

# Frenkel on cyberspace trail of stolen art

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Last year, thanks to two exhibitions in Russia, the world saw some valuable paintings hidden since 1945, the year Stalin's Trophy Commission went into Germany to strip-search buildings for art, some of it stashed Nazi booty, some of it legitimately German.

As critics wondered at the freshness of long-buried works by Renoir, Degas, Goya, Van Gogh, Cezanne, Gauguin and Manet, an outraged German public demanded their return.

It was fresh fodder for Toronto artist Vera Frenkel, who had been toiling away in archives, constructing *The Body Missing*, about the phenomenon of looted art.

The project began as a video installation in Linz, Austria, and is now a "home page," a unique grouping of retrievable text and images, on the Internet's World Wide Web.

For Frenkel, cyberspace provided the ideal medium for her latest exploration into absence and loss. With the help of computer programmer James Allan and computer artist Steev Morgan, her site has become the now-you-see-it-now-you-don't canvas for a global discussion of stolen and missing art.

Anyone with access to the World Wide Web can log onto Frenkel's site, to search *The Body Missing Project* (<http://www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing>).

Still in its first phase, the project incorporates contributions from 10 other artists, along with pieces from Frenkel's ever-growing research on art plunder, counter-plunder and — a U.S. Army Monuments & Fine Arts phrase for the Americans' handling of salvaged art — "internal looting."

The project began when Frenkel was invited, along with several other artists, to prepare a site-specific video work for the Offenes Kulturhaus, a regional art production and exhibition centre in Linz, Austria. The theme of the 1994 exhibition was *Andere Körper* or "Other Bodies."

Situated in the centre of Adolf Hitler's home town, the site was



**VERA FRENKEL:** Toronto artist Vera Frenkel has been toiling away in archives, constructing *The Body Missing*, an investigation into the phenomenon of looted art that began as a video installation and has become an ever-growing "home page" on the Internet's World Wide Web.

the "missing body" by doing detective work in archives and libraries and on electronic data bases, turning up more and more documentation.

One line of investigation turned up Hitler's last will and testament, dictated moments before his suicide. It's found on Frenkel's hand-scripted home

Musée d'Orsay in Paris displayed works never reclaimed by their owners. Frenkel entered the fray, magnifying glass in hand.

The results of her investigations so far can be visited on her home page.

"I wanted to make a work of art that

Artists Joanna Jones, Alice Mansell, Mickey Meads, Birnie Miller, Piotr Nathan, Daniel Olson, Jeanne Randolph, Judith Schwarz, Betty Spackman and Anja Westerfrölke have responded to Frenkel's call for submissions with their own micro-sites.

are gone." The German version translates: "Your father is in the War, your mother is in Pomerania, Pomerania is burnt down."

At another location, a Third Reich sign pops up, warning in German that the contents of said building are under military protection.

Beside it is the blueprint for the huge Hitler Museum, which would have occupied a substantial section of Linz had it ever been built.

For Frenkel, the home page format on the World Wide Web was a natural step from video art and installation.

"It was like swimming in very familiar water," she says, happy to find a medium that so suits her habit of juxtaposing texts that mix popular culture, scholarship (or mock scholarship), personal narrative and evocative imagery.

"I wanted the project to reflect the two ways of valuing art: the way that artists might mourn the loss of historical works that form their cultural memory and the way the whole machinery of the art world establish the market value of missing works."

In customary Frenkel fashion, the artist has created a persona for herself, as listener, narrator, interviewer. For *The Body Missing*, she has borrowed her character from *The Transit Bar*, a bartender who "listens carefully to the stories people tell."

"The power of fictional narrative is part of the work," says Frenkel, who likes to explore the margin between documentary and fiction because "they can interrogate each other."

This is the artist who once held an imaginary press conference for a missing piece of contrived art, a flying toilet as it happens, and called the whole process *Lost Art*; who put on a performance in the abandoned Playboy mansion in Chicago called *Trust Me, It's Bliss: The Hugh Hefner/Richard Wagner Connection*; and who is responsible for the presumed fictive Cornelia Lumsden, "a little-known Canadian writer who lived in Paris between the wars and has since disappeared."

housed in a former Wehrmacht prison. The site prompted Frenkel to think about the missing body of artworks stolen by the Nazis and stored underground just outside Linz.

Frenkel's introduction to her site, prepared for her by York University computer technicians, puts it this way:

"Shipped from all over Europe to the salt mines at nearby Alt Aussee, the brunt of the collection was stored in conditions of perfect archival temperature and humidity, until found by the Allies after the war: cave after cave of paintings, sculptures, prints and drawings destined for the vast museum that was never built."

Frenkel rarely talks about her work, a vast body of video art and video installations, without using words like "digging," "interrogating," "questioning," "sleuthing."

True to form, she set out in search of

ing Fever."

According to Der Führer's last request: "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."

In many cases, those "collected" paintings — as well as sculptures and anything else that could be systematically stolen from Europe's private and public collections — were never returned to their owners.

The Russians seized many of the works, formerly in German hands, justifying their counter-plunder as retribution for German war crimes.

As it happens, the shows at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and Moscow's Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts sparked international chat about stolen art.

A subsequent exhibition at the

tosh," says Frenkel from the fully electronic studio that doubles as her living space in a downtown co-op.

With more sophisticated hardware, the viewer can appreciate the visual layering that goes on with the images Frenkel has loaded onto the project.

The spatial metaphor for the site is the floorplan of the Offenes Kulturhaus. With the freedom of cyberspace, Frenkel installed *The Transit Bar*, her multi-channel video installation, on the ground floor of the art centre.

Images from the actual bar (installed at Harbourfront's Power Plant gallery between November, 1994, and January, 1995) are "hotlinks" into the exchange of ideas going on artists imaginatively seated in the bar telling their stories.

Click on any image outlined in neon colors and you enter another of Frenkel's pages.

body painting a red chalk Tintoretto drawing listed as one of the art pieces stolen from the Uffizi museum in Florence. Olson's project talks about the modernist works the Nazis slashed and burned:

"In order for Hitler's prizes to gather extreme positive value and the allure of scarcity, the Linz collection needed a supplementary Other. The collection needed a degeneracy of which it could be purged, so that a pure essence would remain."

A click of the mouse takes you to "Storage Spaces." Beside a series of archival photos of stacks of stolen artworks in the salt mines, Frenkel has entered a German version of the old rhyme known that goes, in English: "Ladybird, ladybird/ Fly away home./ Your house is on fire./ Your children

ic Kay Armatage talks about the "hyper-reality" of Frenkel's video work:

"Frenkel claims the role of author/enunciator in these complex works . . . situates herself visibly and aurally in the centre of works that dwell on invisibility, mutism, erasure (e.g., through state censorship and totalitarianism) and the loss of identity culture and history."

*The Body Missing* might stand as the title of her entire oeuvre.

In the meantime, Det. Frenkel is in hot pursuit of missing art. As her homepage moves into its second stage, it will become the centrepiece of a symposium in Bremen this year on "The Lost Art Of World War II."

There's no end to this suspense story, as Frenkel follows the trail of missing works and "documents" the problematic relationships of art ownership