

THE GLOBE AND MAIL
THE ARTS

Monday, May 8, 1995



Vera Frenkel's mixed-media installation consists of six video monitors documenting the Nazis' systematic art theft during the Second World War.

In the grip of Hitler's other mania

ART / *Profound commemorative artworks able to awaken the benumbed gallery-goer are rare, but an installation by Vera Frenkel succeeds in invoking war experiences long past, while quietly creating moral agitation.*

BY JOHN BENTLEY MAYS
Visual Arts Critic
Toronto

THE solemnities marking this V-E Day anniversary commemorate those who fought, suffered and died in the Second World War, especially uniformed combatants. But however profound our debt to the warriors who finally brought down the Nazi terror-state, our recollections today are troubled by the evil these heroes did not, indeed could not, destroy.

The end of world war did not inaugurate an era of world peace. Nor did the eradication of Nazism erase mass murder, genocide and terror from private fantasy or the policy options of nations.

We have Mao Tsetung, Pol Pot and other monsters, as well as the murderous neo-Nazis in our midst, to thank for unmasking the delusion that wars "teach" or "improve" something about humankind.

While a number of visual artists have recently made work that blasts away at these specific horrors and sufferings, there is no evidence that such propagandistic artmaking has done anything to stir the benumbed to compassionate action.

Exactly why this should be so, however, I cannot say. Perhaps museums are simply not the right venues for awakening the deadened moral imagination of the masses. Certainly, after many decades of witnessing artists trying to shock

them by showing repellent, perverse images, gallery-goers have become much too blasé to be upset by the hideous or political.

The impotence of art to mobilize public opinion may lie deep, however, in the very nature of visual art. Which is not to say art lacks all power; only that its power lies in strategies other than impudent, imprudent assaults on the gallery-going public.

"Art is seduction, not rape," Susan Sontag has declared. Art's distinctive way with us is "something like an excitation, a phenomenon of commitment, judgment in a state of thralldom or captivity." It can never deliver "knowledge of something" better than the old discourses of history, philosophy and such. But it can bear witness to how an artist has experienced the world, and to the commitments arising from that experience. An art crafted in that oblique way can nourish the viewer's sensibility, which in turn can encourage "our capacity for moral choice, and prompt our readiness to act."

On this conspicuous V-E Day anniversary, I can think of few artworks inspired by the Second World War that are anything more than "knowledge of something," in every case, something I knew already. In fact, I would discourage artists from even attempting to remember war in art, so tricky and prone to failure

and bathos is the challenge, had I not recently become aware that powerful commemorative artworks, and hence their possibility, do exist.

The work I have particularly in mind is called *Body Missing*, a part of Toronto artist Vera Frenkel's three-part Transit Bar project, which premiered last fall in Linz, Austria, and is now at the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo. Frenkel's mixed-media installations deserve close attention for, among other reasons, their success in invoking war experiences long past, while quietly creating moral excitation of the kind Sontag calls for.

If in no position to review *Body Missing*, I can record here the experience of seeing the 36 minutes of videotape at the heart of the work. The location in which Frenkel was invited to create the work is crucial. For it was to his boyhood town of Linz that Hitler wished to retire after his world victory, to be the curator of the great art museum he intended to erect there.

The scouring of Nazi-occupied territory for masterworks to hang there, and their protection from Allied bombing in salt mines near Linz, were among Hitler's obsessions. The video portion of Frenkel's piece has much to do with lists of these artworks, fastidious logs of their transportation, registration and disposition. Frenkel

also lingers tellingly over the disappearance of some — and, always, over the fascination these artworks held, first, for Hitler, and then for others after the war's end.

Of the many images in Frenkel's tape, one image will never leave me. It is a shot of dusty packing-crates, piled in the basement of Vienna's Academy of Visual Art. While never linking Hitler's bizarre art-collecting project, Frenkel has made an image that, together with all the listing and record-keeping she documents, can hardly *not* be received as unbearably horrible. Instantly, Hitler's *other* great mania springs to mind: the collection of Europe's Jews, their parallel listing and transportation — though not to careful protection, but to equally careful destruction.

Frenkel has not discussed the connection between the two sides of this horrible symmetry: the saving of art and the destruction of people. But to what extent does the mind of the busily acquisitive, power-hungry art world, its devotion to lavish buildings, and its tacit disregard (or, at best, condescending notice) of the victims of first-world greed, differ from the *mental culture* Hitler stood for?

I propose this question, to which I have no answer, as the one to ponder on this 50th observance of the world's deliverance from National Socialism.