



FERNANDO MORALES/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Experimental filmmaker Vera Frenkel in her Toronto studio: an artist with a mischievous love of artifice and a knack for mixing gin and tonics.

Art that's inside the box (set)

Artist Vera Frenkel's boxed DVD set establishes her life's work as something moving forward into history, **SARAH MILROY** writes

How to prepare for posterity if you work in the ephemeral realm of electronic media? It's a tough one. If you are Gerhard Richter, you paint a canvas and, even if it gets stashed in the deepest recesses of a museum vault, chances are someone will eventually come across it and it will be, at the very least, the same object it was hundreds of years before (albeit with a few wrinkles), and readable in the same physical terms (that is: eyeball on canvas).

With videotape, or DVD (a medium no doubt imminently to be supplanted by yet another visual technology), this is not so clearly the case. We have witnessed this disappearing act already, in the case of early experimental films. Those works that have been transferred to video or DVD have moved forward into history. Those that weren't have been left behind, perhaps forever.

Sitting in her storefront apartment on Toronto's Queen Street on a sweltering hot mid-afternoon

recently (we were meeting to talk about the new boxed DVD set of her life's work), Vera Frenkel was a little reluctant to entertain the morbidity of my question, and it's easy to imagine why.

Eight months ago, she took a nose-dive after hip-replacement surgery that was followed by a series of hospital-induced infections. The experience left her depleted and weak. These days, she is nursing foot surgery (further hurt from those earlier infections), and her mobility is compromised. An-

swering the door when the courier rings, was, I could see, a considerable undertaking, but she was somewhat nimbler when she rose to mix us two gin and tonics, deemed essential libations (and rightly) once the conversation was properly under way.

At first, we talked about the content of the first of the DVDs, which I had screened that morning — her now famous tapes about a fictitious female Canadian novelist that Frenkel invented, named Cornelia Lumsden, a Canadian expatriate

living in Paris between the wars, and the author of a (this is make-believe, remember) 1934 book called *The Imagined Grace of Fat People*. Frenkel's two tapes — titled *The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story. Part 1: Her Room in Paris and The Secret Life of Cornelia Lumsden: A Remarkable Story. Part 2: ... And Now the Truth (A Parenthesis)* — introduce us to a cast of characters mostly played by Frenkel herself. There is a friend of the deceased writer (or was Lumsden's suicide note a hoax?), a be-

spectacled literary scholar presenting a paper on the writer, a rival of the writer, and a CBC female broadcaster breaking a story on the missing Canadian.

In the second of these tapes, another character appears, a woman (not played by Frenkel) who claims to be Susan Cornelia Lumsden. Poised and rather painfully self-restrained, she asks before the camera why Frenkel is making art about her family.

See FRENKEL on page R2

Collection hits the highlights of a remarkable career

FRENKEL from page R1

I asked Frenkel to explain where fiction stopped and reality took over. As it turns out, the woman was not an actress, but a real woman who, in 1979, stood up in the audience in Montreal when Frenkel was giving a presentation about the first of the Lumsden tapes, and started asking questions. She was, she explained, a Canadian novelist living in Paris writing a book about the nature of time, and in the tape she goes on to recount for Frenkel her real family's very real family history.

"I told my friend Marian Engel, the novelist, about this," says Frenkel, clearly still amazed, "and she laughed and said, 'Oh that's nothing! I run into the people that I write about all the time — except for the tall handsome stranger.'"

The boxed DVD set, which is be-

ing distributed by Toronto's Vtape, includes interviews with the artist before each of the works, and an anthology of writings by the artist and on the artist, but still many of these sorts of details are left obscure, reflecting, perhaps, Frenkel's mischievous love of artifice.

She has made a career of it, and the DVD set presents the highlights.

There's *Censored: The Business of Frightened Desires* (1987), a tape she created in response to the heated battle for artistic freedom of expression in the 1980s. It's a glorious, Swiftian spoof on the imaginary workings of the Ontario Censor Board and its heavy-handed enforcement of ratings regulations for a documentary film on the sex life of fleas. (In Frenkel's fictitious tape, it is the flea's unbridled enthusiasm for mating, coupled with its unerring habit of mid-coitus cannibal-

ism, that puts the flea film beyond the realm of the acceptable.)

I ask Frenkel how much fiction is mixed in with the facts she presents. "You mean, did the censor board really require me to have the fleas in costume?" she says, wryly lifting an eyebrow. On the other hand, I ask, who could believe fleas can mate for four hours at a stretch? Such confusions are delightful to her. Nowhere, with the possible exception of the artist collective General Idea (those ultimate makers of mock history), will future art historians have so much trouble sorting fact from fable.

The boxed set brings us more: *This Is Your Messiah Speaking* (a cautionary hymn to the hypnotic powers of consumerism), *The Last Screening Room: A Valentine* (which imagines a dystopic future Canada where storytelling, and rainfall,

have been made illegal), and *The Institute* or *What We Do for Love*, a work that exists both as a video, an installation and a website (www.the-national-institute.org). The tape posits, with lethal irony, the creation of a retirement home for artists funded by the government and located in abandoned hospitals. The first was to be sited in Hamilton, home of then culture minister Sheila Copps.

Every time Frenkel exhibits the work there are audience members who believe *The Institute* is for real, so adept is her mimicry of cultural bureaucracy-speak. The piece toured last year from Toronto to Ottawa and Sudbury and is now being translated for an international tour. In every venue, people have tried to sign up.

A conversation with Frenkel is never closed; it just kind of rolls on

— in our case, for years. A few days after we spoke, I discovered an e-mail on my screen. "I'm mindful of your questions regarding mortality and the prospect of permanent invisibility," she wrote to me. "As you've pointed out, such questions hover around any substantial collection of work, in this instance, the DVD set and, yes, I do feel some ambivalence about having gathered together so much work in one collection. But while it's true that a cross-section of the production of three decades is more than a snapshot, there's sufficient transience implicit in the project to keep me happy."

She continued: "I should confess that I've agreed to be a canary in the mine for the major research project on the care, feeding and preservation of new media initiated by the Daniel Langlois Foundation in

Montreal. The Queen's University archive will receive most of my papers and working materials in both analogue and digital formats, and will host that part of the study, so any notions I may cherish about disappearing completely may be thwarted. What happens next is anyone's guess, and up to curators, conservators and critics. And if the work isn't of interest, so be it. That's been the case with much art of merit in all eras, even or perhaps especially the big and heavy *Ozymandias*-like efforts to fight time. Art and its meanings get lost or go in and out of focus, and maybe they are meant to."

Of Memory and Displacement: Vera Frenkel: Collected Works is available for purchase through Vtape. For information call 416-351-1317.