

Exposing Research

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NIDA

Read *The Most Magnificent Thing*

Failure

Translation Book

Several years ago, I decided that a book project I was working on about translation and contemporary art was actually not working at all. I realized that the narrative structure of the book was counter-intuitive to the subject matter and as a result, my book lacked a coherent narrative, or at least a narrative I wanted to write. (And perhaps in retrospect this was the real problem, my desire to write that book, as a book, was simply no longer present.) What I had before me were a series of fragments. Each chapter was a case study from the history of modern and contemporary art. And each chapter was a rethinking of theories of translation from literary theory, philosophy and psychoanalysis. So there was definitely something to the project, just not in the form that I expected and thought I wanted it to be.

As I say, the chapters were in and of themselves something; they provided new or alternative ways of thinking about various art practices and different understandings of translation, but they simply did not coalesce into a whole, into a book. I could not get the points of the various chapters to join up in any meaningful way. They would not budge. They wanted nothing more than to do the work that they did in and of themselves. As hard as I tried, and I did persevere with this project for a very long time, the chapters refused to be obedient. A book they would not make.

I did publish various things on translation and contemporary art. For instance, an article called 'Daughter's Tongue: The Intimate Distance of Translation' which was an analysis of Mona Hatoum and Chantal Akerman's work. This was once one of those disobedient chapters. I also published a short piece on translation and painting in an issue of *Garageland* edited by the artist and member of staff on BA Fine Art here at CSM Emma Talbot. And I wrote a short dialogue with the artist Susan Pui San Lok for her artist's book *Triologue*.

But, these texts were not the book I had imagined.

So, I decided to do something else.

Failing with Steiner

The philosopher and literary critic George Steiner begins his book entitled *My Unwritten Books* with the following pithy 'Introduction', (and I am going to read to you the 'Introduction' in its entirety)

Each of these seven chapters tells of a book which I had hoped to write; but did not. It seeks to explain why.

[And Steiner continues,]

A book unwritten is more than a void. It accompanies the work one has done like an active shadow, both ironic and sorrowful. It is one of the lives we could have lived, one of the journeys we did not take. Philosophy teaches that negation can be determinant. It is more than a denial of possibility. Privation has consequences we cannot foresee or gauge accurately. It is the unwritten book which might have made the difference. Which might have allowed one to fail better. Or perhaps not.¹

In this short and engaging introduction, Steiner sets out what is to be found in the seven chapters of his book: seven outlines of books he wanted to write but did not. Within each chapter, Steiner provides us with a map for each unwritten book. He draws for us the essential aspects of the book, the questions he would have asked, the archives he did or would have visited, the broad ideas he would be addressing, the gaps and fissures in the project, and, ultimately, the personal desires that drove him to undertake the research and thinking around the specific topic. And then, at the end of each chapter, Steiner explains to us, often in only two or three incisive and witty sentences something of why the particular project failed, why it did not materialize into a book, and he reveals to us, something about himself.²

Steiner ends his book of unwritten books with two sentences, which form its last paragraph. They are as follows:

¹ George Steiner, *My Unwritten Books* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), n.p.

² For instance, the chapter on 'The Tongues of Eros', the work that has caused so much controversy in the literary community because it seems, the hedonist Steiner has made love in many languages, the author writes...

Or, after discussing what the book on Zion would have entailed, he notes that, 'I had hoped to hammer out these arguments in a full-scale work. I lacked the clarity of vision to do so. And the Hebrew.'

An ancient curse has it: 'May mine enemy publish a book.' To which I now add:
'May he publish seven.'³

The publication of Steiner's book is fortuitous for me in relation to this talk, because it enables me to open up a discussion about failure. We have all experienced what Steiner names a failed project. A project, whether it be a book, an essay, painting, film, installation, performance, or a curatorial exhibition, that does not come to fruition and is deemed a failure.

However, the publication of Steiner's book, as a book, albeit one of failed projects, in some way retrieves the notion of failure for us. Those seven books that Steiner did not write have become, chapters of a book he did write. Perhaps what we can learn from Steiner is that a failed project offers us the possibility of taking up an alternative narrative, of finding a different form for our ideas, of proceeding in an unexpected way, so as to publish, exhibit, curate the work we have done as something else.

³ Steiner, p. 200.

The Blank Page, or the Anxiety of Memory

The English author, screenwriter and essayist Hanif Kureishi starts his essay 'Something Given: Reflections on Writing' with the following: 'My father wanted to be a writer. I can't remember a time when he didn't want this.'⁴ With this essay, Kureishi constructs an autobiographical narrative about his relationship to writing that is intimately connected to his father's failure to become a writer. Although his father wrote many books and plays throughout his life, none were accepted for publication. Working in conflict with his father's failure, where Kureishi found success, and against the wishes of the extended family – who simply did not understand or value the importance of intellectual labour – Kureishi persevered and became a published author.

In this image of the author's life and work, Kureishi establishes a genealogy for his writing outside of himself. He suggests that his desire to write preceded him: he was born into it. Like psychoanalysis's conviction that we are born into culture and language, that they precede us, beginnings are always already culturally and linguistically determined, history precedes us, even if our desires are possibly novel constituents of these antecedents.

However, even within, or perhaps because of these historical, cultural and autobiographical antecedents, the blank page – whether it is a canvas, strip or roll of film, the white space of a gallery, or the blank screen (all of which are always already full of their own antecedents) – brings with it conflict and anxiety. As Kureishi informs us, 'To begin to write – to attempt anything creative, for that matter – is to ask many other questions, not only about the craft itself, but of oneself, and of life. The blank empty page is a representation of this helplessness. Who am I? it asks. How should I live? Who do I want to be?'⁵

In the midst of these questions, while both knowing and not-knowing what we are doing, sitting alongside that blank page, chaos looms. It can propel us forward or create a standstill. While looking at that blank page, those notes, scraps of ideas, and images, one searches for a magnet around which things will gather. With this hope and intention in mind, eventually one loses oneself in what Kureishi and others call the pleasure of play, those 'long periods of absorption and reverie'⁶ wherein we imagine and make, we work to create, something else.

What we learn from Kureishi is that the practice of writing, and here I would also say art making and curating, is a process through which a narrative of the self is in Laplanchean psychoanalytic terms, 'constructed', 'deconstructed' and 'reconstructed'.⁷ Bringing together

⁴ Hanif Kureishi. 'Something Given: Reflections on Writing', *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 1-24 (p. 1).

⁵ Ibid., Kureishi, p. 10.

⁶ Ibid., Kureishi, p. 12.

⁷ Jean Laplanche. *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989 (1987)).

our autobiographical, psychological, social and historical formations, we begin our creative practices in the midst of chaos. And each time we begin, we attempt to plot a course through that chaos, so as to bring about something new.

My father wanted to be a writer. I can't remember a time when he didn't want this. [...]
Writing seems to be a problem of some kind. It isn't as if most people can just sit down and start to write brilliantly, get up from the desk, do something else all day, and then, next morning start again without any conflict or anxiety. To begin to write – to attempt anything creative, for that matter – is to ask many other questions, not only about the craft itself, but of oneself, and of life. The blank empty page is a representation of this helplessness. Who am I? it asks. How should I live? Who do I want to be? [...]

At one time I imagined that if I wrote like other people, if I imitated writers I liked, I would only have to expose myself through a disguise. I did this for a time, but my own self kept coming through. It took me a while to see that isn't a question of discovering your voice but of seeing that you have a voice already just as you have a personality, and that if you continue to write you have no choice but to speak, write, and live in it. What you have to do, in a sense, is take possession of yourself. The human being and the writer are the same. [...]

One of the problems of writing, and of using the self as material, is that this will recall powerful memories. To sit at a desk with a pen is to recall familiar fears and disappointments – and in particular, conflicts - which are the essence of drama. This is partly the difficulty of coming to terms with the attitude to learning that you have already picked up from your parents and teachers, from the experience of being at home and at school; and from the expectations of all of these. There is the inability to concentrate and the knowledge that you must do so for fear of punishment. There is boredom, and the anxiety that more exciting things are going on elsewhere. [...]

How soon, too, when you start to write, do several other things become clear. How much you want to succeed, for instance. Or how much you require the reassurance of some kind of success, or of some kind of enviable status that you believe that writing will bring. To begin to write is to recognize both how much you require such reassurance, and how far away it really is. [...]

Perhaps writing requires the regularity of work and the inspiration and pleasure of play. But this inspiration and pleasure cannot just be conjured up on demand. Or can it? Children never think of such things. If a toy or game doesn't give them pleasure they throw it aside and seek something that does. But if you did that as a writer, just went off when you felt like it, nothing would get done. Or would it? A good deal of writing is finding a method that will make the writing happen. And how the writing happens depends on the ideas we already have about ourselves. We shouldn't forget that we create our creativity and imagine our imagination. [...]

Often, to begin writing all you need is an idea, a germ, a picture, a hint, a moment's recognition – an excuse for everything else you've been thinking to gather or organize around, so that everything falls into place. In the search for stories you look for something likely and malleable, which connects with the other things you are thinking at the time. [...]

Looking at the journal I kept at the time, I can see how much I knew of what I was doing; and, concurrently, how little. It had to be a discovery – of that which was already there. I am reminded of a phrase by Alfred de Musset: 'It is not work. It is merely listening. It is as if some unknown person were speaking in your ear.' [...]
You have to tackle all this while knowing that these are, really, questions about who you are, and who you will become.

I like to work every day, in the morning, like my father. That way I am faithful to him and to myself.

If writing were not difficult it wouldn't be enjoyable. If it is too easy you can feel you haven't quite grasped the story, that you have omitted something essential. But the difficulty is more likely to be internal to the work itself – where it should be – rather than in some personal crisis. [...] there has been a lot to clear away; then the work starts.'

Hanif Kureishi. 'Something Given: Reflections on Writing', *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 1-24.

Fidelity/Infidelity

Image: Rauschenberg with his *White Paintings*

In an interview with the art critic Calvin Tomkins, the American artist Robert Rauschenberg states the following about his practice in the early 1950s:

'I couldn't really emulate something I was so in awe of. I saw [Jackson] Pollock and all that other work [by the Abstract Expressionists], and I said, Okay, I can't go that way. It's possible that I discovered my own originality through a series of self-imposed *detours*.⁸ [Italics mine.]

During the Summer and Fall of 1951, while studying at Black Mountain Art College near Asheville, North Carolina, Rauschenberg produced a series of white paintings. Made up of varying numbers of mathematically calculated canvases (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7), the *White Paintings* are remarkable in many ways. They are made with household paint and a roller. There is no use of brushes, no gestural work, no mark, no figure, no ground, no frame; they are quite simply large expanses of singularly articulated white canvas.

With the *White Paintings*, Rauschenberg had, in art critic Henry Geldzahler's view, 'wiped out the history of painting;' in effect the artist had produced a tabula rasa.⁹ This is obviously an exaggeration by the art critic, but the point should be taken: the *White Paintings* enabled Rauschenberg, and artists coming after Abstract Expressionism, to distance themselves and differentiate themselves from what came before them. Through a 'series of self-imposed detours' the *White Paintings* represent the process of beginning as difference. These works show us that all beginnings mark out, and are marked out by, a moment of difference.

The *White Paintings* enabled Rauschenberg to dislodge himself from the burden and force of the history of painting, more specifically, to differentiate his work from the painting that was being produced around him at the start of his career. As Rauschenberg put it, in the early 50s, he "'start[ed] every day moving out from Pollock and [Wilhem] de Kooning, [...and this] is sort of a long way to have to go to start from."¹⁰

If, then, the issue at stake is how Rauschenberg was to make the necessary shifts, take the detours which mark out difference, in order to do something other than move out from an artistic history, inheritance, and influence as formidable and present as the one in which he found himself, then the *White Paintings* should be understood as a negotiation of this

⁸ Calvin Tomkins, *Off the Wall: Robert Rauschenberg and the Art World of Our Time* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 63.

⁹ Henry Geldzahler, 'Robert Rauschenberg,' *Art International*, 7 (25 September 1963), p. 65.

¹⁰ Robert Rauschenberg, quoted in Calvin Tomkins, 'Bob Rauschenberg', *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Viking Press, 1962, (repr. 1965)), p. 213.

genealogy. For the art critic Geldzhaler, the paintings are just that, because they are a determinate negation of these art practices and histories: they are a 'wiping out [of] the history of painting.'

I would like to propose that these paintings are *also* something a little more complex than a simple negation. I would like to suggest that the *White Paintings* are a type of 'beginning'. Something akin to Edward Said's understanding of beginning as the combination of the 'already-familiar' and the 'novel', but, also slightly different.¹¹ I would characterize these paintings as a beginning that is made up of both a *fidelity* and *infidelity* to what Rauschenberg inherited. On the one hand, the paintings are unfaithful because they are a negation and critique of what came before them. They are a wiping away of the work being done by the most important artists of the time: Pollock, de Kooning, Albers (Rauschenberg's teacher at Black Mountain College), Newman and others. On the other hand, they are also faithful to that inheritance because they are engaging with similar ideas around the limits of painting. The *White Paintings* are dealing with what it means to empty content out of painting, to make abstract works of art that deal with painting as experience for both the artist and the viewer. In the case of Pollock, de Kooning, Albers and Newman, the experience should be a transcendental aesthetic one. What Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* did was related to this, but also different from them.

When you stand in front of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, they do something quite remarkable. They become the ground upon which, as John Cage noted, your 'shadow' is cast. In front of them, you can see your shadow, you can see what is going on in the room around the work, and this was quite an exceptional experience.¹²

As the artist Allan Kaprow said when he first saw them,

[... the] white paintings were an end to art and a beginning. Once a man's shadow gets into a painting for a moment, everything becomes possible and the conditions for experimentation are thrust upon the scene. Possibility, artists know, is the most frightening idea of all.¹³

¹¹ Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (London: Granta Books, 1985 (1975)), p. xxiii.

¹² John Cage, 'On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work,' *Metro*, 2 (Maggio 1961), p. 43.

¹³ Allan Kaprow, 'Experimental Art,' *Art News*, 65 (March 1966), p. 79.

Curiosity: Teaching

I wrote some art criticism. I wrote for exhibition catalogues. And I kept reading things I wanted to read, rather than things I felt I had to read for the translation book. Slowly, the obligation I felt towards the book diminished. And with that disentanglement, my other interests – that developed from the reading and writing that I did for fun – specifically on artwriting and psychoanalysis – emerged as a central concern in my work.

Curious, delighted and excited by this new interest, I decided to test out some of the ideas.

I put together a seminar for Stage 2 BAFA students on the topic of *Spaces of Practice: The Studio, The Study and the Gallery*. Here is the blurb for the seminar:

In this seminar we will consider the various processes that make up what it is that we do in our studio, our study and in an art gallery.

If 'space' is a place that has been activated by 'practice', then what are the practices that we undertake in the studio, study and gallery? By considering examples from contemporary art and writing, we will examine the similarities and differences in how we embody, engage in, and activate the spaces in which we practice.

How do we begin a work of art or a piece of writing? How do we know when it is finished, or when it is a failure? What happens next?

Is it possible to articulate the moment in which what we are working on in the studio, study or as a curatorial project comes together and makes sense? Here, I am referring to that point in our practice when the labour that we are putting into something pays off, everything falls into place, and 'our work' becomes 'a work of art' or a 'piece of writing' or a 'show'.

What are our psychological, experiential and subjective relationships to these practices and processes? How do we engage consciously and unconsciously with the real and imaginary spaces of our practice? In this seminar we will be thinking about how our autobiography, memories, fears, anxieties, and our desire impact upon our choices, and our engagement in the studio, study and gallery. We will also consider what it means to do nothing, or to wait, hope, and day-dream about our practice, rather than 'actively' engage in it.

Each of the classes will have preparatory reading that must be done before the session. In addition, for a couple of the early sessions, we will all be writing very short texts (no more than 100 words) on what it is that we do in our studios, study and in the gallery as a starting point for our discussions. It is essential that both the reading and the writing be done for each

class. This will ensure that our discussions are as lively, stimulating and useful as possible for each member of the group.

The seminar enabled me to talk about these ideas that interested me with a group of students who shared similar interests. Together we read various essays on contemporary art, psychoanalysis, and the spaces of practice. We also discussed different artworks, and wrote short texts on our different practices that we read out in class and talked about. I was really pleased with the fact that I could bring something of my own practice into the classroom and work-through some of the ideas that we shared.

Looking

2 Pouissin paintings

While on research leave in 2000 at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, the art historian T.J. Clark takes a trip to the Getty Art Gallery. There he finds an unexpected sight: two Poussin paintings hang side by side. *Landscape with a Calm* (1650-51) which is housed at the Getty, and next to it is Clark's favourite painting, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (1648), which normally hangs at the National Gallery, here in London.³⁷

Clark decides that instead of working on Picasso, which was what he intended to do, he wanted to spend some time with the Pouissin paintings.

Clark visits the paintings almost every day over a 3 months period. He keeps a record of his visits: a sort of personal journal, which is for him a means of tracking the intense process of looking through which he comes to know the two paintings. After leaving the Getty, he periodically goes back to these entries over a 4-year period. Clark eventually decides that the 'secret' contained within the journal needs to be shared. It becomes the book *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*.

As a form, the diary elicits the rhythms and rituals of successive personal encounters with the paintings over many years. Clark begins the project as a personal endeavor. Writing the journal is for him a means of tracking the intense process of looking and writing through which he comes to know the two works. But, as time passes and the work develops, he realizes that the process of looking and writing about that looking is the book. Clark offers it to us as a testament to the practice of looking and learning from artworks and the work involved in this practice.

What also interests me about the book is the way in which he exposes for us the pleasures and anxieties essential to the work of art writing.

Having taken on the task of writing about Poussin's paintings, Clark, is from his second diary entry anxious that he has nothing more to say. This apprehension occurs often. The unease manifests itself after he has been away from the paintings for a few days;⁴¹ it coincides with his fear that he will not be able to write again;⁴² it recurs when he believes that the writing is "winding down";⁴³ and finally, it repeats itself when he thinks that there is nothing more worth writing about.⁴⁴ Each time the resistance to look, say, or write about the pictures is repeated, acted out. And each time, it is worked-through. For instance, by looking, something is found that is worth writing about;⁴⁵ by writing, the disappointments with himself and the progress of his work are worked-through.⁴⁶ What is established from considering Clark's anxiety---one that I am sure many of us recognize and share---is that through the ritual act of repeatedly

visiting the paintings and the rhythm of looking, thinking, and writing, the anxiety and resistance about writing, about having something to say, is worked-through.

The book turns into a detective story, where Clark is bothered by something but can't quite understand what it is. Eventually, like any good detective story, the secret is revealed.

What we can learn from Clark's writing, and his experience, is research takes time and effort: that going to our work spaces, whether it be a studio, study, library, etc. every day is the only way that things will get done. The only way for our anxieties to be relieved, and our work will become manifest.

Associating

An Aside

In 2005 the Camden Arts Centre in London put on an exhibition entitled *An Aside*, curated by the contemporary British artist Tacita Dean.²² This was her first curatorial project. And it is a remarkable one, because in it, Dean employed some very interesting research strategies: she used the contingent, the associative, and serendipity to guide her in her putting together the exhibition.

An Aside contained work by seventeen modern and contemporary European and North American artists. The artwork ranged from painting, drawing, and sculpture to photography, film, and installation. The works were connected with one another through a fragile and expanded notion of landscape, environment, and their inhabitants. As the art critic Adrian Searle put it, the exhibition juxtaposed work that one would “never imagine seeing together.”²³ And because of this, unusual relationships and meanings arose.

It was apparent that a very particular sensibility was at work in bringing together these heterogeneous works of art, one that betrayed a trust of the contingent, the associative, the ephemeral, the ambiguous, and the intuitive.¹⁴

For instance, upon entering **Gallery 3**, while scanning the room and taking in the diverse combination of work by Thomas Scheibitz, Joseph Beuys, Walther Br ux, and Fischli and Weiss, I caught myself seeing something hovering at the periphery of my vision. Peering more closely, I realized that little loaves of bread with wings on them - **Lothar Baumgarten's *Moskitos in Kopula* (1969)** - were stacked upon one another and lined up along the windowsills in the room. In the same space were installed Beuys's androgynously gendered self-portrait bust from 1947 and **Schiebitz's work *Ohne Titel (Sandstein)* from 2003**, which is both a stone sculpture made from an unfinished gravestone and a tree trunk into which the stone was carved.¹⁵ This type of ambiguity, heterogeneity, and complexity within the artworks and the curation of the show inspired the art critic Michael Glover to suggest that the exhibition raised “precise and troubling questions about how and what we perceive.”²⁴

What is also curious about this exhibition is the catalogue that accompanied it, which is a long essay by the curator and artist Tacita Dean.¹⁶ In it Dean maps the research involved in her

¹⁴ One could say that these strategies are “anti-labor” or, more accurately, perhaps, they seem to wear their work lightly. Lightly or not, the show worked.

¹⁵ As an undecidable, this artwork is at once both and neither of these things.

¹⁶ The exhibition itself was named after the theatrical device known as “an aside.” This is “when an actor chooses to address the audience directly whilst not affecting the action on stage.”²⁵ It is one of the strategies Dean employed in choosing and curating the works of art in the show: each work was independent and yet related to the others. The technical term “an aside” is also what Dean uses to describe the texts that accompany her own artwork. In these pieces of retrospective writing, the artist articulates beautifully the working-through of her practice, not as explanation but, as she informs us, as an “aside”: “independent yet connected.”²⁶ An aside is anachronistic, out of time and place. It comes

curatorial strategies, including the contingent, associative, and serendipitous aspects of it and, quite satisfyingly for the reader, she exquisitely leaves the awe and wonder of the process in place.

Dean writes that the show was “created through a meandering, ill-formed thought process where the minutest of incidents can, and have, instructed major decisions.”²⁷ She followed the threads of unconscious and conscious desire, of coincidence and accident, of memories and musings, of free association and asides.”²⁹¹⁷

For Dean there is nothing more “frightening . . . [or] . . . satisfying than finding you’ve arrived somewhere without any clear idea of the route.”³¹ But, in the end, Dean is pleased with the “coherent fruits” of this “process.”³⁰

What we can learn from Dean’s curatorial venture is that the work done by memory, associative drifting, daydreaming, and contingent impulses is what keeps us motivated and on track, by being seemingly off-track, while undertaking the research that we do in our studio, studies, and in the gallery.

Around the same time I was reading Georges Perec’s work, and I stumbled across an essay he wrote called ‘The Scene of a Strategem’. The essay is an analysis of the time he spent in psychoanalysis with J.B. Pontalis. It too is an essay about process. About Perec’s inability to write about his analysis no matter how hard he tried. 18 months after decided to write a text, he still had nothing written down. Eventually he was able to write, and the result is the short and stunning essay ‘The Scene of a Strategem’.

A+B+C = D

For my talk at the Clark Institute, I wanted to write about these things. About how things begin, and don’t begin. How we get stuck with a project. How research is full of anxieties, and also pleasures. And that’s what I did. The talk was called ‘The Work of Research: Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’. The title is a nod to a famous essay written

from elsewhere and is relocated in a time that is not its own. The An Aside exhibition catalogue (fig. 3) is just such a text.

¹⁷ Dean has an affection for the anachronistic and “courts” things that are out of time.²⁸ I would like to draw an equivalence here between the function and temporality of an aside as anachronistic and the psychoanalytic process of working-through wherein the remembering of repressed material involves a relocation of something from the unconscious, or the past, to the conscious, or the present. The exhibition offers us the working-through and willingness of an artist-turned-curator who has relied upon and given herself up to the workings of the indeterminate, heterogenous, and multi-temporal. This is what Perec refers to as the “opening” through which things happen. Dean calls this “being in a state of grace.

by Freud called 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through'. This essay formed the framework for what I wanted to say about the relationship between the process of curating, writing and being in analysis.

In this talk I gave and the article that came from it, I was fortunate enough to also find a 'voice' for my writing, and one that I enjoyed inhabiting. A way of speaking and writing that made me comfortable, and I hoped would also provide something useful for other people who read my work.

Serendipity

A few months later my friend and colleague here at UAL, the artist William Cobbing was going to have a show at the Freud Museum London. He had invited me to write an essay for the catalogue, and I agreed. Besides being a nice guy, I really liked Will's work, and was curious about the Freud Museum and its contemporary art exhibitions. I had been to a few of them but was not fully up to date on them by any means.

Cobbing made a rather remarkable intervention into the Freud Museum called *Gradiva Project*. My essay looked at the way in which Cobbing's work infiltrated and altered our understanding of the Freud Museum. On the one hand, Cobbing's reliance on sculpture, whether in the form of ceramic or cast iron referred directly to Freud's passion for collecting antiquities. Or, on the other hand, Cobbing's video work of his head encased in a clay mound which he slowly chips at to escape, humorously referring to Freud's understanding of the mind as a archaeological site that is excavated during psychoanalysis.

Daydreaming

That summer I was on holiday in Nice in the South of France. I was still mourning the failure of the book on translation and the visual arts. I had worked on it for a long time. What was I to do with all that work, I kept wondering? And now, there would be no book on translation and contemporary art with my name attached to it.

Consoling myself by reading detective fiction, my mind began to wander and I found myself thinking about the seminar I had just taught, the paper I had delivered at the Clark conference, and Will's exhibition at the Freud Museum. And something began to emerge. The way in which psychoanalysis, and particularly what happens in the consulting room, can be used to think about what artists do in the studio, how curators work in the gallery, and the trials and tribulations about writing on art.

I remembered how inspiring I found Cobbing's exhibition, and how exciting it was to write about his work within the context of the Freud Museum, and larger questions around psychoanalysis and contemporary art practice. I had had fun.

I pulled my partner out of his slumber and we chatted. It became instantly clear that I had been to several exhibitions at the Freud Museum that interested me: Valie Export, Penny Siopis, Sophie Calle, Tim Noble and Sue Webster to name a few.

The more I thought about Cobbing's show, and the others I had seen, and some I had not seen, the famous shows by Susan Hiller, Stuart Brisley and Vera Frenkel, for instance, the more I realized that when I got back to London I would go and talk to the Director of the Freud Museum – a man who I had met only once during Cobbing's exhibition – and ask to see the archives on the exhibitions that had been held there.

Expectations and Trepidation: Approaching the Freud Museum

Of course, when I got back to London, I was petrified to go to the Museum and talk to the Director. The Museum was so famous. That I knew. It had Freud's couch in it. That famous couch, and lots of Freud's belongings. I had been there a few times and I remember the feeling of awe that it created in me. My expectations for the project were high. I was so excited to work on the exhibitions. I did a bit of research and found more and more exhibitions that had taken place there that sounded amazing. Could this be it. could this be the new book project. I wanted to believe it would be, but, I also knew that wanting it and realizing it were 2 different things. The translation book was an excellent case in point.

I couldn't make the call to set up a meeting.

A week later, my partner pushed me, and I made an appointment.

Archives: History / History: Archives

The first meeting was awkward. I was timid. They didn't know me. I didn't know them. But, I was shown the archives, about 20 box-files full of exhibition proposals, correspondence, press releases, catalogues, and reviews of shows. I soon realized that there had been 50 contemporary art exhibitions since the Museum opened in 1986. (Now, almost 7 years later, the number of shows has grown to almost 80.) I spent several months at the Museum going through everything, and breaking all rules of copyright as I photocopied everything I could. I also came to know the employees of the Museum who were extremely helpful and knowledgeable. During this time, I became fascinated by this history and these exhibitions, and spent some time thinking about the shows, attending the Museum's exhibitions, and trying to make sense of them.

(At this point I also realized that the last chapter of the translation book was on the consulting room and included 2 shows from the Freud Museum. Very odd to have remembered this! I had forgotten all about them!)

I also realized that there was a history to the Freud Museum London that I needed to learn about.

20 Maresfield Gardens in London is Sigmund Freud's last home. Freud lived here from 28th September 1938 until his death on 23rd September 1939. During this short time, he completed several manuscripts, saw a few patients, received visitors, and continued his lifelong commitment to his correspondence. In Maresfield Gardens, Freud was fortunate enough to be surrounded by his treasured collection of over 2,000 antiquities and artefacts. He also had a portion of his substantive library at his disposal. Freud was able to engage with these objects and books in the comfort of his unique anthropomorphic chair or while lying on the couch that, over the past 50 years, his many analysands had lay on during their psychoanalysis.

20 Maresfield Gardens was home to Sigmund Freud's daughter, Anna Freud, the child therapist who worked as a practising psychoanalyst all of her life and built up a solid foundation for understanding the development of children, and the practice of child psychotherapy.

But, for Sigmund Freud and the Freud family, Maresfield Gardens is a ghost of another place. A home and practice in which Freud spent most of his life and career: Berggasse 19, Vienna.

Through research, I learnt that:

Freud and his family moved into the newly built apartment 5, Berggasse 19, in 1891. Soon after taking up residence in this apartment, Freud began to see his patients here. When in 1908 Freud's sister Rosa Graf vacated apartment 6 in the same building, the flat adjoining the family quarters, Freud moved his practice into it. Anna Freud, began her practice as a child therapist in apartment 6 in 1923 where she carried out her work and writing for over 15 years. Freud lived and worked at Berggasse 19 for almost 50 years. At Berggasse, he saw nearly all of his patients, wrote the bulk of the major works of psychoanalysis, carried out a lengthy correspondence with colleagues and friends, welcomed guests, and raised a family.

Having dedicated a life to this labour, Freud, at the age of 83, along with his family (his wife Martha, his daughter Anna and his sister-in-law Minna Bernays), was forced to leave Vienna after Hitler's Third Reich annexed Austria on 13th March 1938. Under constant surveillance by the Nazis, the Freud family had to sell a large portion of the psychoanalyst's book collection,¹⁸ borrow funds from family and friends and with the assistance of the American Government, were finally granted permission by the Nazis to leave Vienna on 4 June 1938. After a short stay in Paris, the Freud family arrived in London. Astonishingly, the family was able to take with them almost all of their belongings, and most of these are what we can still view today in the Freud Museum London.

This history brought a series of different framings to 20 Maresfield Gardens.

Certainly, it is a museum, in which the curation, conservation, classification and preservation of the history and memory of psychoanalysis take place. However, it is also a space that embodies other types of practices: the space of the home, in which the practice of everyday life is undertaken; the consulting room, where psychoanalysis is practiced; the study, where the practices of reading and writing occur; and the gallery, where contemporary art interventions take place. In effect then, the Freud Museum London is a multi-layered, multipurpose space.

¹⁸ As John Forrester notes, 'And the fact that the portion of his library that Freud sold was the "professional" portion of mainly psychiatric, neurological, and psychoanalytic books – very little was sold of archaeology or the classics – is an indication of what reading lay closest to his heart.' John Forrester, 'Collector, Naturalist, Surrealist', in *Dispatches from the Freud Wars: Psychoanalysis and Its Passions* (Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 275, ftnt 6. Reference to Edward Timms, 'Freud's Library and His Private Reading,' in Edward Timms and Naomi Segal, eds., *Freud in Exile: Psychoanalysis and Its Vicissitudes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 65-79.

This Way or That: Asking Questions and Making Sense of Things

I slowly tried to piece together a narrative for a book. I could either write about the exhibitions chronologically, from the first to the most recent, or I could try something different.

Because the archives of the contemporary art exhibition are so patchy: with some shows having more information about them than others. And because the shows were so different in their strengths, and in their relationship to the museum and psychoanalysis, I decided the chronological narrative was not going to work.

So, I started to put the exhibitions into groups. And themes began to emerge rather easily and organically. There were shows about the consulting room, and others that had to do with Freud's antiquities and archaeology – like William Cobbing's show. There were other interventions that were autobiographical, in which the artist put something of themselves into the show; while a group of installations dealt with dreams and Freud's famous work on the interpretation of dreams. A large group of exhibitions focussed on trauma – the Freud's move from Vienna to London and the Holocaust. And I knew I had to write about the Freud Museum in Vienna, a museum with its own history and importantly its own contemporary art collection.

As I worked, I used post its to jot down ideas. As the number of post-its grew, and the chapters came to be formed, I began to put them on the main wall of my study. I grouped them together by chapters, and then ordered them within the chapters. My study resembled a colourful jigsaw puzzle for quite some time. The post its kept me company and feeling secure. There was something here. Look, it's right there in front of me.

In a 1980 lecture at Harvard University, the postcolonial cultural critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us that it is the question that drives research and knowledge. What you ask will have a great impact in what you answer.

Asking what does this work of art look like?

Is remarkably different from asking, what does this work of art do?

Or, what does this work of art mean?

Remember, the question is essential.

Writing

I would like to talk about is a short and quite remarkable essay by the cultural critic Susan Sontag entitled 'Writing as Reading'. In it the author sets out for us the 'firm' relationship between writing and reading. (p. 263) In a few short pages, Sontag makes it quite clear that to write is always already to be a reader. She writes, and we read that

to write is to practice, with particular intensity and attentiveness, the art of reading. You write in order to read what you've written, and see if it's OK and, since of course it never is, to rewrite it – once, twice, as many times as it takes to get it to be something you can bear to reread. You are your own first, maybe severest, reader. "To write is to sit in judgment on oneself," Ibsen inscribed on the flyleaf of one of his books. Hard to imagine writing without rereading. (P. 263)

For Sontag although this may sound like 'effort', it is actually the pleasurable part of the process. Even if it is, as she says, 'a mess', 'you have a chance to fix it'. (P. 264) You have something down. You have the opportunity to 'be clearer. Or deeper. Or more eloquent. Or more eccentric.' (P. 264)

So, for Sontag, the practice of writing as reading recognizes the processes of alteration, improvement, deletion, editing: it encourages and solicits change, and does so by ensuring that the first word is never the last. In this way, the author is first and foremost a reader.

From here, Sontag explains how the process of writing is for her the result of a love of reading. Reading, she writes,

makes you dream of becoming a writer. And, long after you've become a writer, reading books others write – and rereading the beloved books of the past – constitutes an irresistible distraction from writing. Distraction. Consolation. Torment. And yes, inspiration. (P. 265)

What Sontag teaches us is that, the pleasures and anxieties that attend this practice of reading, are also those that accompany us while writing. By firmly establishing the relationship between reading and writing – writing and reading – Sontag brings to bear upon us the history of writing. The history of our chosen practice – whether it be artwriting, artmaking, or curating. The narrative within which we begin, always already includes the genealogy within which we practice. History accompanies us. We are always our first reader, viewer, and critic.

Working, Working, Working

Christian Boltanski,

I come to my studio every day at 10.30, and I stay and do nothing. I go to Paris sometimes. I have a few ideas. To be very pretentious, sometimes I believe it is mystical. Sometimes you find nothing, and then you find some-thing you love to do. Sometimes you make mistakes, but some-times it's true. In two minutes, you understand what you must do for the next two years. Sometimes it's in the studio, but other times it's walking in the street or reading a magazine. It's a good life, being an artist, because you do what you want. [...]

Nobody comes here – I don't like it when people come here. There is nothing to see – most of the time I give interviews at a café in Paris, and it's good. I'm so far from Paris, here in Malakoff, people don't know where it is. I consider this room to be my studio, but really there's nothing here. It's like a place where you live. The only useful thing about the studio is that after some time you can imagine something, a forest, for example: I walk in it and today it is nothing for me, but perhaps in two weeks it will become something. [...]

Something like 60 per cent of my work is destroyed after every show. And if it's not destroyed, it's removed, or I'll mix one piece with another. When I make a show it's like when you arrive at home and you open your fridge at night and there's two potatoes and one sausage and two eggs, and with all that you make something to eat. I try to make something with what's in my 'fridge'. [...]

I'm always a beginner, and the most important thing is always the next piece. We artists never know if we can do it again. You have done something – and most of the time I hate what I have done a few years ago – and you don't know if you can do something now. The good artists are usually the very young or the very old. The ones who are very young are so stupid that they have no fear. And when they are very old they aren't afraid any more. In the meantime, you are always, always, afraid.'

Christian Boltanski, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/studio-christian-boltanski>

Pausing

'... having too many questions in my own mind and not being able to answer them all. Too many questions and therefore a lot of doubt – doubt about what I was doing. And not knowing what I was doing took over my activity, it became my activity.'¹⁹

This is Welsh artist Bethan Huws talking about why she decided to take four years (from 1993-1995) out of making and exhibiting art work. Huws was overwhelmed by so many fundamental questions. For instance, 'what is an artwork? What is the nature of the origin of art, what are the conditions that make art possible? And where do the foundations of my own work lie?

So, rather than making artworks, she decided to try and answer some of these questions. She immersed herself in philosophy – such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida and Ludwig Wittgenstein - dictionaries and works of linguistics, as well as the writing by the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, and various works by other artists, including Robert Smithson, Carl Andre, Frank Stella and Marcel Duchamp.

She made notes. Lots of them. In these notes she took down references, she asked more questions, she made doodles and sketches, she noted important words, erased sections, and revised others.

The notes constitute her self-appointed research. With over 1,300 sheets of paper, filled with her thoughts and reflections, this hiatus from art-making certainly produced something else.

EXHIBITION OF ORIGIN AND SOURCE

In 1996, she decided to edit and order the notes into six volumes. This became the work *Origin and Source*.

Research, never lost, is always transformed.

¹⁹ Mathieu Copeland, 'An Internal Depth, Interview with Bethan Huws', Voids: A Retrospective (cat.), Centre Pompidou, Kunsthalle Bern, Centre Pompidou Metz, 2009, p. 128.

Finishing: Terminable and Interminable

Several years later, I have now finished the manuscript for the book. It's called *Inside the Freud Museums: History, Memory and Site-Responsive Art*.

It will be published this Autumn.

But, before that, there is still more to do. I have just received the comments from the Editor, and suggestions on how to improve the manuscript. Editing, rewriting, revising... Yes, frankly somewhat interminable it is...

I wanted to open up this talk to today by sharing this experience with you for several reasons.

First, the translation book is still not written. And it never will be. Not by me anyway. But, in recognizing its failure I gave myself the license and the headspace to think about something else, a project on the Freud Museum and contemporary art that is working out.

Second, looking back at things that interested me, that brought me pleasure and awakened my curiosity was a good guiding principle to moving on with something else, something that can sustain the work that needs to be undertaken in seeing a project come to fruition.

Third, finishing. Well, Freud once said that psychoanalysis is both terminable and interminable. Even when a psychoanalysis comes to an end, and you no longer see your therapist, the work of psychoanalysis carries on. It is something that one carries with oneself.

As a writer, I know that that's the same for my work. As I come to the end of the Freud Museum book, I am completing two projects. 50 Years of Art and Objecthood with Dr Alison Green, published in journal of Visual Culture in April 2017. For that we took a trans-disciplinary approach to Michael Fried's essay 'Art and Objecthood' and had contributions from media studies, film studies, philosophy, installation art, and art criticism. I contributed an article on Art Education and Psychoanalysis.

The second project is called Intimacy Unguarded with Emma Talbot which will be published this December in Journal of Visual Arts Practice. A project on autobiography, biography and memoir, for which I would like to research and write something on artists and writers who represent their analysis with a psychotherapist.

Inside the Freud Museums has also enabled me to reconsider, or think differently about my initial interest in spaces of practice: specifically, the relationship between the consulting room

and the artist's studio, writer's study and gallery space. And I mapping out my next book called 'In the Studio and On the Couch: Art and Psychoanalysis'.

These projects are so much a part of the failed translation book, and yet so very different from it.

Conclusion

In all of these examples, the artists, authors and curators provide us with an understanding that the work that we do in our spaces of practice – whether that be our studies, studios, in the gallery, or somewhere else - is a process research.

That the processes that constitute our practices rely on our ability to accept, critically interrogate, and work-through what it is that we encounter in making, looking, writing about, imagining, and curating works of art. Because of this, the work that we undertake is always a practice that connects us to our personal history and memory, to the historical and contemporary contexts in which we practice, to the places and spaces in which we find ourselves, to the anxieties and pleasures of doing research, and this offers us the promise of future knowledge and understanding that which is yet unknown.

The Long Table Etiquette

This is a performance of a dinner party conversation

Anyone seated at the table is a guest performer

Anything is on the menu

Talk is the only course

No hostess will assist you

It is a democracy

To participate simply take an empty seat at the table

If the table is full you can request a seat

If you leave the table you can come back again and again

Feel free to write your comments on the tablecloth

There can be silence

There might be awkwardness

There could always be laughter

There is an end but no conclusion