austria. After the war, these hoards were discovered by the allies, who realized that many works were missing, possibly hemorrhaged to Russia, the United States, and elsewhere, including Austria. Many remain untraced.

Body Missing, then, ostensibly surveys the residue of one of Hitler's visions of bliss, with its massive mechanical apparatus of transportation, and attendant bureaucracy of record-keeping. This displacement of works of art amplifies the theme of human displacement in ...*from the Transit Bar*. The Transit Bar within *Body Missing* is now fictively located on the real ground floor

of the Offenes Kulturhaus in Linz; and its imaginary, all-infiltrating installation is inflected by the knowledge that the Offenes Kulturhaus once served as a Wehrmacht prison. There are floorplans and photographs and references to buildings, including Hitler's bunker, the Reichschancellery and the tunnels beneath it, throughout the website: its fictive times and spaces are layered and haunted.

... The recognition of Hitler's delusional role as master-curator functions as a cautionary model for any art museum in which *Body Missing* is accessed. Legitimate ownership of art is a vexed contemporary problem, addressed at symposia in Linz and in Bremen, at the time of the first and third installations of *Body Missing*. At what point do matters of cultural theft and appropriation stop? *Body Missing* inevitably draws attention to the residual taint of the Kunstraub within the commercial and institutional circulation of art.

... *Body Missing* builds itself around an absence (the lost works of art and the museum that was intended to house them). Contemporary intellectual occupation with loss and absence involve the theorizing of representation as a failure: no representation can fully represent, that is, materialize, what was actually desired or intended, and any art work can only be a substitute for the desired thing. 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 suggest the metaphors of loss permeating our cultural theory. 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." ...Frenkel's Kunstraub is akin to the



Vera Frenkel, *Body Missing*:
Freud Museum, London.
Partial view: dining room,
Station 3: "Trail of Fragments"

astronomer's 'light-year' as a way of achieving an illusorily comprehensible scale for enormity. While a light-year is, of course, not a metaphor, it may be used metaphorically.

... At the heart of Frenkel's mystery story is [a] fundamental incommensurability: truth and evidence (testimony, as always, residing between them)."

Irit Rogoff, at the 1996 conference on art theft and its implications organized by Sigrid Schade for the GAK (Gesellschaft fuer Aktuelle Kunst) in Bremen spoke about:

"The fact that it has taken more than fifty years after the end of the Second World War for this particular seam of veiled European history to be opened up, indicates that we are not necessarily on the trail of actual objects, but rather in the throes of attempting to articulate some inarticulable relation to the past in which questions of responsibility and implicatedness are attempting to go beyond the binaries of victims and perpetrators of great cataclysmic events.

In each case the major unspoken problem has not been the unwillingness of governments to return property as to face the immense embarrassment of not having anyone to return it to.

And so, long after blames have been allocated and accounts supposedly settled, reparation monies paid and war criminals tried, long after novels and poems and films which took years to gestate, were finally able to see the light of day and be viewed by audiences who could accommodate their lessons – long after all the dust has supposedly settled – along come these missing art works and insist that regardless of all that

corrective action we are nevertheless living amongst a constant absence.

As an art project *Body Missing* is related to earlier art projects by Vera Frenkel such as *The Cornelia Lumsden Archive* (an archive of the work and memorabilia of a fictitious Canadian novelist living in exile in Paris) ... and *from the Transit Bar* made for Kassel's *documenta IX* in 1992. Like much of Vera Frenkel's work it revolves around issues of absence and of movement away from an anchoring state of belonging. Like Foucault's notion of fissure, Frenkel's point of departure for an historical engagement is always at moments of transition, migration, flight or seizure. It is both 'site specific' – to a particular history and to the discomfort that haunts those who have inherited the ongoing burdens of those histories. Simultaneously it equally functions as an active form of cultural critique – a meta theoretical model for an intertextuality of unease in which we can read one unease through another. The long dark corridors, the basements full of boxes and packing cases, the whistle and tunes heard through the echo empty spaces of a building – all link to cinematic and dream images of an uneasy knowledge of that which is hidden, unknown, unacknowledged.

Body Missing assumes the status of bearing witness, or as Maurice Blanchot would have it "of bearing witness for the absence of testimony" ("le dernier à parler"). In recent theoretical discussions of 'testimony' it has become acknowledged that a testimony of faith offered by a survivor, is not a form of proof but a relational position. It does not says Derrida "provide knowledge but rather makes legible the conditions that make that knowledge possible". Thus testimony involves a position of survival beyond the opposition of life and death. The

WWW site for *Body Missing* has become precisely 'a bearing witness in the absence of testimony', a possibility for a series of oblique alignments of the self and the historical without the direct relation of either experience or ideological inscription."

Historian and cultural theorist **Dot Tuer** in her text, *Threads of Memory and Exile: Examining the Art of Storytelling in the Work of Vera Frenkel*, writes:

"When Cornelia Lumsden wrote her novel, *The Alleged Grace of Fat People*, in 1934, Paris was still an artistic mecca for avant-garde coteries, while in Berlin the National Socialists had just come to power. As Canadian writers looked to Europe for the freedom to reinvent cultural boundaries, the first refugees from Hitler's fascism were fleeing Germany. By 1979/80, when Frenkel made the Cornelia Lumsden tapes, exile as a form of creative alienation was already a modernist myth, described by Frenkel at the time as 'Canada's favourite fairy-tale'.

In the post-war period, mass media images and instantaneous satellite transmissions rather than artists promised the reinvention of cultural boundaries. The ideological division and geographical barriers of the Cold War rather than fascism dominated economics and politics. Of the massive displacements of peoples and histories wrought by the ravages of World War II, barely a whisper was heard. Hemmed in by television signals and ideological silences, many artists of the 1970s sought to bridge the alienation of the self from technology by turning the lens of the video camera back upon themselves ... creating in the process what art historian Rosalind Krauss has termed an 'aesthetics of narcissism'. As one of Canada's leading artists,

Frenkel chose instead to use the emergent technology of video to record the fragmentation of the body and of narrative. Holding up the video camera as a witness to the alienation of the self from technology, she became a detective in an electronic surface of appearances, questioning what was forgotten and what was unspoken in the impending ascendancy of the simulacrum over reality.

... Frenkel's *Body Missing* intertwines the detective genre (explored in her *No Solution: A Suspense Thriller* cycle) with the archival task of history. In *Body Missing* ... the mystery is about the art-theft policies of the Third Reich and the lost artworks that Hitler stored in a salt mine near Linz ... Returning to the era when Lumsden was writing her novel in exile, Frenkel collects evidence from archival lists and photographs, conversations overheard in cafes and the memories of people who witnessed events at the time. She is part detective, part storyteller and part archaeologist, excavating a genealogy of art and politics.

In her subsequent adaptation of the *Body Missing* work as a website, Frenkel's work comes full circle. The tools of new technology now deepened the enigma of history in the same way that the video screen deepened the enigma of Cornelia Lumsden. Integrating the ancient ritual of storytelling with the connective possibilities of hypertext, Frenkel links her investigation of the lost works of art, and web pages of artists who have been asked to mount their own inquiries, to narrative fragments of stories told in ... *from the Transit Bar*. Continuing her quest to reconfigure the structure of memory, she unveils a complex mapping of representation in which the act of remembering is now dispersed across both historical time and electronic space."



Vera Frenkel, *Body Missing*:
Freud Museum, London.
Detail: dining room,
Station 3: "Trail of Fragments"



Vera Frenkel, *Body Missing*:
Freud Museum, London.
Partial view: Anna's room,
Station 5: "Athena's Polished
Shield"

The Conference

From Theft to Virtuality: Considerations of the Meanings of Absence, a conference organized by Dr. Griselda Pollock, Director of CentreCATH (Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History), University of Leeds, to mark the installation of *Body Missing* at the Freud Museum and the appointment of Vera Frenkel as Leverhulme Visiting Professor, will provide a forum for discussion on the themes addressed in the work. The conference will take place at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, The Mall, London SW1Y 5AH, Friday, March 21 and Saturday March 22. Reservations can be made by telephone: 020 7930 3647 or by email: Antonia@ica.org.uk:

Biographical note

Multidisciplinary artist Vera Frenkel has developed a practice rooted in an interrogation of the abuses of power and their consequences, exploring through her projects the forces at work in human migration, the experience of displacement and deracination, the learning and unlearning of cultural memory and the bureaucratisation of everyday life.

One of the most respected and influential artists in Canada, Frenkel has shown work at *documenta IX*, Kassel, 1992, the *Biennale di Venezia* (*Headstart*, 2001 and *Club Media*, 1997); and her videotapes formed the prestigious Spotlight Programme of the *Canadian Images Festival of Film, Video and New Media*. She has been artist in residence at the Chicago Art Institute, the University of Vienna's Arbeitsgruppe Museologie, the Slade School of Fine Art, London, the Royal University of Stockholm, the McLuhan Programme in Culture and Technology, Toronto and the Akademie der Bildende Kuenste, Vienna, among others.

The *Body Missing* project, first created at the Offenes Kulturhaus Centrum fuer Gegenwartskunst, Linz, 1994 – shown there again and in Bremen in 1996 as centrepiece of two symposia now published as *Kunst als Beute* [eds. Sigrid Schade, Gottfried Fliedl, Turia & Kant, Wien, 2000] – then toured Scandinavia and Poland as part of a Riksställningar solo exhibition, and by the Haus der Kunst, Munich, in the group exhibition *Deep Storage* en route to museums and public galleries in Japan, France, Canada, and the USA. Following its most recent installation at the Georg Kargl Gallery, Vienna, the current DVD version of this work can be seen in London from March 19 to April 27, 2003 at the Freud Museum, 20 Maresfield Gardens, NW3 5SX.

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A bibliography of writings on this project, as well as copies of the full texts excerpted above, are available from VTape, 401 Richmond Street West, Toronto M5V 3A8, Ontario, Canada.
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