

Review/Art

Weekend

Views of Jewishness In Museum Video Show



A clip from "Leah Gluck: Victim of the Twins Experiments" by Barbara Rosenthal, one of the videotapes in a show at the Jewish Museum.

By JOHN RUSSELL

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

Some artists try to adapt to unbearable realities.

dread were fundamental. What a den, at that time, was the immerse past! Omnipresent were its echoes! Omnipresent, also, the apprehensions 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

end not as victims of theater. The human being is convinced that — Mr. Marton — complete healing. This, if ever, is the title of the "Identity." Irregular healing, are his sub-wider audir.

The two videotapes made by Barbara Rosenthal — "Camps" (1976-86) and "Leah Gluck: Victim 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.

Nam June Paik is not a 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 but-

ton. 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 next door?

of theater. The

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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.