Caption Mays_Textbeginn

Body Missing and Elegy

John Bentley Mays

Each manifestation of Vera Frenkel's six-channel photo-video-text piece *Body Missing* (1994–2008) asks to be understood as what it most obviously is: an instance of interdisciplinary art, a resonant outcome of a relatively recent creative practice. But this reading is not the only one possible. *Body Missing* can also be usefully viewed in a still wider horizon, as a work situated among complex creative artifacts—writings, paintings, plays and films, documentary photographs and musical compositions and video productions and installations—that commemorate ideals, things or people that have died, been lost or gone missing, and that together constitute the immensely rich Western art of elegy.

This cultural terrain is dauntingly large and densely populated. In order to make manageable the discussion and (I hope) illumination of *Body Missing* that follows, I have limited my comparative example to one elegiac work: Allen Ginsberg's *Kaddish*,[1] a long poem about the writer's mother, who died in a hospital for the insane in 1956.

As Ginsberg's *Kaddish* opens, we meet the poet wandering the streets of lower Manhattan one cold, clear day in the winter of 1959, pondering the sleepless night before, spent

> . . . talking, talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening to Ray Charles blues shout blind on the phonograph
> the rhythm the rhythm—and your memory in my head three years after—
> And read Adonais' last triumphant stanzas aloud—wept, realizing how we suffer—[2]

One or another version of the Aramaic liturgical prayer he has recited, and that has lent his poem its name, is traditionally associated with memorials of the Jewish dead, but the ancient text is not a lament. It is rather an exultant acclamation and hallowing of the name of Israel's God, a joyous doxology with which later sections of Ginsberg's own *Kaddish* resonate.[3] As the author sets down the jagged, long-breath lines of the poem's opening passages, Ginsberg's state of mind and soul is like that of Shelley's—anguished, angry, dismayed—in the spring of 1821, when he, Shelley, learned of the recent death of Keats in Rome and wrote the first stanzas of the pastoral elegy, *Adonaïs,* that Ginsberg has been reading.

Ginsberg's imagination and memory have been set on melancholy fire by the previous night's incendiary mixture of literature, liturgy, jazz and grief, and images of his

mother Naomi come raging into his head and on to the page. The listener—*Kaddish* is supremely a poem to be declaimed aloud—hears fugitive recollections of Naomi as Ginsberg imagines her to have been before he was born, a little Jewish girl fresh off the boat from Russia just after the turn of the twentieth century and living on New York's teeming Lower East Side. Ginsberg also recalls Naomi as he knew her: the mother of two sons, who left old-country ways and rites behind her and became a fervent American Communist—whom Allen, a boy of twelve during her first spell of madness, wanted to rescue from the paranoia that was engulfing her.

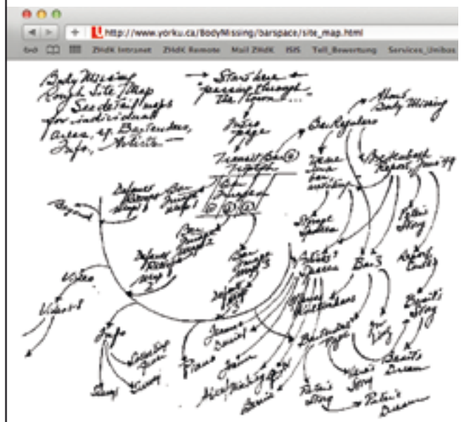
While Naomi lived and suffered, Ginsberg's every move with respect to her, either to aid or flee, had been wrong, it seems in retrospect. After a night of praying and of tears, he recites this testament of quotidian facts about his mother's misfortune and his vexed relationship to these memories:

> All the accumulations of life, that wear us out—clocks, bodies, consciousness, shoe, breasts—begotten sons—your Communism—'Paranoia' into hospitals. . . . Now I've got to cut through—to talk to you as I didn't when you had a mouth.[4]

Kaddish is the fulfillment of this urgent task, his talking to Naomi. Elegy may have been like this at its pre-literary dawn in ancient Greece[5]: a vividly imagined cry of *anamnesis* that summons the lost one back from death to what Derrida might call "spectral" life in the work of art.[6] Naomi is raised from the dead into the transfigurational space of writing. She is not idealized or edited; *Kaddish* is elegy, not eulogy. It is because she is real, not cosmetically revised, that we can hear her resurrected body, now blessed again with a mouth, Allen's mouth.

Naomi has been returned to life, a kind of life that will never end, in the textual weaving of her son's poem. At the center of every elegy (that isn't just so much howling lament, or nostalgia or wishful thinking about loss) is a resurrection of this kind, a reappearing of the person or object that has been lost in an eschatological body transfigured by poetics, but immediately recognizable. This body is real and alive in a manner that sober, reasonable people say is impossible. The dead, they solemnly insist, can never return, will never again speak in the land of the living. Elegists know better.

Like *Kaddish* and every other artwork in this legacy, Frenkel's project *Body Missing* commemorates loss, registers absence, conducts the work of mourning in public. The artist discovered the loss at the heart of *Body Missing* while preparing a site-specific installation for Sigrid Schade's group show *Andere Körper*, mounted in 1994 at the Offenes Kulturhaus in Linz, Austria. Hitler, Frenkel found, had intended to build an immense museum in Linz (his boyhood school town), then stock it with artworks he had ordered looted from public and private collections across occupied



Caption 01

Europe. In 1945, conquering Allied forces found thousands of these purloined objects stashed in the Alt Aussee salt mines near Linz, though some others had disappeared. This missing body of art—re-stolen by GIs or Russian soldiers, or spirited out of the collapsing Reich by fleeing Nazis, or who knows what—suggested the title and topic of Frenkel's work.

My commentary here is based on the images and texts found on the *Body Missing* website (*www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing*), the piece's most accessible iteration. Visitors learn the story by wandering through narrative mazeways outlined on a handwritten site map that is also a choreography, a diagram of possibilities. We pick up the thread at the center of the labyrinth, a *Stammtisch* in the Transit Bar, a hangout frequented by artists, where a group of regulars are sitting and drinking and talking. Their conversation turns again and again to one persistent theme:

> . . . the unanswered questions surrounding the missing art. Slowly, regulars at the bar began to appear with lists, photographs, reports, discovered by one means or another, often contradictory, and tried to do what their counterparts fifty years earlier had already attempted: to determine which were the works first stored at Alt Aussee for the Führermuseum, and which had somehow disappeared.[7]

As the regulars muse about the missing art, however, their conversation circles, wanders, drifts (as bar chat tends to do), alighting on numerous nearby subjects.

> In the bar the talk continues: about fetishistic art collecting fever and war trophies; about the shifting ground between seeming disappearance of a work and outright loss; about the possibility of reinventing, through a kind of cultural memory and fellow-feeling, a connection that opens to an earlier artist and an absent work.

These visual and textual documents, the regulars' "reinvention of connections," the stories and other works of imagination that they make in response to the "unanswered questions"—all carefully gathered up and archived by the head bartender—are the elements from which Frenkel has forged *Body Missing.*

The structural strategy of Frenkel's piece, then, is archival. In this way, it is like most elegies composed between earliest antiquity and the time of Shelley's *Adonaïs:* a compilation undertaken in the long quietude of grieving, the state of sober reflection that can come to the mourner after the word-canceling first paroxysms of loss have subsided. It is an art of the study and the studio, in other words, not of the graveside. Despite its similarities to other artworks in the tradition, however, the shape of *Body Missing* is quite unlike that of the elegiac works one is likely to run across in a poetry anthology. The device Frenkel uses to frame the action, for example, is a

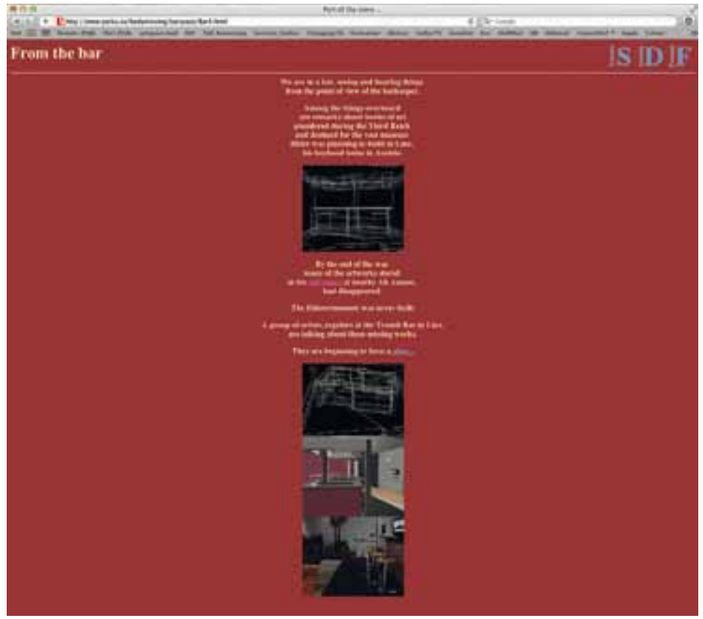
Caption 16

down-market cocktail lounge reminiscent (as Elizabeth Legge has noted) of Rick's bar in *Casablanca*.[8] It has nothing in common with the portentous architecture one frequently encounters elsewhere in the art of grief (gloomy graveyards, empty, shadowy churches, Ginsberg's madhouse, and so on). The atmosphere in the bar is serious, but not lugubrious.

And the speech-acts and images the regulars bring to the table are not elevated. Rather, they are items clipped from the matter of everyday life: snippets of informal conversation, asides, legal documents and passport photographs, scraps of narrative, dreams, lists. Indeed, the lists, perhaps more so than any other form of writing in this work, recall the ritual naming, the incantatory litany of the names of all the dead, that probably lies at the psychological and historical root of elegy.[9] Frenkel's lists include:

> . . . what was insured
> what came from private collections
> what was once another country's treasure
> what the Allies found
> what the Russians took
> what now begins to appear at auction
> what was burned

Caption 04



Caption 11

> what was saved. . . .
> what crossed the ocean in strange ways. . . .

Frenkel's practice of juxtaposing bits and pieces, of listing and assembling, aligns *Body Missing* with the culture of the privileged fragment, the incomplete, the remnant, that came of age with modernism itself. One might almost imagine giving the work an epigraph drawn from T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

"These fragments I have shored against my ruins"[10]—except that, in *Body Missing,* the fragments of narrative, document and image Frenkel sets before us refuse to add up to any "shoring against ruins." She does not seek to tease out a coherent redemptive meaning from the shards of disjointed speech and time, "learn a lesson" from them. Elegy may or may not console the bereaved; *Body Missing* does not, and, in that respect, it is similar to many other elegies composed since the twentieth century's industrial-scale warfare and genocide changed the modern consciousness of loss and death forever.[11]

She accepts, rather, the proposition (advanced, of course, by much fiction and poetry and film since *The Waste Land)* that all we can really know about what has been lost is the painful absence of it—or, at best, the rumors, official reports, newspaper and other scraps of evidence that people spin out of their enduring, their

Caption 17

ignoring or their striving to name and thus overcome this unnameable absence. In Frenkel's grieving art, there is no happy ending that will help everything make sense, no narrative arch that explains and contains.[12] It is also a modern elegy insofar as it frames the death, loss or disappearance, not in some majestic cosmic cycle in which death follows life like winter follows summer—the grand, reassuring site of dying in the West until the nineteenth century—but in the midst of a complex social emergency. For Frenkel, as we shall see, this emergency is the consumerism of the contemporary art world.

But for what loss, exactly, is Frenkel mourning in *Body Missing?* Clearly not only the absence of "great" works of art. It does not seem to matter to the bartender or the barflies if specific artworks in this body they talk about are "good" or "bad," masterpieces or kitsch. This is not the place for the games of discrimination and connoisseurship that collectors and art dealers play—games that, in any case, have no place in an artwork, Frenkel's, that criticizes the very activity of connoisseurship. By declining to pronounce judgment on which lost artworks are "valuable" and which ones are not, *Body Missing* draws our attention instead to the property that each of them possesses (or possessed) in common: what Jean-Luc Nancy has called the "singularity of every being" the "just once, this time" of every life and existence, every suffering, every death.[13] And this event of being—the elusive, polysemous event that shelters, indeconstructible, in every name of anything—haunts the lists and other traces the bar regulars have come up with.

As can happen during such difficult processes of memory, the cries of the vanished artworks have summoned the artist-regulars at the Transit Bar from their individual vexations into a communal project of mourning:

> One by one the artists find themselves drawn to certain works and as if by itself a plan evolves to reconstruct these.
> These would be no ordinary imitative reconstructions, however. No, that would be of no interest at all. The plan that emerged was to realize personal visual links between present studio practice and particular lost works; a gesture.

From this recollection of singularities comes new art that salves the pain of no-one, that does not settle any of the queries about the missing artwork that were (and still are) being pursued by historians, lawyers, museum professionals and the heirs of those whose art was stolen. Rather, like any other philosophical probe, the art-making project at the heart of *Body Missing* raises new questions, opens new avenues of inquiry:

> We search for works that are lost. Do we search to reclaim the economic benefits of costly possessions, to reclaim the great pictorial narratives of western civilization, or do we try to complete the lives, the histories of those who lived and died under the Third Reich? Will the recreation of the sensuality, the palpation of paint and painter, give us back the part of our own lost history that was lost? Will we be more alive, more ourselves in our own still living bodies?

Caption 10

These interrogations give *Body Missing* the character that Irit Rogoff has described 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[ing] empty spaces of a building—all link to cinematic and dream images of an uneasy knowledge of that which is hidden, unknown, unacknowledged.[14]

This "uneasy knowledge" has to do with objects that have gone missing, been withdrawn from ordinary knowledge into shadowy semi-existence, the existential half-light and realm of ghosts where everything tends to be "hidden, unknown, unacknowledged." Elegy operates in this ambiguous borderland between knowledge and unknowing, possession and absence.[15] It asks, with sorrow and care, the absent one (the person, the object, the lost ideal) dwelling in this in-between zone to speak again. It asks the lost one to step forward from the shadows a little, not as a magically resuscitated presence—death is final, irrevocable, after all, and the pain of losing does not go away—but as an event in art, as an "active form of cultural critique," a narrative that holds the *Zeitgeist* and its pieties to account.

In writing about *Body Missing* on other occasions,[16] I have assumed that this critical narrative was about something very bad, Hitler's *Kunstraub*, that immediately brings to mind the infinitely worse (and hence more morally and imaginatively arresting) destruction of Europe's Jews. (It's an interpretation that Frenkel has said[17] did not occur to her at the time of the piece's fabrication.) The missing artworks, in my construal, become missing men, women and children, the generations of Europeans who will never be born as a result of Hitler's genocidal policies. Hitler's obsession with hoarding artworks, on this reading, turns into a monstrous mirror image of his obsession with destroying other singularities, including and especially Jews. The stacked packing crates Frenkel found and photographed in the shadowy basement of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna—the school that rebuffed Hitler's bid for instruction in 1907 and 1908—become coffins of the unclaimed, unburied dead, and so on.

There is certainly nothing wrong with setting the artist's intentions aside and reading *Body Missing* as an allegorical lament for victims of the far greater crime that enframes the less grievous one of art theft. An excellent explication of *Body Missing* and other works by Frenkel along this line appeared, for example, quite comfortably in an anthology about artifacts produced in response to the Holocaust.[18] But looking back over my own texts about *Body Missing,* I have wondered if I did my readers a disservice by slighting the important things the piece has to say about its most obvious subject: art collecting.

Caption 15

The literal topic of the conversation in the bar is, after all, "fetishistic art collecting fever and war trophies," namely, Hitler's greed for "masterpieces" to install in his Linz museum, the scandal of his contradictory savagery and connoisseurship. But, the lost, ghostly artworks whisper: Was there really a contradiction in the case of Hitler, or does there merely 'seem' to be one? And, more subversively, they quietly—the absent never shout—say: Is there really a difference, a really radical difference, between the fetishism Hitler exhibited and the forces that drive the fine arts market in our own day?

In this liminal region where the specters of the dead and missing live and speak, in the body of *Body Missing* I mean to say—in the topsy-turvy space opened by the piece's "active form of cultural critique"—the reasonableness of contemporary art institutions and collectors looks for all the world like the hunger of Hitler. In both his world and ours, collectors spend lives and fortunes (and, in the case of museum curators, the fortunes of others) in the pursuit of trophies and memberships in exclusive clubs of "top" museums or "top" collectors, all in the grip of "fetishistic art collecting fever." On the face of it, the proposition is outrageous. Common sense recoils at the notion that all systematic, strategic collecting, whether in the Third Reich or now, is energized by a common passion that is, in the end, malignant. But the missing works of art—the victims of this craving, the ones who haunt the lists and

Caption 18

scraps of information in *Body Missing*—know otherwise, and say what they know in their spectral voices. These voices can hardly be heard nowadays above the din of consumerism, of genuinely mad mass-cultural distractions, above the alternating upbeat and despairing songs blaring in the marketplace. But this fact only makes more urgent the kind of grieving proposed by Frenkel and other modern elegists—what William Watkin has called "ethical mourning," that is, a remembrance of loss that carries with it a judgment of the status quo, a thinking of loss that exposes contemporary political and social practices and customs to moral criticism. Art can be the site of such grieving, and an act of essential freedom for the artist who grieves. "Freedom, the freedom to remember what happened, to mourn it and be responsible for it," writes Watkin, "is the act or event of crying itself, opening up a space or locale for mourning. Ethical mourning is, in other words, the opening up of an environment for loss through the event of the cry."[19]

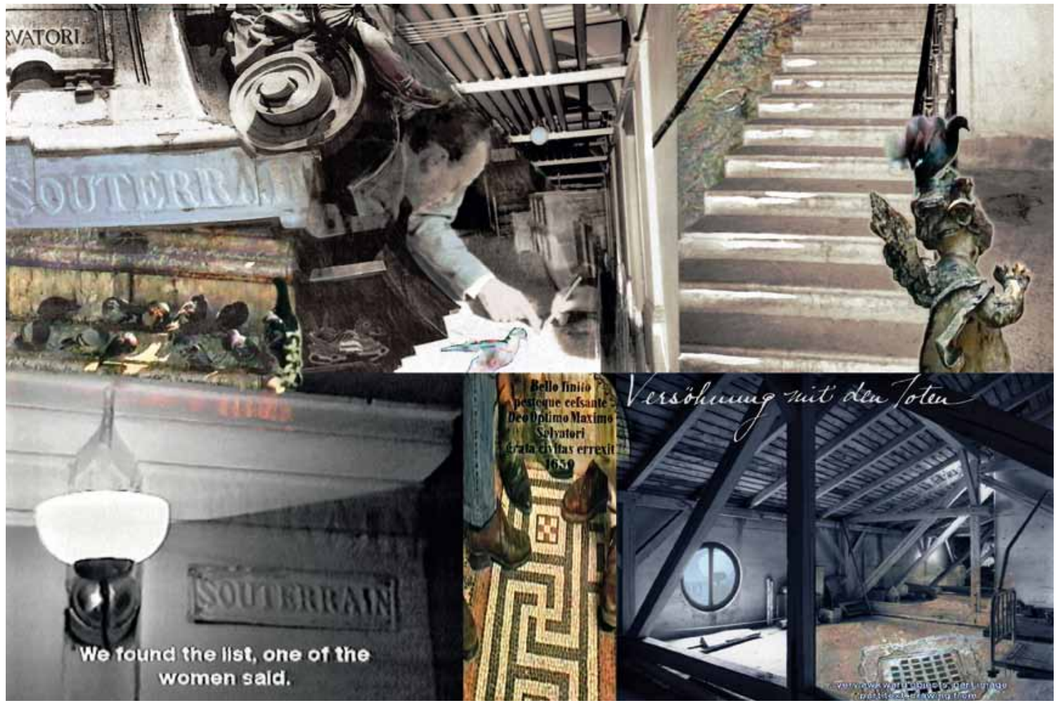
People commonly feel bereft, impotently guilty or self-pitying in the face of historical loss, if they think about it at all. It is relatively easy for people who do think about it to move with the memory-destroying pulse of mass culture, to deal with the loss by "getting over it," or by eventually forgetting about it. Frenkel's *Body Missing,* in contrast, is an opening through which the lost live and speak to the living, quietly calling attention to destructive desires that the artist sees have long animated—and brutalized—the world of art.

1 "Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg 1894–1956," in Allen Ginsberg, *Kaddish, and Other Poems 1958–1960* (San Francisco, 1961), pp. 7–36.
2 Ibid., p. *7.*
3 The Wikipedia entry on Kaddish, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaddish (accessed April 2012, provides a useful account of the prayer and transliterations and translations of its various forms.
4 Ginsberg 1961 (see note 1), p. 11.
5 An interesting speculative account of the origin of elegy appears in William Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh, 2004), pp. 3–4.
6 "Spectral," the word and the notion, has been borrowed from Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International,* trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London, 2006).
7 All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the *Body Missing* website.
8 "Analogs of Loss: Vera Frenkel's *Body Missing*," in Barbie Zelizer, ed., *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (London, 2001), p. 340.
9 Watkin 2004 (see note 5), pp. 3–4.
10 *The Waste Land,* in T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1935* (New York, 1958), line 430.
11 Writing shortly after the outbreak of World War I, Freud saw clearly how drastically death was about to change. See his *Reflections on War and Death,* A. A. Brill and Alfred B. Kuttner, trans. (New York, 1918).
12 A summarizing, scholarly narrative about Hitler's *Kunstraub* appeared at almost the same moment that *Body Missing* premiered in Linz: historian Lynn H. Nicholas's *The Rape of Europa: the Fate of Europe's treasures in the Third Reich and the Second World War* (New York, 1994). While Nicholas has never said her story had a happy ending—Frenkel, of course, has never suggested such a thing—she came close during a 2008 interview: "There are still a lot of things that were not claimed or returned, but I think in proportion to the total amount that was taken, most of the things have gone back." See: http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/28554/lynn-h-nicholas-on-the-rape-of-europa-fifteen-years-on/ (accessed April 2012).
13 In *The Experience of Freedom,* trans. Bridget McDonald (Stanford, 1993), p. 66.
14 Quoted in the publication that accompanied the exhibition of *Body Missing* at the Freud Museum in London, March 19–April 27, 2003, and available at http://ftp.ok-centrum.at/%20%20LINZ%20Materials%20for%20Michael/2.%20BM%20background%20info/freud_museum.pdf (accessed April 2012).
15 At its pre-literary birth in ancient Greece, elegy may have been only a vividly imagined cry of anamnesis that summoned the lost one back from death to what Derrida calls "spectral" life in the work of art. Watkin 2004 (see note 5), p. 5.
16 See, for example, my article "In the grip of Hitler's other mania," *The Globe and Mail,* May 8, 1995.
17 In a telephone conversation with the author, December 7, 2011.
18 Elizabeth Legge, "Analogs of Loss: Vera Frenkel's *Body Missing*" in Barbie Zelizer, ed., *Visual Culture and the Holocaust* (London, 2001).
19 Watkin 2004 (see note 5), p. 234.

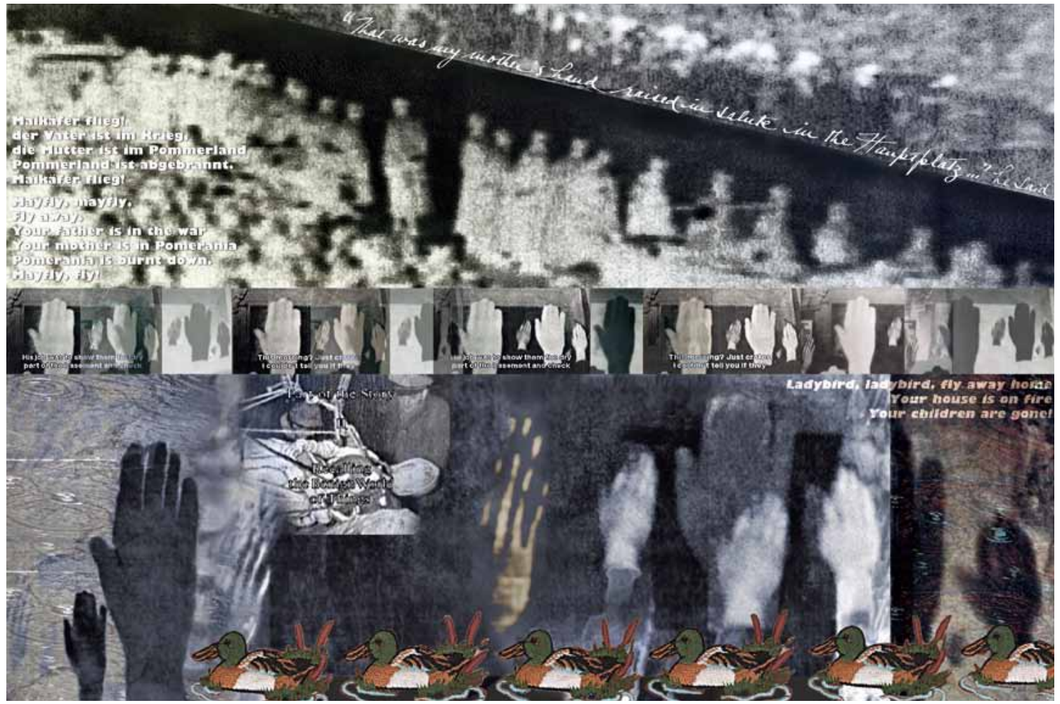
Image 4

Image 5

Caption of image 6 on page 15



Wall Pannel 1



Wall Pannel 2

Wall Pannel 3

Wall Pannel 4

Wall Pannel 5

Wall Pannel 6

oben: image 6.1, image 6.2

unten: image 6.3

image 7.2

image 7.3

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Kelle Hadiz
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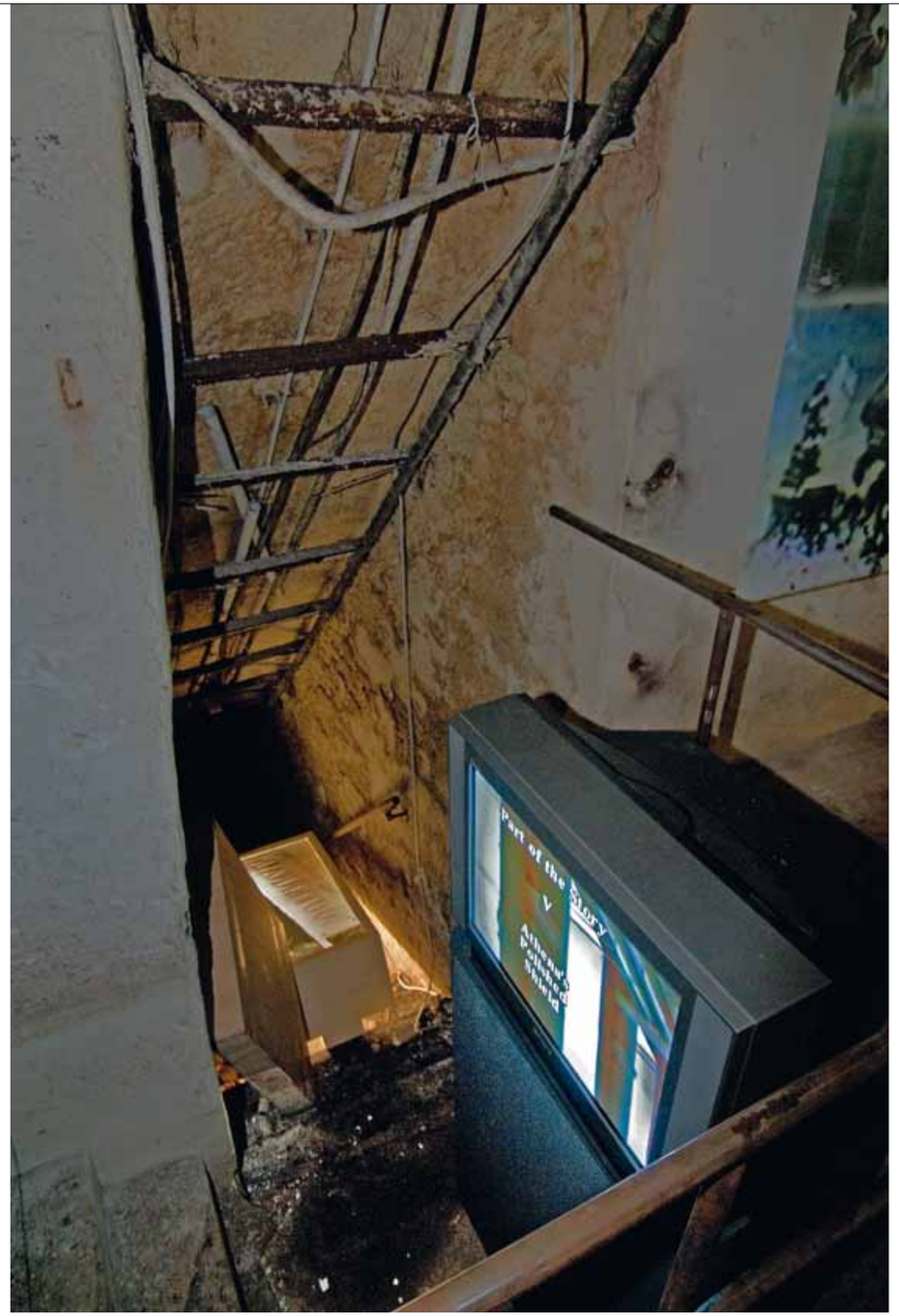

Image 8

1994
Andere Körper, Offenes Kulturhaus, Linz (six-channel video/photo/text installation)

1995
Body Missing (website), www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing
Spirits on the Crossing, Setagaya Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo et al. (multichannel video installation)

1996
Two Projects by Vera Frenkel, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (website displayed in gallery)
Vera Frenkels Body Missing: Media-Installation und Internet-Projekt, Offenes Kulturhaus, Linz (multi-channel video installation)
Vera Frenkel: Body Missing, Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst, Bremen (video installation)

1997–1998
Vera Frenkel: . . . from the Transit Bar, Body Missing, www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing
Exhibition tour, organized by Riksutställningar, Stockholm: February–March: Royal University College of Fine Arts, Stockholm; May–June: Konstens Hus, Luleå; June–August: Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej, Zamek Ujazdowski, Warsaw; September–November: Lillehammer Art Museum, Lillehammer; November–January (1998): Ars Nova and Turku Art Museum, Turku

1997
Deep Storage, Haus der Kunst, Munich; Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Henry Gallery, Seattle; P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (multichannel video installation)

2000
Goethe-Institut, Toronto (multichannel video installation)
VideoCulture: Three Decades of Video Art, Elaine L. Jacob Gallery, Part of Wayne State University Festival and Symposium, Detroit

2001
The Body Missing Project, Galerie Georg Kargl, Vienna (six-channel version)
Centre culturel canadien, Paris (three-channel version, with photomurals, light boxes and website projection)

2003
The Freud Museum, London (six-channel video-web installation)

2008
Tiefenrausch: Strom des Vergessens, Aktienkeller, Linz (six-channel site-specific video installation)
Recollecting: Raub und Restitution, Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna (three-channel version with large-scale photomurals)

2010
EXiS Experimental Film and Video Festival, Seoul (screening)