

**Autobiographical Fictions:**  
**Intimate Encounters with Louise Bourgeois and Melanie Klein Inside the Freud**  
**Museum<sup>1</sup>**

Joanne Morra

**Being with Freud**



Sometime in November 1937, a rather extraordinary photograph was taken of writer and practising psychoanalyst, Princess Marie Bonaparte filming her friend and analyst Sigmund Freud. From entries in Freud's diary, we know that during this winter Marie Bonaparte visited Freud for her ongoing psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup> The photograph shows Freud sitting behind his desk, turning away from us, and facing his patient and friend. Bonaparte is crouching down, looking through an early movie camera that she had recently purchased. We don't know if she is filming Freud, or is posing for the photograph. Is Freud being filmed, or posing by turning to look at Bonaparte. A piece of autobiographical documentation, the photograph also has elements of being constructed, and thus a fiction.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at Freud Museum London during *Intimacy Unguarded: Gender, the Unconscious and Contemporary Art* symposium 27 February 2016. The symposium was part of the *Intimacy Unguarded* research project that is run by Emma Talbot and myself. A version of this text will form a part of a chapter in my forthcoming book *Inside the Freud Museums: History, Memory and Site-Responsive Art* (IB Tauris, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Reference is to the entry in Freud's diary dated Sunday 14 November 1937. Michael Molnar, Translated, Annotated, Introduction, *The Diary of Sigmund Freud, 1929-1939: A Chronicle of Events in the Last Decade* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1992), p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> In the Freud family's *Home Movies*, which run on a continuous loop in both Freud Museums (Vienna and London) there is footage taken by Marie Bonaparte of Freud in his study, as well as of Marie Bonaparte sitting in Freud's waiting room anxiously waiting for her session with the analyst to begin.

What fascinates me about this image is what I am granted the right to see: the apparatus for looking/the movie camera, the operator of the camera/Bonaparte, and the object of her gaze/Freud. This mise-en-scène makes it a compelling representation of representing: a photograph of a filmic encounter, specifically an encounter between Bonaparte and Freud. In addition to this rather remarkable portrait of looking and representing, there is an intensity figured between the filmmaker and the sitter, as each holds the gaze of the other.<sup>4</sup>

For me, this photograph is less a portrait of Freud, or of Bonaparte filming Freud, although that is rather marvellous, and more a documentation of Marie Bonaparte's engagement with Freud. It strikes me as an image that tells us a great deal about Bonaparte's response to being with Freud, perhaps even a response to a cherished, intimate encounter with Freud. The focal point of this photograph, unlike most portraits of Freud, is not the elder psychoanalyst, but his analysand Bonaparte. More specifically, the focus of the image is the relationship between the analysand and the analyst. Because it concentrates on figuring the relationship between them, as a piece of documentation, and a complex piece of autobiographical construction, I consider it an autobiographical fiction. It is part documentation and part fiction. It conveys Bonaparte's desire to be a part of the world of her analyst. The image stages and represents subjectivity and in so doing fictionalizes it. In this instance, the autobiographical fiction could also be read as a moment of analytic transference: a positive transference, wherein the patient's unconscious desire for her analyst has risen to the surface, and is captured in this representation. Bonaparte has been photographed inside the psychoanalytic stage.

\*\*\*\*

One of the Freud Museum London's most pressing provocations is to do what has been captured in this photograph: to encourage its artists and 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. 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. As we wander through the rooms, we wait for the analyst to return.

A group of exhibitions carry this fiction forward for us because the artworks rely on fragments and traces of the artist's own life – anecdotes, stories, memories and objects – that once inside the Freud Museum respond to the psychoanalytic context of the site to create a fictional narrative of the artist in analysis.<sup>5</sup>

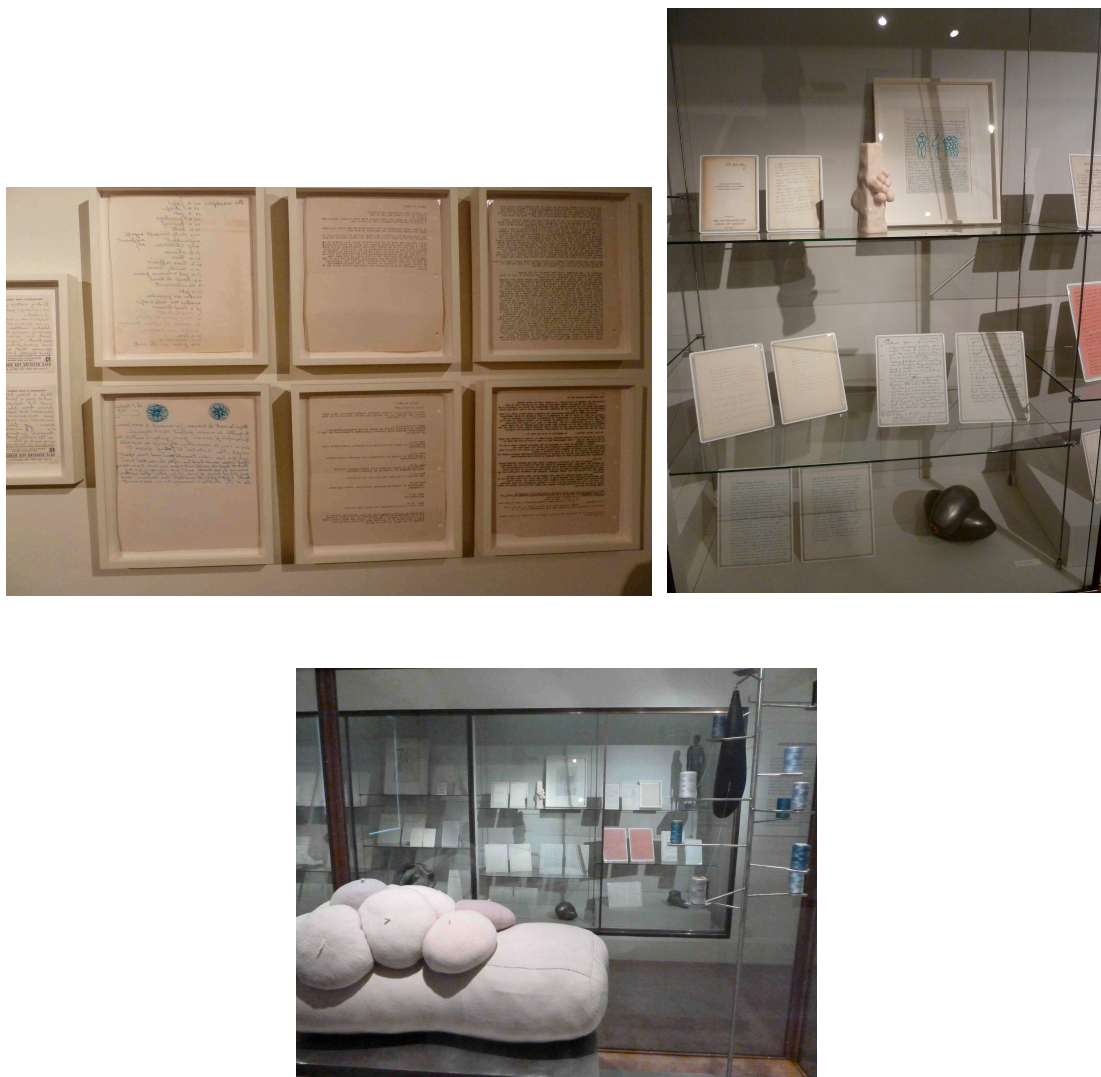
---

<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Rita Aspen from the Freud Museum London for factual information relating to this photograph.

<sup>5</sup> With this argument I am referring to Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement,' in *Modern Language Notes*, 94/5 (December 1979). The literature that I have engaged with on autobiography is vast. Therefore, I refer only to

In this talk, I will consider one intervention. The exhibition of Louise Bourgeois' work entitled *Return of the Repressed* (2012). This exhibition included a set of artworks, and importantly, a selection of Bourgeois' extensive writings around her experience of being in psychotherapy. I have chosen this intervention because unlike most exhibitions that invoke the figure and work of Sigmund Freud, this show introduces us to the history of psychoanalysis after Freud, by working with Melanie Klein.

### Acting Out: The Return of the Repressed



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

---

specific texts where necessary. For an overview of the various discourses and approaches that constitutes the field of autobiography, see, Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 2011 [2001]).

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*. The exhibition was first shown in a large museum in Argentina, and then travelled to Brazil, with a small portion of works shown at the Freud Museum London in 2012.

The intervention that took place within the Freud Museum 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. On the one hand, we were given access to documents and artworks that would transform our collective understanding of Bourgeois' art practice and its psychoanalytic dimensions. On the other hand, the curation of the show, particularly, the choice and density of the material, produced an intense love-hate experience of being with the work. Confined and held by the Freud Museum's powerful psychoanalytic and domestic setting, the engagement with Bourgeois' intimate and powerful accounts of her feminine subjectivity took on a complex psychoanalytic experience of acting out. In order to unpack this, it is helpful to focus on Bourgeois' psychoanalytic writings that dominated the exhibition's affect. By having these personal writings framed and displayed, they turn into a form of art. The writings speak to the many sides of someone we know as Louise Bourgeois.

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 -

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.

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 ebb<sup>6</sup>

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. 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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 'an imbrication of various and multiple preoccupations such as would arise within a clinical session'. By

---

<sup>6</sup> Louise Bourgeois, pencil note on 8x5 white paper, 1957 (LB-0129), in Freud Museum exhibition.

<sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>8</sup> The most relevant texts by Klein are: Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (London: Vintage, 1995); *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963* (London: Vintage, 1997); and *The Selected Melanie Klein*, ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

focussing on Bourgeois' articulation of 'violent jealousy' in these writings,<sup>9</sup> 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. The talismanic precept of psychoanalytic treatment is 'where id (unconscious) is, there (ego) conscious shall come to be'; for Bourgeois it was 'where id (unconscious) is, there shall a sculpture (consciousness) come to be.'

The paradox that Mitchell is highlighting is the way in which Bourgeois worked with the knowledge that making manifest her repressed emotions, such as her jealousy and rage within her psychoanalysis, meant getting better. But, if that were to happen, her artwork would suffer, as these repressed emotions fuelled the creative process. Thus, Bourgeois' conflict was knowing that "getting better" and becoming a significant artist were in tension.<sup>10</sup> Because of this tension, Mitchell is attuned to the frequent references in Bourgeois' writings to 'acting out' rather than 'working through'. In acting out, rather than working through, Bourgeois was able to

keep the emotions raw and alive because her sculpture was to make conscious what we all experience unconsciously. She thus has to have more not fewer of her symptoms; both bad and good experiences must be intensified. [...] she goes into what is unbearable/unknowable (which is why it is repressed) and makes it conscious in visual form.<sup>11</sup>

Art historian Mignon Nixon takes a different tact to Juliet Mitchell. Nixon traces the letter 'L' in Bourgeois' psychoanalytic writings – 'L' for Louise and for her analyst Lowenfeld. Tracing this letter and its meanings, Nixon uncovers the ways in which Bourgeois' politically and ethically charged artwork and her psychoanalysis function in relation to the complex machinations of the Kleinian subject. Feelings of aggression and violence are followed by anxiety, guilt and fear, and then the need for reparation. This is the case because, as Nixon explains,

Bourgeois holds herself to account daily, even hourly, in a painstaking catalogue of self-examination, duly acknowledging the pleasures of her own beastliness [...] and the pain of its boomerang effects [...] Unsparing but never

---

<sup>9</sup> 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).

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell, 'The Sublime Jealousy', pp. 47-8.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell, 'The Sublime Jealousy', pp 50-1.

self-lacerating, [... Bourgeois] recounts the 'psychic facts' of life, [...] the destructive impulses in one's life.

Nixon concludes by proposing that Bourgeois' relationship to her psychoanalysis is a form of negative transference. For Klein, negative transference is at the centre of analysis: feelings of violence, aggression, anxiety, and guilt are key.

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. The dichotomy that the show affected opened up the consideration that there may be a correlation between the use to which Bourgeois put her psychoanalytic treatment, a use that enabled an acting out, and the way in which the work and show acted out and used the site and the viewer. How so?

Bourgeois was aware of the dilemma she faced as a modern artist: a need for psychological release, and, an audience to witness that release. She wrote,

The drawing is the most  
basic psychologique [sic] release  
the modern artist is  
caught in a delemna [sic] in that  
he considers art as a psychological  
release and  
at the same  
time wants to  
have an  
audience<sup>12</sup>

As a viewer, we are members of that audience of whom Bourgeois speaks; and so was the Museum. In entering *The Return of the Repressed* inside the Freud Museum, we move into a condensed version of Bourgeois' already complex world. Layer upon layer of material objects, artworks, words and memories come together to create an almost claustrophobic space. This is a result of the artwork and writing itself, as well as the enclosed and restrictive space of the Museum: a space that when filled to the brim with intense work, such as Bourgeois, leaves the viewer little room to escape psychologically, emotionally, and literally for a breathe of fresh air. The site with its intense psychoanalytic history and memories bearing down on the viewer, as well as the intimacy of the space as a domestic and analytic one, results in a compressed relationship to Bourgeois writing and artwork. And this work gives us no relief.

---

<sup>12</sup> Louise Bourgeois, black ink and pencil on 18<sup>th</sup> street stationery, 1951, LB-0216, in Freud Museum exhibition.



There are so many verbal, visual and tactile objects, images, and texts in the exhibition, and so much intensity. Artworks are fragmented, broken, missing parts, in bits and pieces. The artist's writing is strong, aggressive, overwhelming.

Slowly moving through the intervention, looking, reading, listening, seeing, engaging, remembering, sympathizing, retracting, shaking one's head in astonishment and disbelief, and then in recognition, and empathy, a viewer finds herself repositioning her emotions, from sympathy and acknowledgment to hostility and anger, back and forth, and over and over again. The experience 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. Following Nixon, in the writing, we are witnessing a form of negative transference. Following Mitchell, the experience is not one of working through but 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?

As a complicated form of autobiographical fiction, it is as though the artwork, documents and exhibition are acting out the complex situation that Bourgeois negotiated all of her life, and as a viewer I was giving it back: loving it and hating it, both at the same time.

\*\*\*\*\*

In conclusion, I wonder if Adam Phillips is not right. Phillips has written the provocative statement that 'those who want to continue misleading themselves about the past write autobiographies; those who want to know themselves and their history have psychoanalysis'.<sup>13</sup>

His point is that when undertaking psychoanalysis the repetition of the actions and stories we practice and tell ourselves are broken down; then rebuilt, told differently. That is how we stop misleading ourselves about the past and come to know something of ourselves, and our history. Clearly, the access I have been granted by Bourgeois and Bonaparte is to a representation of herself that each constructed through a form of autobiographical fiction. The photograph and Bourgeois' writing, attest to something that is personal, Bonaparte's relationship to Freud, Bourgeois' understanding of herself as a Kleinian subject. At the same, they are representations that attest to the fictional nature of representation. Each time we write or speak the word I, we encounter something of ourselves and construct ourselves.

Certainly, both art and psychoanalysis have a transformative potential and alter one another: but, ultimately, because art is not a psychoanalysis and a psychoanalysis is not art what we are presented with are autobiographical fictions.

---

<sup>13</sup> Adam Phillips, 'The Telling of Selves', *On Flirtation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 65-78 (p. 66).