

The New York Times

Review/Art

Views of Jewishness In Museum Video Show

By John Russell

July 29, 1988

This summer, the Jewish Museum has made its debut in the domain of video art. "Time and Memory: Video Art and Identity" is the general title of the show. Visitors to the museum will hear and see live canaries as a counterpoint to antiphonal readings from the diaries of Anne Frank and the confessions of a Chilean torturer. Schubert's early masterpiece "The Erl King" is sung and played fortissimo on tape while visitors are given the chance to summon at will a wide range of related images on the screen. This visitor had to miss Bart Friedman's "Harold's Bar Mitzvah" (1977), which has been giving great pleasure. (I also missed part of Beryl Korot's "Dachau 1974" (1975), which I had seen more than once when it first came out.) But Fred Riedel, the guest curator in charge of the show, rings any number of changes during its somewhat erratic course, and some of them have much to teach us.

The most remarkable achievement was also the least experimental. Where others doctor the image, play tricks with the fast-forward and the pause buttons, work with deliberately grainy images and in general tease and torture us, Pier Marton does nothing of the kind. His "Say I'm a Jew" (1985) lasts about 30 minutes and consists of cross-cut interviews with young Jewish men and women who were born in Europe and now live in this country.

Not a moment is wasted, nor a word. The speakers are intelligent, articulate, fearless and often very good-looking. What they think, they say. What they feel is written on their faces. We are in the room with a bunch of people - some of them clearly brilliant, all of them truthful - who decided that there are tricky and disconcerting problems in life as to which passivity is not enough.

One of those problems is, or was, the problem of what to do about being Jewish as a very young person in Europe in the immediate aftermath of World War II. People who were not alive at that time have trouble imagining the extent to which fear and dread were fundamental. What a burden, at that time, was the immediate past! Omnipresent were its echoes. Omnipresent, also, the apprehension that it might repeat itself at any moment.

Mr. Marton's still-young people come straight out with thoughts not often so bravely and so clearly expressed. "Why did I have to be born Jewish?" is one of them. "Can I ever pass unnoticed?" is another. "Why are we so damnably different?" is a third. We know why these questions had to surface. Not to be in a state of emotional disarray at that time would have been a mark of some kind of moral paralysis. And, as Mr. Marton says in his notes on the film, "When opening wounds, the first thought or fear is that of infection."

It is the wonder of Mr. Marton's film that his young people heal their wounds almost before our eyes. They end not as victims, but as exemplary human beings. And we leave convinced that - to quote again from Mr. Marton - "nothing short of complete healing is required of all of us." This, if ever, is a film that justifies the title of the show - "Video Art and Identity." Individual identity, individual healing, individual transcendence are his subjects. It deserves a much wider audience.

The two videotapes made by Barbara Rosenthal - "Women in the Camps" (1976-86) and "Leah Gluck: Victims of the Twins Experiments" (1986) - relate to "Say I'm a Jew" in so far as they, too, represent an attempt to come to terms with unbearable realities that were experienced at one remove - a long one - from their original source.

Ms. Rosenthal (born in New York in 1948) describes how her father left the Bronx in order to be able to say quite flatly, "I'm an American," when asked what his heritage might be. A working-class Long Island neighborhood in which Jews were rarely seen seemed promising, but Ms. Rosenthal soon found that the local priest had warned the other children not to play with her. (What did he tell them? That she had personally killed Jesus Christ and had horns?) Learning about the Holocaust, she could not believe that it was over. "Dozens of times every day when I encounter an imperfection in Reality, I remember how unspeakably worse things could be, and have been, and at this very moment are, in the lives of others."

After years in which she was "excluded from an American identity, yet not secure in a Jewish identity either," she decided to take her video camera and ask some people who had survived the camps to tell her what it had been like. The films that resulted have no quality whatever as "art," but in their quiet, painstaking, unemphatic way they tell us terrible truths.

The wild card in this pack is the film made by Nam June Paik and Shigeo Kubota, called "Allan 'n' Allen's Complaint" (1982). This is basically a movie about Allen Ginsburg, the poet, and Allan Kaprow, the pioneer of the happening, with particular emphasis on their relationships with their fathers.

Nam June Paik is never dull. Allan and Allen are themselves. There is a cameo appearance by the French art critic Pierre Restany that is very droll. The father-son theme is an amusing variant on the mother-son theme of Jewish legend. The film rambles and divagates, but as a historical curiosity it is well worth sitting through.

Thus far, we are mostly looking at a single television screen, in a very comfortable chair. Time ticks by. The forms of our attention are much as they are when we load up the video-cassette recorder and press the button. What do we gain, and what do we lose, when we walk into a room that offers us a complete three-dimensional experience, furnished, packaged and sealed off from even the room next door?

We gain, in terms of theater. The experience envelops us, and we can't get away. Sometimes we are partly or seemingly in control of it, as when the "Erl King" story is illustrated or commented upon in many different ways. Sometimes the experience deliberately overlaps with itself, as in Juan Downey's "About Cages" (1987), in which the live caged canary overlaps with the caged canary on the television screen and the voices answer, each to the other: the one about Chile and the other about German-occupied Amsterdam.

In this context, Beryl Korot's "Dachau 1974" is neither one thing nor the other. It has four screens, and keeps us jumping from one to another, but it has no extraneous enticements. We look. We don't need to listen. Repetition subdues us.

"Dachau 1974" ranks by now among the incunabula of movies related to the Holocaust. It was one of the earliest of the films that culminated in the great and somber masterpiece of Claude Lanzmann, "Shoah." These are films in which horror is there by implication only and may be all the more haunting for that reason.

Ms. Korot goes about her work in a wordless, unhurrying way. With four screens side by side, she monitors the road outside the wall of the camp at Dachau, the empty scene inside it, the stunned

perambulations of the visitors and from time to time a terrible relic of what had once been there and in full operation. This is a film that burns on a long slow fuse, but there is no mistaking the dignity of its stance at a time when it was customary to spell out the hideous facts.

"The Erl King" and "About Cages" work upon us in quite a different way - teasing, provoking, asking riddles, suggesting connections of the kind that we normally make in psychotherapy, if at all. Of the two, "The Erl King" is the more ambitious, but also the more diffuse. We are entitled to think that Schubert is made to work as if on a treadmill - no one should be asked to hear that stupendous song over and over again - while Grahame Weinbren and Roberta Friedman, the authors of the film, invite us to take part in a lucky dip in which Goethe, Freud and the Talmud hand out the prizes.

"About Cages" is visually an ordered and rather distinguished statement, with live birds to add animation. The antiphonal sound has honorable intentions, but does not so much win our sympathy as pre-empt it. So this is a show to move around in, and from time to time to duck out of, but in any case a show to see.

"Time and Memory: Video Art and Identity" remains at the Jewish Museum, 1109 Fifth Avenue at 92d Street, through Sept. 1.