

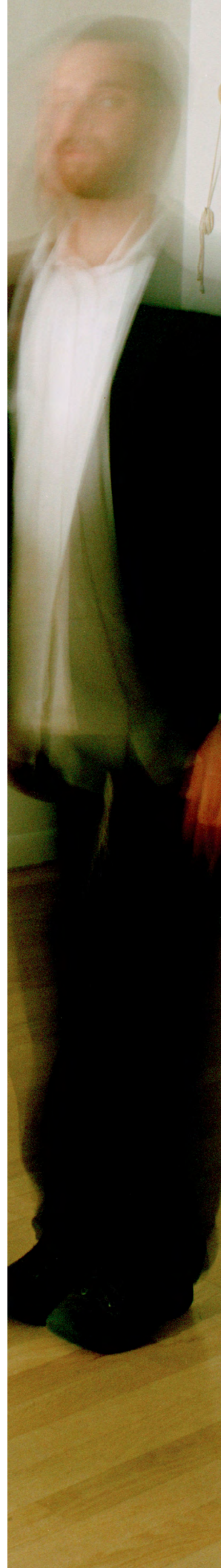
In the Mosaic: Jewish Identities in Canadian Performance and Installation Art

by Carol Zemel

In a nation that trumpets its pride in diversity, Jewish experience exemplifies the success of the Canadian mosaic. Indeed, if a mosaic is a patterned whole, with its disparate components proudly visible, Canada's Jews live comfortably in that configuration and participate in all sectors of Canadian society.

To some extent, high culture in this country has undergone a parallel development. Although globalization has produced a more inclusive art world generally, national categories still govern the writing of art history and international art fairs and biennials, where cutting-edge work is exhibited. In these contexts, the vexed question of what is "Canadian art" may ricochet from an elusive search for intrinsic national identity to simply asserting an artist's citizenship. From early in the twentieth century, Group of Seven landscapes were promoted as national icons, images of a virtually unpeopled "true north strong and free" (Zemans).¹ That national impulse recurred in the late 1960s, when a desire to distinguish this country from the United States—at that time fully engaged in the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and student protests—prompted artists like Joyce Wieland and Greg Curnoe to insist on the Canadian-ness of their work.

The quest for a distinctive national culture has since shifted its focus as artistic evidence of Canada's diversity has wound its way from parochial settings into the artistic mainstream. In general, ethnic concerns are much less hushed, though First Nations artists may be the only minority regularly shown in major museums.² While there is no major Jewish museum in Canada, contemporary art by Jewish artists or work related to Jewish themes is often shown at the Koffler Centre of the Arts.³ Long a Toronto venue for vanguard artists, the Centre has explored off-site locations around the city and has produced innovative exhibitions like





Vera Frenkel, video stills composite with seven of the fourteen on-camera narrators, hands of the piano-player in *...from the Transit Bar*, six-channel video installation and functional piano bar, 1992.

Photo by the artist

Spin-Off: Contemporary Art Circling the Mandala (2011) and E. C. Woodley's *Auguststrasse 25* (2010).⁴

Often set in museums and galleries, the genres of installation and performance art marry the frameworks of visual art and theatre. Installation art creates a theatrical environment through which we are invited to wander, as actors or participants. But to enter is to cross a threshold, and often an adventure; no wonder visitors may hesitate or slow down. Performance art maintains theatre's notion of audience, but with different demands. With events lasting minutes or many hours, the genre may stretch or condense experience and, through its duration, turn the conventions of narrative into poetry and dance. Performance too is famously ephemeral, a one-time-only event. This unique "original" is obviated, to some extent, by video recording, which enables repeated views. And with this repetition, once-ness becomes ritual—each time familiar and each time new.

Jewish artists working in these modes take up historical and cultural themes. There are no fiddlers, rabbis, or other Jewish stereotypes, and religious subjects transpose into ethical rather than theological concerns. The Holocaust—the major catastrophe and defining event of modern Jewish history—looms large on this cultural agenda, but questions of diaspora, identity, ethical practice, and gender recur as well. In this essay, I very briefly sketch out two decades of this Jewish Canadian cultural stream through works by Vera Frenkel, Melissa Schiff, and Tobaron Waxman. Toronto is a centre for all three: Frenkel and Schiff live there, Waxman wanders. In distinctive ways—and not always explicitly—each

artist takes up these Jewish cultural concerns.

Though seldom overtly Jewish, Vera Frenkel's video and installations invent spaces of fantasy, travel, and connection and often allude to Jewish experiences of distance, dislocation, and loss. *String Games: Improvisations for Inter-City Video* (1974), an early experiment in improvisational video, pulled at the links of that technology like the threads in the ancient string game. With simultaneous participants in Montreal and Toronto, the work is conceptually and visually complex,⁵ but its metaphor—well before Skyping and other video immediacies—playfully insists on redefinitions of connection and distance. What occurs in this techno-play? Who manipulated whom? And where is "here"? One would be



Vera Frenkel, *... from the Transit Bar*, six-channel video installation and functional piano bar, documenta IX, Kassel, 1992, partial view.

Photo by Dirk Bleicker, courtesy of the artist

hard-pressed to call this Jewish art, but with *String Games*, the artist posits new forms of “imagined community” (to borrow Benedict Anderson’s [1991] phrase) and in this communicative reach expands the potential of diasporic geographies.

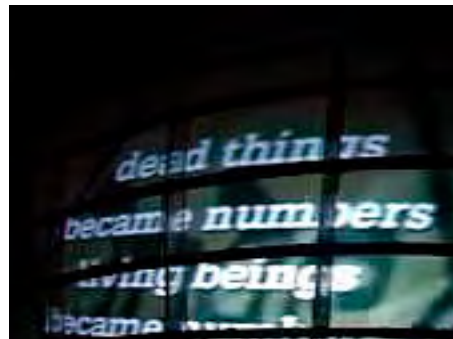
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Frenkel’s playfulness is most irresistible in . . . *from the Transit Bar* (1992) (www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing/barspace/Bar1a.html), the installation designed for Kassel’s *documenta ix* and since mounted in Ottawa, Toronto, Stockholm, Tokyo, and Warsaw. The work’s global itinerary suits its setting—an art deco train station bar, where each visitor temporarily pauses somewhere en route. With echoes of some “You must remember this” tune tinkling in the background, viewers sit at the bar or a café table and watch interviews of other travellers on a nearby monitor: all this surrounds and remakes the viewer’s identity. The bar’s pleasures are seductive: the drinks, the entertainment, a handsome barman, chance meetings. Indeed, the bar and the road hold great promise and a sense of adventure, cushioning uncertainties and the unsettled question of home. But allusions to greater losses echo through a mix of languages. The monitor interviewees speak Yiddish and Polish—the languages of Frenkel’s grandparents, voices of family long gone—while subtitled translations of their speech appear in English, French, and German, hegemonic languages of the West. Their displaced and tragic histories curl through the environment, heightened by the intermittent sound of trains and whistles. But the meld of fantasy, history, and memory also delivers unease, anger, and pain. This is a *Shoah* story, never named as such and no doubt more immediate for some visitors than for others, but an evocation of modern Jewish history and experience nonetheless (Rogoff). At the same time, the work’s unspecified sense of loss and numerous travellers—now including us—expand beyond a specific history and become the experience of many more displacements, migrations, and diasporas. It is difficult to leave the *Transit Bar* with a simple sense of home.

Frenkel’s subsequent installation, *Body Missing* (1994), grew out of the *Transit Bar* and has had several iterations—from museum to online exhibition (www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing/). The title derives from the “bodies” of art stolen by the Nazis from private and museum collections and intended for a Führermuseum in Linz, Hitler’s hometown. Like the Nazis’ human victims, some were recovered, but many stolen works remain lost. The online interactive work—with contributions from invited artists as well as visitors—presented a



Melissa Shiff, *ARK*, Video sculpture, Jewish Museum in Prague, 2006. Video segment: *Aleph, In the Beginning*, 2 minutes 15 seconds. Running time of entire video: 30 minutes.



Melissa Shiff, *ARK*, Video sculpture, Jewish Museum in Prague, 2006. Video segment: *War Time*, 3 minutes 43 seconds. Running time of entire video: 30 minutes.

constellation of discussion possibilities around topics such as art collecting, disappearance, and retrieval. As with the *Bar* experience, one might keep the quest entirely cultural, a relatively thoughtful search, but that would overlook the shadowing history of military death and genocide, a fact but also a metaphor for millions of lost human bodies and lives. Jewish content here is not foregrounded, but once again, as with the *Bar*, the metaphor and parallels are inescapable as viewers ponder and search for what is irretrievably lost.

Jewish ritual and diaspora are central terms for installation artist Melissa Shiff (www.melissashiff.com). *ARK* (2006–2007), a site-specific work commissioned by The Jewish Museum in Prague to celebrate its centennial year, uses the biblical tale of Noah’s Ark and the flood to convey the task of reclamation and renewal. Anchored in the narrow space beside the museum, the bulbous hull of a 4.5-metre-high vessel nudges the building like a tethered whale. Its surface, however, functions as a video screen on which Shiff projects the moving shapes of ritual objects of Judaica—plates, candelabra, goblets—that the Czech museum houses and protects. Beginning with a giant *Aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the ark’s surface seems to contain the forms of a Jewish past.

Like many salvage projects, however, and miming the biblical catastrophe of the flood, *ARK* sails under history’s dark cloud. The Jewish Museum in Prague was founded in 1906. The Nazi occupiers of Czechoslovakia during World War II

intended to use the museum as a storehouse of objects and texts pillaged from Europe's destroyed Jewish communities, thereby maintaining as perverse memory the artifactual evidence of the people they meant to obliterate. This history of the Prague museum haunts the work, as *ARK*'s video screen pictures schools of fish—communities, perhaps—swimming beneath a running digital counter of Jewish lives lost. In this

In Shiff's version, the journey to Ararat is a digital adventure. Travelling through its screens, the website offers a history of Noah's project, a current account of the area with an extensive bibliography. The Mapping Ararat website points to several digital aspects of the project, such as an Augmented Reality Walking Tour set up in Grand Island, which invites viewers to access the grounds of the imaginary Jewish Homeland—



Augmented Reality Walking Tour screenshots: Adan Rovner reads the inscription on the virtual Ararat cornerstone (top left). Virtual Synagogue as seen from the eighteenth hole on the River Oaks Golf Course (top right); Virtual Ararat, a user-activated art installation and virtual world to be displayed in a gallery (bottom left); Samples of vernacular culture from the imaginary Jewish homeland such as stamps, dollar bills, and postcards (bottom right). Melissa Schiff, Louis Kaplan, and John Craig Freeman, *Mapping Ararat*, 2012.

Photos courtesy of the artists

installation, both museum and its tethered *ARK* are rescue vessels and sites of salvage for both objects and memory.

Shiff develops the theme of Jewish diaspora and home in an ongoing interactive video project, *Mapping Ararat* (2012–). Ararat is the name of the mountain (presumably in present-day Turkey) where Noah's ark of salvaged species settled when flood waters receded. The term has become a signifier of safe haven after a storm and a site of hope and renewal. In this work, Shiff and her team partners, Louis Kaplan and John Craig Freeman, turn to an actual invocation of the name: the proposal in the 1820s by the appropriately named Mordecai Manuel Noah to create a homeland for Jews—to be named Ararat—on New York's Grand Island in the Niagara River. The actual site is adjacent to present-day Buffalo and Niagara Falls.⁶

street intersections, synagogue, and cemetery locations—through a digital phone application. For example, a stone marker engraved in English and Hebrew owned by the Grand Island Historical Society will suddenly appear on the phone during the walking tour, allowing participants to “see the objects integrated into the physical location as if they existed in the real world” (Schiff). Further computer manipulations described on the project website provide greater detail for Ararat's map and extend the “visiting” experience.

The play with this romantic fantasy in Jewish history is also linked to modern diasporic concerns—the desire for home and the possibility of new beginnings. But like the *ARK* project, there are further resonances that haunt the cheery optimism of Ararat's adventure. One, of course, is the arbitrariness of



Tobaron Waxman, *Mincha* (from *Amidah* triptych), performance for photograph, 3' x 4', 2004.
Photo courtesy of the artist

the very notion of “homeland.” The nineteenth-century Noah devoted considerable legal effort to procure the site, and his activities are precursory to those of the modern Zionist settlers of the Palestinian *Yishuv*. In this sense, the Ararat project calls into question all such efforts to secure a homeland—and by what authority. The site is also that of a Native Seneca burial ground, first built over by white settlers of the area and currently the subject of land claims dispute.

As a former resident of the region, it took me years to realize that despite all the historical markers of the War of 1812, there was no mapped, trail-posted, or named roadway that bore witness to the Native settlers who continue to live in the area on reserves. For these residents, whose history remains uncharted and visually erased, the project of mapping Ararat can mean further injury or challenge. Or it might function as a reparative journey, bringing together ideas of the Unlanded (Jews) and Most Landed (First Nations) and the perils of (dis)-enfranchisement.

Tobaron Waxman’s performance art turns to questions of gender and formulations of “queer” through Jewish ritual and Talmudic learning. Queer theory as a critical practice was launched by Teresa de Lauretis in 1990 and elaborated in succeeding decades through the writings of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. By now, queer and related vocabulary has expanded to include LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) and cisgender (identification with “normative,” assigned gender) positions (Schilt and Westbrook).

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And does this performance create a
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Waxman, whose work derives from his own transgender experience and his extensive study of orthodox practice, explores these contemporary issues through a Jewish lens. Rather than critiques of dogma, however, the works audaciously invest centuries-old texts and rituals with new relevance and insight. One effective example opens the artist’s website (www.tobaron.com). The portal image, an interactive animation of a photo titled *Amidah: Mincha* (2004), is part of a triptych on Jewish prayer. *Amidah* means standing in Hebrew and refers to the standing prayer central to Jewish services. The image shows a series of vertical panels in which performers playing Jewish men—both traditionally dressed and unclothed—stand and pray. A move of the mouse over the image produces flickers and changes as dressed and naked figures appear and disappear. Standing with their feet held firmly together, as ritual practice prescribes, the shifting men seem to bend and bow in the movements of the *Amidah*. What’s startling, of course, is the nakedness, and in this sense, the image functions as spectacle. The fascination, however, is not merely voyeuristic. Genitals are obscured, and though one peers closely to determine gender identity, such certainty

serpentine trajectory delineates the borders and underscores awareness of those who neighbour, confront, or isolate us in space. There is both an existential and mapping metaphor here as the terms of ritual separation extend beyond gender to the politics of present-day Israel and ethnic performance. With whom or what do we connect? From whom or what are we separate? And does this performance create a sense of community or estrangement?

In all his work, Waxman brings orthodox and avant-garde practice into an unexpected partnership. In the traditions of Jewish religious study, learners achieved insight and understanding by working with a study partner. Waxman moves this study into the realm of the aesthetic. As viewers, we undertake a similar exchange when the work asks us to bring the traditional and familiar to bear on the modern and new. Whereas Frenkel's and Schiff's work asks us to consider and repair absence and loss, Waxman's art revitalizes ritual and tradition with pointed contemporary relevance.

Paradoxically, the non-parochialism of these works is crucial to their success. Whether the Jewish references are allusive or openly declared, the performance and installation art supersedes specific ethnicities. . . . *from the Transit Bar, Body Missing, ARK, Mapping Ararat, Opshernish, and Mechitza*: all use Jewish history to pose bigger questions of gender, nation, and identity. In the expansive diversity of the Canadian mosaic, this work is very much at home.

Notes

1. On the level of mass culture, the Native Inuksuk figure, which can be seen as cultural artifact, was used—some would say, appropriated—to advertise the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver.
2. Exhibitions mounted by groups like the South Asian Visual Arts Collective (SAVAC), the Latin American Canadian Art Projects (LACAP), and the Aga Khan's planned Museum of Islamic Art for Toronto are promising signs of cultural diversity.
3. There are modest museums of Jewish history and Judaica, like those housed at Temple Emmanuel in Montreal, Toronto's Reuben and Helene Dennis Museum in Beth Tzedec Congregation, and Vancouver's Jewish Museum and Archives of British Columbia, but apart from the Koffler Centre of the Arts in Toronto, there is no Canadian institution with a commitment to modern Jewish art comparable to New York's Jewish Museum, the Skirball in Los Angeles, or the Spertus in Chicago.
4. The politics of diaspora are complex, and the institution has vetted an artist's political position on Israel, regardless of the content of the proposed work.
5. For analysis of the work and its prescient demonstration of web cultural potential, see Tuer.
6. This history has been told, with considerable irony, in Ben Katchor's graphic novel, *The Jew of New York* (New York: Pantheon, 1999). See Zemel.

7. *Opshernish* was later produced as an installation for The Jewish Museum in New York (2009). It included a real-time documentary video and recreated and condensed the original performance to suggest "the affect of ritual without the presence of the body" ("Installing Tobaron Waxman's 'Opshernish,'" Jewish Museum, <http://blog.thejewishmuseum.org/?p=245>).

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Carol Zemel is Professor of Art History and Visual Culture at York University in Toronto. Her book, *Looking Jewish: Visual Culture and Modern Diaspora*, is forthcoming in 2013 from Indiana University Press.