

## A Bureaucratic Poetics

Elizabeth Legge

The following passages are excerpted from a paper given by Elizabeth Legge at the symposium on Vera Frenkel's work, ***Body Missing: From Theft to Virtuality: Considerations of the Meanings of Absence*** (Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, March 21 – 22, 2003). They trace a trajectory of concerns through Vera Frenkel's previous work as these inform her current project. The full text will appear in the symposium-based anthology proposed by Griselda Pollock and published under the auspices of the University of Leeds Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History, which Dr. Pollock directs.

Vera Frenkel's practice as an artist has been associated with complex video installations about evasive characters in evocative settings —the generic bureaucratic office of a pornographer, or the 1930's Paris hotel room of a Canadian novelist, Cornelia Lumsden, who has inexplicably disappeared.

Another installation,...from the Transit Bar (originally built at ***documenta IX***, 1992) is set in a working piano bar. In it, on six “television” screens, speakers talk about their experiences of immigration, loss of cultural identity, and exclusion. ...*from the Transit Bar* provides a framing narrative for a website, ***Body Missing***.

Frenkel's experiences as artist-in-residence in Austria: at the <sup>29</sup> Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna (where Hitler had been twice rejected as a prospective art student, and where Nazi sympathizers on its staff later collaborated with Hitler's art theft policies), and at the Offenes Kulturhaus Centrum für Gegenwartskunst (in Hitler's home town, Linz) inspired the ostensible subject of ***Body Missing***. It addresses the Kunstraub, the Nazi's secret wartime theft and transportation of works of art from all over Europe, especially those works destined for the planned vast Führer Museum at Linz, which were

hidden in the salt mines at Alt Aussee. After the war, the decimated remains of these hoards were discovered by the Allies. Many of the displaced artworks had already disappeared, and still remain untraced.

*Body Missing* is a collaborative work, and all the artists and writers who contribute to it play “Transit Bar regulars”, mysterious operatives enjoined by Frenkel to make some empathetic reparative “gesture” toward “an earlier artist and an absent work.” Frenkel’s project suggests that we, the viewers, are also bar “regulars,” who occupy a time and space in which our participation and knowledge could influence —and, more chillingly, might have influenced —the course of events. There is an uneasy sense that we may be cast as collaborators as well as contributors, then, and now. Frenkel’s attention to Nazi cultural policy shades into concern with contemporary appeals to nation-based culture, such as the regressive, pan-Germanic cultural vision of Jörg Heider’s Austrian Freedom party.

This interest in our implication in contemporary political situations leads us out of *Body Missing* into Frenkel’s current project, *The Institute™: Or, What We Do for Love*. In the wake of the drastic reductions in government spending on the public health system and on arts grants, Frenkel imagines the Canadian government passing a Bill to transform vacant hospitals into a coast to coast chain of residences for senior artists: The National Institute for the Arts (known informally as “*The Institute™*”)

In a fictitious present, a real Minister of Culture and Heritage, Sheila Copps, opens the first branch in a decommissioned hospital in Hamilton, Ontario. Hamilton, a steel town trying to weather the shift from the old production-line heavy manufacturing to a post Fordist improvised economy, has been trying to enhance its “arts profile.” As elsewhere, arts institutions function as a kind of front, masking actually unstable economic and

social conditions. *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> bears its “”<sup>TM</sup>” to signal its relationship to the privatized and corporate chains of medical clinics envisioned by spending cuts.

In Frenkel ’s ironic vision of the new Canada, former hospitals, logically, provide homes for “mature” artists, riters, and musicians. These are staffed by laid-off cultural bureaucrats from downsized government agencies (such as the Canada Council, the National Film Board, and the CBC). Frenkel ’s bureaucrats have displayed an exemplary post Fordist flexibility and zeal for reinventing themselves and their skills, and have been “retrained” in order to play a part in the brave new showcase world of *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>

<sup>TM</sup>

There are ways in which *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> seems to be heterotopically nested within the *Transit Bar* within *Body Missing* .As we navigate through both websites, we click our way through the floor plans and ambiguous photographs of their imagined architectures. The bitterly ironic associations of concentration camp and museum within *Body Missing* now extend to the hospital as arts institute as retirement “home.”

Frenkel ’s website in progress is a masterpiece of intentionally second rate corporate website design with its attendant jargon and **euphemismS**. The subtitle of *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> is: “Or,What We Do for Love” . With characteristic asperity, this phrase directs our attention to the pious official line that government policies (including slashed funding) always exist for the social good.

One bridge between Frenkel ’s work in *Body Missing* and *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> has to do with the nature and functioning of state bureaucracy. The inconceivably vast bureaucratic apparatus of the Kunstraub finds its bland demonic double in the administration of a Canadian arts institute. If the habitués of the *Transit Bar* operating within *Body Missing*

have their ghostly doubles in the lost works of art that they must address, and, implicitly, in the bodies lost to the Holocaust; they also, bathetically, now have doubles in the personae of the residents of *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>

The Austrian novelist Heimito von Doderer observed that, “Just like a work of art, an act [a bureaucratic protocol ] has an independent and autonomous existence, separate from the whole world.” Can we read bureaucratic dossiers and reports not only in terms of their currency value as standardized units, but also, poetically?

If so, what would a “bureaucratic poetics” be? One example might well be Frenkel ’s work with records and lists and official documents within *Body Missing*, and with the lovingly simulated corporate prose and mission statement and institutional regulations within *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>.

*The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> is an ironic apotheosis of Canada ’s nationalized vision of its culture. The artists, who represent at least the raw materials of that vision are fictively situated in one building with the administrators of that vision, whose interests the artists must serve. *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> is a trivialization of the historical art academy (and we recall Frenkel ’s artist in residency at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna). The defunct notion of an academy, with its attendant rhetoric of agreed upon excellence and standards and enduring values, signals its own moribund antiquity —the academy can only exist as a retirement home.

Moreover, the romantic notion that putting a number of artists together in one place will produce a kind of energy exchange and spontaneous combustion of creativity, comes up against the fundamentally solitary and occasionally unsociable nature of intellectual or artistic endeavour. In administrative terms, there ’s a “herding

cats” problem. *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> takes the form of a “ combination bureaucracy/adhocracy;” in which the professional has the best of both worlds: attached to an organization, yet free to function in her own way, free even from the need to coordinate closely with peers. In such an environment, the professional can, potentially, evade all the “pressures and politics” that peer interaction entails.

But, of course, as most institutional professionals know, freedom from peer interaction entails the inevitable consequence of fearing that, in the absence of such interaction or monitoring, some peer, somewhere, will be up to something. It is just that seeping paranoia that Frenkel ’s personae in *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> so effectively embody, as do the fragments of gossip and rumour amongst residents and administrators, and the deadpan accounts of intrusive surveillance and petty rules and regulations. *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> evokes the generic malaise of “the institution.”

(An important thread of Frenkel ’s work has been recognition of “plot” in the sense both of narrative and of conspiracy. Not coincidentally, one resident of *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> is working on a libretto for an opera of Kafka ’s *The Trial* .)

The residents of *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup> we gather from Frenkel ’s preliminary radio play, Artists in Residence are already in a state of anxiety. They worry that *The Institute*<sup>TM</sup>, like the hospital that preceded it, will be closed down. A chorus of bureaucrats recite the mantra of bureaucratic method as a form of subversion: it protects itself by being effectively functionless, except as a mode of putting things off. “*We manage ...We manage ...this branch /Of a country-wide chain /Of residences for /Mature artists /In the course of which we .../Make no decisions /Escape all responsibility/Invent valid objections?/...To any proposed solution ...We have no power /Which gives us /...Endless Authority.*”

This raises the ambiguous status of the artist, who has been put —as the euphemism goes —into a “home.” One rhetoric that has sustained ideal communities has been that of hygiene and health, from Hausmann ’s Paris to Port Sunlight to any new housing development we might visit. These utopian communities boast what we might now call amenities: swimming pools, sports complexes, libraries, and so on. But this recreational hygiene shades into the therapeutic: As the “Chorus of the Bureaucrats” in Frenkel ’s related radio play “Artists in Residence” makes clear, while the presence of artists is suffered in *The Institute*<sup>™</sup> yet they must be held in check: **“Everyone knows that artists,/like children or madmen,/Are powerless or nuts./Or both.”** The mad, infantilized, institutionalized spectre of the artist in *The Institute*<sup>™</sup> as hospital as home takes us back both to management problems of adhocracries; and again, back to the *Body Missing*, to the hospital as prototype death camp and site of early experiments in murdering society ’s anomalies.

Vera Frenkel ’s work embodies the darkness of the individual and socio-political psyche and its apparatuses, while directing us, as *Transit Bar* regulars, to make some reparation for what has been lost: a subjective gesture —moral, artistic, intellectual, poetical, ethical —however we want to put it —toward making reparation.

©Elizabeth Legge, 2003