



Body Missing, six-channel video installation, transparencies and black curtains in façade windows, Offenes Kulturhaus Linz, 1994

Between Estrangement and Loss: Some Thoughts on Vera Frenkel’s *Body Missing*

Ryszard W. Kluszczyński

The story is always partial
Partial to what, you ask.
To nothing;
a fragment,
merely a fragment.
Vera Frenkel¹

The following observations of contemporary art’s strategies will be an introduction to my reflection on *Body Missing* by Vera Frenkel.

Contemporary art of today is attracting more and more interest, not as a source of aesthetic experience—whatever this might mean at the moment—but as a domain of reflection and discussion expressing anger rather than nostalgia, as a place for rebellious meditations on the human condition. Increasingly, contemporary art emphasizes the importance of context at the expense of text. Nowadays, artistic forms tend to transform themselves into discourses on community and alienation, on belonging and exclusion, on domination and subordination, on relations between people and cultures. Works of art transgress their former boundaries and thus become important factors in political, economic, or ecological activities. This, however, does not mean that they are now outside the scope of artistic endeavor. What we are observing is actually nothing more than new artistic strategies and reorganized hierarchies. In an attempt to preserve the characteristic features that set it apart from other areas of social activity, contemporary art is exploring a wide array of various and multifaceted discourses that address problems which are often of critical importance both for the sake of the world community and each individual. With its active and important participation in all those discourses and confrontations, art of this kind is now playing an essential and indispensable role in contemporary intellectual life.

An issue that is particularly often and eagerly discussed, and not just within the limits of art, is the complex problem of globalization. When debates on globalization refer to cultural issues, they involve reflections on such questions as linguistic and symbolic penetration, loss of clarity and coherence in axiological systems, the phenomenon of cultures losing their presumed identities and the spread of hybrid forms. Some participants in these discussions turn their special attention to the world of media (and multimedia) and the role of global communication systems in the process of shaping new cultural conditions.²

Artistic practices, sensitive to the issues of globalization, sometimes address some general aspects, in particular when they take place in cyberspace. What we face more often however, is a situation where art addresses specific issues referring to selected aspects of reality and particular events, to processes located in particular and specific social milieux. The range of issues that are covered is as wide as the range of methodological approaches. The diversity of created structures and organized events proves that those issues are of vital importance in contemporary art.³

In this context, I am going to examine here one particular work by Frenkel—*Body Missing*. However, because of my curatorial involvement in exhibiting *Body Missing* and “. . . from the Transit Bar” together in 1997,⁴ I cannot avoid now being influenced in my thinking on *Body Missing* by the dialogue between those two installations. But there are many other good reasons for listening to this dialogue. Those works are linked in several ways and connected on numerous levels. The title of my essay, “Between Estrangement and Loss” refers directly to the conversation between them, as I hear it.⁵ In my text, I shall thus refer to both of these works interchangeably, trying to answer the question about the consequences of close relationships between “. . . from the Transit Bar” and *Body Missing* in order to understand and interpret the latter. This also means interrelating thematic areas that are specific for each of them independently in the course of mutual references.

www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing, 1995



The Piano Players' page
http://www.yorku.ca/bodymissing/piano/piano_ind.html

In addition to the site specificity that has informed this work, *Body Missing* is connected with the earlier work through mutual characters, and through mixing documentary and fictional orders. Each time the installation “. . . from the Transit Bar” is installed, it is always placed on the border between exhibition and service space, which blurs the clarity of its status and makes it ambiguous. Its character of an actually functioning piano bar provides this hybrid feature of Frenkel’s installation with a form of overwhelming power. In addition to that, *Body Missing* provides elements of an archive that involves materials regarding the theft of artworks that disappeared during the times of the Third Reich. At the same time, the realistic-fictional character of the work of art itself comes to light again. As some materials (correspondence) that have been placed on the website⁶ of the project prove, for some recipients of the work it became a substitute for a real archive that deals with the disappearance of artworks during World War II.

The installation “. . . from the Transit Bar” was presented for the first time during *DOCUMENTA IX* in Kassel in 1992. The work mainly addresses subjects of displacement, diaspora and migration. Nowadays, the issue of migration is not very often discussed in relation to globalization. One might say that this subject is almost outdated when compared with issues such as Web 2.0, Semantic Web and Social Media, networked identities and virtual communities. But clearly, it is not. Only migration is able to offer an individual one of the most basic, direct and existential experiences



The Offenes Kulturhaus Floor Plan, <http://www.yorku.ca/bodymissing/artists/offen.html>



Storage Spaces, http://www.yorku.ca/body-missing/history/salt_mines.html

caused by globalization: the direct experience of estrangement. “. . . *from the Transit Bar*” addresses the problem of alienation, a problem of living in diaspora, it talks about loneliness and the need of contact. About interpersonal communication. About the sense of loss. And about the need for closeness. These are the actual roots of this work. It becomes a bridge to reality. At the same time, however, this installation, in a way that is typical for avant-garde activities, triggers a metadiscourse concerning the problem of art, its status, framework, social meaning, and its cognitive values.

Migration is indispensably linked with transfer, with traveling. These two works “. . . *from the Transit Bar*” and *Body Missing*, are related for the reason of their thematization to the idea and practice of movement and travel. Travel is both a source of estrangement and a form of escaping that feeling. It is a strategy that creates balance between the experience of belonging and the feeling of dissimilarity. Art resulting from the experience of travel must inevitably address these problems. The frequently enforced character of journeys referred to in both works associates their travel with memories of another journey— to the places of extermination.

Meta-artistic discourse in “. . . *from the Transit Bar*” underwent thematization in *Body Missing*. Art, as such, became an object of direct interest. Art in social space. Consumed, concessioned art that is overtaken, fetishized or stolen. This artwork raises the question of the artwork’s status, the future of museums as institutions, raising doubts which lead to a hypothesis concerning the relativity of art. Furthermore, *Body Missing* brings issues of art closer to the discussion about the human condition, and does so in a disturbing way. Loss, destruction, death, appropriation, slavery come together again, becoming an artistic issue that joins an existential one. *Body Missing* and “. . . *from the Transit Bar*” together carry out a dialogue on the meaning of art in the contemporary world.

Body Missing appeared for the first time in 1994 in Linz, Hitler’s schoolboy hometown, in the form of a multimedia installation that included a six-channel video, texts and photographic transparencies in the windows of the three-storey front façade of the exhibition building.⁸ Near Linz, in the Altaussee salt mines, artworks had been stored— paintings, drawings, sculptures, graphics— all obtained more or less illegally by Nazis in the European countries they had conquered, and placed there with the prospect of creating a collection for the proposed Führermuseum in Linz. In this way, *Body Missing* inscribed itself into the context of site-specific art, remaining in significant relation to the site of its exposition. The installation was part of *Andere Körper*, an exhibition in the Offenes Kulturhaus—the local center for contemporary art.⁸ During Nazi occupation, the building was a Wehrmacht prison, used for investigations and torture, providing the bond between the location and the artwork with an additional and special character.

The emphasis in *Body Missing* is placed on the works of art themselves. The underground mines turn out to be a prison for art, from which some prisoners disappear without a trace. Is this, however, such a scandal? Does not every museum play this role for art—of a prison? Many times, Frenkel in her previous artistic projects and works, addressed the problem of art being limited by censorship and other oppressions. *Body Missing* inscribes itself in this context perhaps not directly, yet clearly and originally at the same time. In a world ruled by inhumane regulations, art is subject to the same laws.

Other issues arising from this context are also interesting. For instance, the one concerning the phenomenon of collection—of owning art. Collecting works of art frequently takes them out of their original environment and puts them in a new context, at the same time interfering destructively with values and the horizon of meanings characteristic for them. The collection creates its own universe, disrupting and transforming the works of art into works of fetish, cult objects, or trading goods: objects of investment. Neither fetishization nor commodification prevents the perception or experiencing of the artwork in its critical and political dimensions, as a form of questioning. The works created by Frenkel have features that invite the viewer to treat them as political discourses that are inscribed in the range of most important public debates. Neither of these aspects in Frenkel's work correspond with the fetishistic or commercial perspective. By choosing video as a basic medium, even before the times that placed it in the museum, Frenkel thereby added to the underground and subversive character of her works.

Her works undertake significant dialogues with the spaces in which they are placed, with their properties and stories, and with what has happened there before. They encompass such distinct media as installation, billboard or website, ensuring—due to their media attributes—strong relations to the places of their presentation and to the subjects that they address.

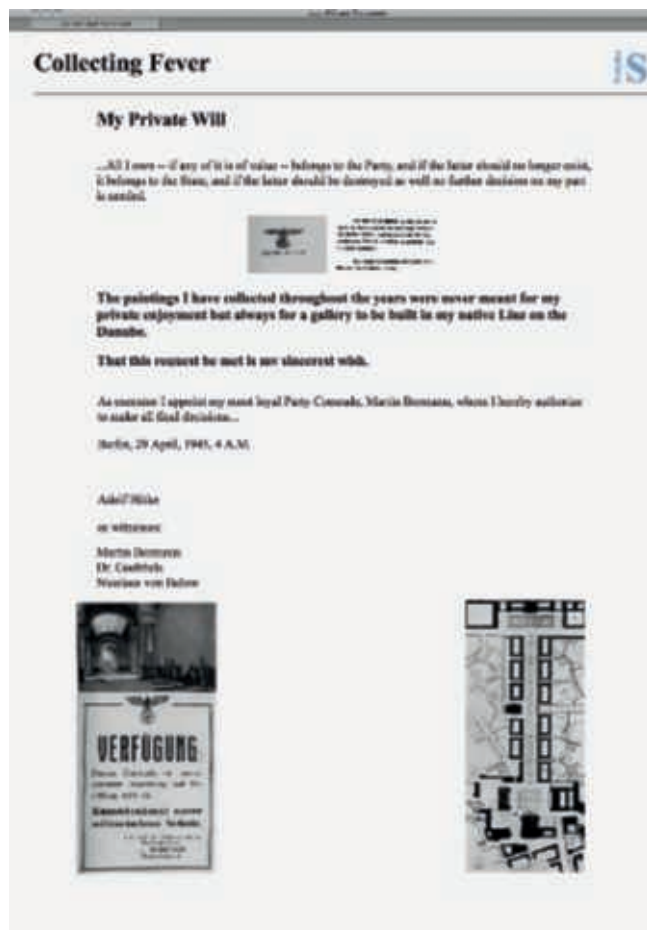
The thematics of the installation “... from the Transit Bar” leads us straight to the issue of identity which forms the intersection of all the motifs of Frenkel's artistic work, that is, identity, which is not taken for granted, but has to be created and maintained on a daily basis with constant reflection on the part of the individual.

Migration introduces instability into the space of individual identity. Auto-narrative discourses as methods of creating identity accompany the individual during his or her whole lifetime, which suggests not only that identity has a polyphonic character, but also that it remains in a permanent condition of reorganization. Auto-narration becomes especially useful in crisis situations.

Frenkel's art manages jointly to address the issues of migration, identity and narration. Her art—a journey embarked on for the sake of identity—takes the form of a narrative, through which this identity is established, processed or sustained. Her



Transit Bar video fragments
http://www.yorku.ca/bodymissing/video/video_5.html



Hitler's Will
<http://www.yorku.ca/bodymissing/news/fever.html>

individual works either take the form of narratives, or contain references to narratives, stories that everyone brings with him or her to the process of interpreting the artwork.

Body Missing places a question about an artwork's identity in the context outlined above. In the world of art today, organized around reenactment and remix practices, the question of the identity of a work of art takes on a totally new meaning. It comes out in *Body Missing*, for example when we consider the consequences of placing artworks obtained violently in such a museum as the proposed Führermuseum of Adolf Hitler. Would these artworks remain untouched, unchanged? Would they evoke the same emotions and values in a National Socialist museum as anywhere else? Does the place and context of an exhibition not influence the character of an artwork? Another dimension of this issue appears together with a concept broached in *Body Missing* of contemporary artists remaking the works of art that disappeared during World War II. In this case we deal with the same issue that appears while analyzing the phenomenon of re-enactment. Does an artwork recreated in this way retain the features of an original? Or should we rather ask why it does not? And what exactly is a remade artwork? What is its status? Its identity? Is it connected—as with Benjamin's aura⁹—with the time and place in which an artwork has been created? Is this artwork inevitably linked to the person of its creator? What does it, in fact, mean?

Contrary to humans, an artwork cannot be a narrator of its identity. Therefore the question arises—who can be? The author? Perhaps the current owner? The curator of the exhibition in which the work of art is situated? The art dealer that sells it? The critic who interprets the work? Or perhaps it is all of them, though not at the same time? Is the meaning disclosed by each one of them only when it is their turn? Is the artwork's identity a product of a social game it takes part in? Probably yes? I would rather leave this complex issue in the form of the above questions than try to formulate answers to them. Just like Frenkel does.

How close it is from “. . . from the Transit Bar” to *Body Missing* we can experience in a spectacular way especially on the Internet. Both works exist there and their presence there plays a very important role in the overall concept. Both parties are interwoven, creating a single hybrid organism. There is just one click from one site to another, two clicks from exploring the different histories/stories around the bar to reading the last will of Adolf Hitler saying: “The paintings I have collected throughout the years were never meant for my private enjoyment but always for a gallery to be built in my native Linz on the Danube.”¹⁰ Stolen paintings, one should add, paintings, many of which are still missing.

Body Missing has been accessible since 1995 in a Web version. As mentioned, this version has been closely connected to “. . . from the Transit Bar”. Some parts of the *Body Missing* website content seem only to be accessed in the “. . . from the Transit

Bar”area. The stories of the proposed Führermuseum and of the artworks stored in the nearby Altaussee salt mines—the starting point for *Body Missing*—appear to be overheard by the barkeeper. And the new hybrid narrative begins here. It is almost as if a group of characters we met earlier in the “. . . from the Transit Bar” installation become part of the *Body Missing* discourse. All the stories interweave and merge with each other. The *Body Missing* website appears to function as a merging tool for both Frenkel’s artworks discussed here.

In the Web version, the direct and mutual reference to both works makes *Body Missing* take on meanings that refer to the work created earlier. As a result, the problem of migration and identity that in “. . . from the Transit Bar” was originally connected exclusively to human reality, is transferred into the world of artifacts. This perspective makes it possible to refresh the language of art analysis, discover similar identity issues in *Body Missing* and look at contemporary art in a way that allows the viewer to find a character probably never before assigned to it. *Body Missing*, supported by “. . . from the Transit Bar”, suggests a new way of looking at artworks, a new perspective of art vision. And a new perspective on understanding art.



Body Missing, six-channel video-photo-web installation, detail of station six, Freud Museum, London 2003

- 1 Quotation from the source material for the multimedia installation “. . . from the Transit Bar” by Vera Frenkel, in *Of Memory and Displacement/Vera Frenkel. Collected Works*, 3 DVD/1CD-ROM, V-Tape (Toronto, 2005).
- 2 See for example Mark Poster, “Postmodern Virtualities,” in *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk. Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, ed. by M. Featherstone and R. Burrows (London, 1995), and Paul Hirst/Grahame Thompson, *Globalization in Question* (London, 1996).
- 3 See Arjun Appadurai, “Anxieties of Tradition in the Artscapes of Globalization,” in *Art Magazine Quarterly*, no 3, 1999 (23); Luc Courchesne, *Experiential Art: Case Study*, 2001, <http://www.courchel.net/#> (accessed April 15, 2012); Yvonne Spielmann, “Hybridization. Some Reflections on the Technologies and Aesthetics of Contemporary Media Cultures,” in *Art Inquiry*, vol. V. 2003, Special issue: *Cyberarts/Cybercultures/Cybersocieties*.
- 4 Vera Frenkel: “. . . from the Transit Bar / Body Missing / www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing, Center for Contemporary Art – Ujazdowski Castle (Warsaw, 1997).
- 5 “Estrangement” is the main issue of “. . . from the Transit Bar”, whereas “loss” is in the very center of the matter of *Body Missing*. At the same time however, the concept of loss appears in the discourse of “. . . from the Transit Bar” just as the idea of estrangement comes into view in the interpretation of *Body Missing*. Therefore, we can find within each artwork the same basic themes. Navigating between Estrangement and Loss is the way of exploring *Body Missing* as well as its links to “. . . from the Transit Bar”.
- 6 www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing/message.html (accessed April 15, 2012):
 E.g.: I AM LOOKING FOR ARTWORKS STOLEN FROM NICE, FRANCE IN APROX. 1941. IF YOU COULD HELP POINT ME IN THE RIGHT PLACES TO LOOK I WOULD BE FOREVER GREATFULL
 EDWARD DONNER
 ECWD3@AOL.COM
 Dear Mr. Donner,
 The Body Missing Website is designed to raise questions regarding the *Kunstraub* policy of the Third Reich, as an instance of war trophy art theft in general and its implications, but is not directly involved with searches of the kind I think you require. Nevertheless, I would like to thank you for writing, and wish you luck in your investigations. We will be happy to post your request on our message center in case someone has information that might be helpful.
 Yours sincerely,
 Vera Frenkel
- 7 Sigrid Schade (ed.), *Andere Körper—Different Bodies*, exh. cat. Offenes Kulturhaus Linz (Vienna, 1994), pp. 59–68.
- 8 In the meantime part of the OÖ Kulturquartier Linz.
- 9 Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” described aura as the “special, unique apparition of distance, however near it may be,” in *The Work of Art in The Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge MA, 2008), p. 14.
- 10 www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing/news/fever.html (accessed April 15, 2012).



Body Missing, video stills, channels 1-6, 1994

