

Why Contemporary Art? Why Inside the Freud Museum?

Joanne Morra

Freud Museum London, 22 April

Image

Today I would like to talk about the Freud Museum London and several contemporary art interventions that have taken place within it, in order to open up some broad questions about the effects of having contemporary art exhibited inside various museological spaces whose primary purpose is neither to house nor to exhibit it. Over the past 50 years, we have seen contemporary art make its way into institutional spaces other than the white cube gallery. These spaces have included large-scale historical museums, personality museums, small independent museums. The temporary exhibition of contemporary art in these spaces began in the 1960s and 1970s with various forms of institutional critique, conceptual art, performance art, and site-specific work, and has proliferated over the past two decades.

There has been some discussion of various individual artistic interventions or types of practice within these museological spaces, but it is only recently that a few scholars have provided a more general overview of this history offering a critical interrogation of this complicated phenomenon. From my point of view, there is something unique about the way in which contemporary art functions once it has entered these sites, and I call this 'site-responsive'. The term is meant to offer us an understanding of the generative, sometimes critical, and definitely reciprocal nature of this form of art intervention. By this I mean that having

contemporary art within a museum alters our understanding of the museum, and at the same time, the site impacts upon our interpretation of the artwork.

With over 90 exhibitions spanning 30 years, the Freud Museum London leads the way in its acceptance, promotion and exhibition of contemporary art. Spoilt for choice, I had to limit my discussion today. To this end, I've decided to talk about exhibitions that are related to psychoanalytic practice – to what happens in the consulting room - as this is both the centre stage of psychoanalysis and the Freud Museum. At the same time, I chose exhibitions that have disturbed, extended or revealed something about 20 Maresfield Gardens, about the history, theory or practice of psychoanalysis, and how the site has responded to the artwork in productive ways. By considering these exhibitions, I hope to open up for discussion the previous questions about the roles of contemporary art within the museum.

Slide

Part I: The Personality Museum

In order to understand the relationship between contemporary art, and a museum such as the Freud Museum London, it is helpful to consider a few general conditions that constitute the personality museum. The personality museum is a museum that is dedicated to the life and work of an individual. These spaces were very popular in the late 19th century, and experienced two resurgences, one in the 1940s and again since the 1970s. The Freud Museum London is a part of this contemporary resurgence having opened its doors to the public in 1986.

Like the Freud Museum, all personality museums are complex sites comprised of spaces, objects, and practices. The practices that constitute a personality museum range from the conservation and curation of the objects that were once owned and used by the individual who resided and worked there; a dedication to the individual's cultural production and its dissemination, and as an embodiment of the various experiences, histories and memories associated with the site and its inhabitants.

Since the primary purpose of a personality museum is the conservation and curation of the objects within it, authenticity is key. One of the Freud Museum London's most urgent provocations is to encourage its visitors to enter the psychoanalytic stage. To walk into the Museum and somehow at the same time walk into Sigmund and Anna Freud's consulting room. As we know, the myth surrounding the Freud Museum is that Sigmund Freud's consulting room and study has not been touched since his death in 1939. This is certainly a part of the

Museum's hagiographic power. Its ability to make us believe we are in an active, living consulting room, in which the psychoanalyst has momentarily stepped out of, and as we wander through the rooms, we wait for the analyst to return. This makes psychoanalysis a very present experience.

Slide

Sigmund Freud made a short cryptic observation about space that is helpful in thinking about the psychological conditions of the personality museum and the role played by the person who once inhabited the space and the visitor. In 1938, the year preceding Freud's death, in exile from Nazi Vienna and living in Maresfield Gardens, Freud noted that 'space may be the projection of the extension of the psychological apparatus. No other derivation is probable. [...] Psyche is extended; knows nothing about it'.¹ For Freud, space is constituted and imbued with the subject who resides within it. More precisely, the subject's psychological apparatus is projected onto the space consciously as well as unconsciously. We constitute our space with our psychic life, as it constitutes us.

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Shorter Writings' (1938/1941), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XXIII, trans. James Strachey, et. al., (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 300.

Slide

Many authors have commented upon the stillness of the museum's setting, and the death of its objects. In thinking about this, we could elicit the aid of Theodor Adorno's critique of museums, in which he called them 'the family sepulchers of works of art'.² Here, Adorno was taking issue with the way in which the museum preserves artworks as historical objects rather than works living in the present because they are stripped of their initial context, and the objects are in 'the process of dying'. However, this condition is not irrevocable. Adorno also argued that the museum is essential as it is the place in which dying objects are to be encountered by a viewer, and through this encounter the objects become vital once more. Along with the viewer, I would like to suggest that contemporary art also disrupts and enlivens the objects and spaces of the museum. By introducing site-responsive art into the personality museum, the museum's fixed, ideological narratives can be disrupted and extended.

² Theodor W. Adorno, 'Valery, Proust Museum', *Prisms*, trans. S. and S. Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), pp. 173-185 (p. 173).

Slide

Part II: The Mise-en-Scène of the Consulting Room

To this day, psychoanalytic practice takes place in the same distinctive setting that Freud invented over 125 years ago. To this extent the mise-en-scène that we find in 20 Maresfield Gardens is the exemplar for psychoanalysis today. Claudia Guderian's exhibition *The Magic of the Couch* and Nick Cunard's *Head Space: Photographs of Psychotherapeutic Environments*, both held at the Freud Museum London in 2004, confirmed for us the historical continuity of the consulting room through a series of photographs of psychoanalytic environments around the world. There is no mistaking the way in which the mise-en-scène that Freud conceived of in 1886 forms the basis for psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic settings worldwide. There is a striking resemblance between all of these settings: specifically, the positioning of the patient's couch and the therapist's chair.

As Guderian points out, interviewing the analysts whose consulting rooms she photographed, it was clear that '[m]odels – conscious or unconscious ones – were Sigmund Freud's setting'.³ Perhaps this is the layout we know best because of its staging in the Freud Museum London, but, it might be that our image of Freud's consulting room is actually a result of viewing the famous black and white photographs taken by Edmund Engelman of Berggasse 19 in May 1938 just a couple of months before the Freud's left Vienna. These images record the layout of Berggasse in detail.

In having Guderian and Cunard's photographs of contemporary consulting rooms in the Freud Museum London, the exhibitions' site-responsive impact was a form of critical re-staging of Berggasse that demonstrated both the universality

³ Claudia Guderian, quoted in Freud Museum London archives.

of the mise-en-scène of the consulting room, and how the set-up in 20 Maresfield Gardens always echoes back to Berggasse.

Thus, the photographs disrupt the originality of Maresfield Gardens, by pointing us to Berggasse, the place where Freud worked for almost 50 years, while at the same time, demonstrating that Marsefield Gardens is constituted by important historical accretions, that are vital to its history and power.

Slide

Part III: Saying It

I would now like to take a look at a film installation entitled *Sissi in Analysis* by Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker which formed a part of the exhibition I curated entitled *Saying It* (2012).

Sissi in Analysis is a 10-channel work that presented the individual case history of Sissi, an allegedly schizophrenic woman in her thirties, institutionalised since she was 18. Based on a real case history from French psychoanalyst Françoise Davoine's 1998 'theoretical fiction' entitled *Mère Folle*, Sissi struggled to begin telling her story.⁴ Having been the victim of sexual abuse by her father, neglected and betrayed by her mother, and forced to have an abortion and hysterectomy by the medical establishment. In *Sissi in Analysis* the patient, discontented with her treatment with Davoine, tries again with another psychoanalyst. This second treatment, is a fiction, but is also based on the dialogue within Davoine's book and her case notes.

The 10 sessions which constituted Sissi's analysis, were around the Freud Museum and did not follow a linear narrative. Rather it responded to the way in which an analysis is non-linear: memories are remembered out of chronological order and intermingled with present-day events and emotions. The installation invited each viewer to create his or her own travels through it.

⁴ Françoise Davoine, 'La Boîte à Transfert', *Mère Folle: Récit* (Strasbourg: Arcanes, 1998), pp. 155-80. Thanks to Marie Morra and Lucia Fitzsimmons for their helpful translation.

In viewing Sissi's sessions, we were slowly given access to the gradual process of uncovering the cause of her traumatised state. Speaking face to face with her analyst, rather than lying down as Freud recommended, Sissi spoke of her desire to live 'the life an artist... of a great queen', in another she spoke of her sadness and confusion: 'one day I went to Paris and had an abortion. They said I was pregnant, they didn't tell me I was expecting a baby. It was taken out of my body, who had the right to decide?' Showing both affection and hate towards her analyst, she concedes that her analyst understands her so well, and then lashes out at her. Abandoned by her mother who did not acknowledge Sissi's abuse, Sissi could not reconcile her ongoing love for her mother, and this division between loving and hating her began the 'war' within Sissi. Sissi eventually had her moment of 'saying it'. She spoke her traumatic memories. The session was appropriately placed next to Freud's couch.

Freud had serious concerns about whether psychotic patients would not benefit from psychoanalysis because of their inability to make an effective transference onto the analyst.⁵ However, post-Freudian psychoanalytic thought and practice has challenged Freud's ideas, and shown that productive results can occur by having psychotic patients enter psychoanalysis.

Sissi's real life analyst – Davoine – is one of these contemporary psychoanalysts working with psychotic patients. In Davoine's view, psychoanalysis can be used to treat these forms of madness.⁶ For Davoine, the process of transference and

⁵ Freud, 'On Beginning the Treatment', p. 139.

⁶ On Françoise Davoine, see, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues: The International Journal of Relational Perspectives*, 17/5 (2007), pp. 621-682; and Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, *History Beyond Trauma*, trans. Susan Fairfield (New York: Other Press, 2004). See also the earlier work of the Italian Gaetano Benedetti, one of the pioneers of using the talking cure with psychotic patients, whose work influenced Davoine. Brian Koehler, 'Interview with Gaetano Benedetti, M.D.', *Journal of The American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry*, 31/1 (2003), pp. 75-87; and Gaetano Benedetti, *Psychotherapy of Schizophrenia* (Northvale, N.J. and London: Jason Aronson, 1995

counter-transference are ethical encounters with the 'other': both the other that resides within each of us, and the other to whom we speak – patient or analyst. The narrative that emerges during such a process is always partial, fragmentary, and incomplete because the workings of the unconscious are also partial and fragmentary.

By having this artwork - *Sissi in Analysis* - inside the Freud Museum, this post-Freudian history and therapeutic practice is brought to the foreground and is given its rightful place within the history of psychoanalysis, as well as making clear that psychoanalysis has developed and changed in ways that have been extremely beneficial to those with mental illnesses such as psychosis and society.

(1987)); Marco Conci, 'Gaetano Benedetti in his Correspondence' in *International Forum of Psychoanalysis*, 17/2 (2008), pp. 112-29.

Slide

Part IV: The Voice of Shame

South African artist Penny Siopis multi-media exhibition *Three Essays on Shame* (2005) curated by Jennifer Law considered the ethical bond that exists between the individual and the social by focusing on shame and its various configurations in South Africa's apartheid (1948-1994) and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that followed. I would like to focus on one work from this exhibition, entitled *Voice*.

Voice was staged in Sigmund Freud's consulting room and study. It included seven audio recordings marking the perimeter of public access into Freud's study and consulting room. We listened to the personal experiences of shame spoken by 7 prominent South Africans. The focus of these recordings was twofold. First, they spoke about how shame is so central to gender and sexuality, and the delights and discontentment of the body. Second, the voices discussed the intertwining of shame with the political, social and cultural context of apartheid and the TRC.

The TRC was set up in 1996 two years after the first democratic election in South Africa, and came to an end in 2003. A political compromise, the TRC was formed and understood to be different to both the punitive nature of the Nuremberg Trials after WWII, and a blanket amnesty for all of those who committed crimes during the last three decades of apartheid rule. Under Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the Chair of the TRC, it became a forum for a Christianized form of repentance and forgiveness. For two years the TRC

became a setting within which the victims of crimes against humanity and their perpetrators who applied for amnesty were able to voice their individual and collective histories. In face-to-face encounters between victims and their perpetrators, voices spoke of trauma under the rubric of forgiveness, reconciliation and transformation. This form of 'empirical' forgiveness has been said to share attributes with the healing and therapeutic aspects of psychoanalysis.⁷

In Siopis' installation *Voice* we heard about how at the TRC, the poet, author and reported Antjie Krog felt shame to be visceral, 'it never left the room' in fact, 'shame needs an audience', and witnessing it, she was 'pulled into the pool of shame'. We also listened to Judge and gay and AIDS activist Edwin Cameron speak of how shame is associated with a sexually transmitted disease is not relegated to the gay community but also includes the social shame of interracial sex. While Fatima Meer, professor of sociology and political prisoner of the apartheid regime described the torture she endured during her political detention: a torture that was organized to instate a brutal kind of shame based on the violation of her genitals.

⁷ For Jacques Derrida, forgiveness is a complex condition made up of two irreducible poles, poles that he remains 'torn' between: the 'ideal' and the 'empirical'. The ideal is a state in which the unforgivable crime must be forgiven, outside of any sovereign power. This is an impossibility because the act of forgiveness cannot take place outside of a religious, juridical, historical, political or ethical frame. The other form of forgiveness is 'empirical': a type of forgiveness that is a part of an act of reconciliation and transformation within a personal, political, religious, juridical, social and historical context, as well as a psychoanalytic and therapeutic one. In the case of South Africa's TRC, Derrida notes how the need for 'reconciliation' between the 'victim' and 'perpetrator' – the persons involved in crimes against humanity - which was at the centre of the commission, in order for the 'nation' to reconcile itself to its past and move forward, made the process 'empirical'. See, Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001).

For an analysis of the 'empirical' complexity of the TRC, see, for example: Ashley Dawson, 'Documenting the Trauma of Apartheid: *Long Night's Journey Into Day* and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *Screen*, 46/4 (2005), pp. 473-86; Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Long Night's Journey into Day* (London and New York: Vintage, 1999); and Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Chatto Windus, 2003).

The content and form of these recordings worked together to build up a sense of the radical potential of the voice in articulating and materializing shame within the body, its passions and the crimes levelled against it.⁸ On the opening night of the exhibition, all seven stories were audible to everyone: 'loud, public and intense'. As Siopis notes:

The spectator/audience could not look at Freud's desk, his couch, other things without the accompaniment of voices audibly pondering attitudes to personal shame and the shame of other. [...] This complex scenario shared something with what actually happened in the TRC hearings themselves. Shame was staged in a very public, emotive, almost theatrical way during oral testimony.⁹

After this evening, the voices are heard through individual earphones transforming the experience into a private, emotionally intense and visceral form of listening. In this intimate form of listening, while standing in Freud's consulting room and study, it is as though we are sharing and witnessing a form of psychoanalytic listening: hearing what is spoken and voiced to us, while also listening to what we say to ourselves. In the voices that are speaking loudly, shame is felt viscerally - there is no silencing it.¹⁰

⁸ On the radical potential of the voice, see, Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 179-89; Cavarero, *For More Than one Voice*; Hélène Cixous, 'Laugh of Medusa', trans. Keith and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, ¼ (Summer 1976), pp. 875-893; Hélène Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson, intro. Susan Rubin Suleiman, trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, and Susan Sellers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Wayne Kostenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and The Mystery of Desire*, intro. Tony Kushner (San Francisco: Da Capo Press, 2001); Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller, intro. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁹ Siopis, 'Shame in Three Parts', pp. 148-9.

¹⁰ For other forms of speaking to the viscosity of shame, see, Annie Ernaux, *Shame*, trans. Tanya Leslie (London: Seven Stories Press, 1998); Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*; and Jacqueline Rose, 'Shame', *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Chatto Windus, 2003), pp. 1-16.

Slide

Part V: Acting Out: The Return of the Repressed

The final exhibition I will discuss is from 2012 entitled *The Return of the Repressed* and saw Louise Bourgeois' work enter the Freud Museum.

In 2004 and 2010 Bourgeois' assistant Jerry Gorovoy discovered over 1,000 looseleaf sheets of writing in the artist's Chelsea home in New York City. These notes, which included both texts and images, related to the more than 30 years of psychoanalytic treatment that Bourgeois undertook between 1951 and 1985. This is a dramatic discovery given Bourgeois' long-standing public criticism of psychoanalysis. To begin to make sense of this archive and its position within Bourgeois' oeuvre, art historian and curator Philip Larratt-Smith brought together many of these papers along with an extensive array of Bourgeois' artworks for the landmark exhibition *The Return of The Repressed*.

Exhibited at the Freud Museum, this exhibition included 79 items, which is a vast number of artworks and pieces of writing to be exhibited in the rather small and already full space of 20 Maresfield Gardens. The site-responsive affect of this crowded intervention constituted something rather extraordinary.

Slide

In one of these documents, we read Bourgeois' witty, fulsome, and powerful assessment of her psychoanalysis:

The analysis is a jip
is a trap
is a job
is a privilege
is a luxury
is a duty
is a duty towards myself
my husband my parents
my children my
is a shame
is a farce
is a love *affair*
is a rendez-vous
is a cat + mouse game
is a boat to drive
is an internment
is a joke
makes me powerless
makes me into a cop
is a bad dream
is my interest
is my field of study –

is more than I can manage

makes me furious

is a bore

is a nuisance

is a pain in the neck -

Slide

In another piece of her psychoanalytic writings, we encounter Bourgeois' 'wants':

I want to get
I want to keep
I want to say.
I want to tell
I want to see
I want to learn
I want to know
I want to know
I want to control
I want to hold
I want to feel
I want to remember
I want to go
I want to want
I want to find
I want to finish
I want to get rid of
I want to clean
I want to be good
I want to be better
I want to do it
I want to show
I want to outdo
I want to top it
I want to accomp
lish mastery

And the insistent and constant wanting continues for another four pages. All five pages, hand-written, are framed and hung side-by-side.

Slide

Close by, we also encountered her sense of failure:

step No 4 -

I have failed as a wife

as a woman

as a mother

as a hostess

as an artist

as a business woman

and as any 47 –

as a friend

as a daughter

as a sister

I have not failed as a

truth seeker

lowest ebb¹¹

Slide

And then, we read Bourgeois' note,

'When I do not attack, I do not feel myself alive.'

This form of writing continued, unabated throughout the exhibition.

¹¹ Louise Bourgeois, pencil note on 8x5 white paper, 1957 (LB-0129), in Freud Museum exhibition.

We know that Bourgeois was extremely well read in psychoanalysis. She has references in her writings to Sigmund Freud, Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan to name just a few. We also know that Bourgeois first saw her psychoanalyst Dr Henry Lowenfeld after the death of her father in 1951. This loss resulted in a deep depression that lasted over a decade during which time Bourgeois was unable to produce any artwork.¹² The first ten years of the artist's psychoanalytic treatment enabled her to come out of her depression and make art once more. At the same time, the therapy confirmed Bourgeois' sense of herself as a psychoanalytic subject, specifically a Kleinian subject.

As psychoanalyst and feminist Juliet Mitchell argues in her analysis of Bourgeois's psychoanalytic writings, the artist was able to 'use' her symptoms, in a psychoanalytic sense, to continue to make her work. Mitchell notices that the writings are filled with Bourgeois' articulation of 'violent jealousy',¹³ Mitchell concludes that, if psychoanalysis is a process through which the patient is relieved of their symptoms as a means of being cured, then, Bourgeois treatment 'cured' her of nothing, nor should it have done; she used it to become an important artist. Because of this tension, Mitchell is attuned to the frequent references in Bourgeois' writings to 'acting out'. In acting out Bourgeois experienced feelings of aggression and violence are followed by anxiety, guilt and fear, and then the need for reparation. Within the Kleinian consulting room, this dynamic is a form of negative transference.

¹² Phillip Larratt-Smith, 'Introduction: Sculpture as Symptom', *The Return of the Repressed*, ed. Philip Larratt-Smith, exhibition catalogue (London: Violette Editions, 2012), pp. 7-14 (p. 8).

¹³ Mitchell, 'The Sublime Jealousy of Louise Bourgeois', in *The Return of the Repressed*, ed. Philip Larratt-Smith, exhibition catalogue (London: Violette Editions, 2012), pp. 47-67 (p. 47).

Spending long periods of time in this exhibition and with this writing and work meant spending time with, on the one hand, forthright, aggressive, demanding, claustrophobic, and exhausting objects and texts, and on the other hand, being consumed, surprised, delighted, and stimulated by the thought-provoking truth that was being presented. Experienced within 20 Maresfield Gardens, this leaves a viewer with little room to escape psychologically, emotionally, and literally for a breathe of fresh air.

The experience of being in this intervention is dramatically conflictual. We are subsumed into Bourgeois' world: the dramatic world of a Kleinian subject.

The intensity of encountering this show inside the Freud Museum results in a love-hate encounter with Bourgeois' art and writing practices. In the writing, we are witnessing a form of negative transference, a form of acting out. Is it then the case that the love-hate relationship that we experience when encountering this show in the Freud Museum is one that rehearses the acting out of a negative transference. While being attuned to the singularity of acting out within the consulting room, I was still encouraged to perform something that was similar: I was giving it back: loving it and hating it, both at the same time.

Slide

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope that I have introduced some of the ways in which contemporary art transforms, expands, and undermines what a museum stands for and represents. Our understanding and interpretation of the objects within it – in this case, the chair and the couch – is given a deeper history, a history that may undermine the authenticity or originality of the museum's own mythology. In addition, contemporary art can intervene in ways that extend the parameters of what the museum exemplifies. Moving beyond the initial discourses offered by the museum, in this case, to post-Freudian thought such as the work of Klein and Davoine, and to alternative geo-political histories, such as South Africa's apartheid history and the TRC, contemporary art enables a great deal.

Taken together, one would have to say that, yes, contemporary art does make a lasting incursion on a museum. That exhibitions alter the museum's history and the work it does in quite remarkable ways. The meaning of the museum is certainly altered, and it is clear that there are also practical changes that can accompany these exhibitions. Visitor numbers may increase and diversify; the education program can be aligned with the exhibitions, Yes, at times, audiences that visit and want to see the consulting room undisturbed are disappointed at having contemporary art within the space, but, the question any museum has to consider is: ultimately, is it worth it?

Thank you.