

# Searing, daring, not exactly real

B2—THE SUDBURY STAR, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 2004

"In an effort to enhance its bottom-line, and concurrently address the varied wellness needs of the country's aging creative class, the Art Gallery of Sudbury has become a show-home for the National Institute of the Arts.

"For the next several weeks, gallery curator/director Celeste Scopelites will act as tour guide and sales agent for this national chain of retirement homes for our most respected geriatric artists.

"The homes — the bricks and mortar realization of a visionary public/private partnership — have flowered in the skeletal remains of abandoned hospitals, deemed obsolete during a particularly aggressive, but fiscally necessary decade of governmental constraint in both the health care and cultural sectors."

If any of the proceeding struck you as real, plausible or even tolerable, you are the very person that Canadian multidisciplinary artist Vera Frenkel wants to reach out to, grasp and shake forcefully.

Frenkel's sardonic, searing, sometimes uproarious and oddly compassionate *The Institute, Or, What We Do For Love*, is not exactly real. But it bares more than enough resemblance to current institutional/bureaucratic culture to both infuriate and enlighten gallery visitors.

Among the giants of contemporary Canadian art, Frenkel has transformed the historic Bell Mansion into a venue for her internationally acclaimed brand of fictional documentary. The multimedia work can be baffling at first blush, but becomes, with a little effort, deeply engaging on a number of levels.

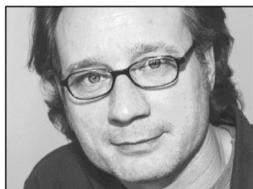
If you enter the gallery with an expectation of finding a traditional aesthetic — i.e. paintings on the wall or objects on the floor — your hopes will be dashed. Web pages projected on giant screens and mounted in museum quality frames, computers on desks and office furniture retrieved from the utility rooms of various local institutions, are the objet d'art of this project.

## Explanation, defence

If you seek an art that challenges preconceived notions of what art is, an art that scrapes away at the cold rationality that lies just under the skin of contemporary bureaucracies and exposes its inhumanity this is a show you will want to spend an afternoon exploring.

Frenkel's explanation and defence of *The Institute, Or, What We Do For Love*, is as compelling as the work itself. Among the most articulate and intelligent people you're likely to meet, she sees the work as an evolving commentary on how decisions based on contemporary economic efficiency models — i.e. the deficit-fighting decisions of recent governments — has eroded the health care system and gutted once thriving cultural institutions, while relegating many senior artists to a life of near destitution.

"It's art because it shapes reality in



Rob O'Flanagan

THE SUDBURY STAR

**"We live in a very complex world, and there are betrayals everywhere, with government and other authorities ... I think the artist has a responsibility to be alert to those things, and point them out."**

—Vera Frenkel

ways that may not have been evident to the person coming in off the street," she said in an interview.

"As happens with many socially engaged practices, it's designed to treat the viewer as an equal, not as subordinate."

This is hands-on, interactive art — art you can play around with, pose questions to (literally) and sit down with.

Frenkel is decidedly skeptical of the contemporary world, and considers it her responsibility as an artist to evoke skepticism in her viewers.

"We live in a very complex world, and there are betrayals everywhere, with government and other authorities," she said. "I think the artist has a responsibility to be alert to those things, and point them out. That's what I'm doing."

Explore the many layers of *The Institute* and you meet an array of characters — from the bureaucrats that run the facilities (their pictures are like composite police sketches, artificially aged, or badly reproduced obituary photos) to residents with complex personalities and an array of personal aspirations and ills.

Underscoring the entire work is a disturbing unreality, a scathing indictment of the system, and a strong odour of morbidity. The troubling irony and symbolism of housing accomplished artists in refurbished hospitals (both the artists and the former health-care facilities have been victimized by government cut-backs) plays on the viewer from first glance, and intensifies as you delve deeper into the work.

I left, after a third viewing, with the sense that these residents were actually prisoners, caged birds in a system designed by bureaucratic functionaries to be a kind of jail of the imagination.



Frenkel

*We'll have to show that there was no coercion, and maybe make some tax ad*  
*We feel strongly that these materials are part of our collective cultural heri*  
*And of course we can take better care of them than their families can.*

**Institute™**  
**Health**  
 The Copps Clinic opened

A word on this special occasion from the Minister of Health and Culture

The Institute's™ Humiliation has inspired from its inception to provide its clients with the highest possible level of health care.

We are proud to minister to creative in their respective fields, as well as their families, and we believe that it does so in the most informed and subtle

Mindful of the need of our residents to be able to manage their own well-being, the Institute™ has developed a number of services and as a result, our clients are given

From Head Nurse to Chaplain, from the most respected staff, Residents of The Institute™ are given the opportunity to be heard and to be seen.

*It gives me the great pleasure to welcome you all to celebrate this very special occasion*

*This hospital, where so many of us were born, or came for medical attention, or when the fates decreed that we were to die, where we were to be buried, is now a part of our lives.*

**A Message from the Minister**

PHOTO SUPPLIED TO THE SUDBURY STAR

Vera Frenkel's *The Institute, Or, What We Do For Love*, challenges everything we knew — or thought we knew — about art and its role in society.

## ARTS REVIEW

Though marketed (through gut-turning bureaucratic language) as a deeply caring, healthy environment, the fictitious National Institute of the Arts is really a veiled and failed form of compensation for past neglect. The facility's shortcomings become apparent as you explore the exhibition.

"The most profound irony," said Frenkel, speaking of the many layers of irony in the exhibition, "is what people do with artists that are in their prime, where the system pays very little attention to them, and focuses almost entirely on emerging artists."

The "full trajectory" of the lifespan of artists, she said, is not respected in this country.

"If I have a critique, it is that the ageism that inhibits many realms, also inhibits the realm of art practice, art support. And there seems to be no long view."

The Institute, we learn, is run by a top-notch board of directors, and a staff of retrained workers who loyally served the very facilities that came under the cleansing fiscal policies of the 1990s.

Frenkel's contempt is most evidence when we access the board of directors page, and read their glowing bios. Here, the line between fiction and reality is most blurred: This actually could be the board of directors of any major arts institution.

We meet Derek Eisen, a successful optician, and read: "With so many artists relying on their eyesight for the realization of their work, it is especially helpful to have an optician on board."

Or Jayne M. Farnsworth, a lawyer with a specialty in estate planning and intellectual property issues (the

Institute encourages artists to bequeath their work to the facility). Jayne is an avid collector of ceramics and wooden duck decoys, and is therefore infinitely qualified to appreciate the creative work done by residents.

On first encountering Frenkel's work, I was struck by a different kind of irony. Here is an internationally acclaimed visual artist who has been supported along the way by various public granting agencies and arts institutions, and yet she has the gall and the arrogance to turn around and lambaste the very system that supported her. How dare she?

"The crux of your question is, how dare I bite the hand that feeds me," she countered. "First of all, it is part of my job, just as it's part of the journalist's job not to be taken in by your subject. You have to remain alert to what's being said and done.

"I'm immensely grateful for what I've received, but I'm also immensely vigilant for the deterioration of that time when I was able to get that support."

Frenkel is not trying to change the world, only to bring it under closer scrutiny, and to encourage others to do the same.

"I have no notion of making the revolution," she said. "I think part of my task is building skepticism. I really am interested in inviting people into the role of citizen. That, to me, means that they feel they have the right to criticize, the right to question, the right to be heard at whatever level they are willing to speak. I find that the work frees people to a certain extent to do that."

● Vera Frenkel's *The Institute, Or, What We Do for Love* is at the Art Gallery of Sudbury, 251 John St., until Oct. 17. Hours are Tuesday to Sunday 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.