



Faculty of Art

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Mad For bliss: Vera Frenkel at The Music Gallery, Toronto

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Such a decentralization of history serves firstly to deconstruct linear history and subsequently forms the foundation for a non-hierarchical, open-ended reading of history.

Roy Arden scrutinizes the manipulative nature of photographic representation, reconstructing these limiting codes into an open and de-centralized site of communication and exchange. Conversely, Dominique Blain prescribes a state of closure by re-writing the historical within the discursive structures of representation. Her archeological artifacts, remaining uncommunicative, deny the possibility of overcoming representation's shortcomings, shortcomings that prevent an open, unmediated reading of the original historical subject. We are thus met with two opposing discourses: one of denial and one of hope. Roy Arden instills us with the hope that we may recover at least some of the disinformational losses of the historical subject through the transcendent mediation of photographic representation.

Earl Miller

MAD FOR BLISS
VERA FRENKEL
THE MUSIC GALLERY
TORONTO

A pyramidal set of rolling stairs peopled by interesting characters. Some curtains or screens. Palm trees on wheels. A hat rack. A man dressed as a flying ace in a tutu strokes out "Some Enchanted Evening" on a grand piano. We're in Vera Frenkel's piano bar, one of those spots located in the business district of a city of transients. Like a bartender, we're hoping that these interesting characters are going to tell us a few interesting stories to pass the time and, if we're lucky, give us a little insight into the human condition. They do. She does.

She certainly can tell a story, that Vera; any number of stories. And *Mad for Bliss* is full of stories about the telling of stories. Details spill out in pungent profusion: olives in the shape of bunnies, hip-crushing tigers and prosthetic device manufacturers. All built up in layers until we get the point. There is, after all, a moral; and we are here to be instructed in it. The tales of romance and obsession are truncated by a lock-step salute to our leaders, Oliver North to L. Ron Hubbard. Just when you thought she was going to be Prince Charming she turns out to be a tyrant, directing merciless attention to the folly of romance, the dangerous error made in losing yourself in another.

From here the work unfolds in sections. The seductive stories at the Piano Bar are followed by a staged reading of excerpts from *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. This is



DOMINIQUE BLAIN; Empty Box; 1989; mixed media. Photo: R. Max Tremblay

the 1964 case history of three men with messianic delusions who were brought together in the same hospital ward. It bickers amongst themselves for the title of the Big One and for the edification (and, it seems, the perverse amusement) of their psychiatric observers. The reading from *The Three Christs* is transposed to the Queen Street Mental Health Facility, located next door. We are told by the narrator that it is staged, not for us, but for patients who may be in the audience. We are displaced.

Interspersed with the stories are tangos as thrilling as, well, tangos. By Weill, for instance. And like Weill and one of her own characters (the psychiatrist lecturing on *The Three Christ of Ypsilanti*), Vera reveals "a streak of the sinister": none of the stories have happy endings; in fact, they have no endings.

The final section begins with an enactment of the first encounter between the native people of Papua-New Guinea and The White Man, tying this to instruction in the nature and formation of cargo cults. Historically, similar encounters and colonisations have led in many cases to the fabrication of a "cargo cult," a religious movement that "exhibits belief in the imminence of a new age of blessing to be initiated by the arrival of a special cargo of goods from supernatural sources," with tragic results. Tragic results. Like so many stories of obsession, displacement. Murder suicide. Footage from the film *First Contact* flows repetitively and endlessly on the video pro-

jection screen centre back.

A brilliant cast — Jan Kudelka, Paul Bettis, Ian Wallace, Richard Sacks, Peter Chin, Katherine Duncanson, Norah Kennedy and Elyakim Taussig — all stars in their own right, becomes a mesmerizing ensemble. Dividing the text among so many unique voices, Vera spreads her net wider the better to achieve her attempt at seduction / rejection. One notes that the assemblage of talent is partly the work of producer Elizabeth Chitty, Cultural Desire Projects. (One of a handful of independent producers of performance art in the world, Chitty seems indefatigable in her support of the performance artist.) Technically the evening is controlled, accomplished, though the work seems designed for viewing from a greater distance. One doesn't want to quibble that the visuals are surprisingly tedious for a visionary like Vera. The constant interpretation of spoken text and sound into American Sign Language (ASL) is absorbing enough.

A work simultaneously seductive and stiff-armed, *Mad for Bliss* is like a book of love poetry written by an anthropologist. Vera reminds us that we are viewers just when we want to be voyeurs; these are a cautionary tales. The dramatic gestures of ASL accompanying the voice-over are meant to remind us of the inadequacies of spoken language. Instead, I am reminded that there are no deaf people in the audience, just as there are no Jesuses visiting from next door. Certain people have not



WILMAR KOENIG; *Le Bestiare*; 1989; installation view, Optica Gallery. Photo: Denis Farley.

been invited to shop around for their salvation or its critique.

This is the ultimate story, the story of the coming of the Messiah, that special story of escape and redemption. A story in which a people are united as one. United in sitting by the eternal telephone waiting to be invited to ... what? ... the best party ever? Deliverance to a world of promised bliss? And, we've heard this story before in *This Was Your Messiah Speaking*, a piece done for Public Access for the Mississauga Mall Video Wall in 1987. (Deemed inappropriate by the Mall's management, it was never shown there.) We hear it now from Vera in an instructional voice-over narration. But then, there is an easy slipping from shopping for cargo into waiting for it. From shopping at the mall/TV, shopping for a Redeemer, to waiting on the beach/landing strip. That deliverance we are promised, might it be instead, deliverance into what haunts our dreams, deliverance to a state, a place where everyone once again believes in Him, Whoever. A country where, like in the mental hospital, only believing is all-important.

Johanna Householder

WILMAR KOENIG
OPTICA
MONTREAL

The German architect Wilmar Koenig started to become seriously involved in photography in the early 1970s. Associated with the Werkstatt für Photographie at the Volkshochschule in Berlin-Kreuzberg from its inception, Koenig has been an important presence on the photography scene in Berlin since the late 1970s.

It is salutary to note that Koenig's early larger-than-life-format portrait photographs predate those of his contemporary Thomas Ruff. Less neutral — and far less neutralising — than Ruff's, Koenig's early portraits of Berlin youth betray a rank authenticity of the subjectival; by turns aggressive, unsettling in their forthrightness, street-smart, self-possessed and uncompromisingly confessional, they are also less opaque. Adamantly, these are not laboratory specimens but human beings.

Shot at what seems uncomfortably close range, affording neither the subject nor the observer any comforting margin of aloofness, there is no lurking spectre of cosmetic fraud. Every possible blemish is brought out, every apparent break in the fabric of 'normalcy' is highlighted. The tremulous

markers that might suggest the unconscious strivings of a personality that beneath the surface of a facial physiognomy are drawn taut before our very eyes across the radius of the photographic print. But his subjects are never sentimentalized nor theatricalized — nor, for that matter, trivialized.

Koenig demonstrated in this work that he was able to reach within his subjects in dramatic fashion, revealing not just facets of social facture but dynamic indices of social hope. Some commentators suggest that they locate a vulnerability, others insist they do not. What they do reveal is the specific vulnerability of their subjects to time and within the boundaries of the social.

Koenig does not seek to free his subjects into some mythical sphere of subjective freedom beyond society. He seeks, instead, to objectify them in the midst of their socialization. This perhaps helps explain why the early portraits, seen in a group take on the totalizing guise of, as Jürgen Habermas would say, society as matter. In other words, the ultimate group portrait. The social life-world becomes the only inalienable content therein.

It is interesting to reflect on this early work *vis à vis* the current work on exhibit here. If the real concern of the early portraits was neither a given method of staging