

## ***from the Transit Bar***

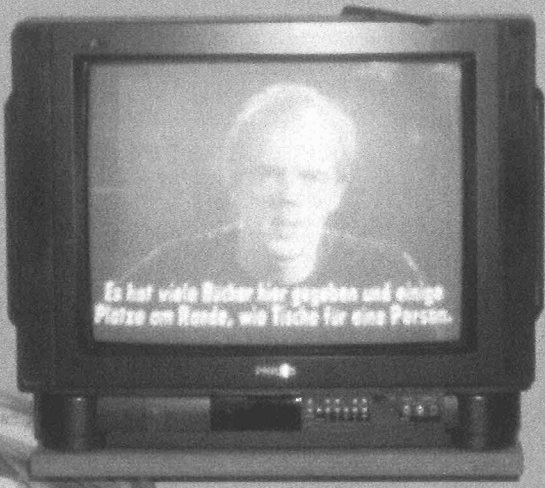
Vera Frenkel

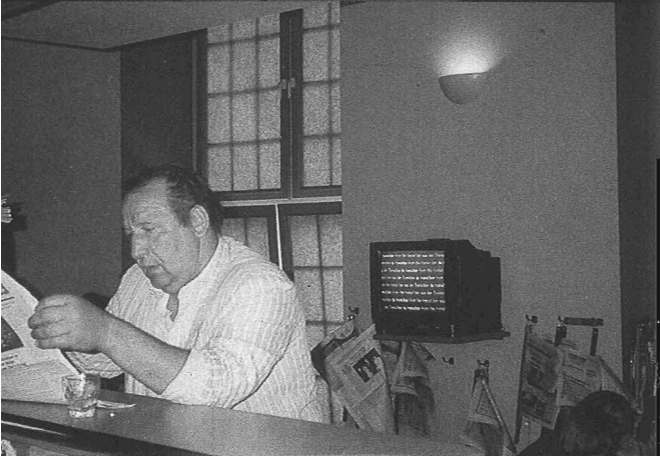
*from the Transit Bar, was a site-specific, six-channel videodisc work made by Frenkel for Documenta IX (1992) in Kassel, Germany. It featured a functional piano bar with video monitors situated on the bar itself, on the piano, and in the walls of the room. Some of the monitors had Polish voice-overs while the others featured Yiddish voices. Together, the various voices wove different accounts of the experience of moving from one country and culture to another. These video stories converged with the live and transient stories that Frenkel herself heard while she served behind the bar. The following account of from the Transit Bar was compiled by Public from a number of current sources, including an interview by Dot Tuer in Vera Frenkel: Raincoats, Suitcases, Palms, and the artist's book The Bar Report, both published by the Art Gallery of York University, 1993.*

When I was first invited to make a work for *Documenta IX*, a number of memories and concerns emerged. I was shown three or four possible sites in the Museum Fridericianum, all of them wonderful, but they also seemed too dramatic, too sacred. I was looking for a simpler, more vernacular space, and then when I walked into the empty corner gallery I thought that what it needed was a bar. Standing there, I had this sudden longing to hear the voices of my grandparents. I had never known them, but I had been told that both sets of grandparents spoke a number of middle and eastern European languages, including Yiddish, Polish, Hungarian, Czech, and German. So, my visit to determine where my work would be installed prompted a longing to hear in that space in one of Germany's oldest museums the languages that, had things been different, I might have spoken.

This intuitive realization that what the space needed was a bar became the confirming moment around which the work began. I wanted to make a place where everyday rights could be acknowledged and enjoyed and in the form of a work that addressed recent European/North American migration history. I discovered while making the work that it related to current events in Germany rather more immediately than I might have liked. Just as I was completing the installation, the firebombing of the refugee centres began, and the responses of many of the people who visited the bar suggested that my concerns about language, race, diaspora, alienation, and loss or change of identity were shared and had deep resonances in Europe today.

After Rostock (the immigrant hostel that was firebombed by two young neo-Nazis) I





called Harald Kühn, director of *Rat und Hilfe im Asyl* (Advice and Help in Asylum), where I had hoped that the Transit Bar proceeds might go. I asked him whether it would endanger the residents of the hostel if I were to mention it in the on-air interview I was about to do with a local television station. "You must say everything openly, whoever asks," he said. "We are anxious, of course. We live with anxiety. We know the risk we take and we do it willingly. If you do not have the right to speak about us in public, then they have already won!"

One of the premises of the project was that bars allow for the kind of candid disclosures that are often only possible when you believe that you will never see the other person again, that the stranger in whom you are confiding will remain a stranger. In *from the Transit Bar*, the interwoven disclosures that appear on the monitors provide an arena for these kinds of candid dialogues between strangers who are only "passing through." As Cornelia Lumsden, the Canadian novelist, has suggested, these forms of alienation constitute a genuine folk-culture, perhaps the only one we have.

The experience of the bar was a layered one. If you remained in the bar long enough, this "folk-culture" might "reveal" itself to you, and the bar itself become what one observer described as "an oasis that isn't: a problematized oasis." Midway through your drink, looking at the monitors and listening to the mix of live and recorded voices in the room, you might become aware that only people who spoke either Polish or Yiddish could understand all the video stories. These were the languages that carried the full narrative sequence of the work. There are other languages that would have been just as appropriate, but I chose Polish and Yiddish because they were connected to my own personal history. The subtitles were in English, French, and German, but they alternated from speaker to speaker.

While I was in Kassel I worked behind the bar every day and heard many stories. One day a woman who had been in

the bar a few times previously for a late afternoon drink put her passport on the counter while I finished pouring her a vodka. She showed me the stamp, *Statenlos* (stateless), that was imprinted across her photograph. "After the war," she said, in heavily accented German, "I went back and began to look."

"Other people had lived in the house but over the big pipes in the basement I found a box of documents, and a suitcase full of bedding. The woman living there was nice enough at first, but then she got impatient. 'What will you do with all these things? They are only papers,' she said. 'Where will you put them all?' Love letters from my father to my mother. An affidavit about an attempted rape of his sister. Children's drawings. And in the suitcase, between blankets, the photographs and the old passports. 'They are only papers,' she said again. 'I can get rid of them for you. It won't cost you much.' And again, 'Where will you put them all? 'In my heart,' I said. The woman laughed. 'But your heart can't be so big,' she said. 'Look again,' I told her."

"And where are the papers now?," Peter, who also worked at the bar with me, asked her. "In my heart," she said.

Recently I attended a symposium in Toronto sponsored by the Goethe-Institut and the Art Gallery of Ontario. It was called "Identity in a Foreign Place," and amongst other things it addressed different experiences of being a foreigner in Canada, in a country which is constitutively heterogeneous and where everyone is an immigrant or the descendant of an immigrant. After one of the first sessions, I met a German couple who expressed some disappointment: "We thought Canada had solved these problems. In Germany we think of Canada as an ideal place from the point of view of race relations." It was a strange moment for me. I explained to them that legislated rights are one thing, and the reality of the street, "out there," quite another. *from the Transit Bar* addressed, in part, the incommensurability of these two poles of identity.

