

# Threads of Memory and Exile: Examining the Art of Storytelling in the Work of Vera Frenkel

by Dot Tuer

It is a testimony to the simultaneous ephemeral and tangible qualities of Vera Frenkel's video art that years after I first viewed her videotape, *Her Room in Paris*, I still retain a vivid image of the room in which the central character of the tape, Cornelia Lumsden, a little known but brilliant Canadian writer, wrote a great novel in exile and then mysteriously disappeared.

The room as I remember it is small and cluttered, with loose papers curling at the edges and faded flowered wallpaper peeling. A gray diffuse light filters through lace covered windows that open onto a mournful Paris sky. A stately oak desk dwarfs a threadbare couch over which a shawl is carelessly thrown. The memory is picture perfect, flawless in its detail, except for one troubling aspect. I am convinced that a video monitor is present amongst the loose papers and worn objects of the room. This however, is impossible, since Cornelia wrote her novels in the period between the two World Wars before there was television.



Watching the videotape again, I discover that the room I had imagined in all its detail does not exist. More precisely, the videotape is not about the material evidence of Lumsden and her writing sanctuary, but about its absence. The viewer never actually sees the room, although it is true that one blurred black and white photograph of it is momentarily displayed before the camera. Instead, one is a witness to the testimonies of an expert, a friend, a rival, a lover and a CBC reporter who proffer information and rumours concerning Lumsden's life and the circumstances surrounding the mystery of her death. I discover that what I have retained all these years are the traces of an after-image, a fictional recon-

struction of a room in Paris stitched together from the scattered clues and artifice of Frenkel's narratives. I harbour a memory, that, like Frenkel's work, moves between the act of seeing and the act of remembering.

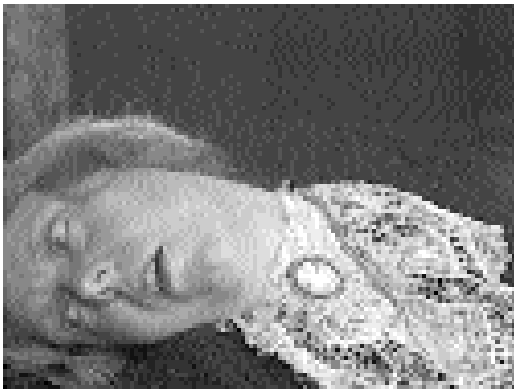
In Frenkel's videos, this illumination of memory as simultaneously real and fabricated threads together themes of exile and displacement, loss and longing, into a rich tapestry of work spanning (at this writing) twenty-three years.

From her earliest experimentation with telepresence in *String Games: Improvisation for Inter-City Video* (1974) to her current *Body Missing* website (1995 and ongoing), Frenkel engages the viewer in an active process of piecing together meaning from fractured points of view. From her single channel videotape *Introduction to Some of the Players (No Solution – A Suspense Thriller, #2)* to her videodisc installation "...from the Transit Bar", she is concerned with a conceptual model of interactivity rather than with the sanctity of the image, creating in the process an ongoing interrogation of how remembering and forgetting are cast into flux by new technologies.

This is the catalogue essay for the Vera Frenkel Spotlight Programme at the Images Festival of Film, Video and New Media, Toronto, 1997. Curator of that Programme, Dot Tuer, is a cultural theorist and writer on new media with a special interest in the impact on culture of changing technologies.

While each of Frenkel's individual works offers the viewer distinctive pathways into an entangled web of memory and technology, what is also remarkable is the way in which the works interconnect. On a formal level, the migration of images and characters and themes from one tape to another multiply potential interpretations and meanings. On a conceptual level, the destabilization of narrative conventions such as the detective or romance genres lead to a profusion of possible truths and fictions. Through the ancient ritual of storytelling, Frenkel has created a representational realm that finds a contemporary parallel in the hyper-text junctures and chimerical on-line identities of the World Wide Web. But while the electronic landscape of the Web promises redemption through the blurring of boundaries between consciousness and simulation, Frenkel's work cautions against false messiahs preaching a technological salvation.

In the World Wide Web, the computer screen serves as a window that opens onto a seemingly endless expanse of information. Within this vast network of archives and web pages, chat lines and databases, hypertext charts multiple pathways through a labyrinthine territory, and promises to reconfigure what we know and remember. Through the invention of on-line identities, surrogate personalities promise the freedom to discard our bodies and forget our histories.



In contrast to the Web's promise of redemption through the blurring of boundaries between consciousness and simulation, Frenkel's work cautions against false messiahs preaching a technological salvation. In Frenkel's work, the video screen reflects back to the viewer an electronic landscape filled with elusive ghosts and discordant memories. The intimate disclosures and deceptions in her storytelling link disparate fragments of information to call into question how we know and remember. Rather than inventing surrogate personalities, Frenkel's use of fictional identities discloses the existence of missing bodies and forgotten histories. In a prescient, and almost uncanny manner, Frenkel creates a technological horizon in which it is the structure of memory rather than the structure of information that is reconfigured.

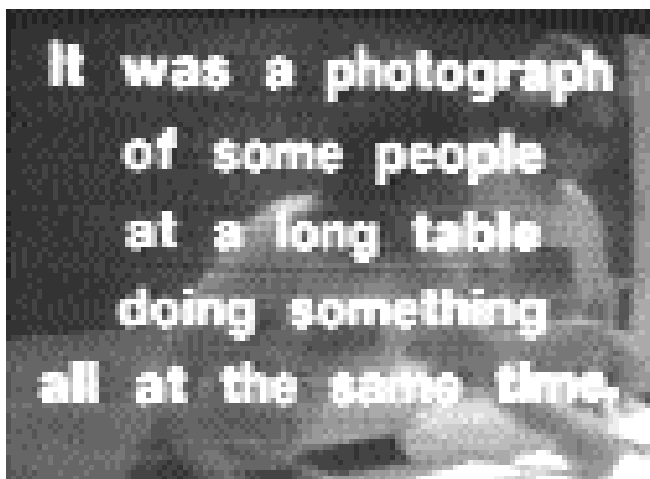
Take, for example, the mysterious identity of Cornelia Lumsden, the obscure but brilliant Canadian writer who is first conjured by Frenkel through a ghostly absence in *Her Room in Paris*. In a strange turn of events, a chance encounter between Frenkel and a woman claiming to be a member of the Lumsden family unsettles a delicate ecology of fabrication. Frenkel was giving a lecture in Montréal when a woman rose from her seat in the audience and demanded to know by what right the artist was using the Lumsden name in a work of art. A reenactment of this confrontation subsequently forms the underpinning of Frenkel's videotape, "... And Now, The Truth", (A Parenthesis). In this tape, the story of the "real" Lumsden (whose mother's name is also Cornelia and who writes novels in Paris) builds upon the testimonies of *Her Room in Paris* to create another layer of memory and dissimulation.

In "... And Now, The Truth", an interview takes place between the woman claiming to be a member of the Lumsden family and an expert on the novelist's life and work played by Frenkel. The juxtapositions of the expert's knowledge, accumulated from years of careful study, and the memories that the "real" Lumsden divulges about her past, replete with snapshots of the family castle in Scotland, deepen the enigma of Cornelia Lumsden. Although improbable, it seems plausible that an encounter between the artist and the "real" Lumsden did occur. Yet the tall tales the latter tells of the family's genealogy and the curious coincidences that emerge between herself and

Frenkel's fictional character heighten a suspicion that not only Cornelia but the family member has been fabricated by the artist's hand. However, the more intricate and entangled the web of memories becomes, the more tangible Cornelia Lumsden seems.

With the same ease with which Lumsden appears to slip in and out of Cornelia Lumsden's life and Frenkel's storytelling, the viewer begins to slip in and out of a belief in the novelist's existence. She seems so familiar that I am sure I have stumbled upon a reference to her writing in one of those voluminous and dusty tomes on Canadian literature that I occasionally pull at random from the library shelf.

What makes Cornelia Lumsden so real in the viewer's mind is not only the interplay of truth and fiction, but the emotions that her story of exile evokes. Through her enigmatic absence, Cornelia Lumsden becomes a cipher for feelings of alienation and dreams of belonging that mark the experience of exile. She becomes a repository for the gaps and ellipses of history that stories of exile elicit.



When Cornelia Lumsden wrote her novel, *The Alleged Grace of Fat People* in 1934, Paris was still an artistic Mecca for avant-garde coteries while in Berlin the National Socialists had just come to power. As Canadian writers and artists looked to Europe for the freedom to reinvent cultural boundaries, the first refugees from Hitler's fascism were fleeing Germany. By 1979/80, when Frenkel made the Cornelia Lumsden tapes, exile as a form of creative alienation was already a modernist myth, described by Frenkel at the time as "Canada's favourite folk-tale". In the post-war period, it was mass media images and instantaneous satellite transmissions rather than artists that promised the reinvention of

cultural boundaries. The ideological divisions and geographical barriers of the Cold War, rather than fascism, dominated economics and politics. Of the massive displacements of peoples and histories wrought by the ravages of World War II, barely a whisper was heard.

Hemmed in by television signals and ideological silences, many artists of the 1970s sought to bridge the alienation of the self from technology by turning the lens of the video camera back upon themselves. Using the grainy images, awkward close-up framing and feedback capabilities of primitive portapak video to enact an intimate mirroring of body and machine, they created in the process what art historian Rosalind Krauss has termed an "aesthetics of narcissism." As one of Canada's leading artists, Frenkel did not use video to reflect the body back upon itself but chose instead to use the emergent technology of video to record the fragmentation of the body and of narrative. Holding up the video camera as a witness to the alienation of the self from technology, she became a detective in an electronic surface of appearances, questioning what was forgotten and what was unspoken in the impending ascendancy of the simulacrum over reality.

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In Frenkel's earliest video work, *String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video*, (1974) she orchestrated a live teleconferencing transmission between two groups of people playing a game of *Cat's Cradle* between Montréal and Toronto. Although the technology of telepresence offered the illusion that the participants could see and touch each other, what the viewer witnesses in the video documentation of the event are the

disjointed and incongruous gestures of the participants. Seeking to string together a seamless pattern of interaction, the players reveal instead a disorientation of body and place. What connects their gestures is not the teleconferencing camera but an imaginary thread that they are passing back and forth between them. In the passage of this thread that falls into a space between transmitted images, Frenkel's work alludes to what is lost in electronic transmission.

In subsequent works, such as *Introduction to Some of the Players and Signs of a Plot: A Text, True Story & Work of Art*, the game of *Cat's Cradle* becomes a mystery puzzle; in *Stories from the Front (& the Back)* and *The Last Screening Room: A Valentine* it becomes a true, blue romance. The cast of players is increasingly complex; the imaginary thread that connects their actions increasingly entangled. Missing bodies, a novelist in exile, banned storytellers and state censors populate the narratives. In the process, storytelling emerges as an antidote to the simulacrum while the poignancy of the participants' gestures in *String Games: Improvisation for Inter-City Video* remains an underlying constant in the fracturing of narrative. In the participants desire to reach out across time and space to touch one another, their actions embody the search for a connectivity that is central to Frenkel's exploration of new technologies in her work.

When *String Games: Improvisation for Inter-City Video* was made in the 1970s, the World Wide Web was still in its infancy, born of and carefully nurtured by a military-industrial complex. The materialization of a desire to reach across time and space was a distant mirage on the technological horizon. By the 1990s, the Web had become a household word and the divisions of the Cold War had given way to a global embrace of instantaneous communication. As a counterpoint to this increasingly totalizing vision of cyberspace, Frenkel's 1992 videodisc installation, "... from the Transit Bar", restages the disorientation of body and place first enacted in *String Games* as a deterritorialization of memory and space. Here, exile as a metaphor for alienation and displacement first conjured in the enigmatic absence of Cornelia Lumsden becomes the embodied dislocations of languages and histories.

In "... from the Transit Bar", Frenkel constructs a working piano bar within a gallery setting. The walls of the bar are slightly skewed and false windows open onto still life tableaux of fake palm trees, suitcases and raincoats. As viewers meet to sip drinks, or perhaps talk to the bartender, they are also witnesses to stories that unfold on six video monitors placed in the walls and on the bar and piano. On the monitors, fourteen friends of the artist tell tales of forced emigration and border crossings; they recount memories formed by war, trauma, and displacement. Although the subtitles on the monitors are in alternating French or German or English, the voice-over languages are Yiddish and Polish. The viewer, straining to thread together the narrative fragments she or he hears, literally inhabits the space between image transmissions. From this location, the viewer experiences exile as an alienation of the self from history rather than from technology; she, or he, encounters the echoes of memories linking real bodies across time and space.

Similar to the way in which "... from the Transit Bar" turns the conceptual premise of *String Games* inside out, Frenkel's most recent work, *Body Missing*, intertwines the detective genre explored in *Introduction to Some of the Players and Signs of a Plot: A Text, True Story & Work of Art* with the archival task of history. In the earlier works, a mystery revolves around the missing corpse of *Sample Art Broom*. Although there is a crime scene, the body cannot be found, and thus the reasons for its disappearance cannot be solved. In its absence, Frenkel, the narrator turned detective, gathers scattered clues and a trail of evidence to knit together an open-ended plot with an unexpected twist. In *Body*

Missing, first exhibited as a multiple channel video installation in the Offenes Kulturhaus (now the OK Centrum fuer Gegenwartskunst) in Linz, Austria in 1994, the mystery is about the art-theft policies of the Third Reich and the lost artworks that Hitler had stored in a salt mine near Linz during World War II. Returning to the era when Lumsden was writing her novel in exile, Frenkel collects evidence from archival lists and photographs, conversations overheard in cafes and the memories of people who witnessed events at the time. She is part detective, part storyteller and part archaeologist, excavating a genealogy of art and politics.

In her subsequent adaptation of the Body Missing video installation as a website, Frenkel's work comes full circle. The tools of new technology now deepen the enigma of history in the



same way that the video screen deepened the enigma of Cornelia Lumsden. Integrating the ancient ritual of storytelling with the connective possibilities of hypertext, Frenkel links her investigation of the lost works of art and the web pages of artists she has invited to mount their own inquiries, to narrative fragments culled from the stories told in "... from the Transit Bar". In a continuing quest to reconfigure the structure of memory, she unveils a complex mapping of representation in which the act of remembering is now dispersed across both historical time and electronic space.

While Frenkel's strategies of narrative fragmentation and her interplay of real and fabricated evidence adapt well to the structures of the World Wide Web, her works are at

the same time cautionary tales against a too seamless adaptation. Through the weaving of her stories, Frenkel warns against abandoning our bodies to the realm of simulation and our histories to a technocratic vision of the future. In *Censored: the Business of Frightened Desires*, the sexual habits of fleas come under the magnifying glass of the censor to alert us to the power of the state to control our images and our narratives. In *The Last Screening Room: A Valentine*, a story about a time in Canada when storytelling is banned and memory is considered a highly flawed form of data, Frenkel presents the viewer with a dystopic and ironic version of exile as a form of alienation from our own culture.

At the end of *The Last Screening Room*, the narrator reveals that an imprisoned storyteller had in her possession a scarf embroidered with the initials C.L. Although the narrator in the videotape dismisses speculations that the storyteller might have been the enigmatic Cornelia Lumsden, the viewer feels reassured nevertheless that through these traces, the legacy remains of a time when the recounting of the past was revered as a form of reinventing cultural boundaries. The initials serve as a material residue of the deep belief that underlies all of Frenkel's work: a belief in the power of memory rather than technology to give shape to the incorporeal, and the potency of storytelling to breathe life into art.

In .... And Now The Truth, this belief is manifested in the images of Japanese Bunraku puppeteers practising their craft of animating nearly life size marionettes. As ancient as the ritual of storytelling, Bunraku puppetry involves a lifetime apprenticeship in which years are devoted to perfecting simulated movements that render inert matter lifelike. Revealing the hand that lies behind the mimicry of life, Frenkel offers the viewer a metaphor for the mechanics of new technologies. As viewers, we can accept the puppets as real, or we can begin to search for the threads that animate their gestures.

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Through her artwork, Frenkel invites the viewer to choose the latter. To engage with Frenkel's videos is to find our own pathways through her interwoven narratives of exile and history; to create our own memories from her interplay of truths and fictions. □