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Brass Art

A Constellation: *thoughts in process*

A Thought Position is an ongoing process for us: a fluid landscape of the overlapping concerns, interests and passions generated by three artists, converging and distending in unexpected directions. We do not expect it to be fixed and static but prefer to engage with mutable, subtle forms and approaches. We think of Thought Positions as a set of expanding constellations to which we return, again and again, to orientate our sense of being in the world. These returns are physical, practical and philosophical.

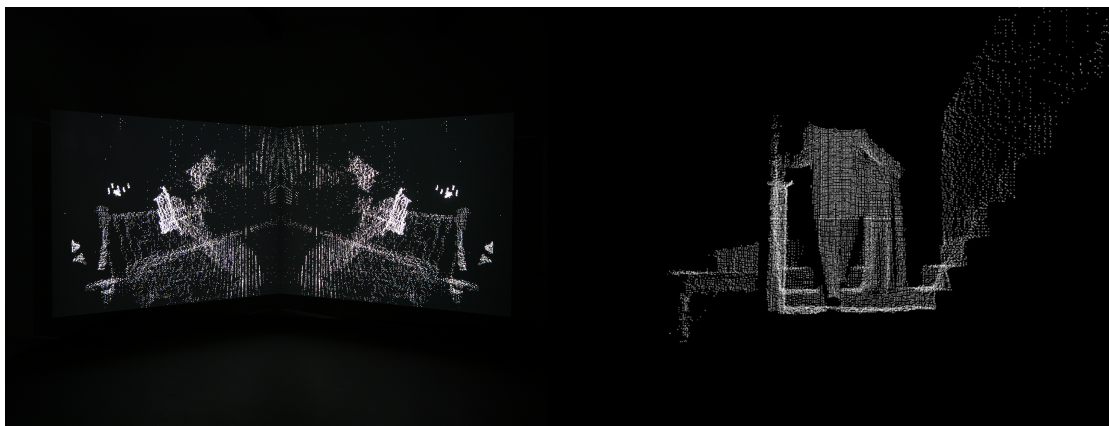


fig 1.

The Rotational Return

For us, the idea of rotation – in the sense of a *return* – imbues our practice. The loop, the arc and the full 360° revolution are recurring motifs in the installations and artifacts we have produced¹. If we consider this idea of the rotational return (ie. it *appears* that the constellations in the night sky are moving *around us*) we can predict that each time we return to a cluster of thoughts, they will appear slightly differently and viewed from a changed angle. We form a new relation to each constellation, and this temporal flux is intrinsic to our practice. It is of particular importance when we respond to archives and collections, and consider objects existing in, and out of, time. Artist Susan Hiller reinforces this thought position, in conversation at The Freud Museum, stating that,

“Meaning is never fixed, it always changes. Not just as I make more work - seeing meaning shift in past work - but as we all live and change collectively”²

¹ **Phantasmagoria** (2000/2005) **Pantomimesis** (2003), **Still Life No.1** (2011), **The Air Which Held Them** (2013) and **Freud's House: The Double Mirror** (2015)

² Einzig, B. (Ed.) (1996), *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Hiller's reflective encounter with 20 Maresfield Gardens reveals her own sense of the rich possibilities afforded by a constellation of ideas. Her excavational and anthropologically-focused artwork **After the Freud Museum** (1994) led her to revisit and 'work through' objects of personal resonance in her own collection in light of Freud's life, writing and collected artifacts. Hiller writes,

"Taken as a whole the Freud Museum strikes me as the site of a provocatively *poetic* accumulation of contexts"³ [Hiller's emphasis].

This description is full of wonder. It suggests a place steeped in abundance – an assemblage of thoughts in process. Hiller's observation precisely emphasizes the potential that is inherent both in Freud's thinking, and in his collection of artifacts and texts, something we also aimed to capture. Visual Theorist Griselda Pollock, referencing the exhibition **Freud's Sculptures** (2006)⁴, reiterates that the collection of antiquities and their composition on Freud's desk constitute a virtual "museum of forgetting and remembering"^{5 6}. Their mute forms embody emotion and unknowing as well as conscious thought, and their miniature sculptural scale offers uncanny doubles of human presence.

Any visit to an archive returns us to what we thought we knew, and forces a reappraisal or reconsideration of objects, time, knowledge and our own position in relation to them. Unlikely juxtapositions of the banal and the fantastic are flanked with the overlooked and the uncatalogued objects without provenance or value. Such intimate proximity between objects creates narratives 'written' in the slender margins between one form and another. In an essay reflecting upon our practice, and Museum project **Paradise Revisited**⁷, curator and writer Lisa Le Feuvre⁸ wrote,

"Led by Brass Art, Paradise Revisited looks as much to the spaces between the objects themselves as it does to the items and the compilation they form. As with Brass Art's own practice, the classification of Bury Art Museum's collection is a constellation of ideas that only sit together through a simple act of naming. In his introduction to *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault cites Borges' list, pointing out that the ordering system has "insinuated itself into the empty space, the interstitial blanks separating all these entities from one another. It is not the fabulous animals that are impossible, since they are designated as such, but the

³ Hiller, S. (2000), *After the Freud Museum*, London: Book Works. Afterword.

⁴ Curated by Jon Wood, Research Curator at the Henry Moore Institute.

⁵ Pollock, G. (2007), *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive*, London: Routledge. p.86

⁶ Might this be conceived of as another recursive frame, beyond that which we have already outlined - a house within a house within a house within a house *within a house*? See FN 20

⁷ **Paradise Revisited** (2000) Bury Museum and Art Gallery, Manchester - Brass Art invited artists, writers and performers to explore the eclectic and eccentric choice of collected curios and discarded ephemera that form the Bury Museum store. By liberating selected items from this 'künstkammer' and making new work, each artist contributed to Paradise Revisited a new temporary archive, housed in the art gallery, evolving over a ten- week period. artist interventions will Featuring: Jane Benson, Brass Art, Sarah Carne, Eggebert & Gould, Martell Linsdell, Lisalouise, Louise Milne, Jane Sebire, Kathrine Sowerby

⁸ LeFeuvre is the current Head of Sculpture Studies at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds

narrowness of the distance separating them from (and juxtaposing them to) the stray dogs, or the animals that from a long way off look like flies.”⁹

Our intervention into Freud’s house became an attempt to grant its solid objects, furniture and rooms, a light, apparitional quality. We recorded our performances at Maresfield Gardens with three Kinect sensors. This process had a unifying effect: the laser’s touch does not differentiate, rendering all objects - alive, dead, static, breathing - with the same shining, white brilliance. In this way, the objects and places that formed the props and settings for our performance – the groaning chair we danced with, the stairways, landings and balcony that tempted us to drop things – all took on an intense luminosity, and appeared to hover and tilt in a horizon-less figure-ground. This interplay of focus, proximity and perception returns us to Hiller and her observations of the Freud Museum,

“Close consideration of its beautiful, utilitarian, tedious, scholarly, macabre, rare, banal, eerie, and sentimental objects produces a picture in which figure-ground relationships seem to constantly shift.”¹⁰

Curator of **Freud’s Sculptures**, Jon Wood, also focuses on the spatial experience of viewing the collected objects – some on pedestals and stands, others oversized – stating that this variety of scale and detail produces,

“...a contradictory spatial and temporal experience of nearness and distance, small-scale and monumental”¹¹.

The image this suggests of Freud and his antiquities is one of historical and spatial depth, accessed by simply stretching out his arm on the horizontal plane of his desk, from his study chair. The changing configurations and curation of the collection over time, documented in photographs, reveals the bringing into focus, or throwing into relief, of talismanic forms as the touchstones of Freud’s daily routines and writing habits. Writing as a studious teenager the young Freud commented that he was always to be found between two pieces of furniture – the desk and the chair¹². As an old man this position offered a view of his antiquities of deep time and the imaginary journeys his collection could take him on.

The Reading Chair

Freud’s iconic anthropomorphic desk-chair is the chair of a reader. Designed for him specifically, it recognises a significant shift in posture from writing to reading - Freud reportedly preferred to recline diagonally, so what is perceived as an armrest in fact doubles

⁹ LeFeuvre, L. (2007), *Animals that from a long way off look like flies*. Essay commissioned by International3 Gallery

¹⁰ Hiller, S. (2000)

¹¹ Wood, J. (2006) Re-staging Freud’s Sculpture, in Wood, J. (2006) *Freud’s Sculpture*, Leeds: Henry Moore Sculpture Trust.

¹² Ward, I. (2006) *Freud’s Chair*, in Wood, J. (2006) *Freud’s Sculpture*, Leeds: Henry Moore Sculpture Trust. p.34

as a leg rest. The design of the chair, produced in 1930 by the architect Felix Augenfeld, responded to a very specific brief from Mathilde Freud,

“She explained to me that S.F. had the habit of reading in a very peculiar and uncomfortable body position. He was leaning in this chair, in some sort of diagonal position, one of his legs slung over the arm of the chair, the book held high and his head unsupported. The rather bizarre form of the chair I designed is to be explained as an attempt to maintain this habitual posture and to make it more comfortable.”¹³

Rather than picturing Freud with glasses perched and head down at his desk; we may now see instead the poise of a reader inhabiting his furniture in a more idiosyncratic manner. The chair shifts in our perception to become more of a cradling object, bracing itself under the unequal positioning and weight, to aid the ‘bad posture’ and habitual gestures of Freud reading. In this repose, we can visualise Freud’s head would be mirrored, but not supported, by the chair ‘head’ – to form a virtual twin or double ‘reading’ over his shoulder. Ivan Ward, Deputy Director of the Freud Museum London, suggests that,

“...the psychoanalytically minded onlooker will want to enquire why Freud adopted his peculiar reading posture in the first place.”¹⁴

Visitors and scholars alike are intrigued by the relevance of Freud’s chair in association with his creative work, posing the question ‘what does the chair mean?’ Ward neatly reminds us that, “Meanings are not so much in the objects as in our complex relationship to them,”¹⁵ and so we must start from our own position of what the chair means to us as artists, visitors, and fellow readers:

The notion of the double has been a core concern of our collaborative practice - a means to signal a temporal fluidity, produce uncanny mirroring, a way to transgress spatial constraints, access the inaccessible, gain privileged vantage points and, through use of shadows, to merge and mask our identities. Freud (after Rank) states that the double has always acted as “an insurance against the extinction of the self”¹⁶ and that the soul itself can be read as the first instance of the doubling of the body. If the chair represents ‘another’ - a double - then many visitors conclude that, on an unconscious level at least, the designer constructed a doppelgänger for Freud himself –

“...an externalized ‘alter ego’ or intellectual travelling companion. A kind of internal sounding board for his ideas, or a critic with whom to debate and engage in dialogue.”¹⁷

There are many other possible motifs to be elicited from Freud’s life works, as to what the chair could represent - a mother or father figure, a phallus, womb, throne - but most relevant for us is the figure of Freud doubled and the notion that Freud’s bifurcated life

¹³ Ward, I. (2006)

¹⁴ Ward, I. (2006)

¹⁵ Ward, I. (2006)

¹⁶ Freud, S. (2003), *The Uncanny*, London: Penguin. p. 142

¹⁷ Ward, I. (2006)

created a ghostly twin - one that represents 'what might have been' and suggests possible temporal slippages, whereby Vienna ostensibly 'haunts' London.



fig 2.

The Haunted Twin

After our first foray into Freud's London home and encounter with his 'exiled' collection, (transplanted from Vienna after his own flight from the Nazis in 1938) we wrote a text¹⁸ focussing on the doubling of the Freud Museums, both former homes, in London and Vienna. In this we wanted to articulate the sense of the two sites being twinned, both revolving at opposite ends of an axis – one empty, and one full of the collected objects, books, furniture and artefacts that represent the Freud legacy. We drew upon the writing of Joanne Morra¹⁹ for a consideration of how the two sites 'work' -

"The images we have of Freud's psychoanalytic spaces are either those from Vienna – those that photographer Edmund Engelman took in 1938 before the Freud family fled to London, or the duplication and reflection that we sense in the London space, which is no coincidence. London is meant to echo what Vienna once was. And yet, there is a paradox at the centre of both spaces: the objects with which psychoanalysis is symbolically aligned – Freud's couch, his desk and anthropomorphic chair, his antiquities – are present in London. These same objects are absent from Vienna, from the space in which they were 'used', imbued with their phenomenological presence."²⁰

At the centre of this doubling is a core: the couch, the desk and artefacts, the desk chair, forming a 'psychoanalytic set'. Carol Seigel, Director of the Freud Museum, agrees that this central configuration of furniture, with Freud's attendant desk artefacts, is central to the experience of Freud's house: when Freud's house became a museum a two-fold framing occurred – *a house within a house*. Within this house, the downstairs study and consulting

¹⁸ Lewis, C., Mojsiewicz, K., Pettican, A. (2014), *A House within a house within a house within a house* Journal of Writing in Creative Practice, vol 7, no. 3.

¹⁹ Morra, J. (2013), *Seemingly empty: Freud at Berggasse 19, a conceptual museum in Vienna*. Journal of Visual Culture, vol 12, number 1. pp. 89-127.

²⁰ Morra, J. (2015), *Reflections | Iterations*. Essay commissioned by International3 Gallery, p.5 <http://www.international3.com/2015/09/brass-art-shadow-worlds-writers-rooms> for pdf

room form a psychoanalytic core – *a house within a house within a house*. Within these attached/paired rooms, the set described above forms a distinct centre – *a house within a house within a house within a house* – a four-fold recursive frame.²¹

This sense of *mise-en-abyme* is a common literary device and central to our creative approach as artists making collaborative work. The imagined dynamics of our practice fascinates others and raises question of what happens not just in the focal point of an artwork, but round the edges, beyond the frame and behind the screen. If we apply this recursive framing to the 'psychoanalytic set' of objects, then Freud's anthropomorphic chair form occupies a potent place; acting as an echo of the figurative, sculptural artefacts that Freud collected and surrounded himself with; a supportive carapace designed to the particular behaviour and gestures of the man; and as substitute for the presence of Freud himself.

The original Augenfeld-designed chair resides in Freud's former London home (now Museum) in Maresfield Gardens, but there are numerous copies: a replica is housed in the London Freud Museum, while Freud's long-term former home on Berggasse in Vienna (now Museum) also has a copy. This further cements the strange mirroring between the London and Vienna Museums – one full of memorabilia and one mostly devoid of it. The 'London copy', which we borrowed for the **Thought Positions in Sculpture** exhibition, was made as a prop for filming by a German production company many years ago and remained at the Museum. Film director David Cronenberg also had a copy²² made for his 2011 film *A Dangerous Method*. He was particularly keen to capture the juxtaposition of Freud's usual formal attire with this relaxed reading posture, and so had the chair made for actor Viggo Mortenson to inhabit as Freud would, as part of the behavioural and historical detail of the film. Cronenberg²³ says of the copied chair,

“...it has a double history for me - Freud and his movie doppelgänger Viggo/Freud - and I like to sit in it from time to time.”²⁴

This conflation of Freud and his actor-double in the copied chair is germane to our interest in the mutable and the mistaken, the act of disguise and of inhabiting the gestures of another person.

²¹ Seigel, C. (2014), In conversation at the Freud Museum, (18th June)

²² In this interview Cronenberg states the furniture maker who made the Vienna Museum copy also made their prop for the film <<http://www.macleans.ca/authors/brian-d-johnson/david-cronenberg-on-freud-keira-and-pressing-the-flesh/>>

²³ Cronenberg's filmic oeuvre is also linked to Freud by way of the *unheimlich*. See: Anneleen Masschelein, (2011), *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in the Late-Twentieth-Century Theory*, New York: SUNY Press, p.148

²⁴ Original Cronenberg interview no longer accessible on Landmark Theatres site – verbatim here: <<http://boingboing.net/2012/01/19/david-cronenbergs-on-freud.html>>

The Body Doubled

The replica chair in conjunction with the video **Freud's House: The Double** became the third iteration of the piece originally commissioned by University of Salford's Commission to Collect Scheme, and the second chapter of the **Shadow Worlds | Writers' Rooms** project. The commission afforded us the opportunity to temporarily occupy the Museum spaces with our props, sensors, recording equipment, a programmer and a composer. Our intention was to capture - through a laser's touch and via the sensitivity of a microphone - fleeting and involuntary aspects of our performances, and coax sounds out of long-dormant objects.

In other Museums we have encountered there have been stores behind the scenes to visit and re-visit, but the Freud Museum does not have an extensive store hidden from public gaze. The preserved study - already a micro museum of Freud's extensive collection - is the heart of the Museum, and, significantly, the site of Freud's last moments. Cultural Historian Peter Gay writes,

"Freud chose to die in his study, around him his famous couch, the desk on which he had created a new theory of the mind, his library, his lifelong collection of fragments from a buried past; his ancestors of choice ...and the embodiment of his excavated truths of psychoanalysis"²⁵

The first single-screen iteration of our piece **Freud's House: The Double** (2015) was shown in the Museum's **Festival of the Unconscious** in Freud's dining room as an intimate viewing experience for a solitary viewer. The second incarnation, **Freud's House: The Double Mirror**²⁶ (2015), transformed the piece into a Rorschach projection on two suspended, angled screens, with the audience free to wander the space and experience the binaural soundscape conveyed through wireless headphones.

The doppelgänger study chair takes on another meaning at Huddersfield Art Gallery, it acts as interlocutor with the Kinect video, suggesting a relationship between a viewer and the subject of their gaze. The empty chair in the context of the Gallery offers both potential space

²⁵ Pollock, G. (2007)

²⁶ **Shadow Worlds| Writers' Rooms - Freud's House The Double Mirror** (2015) - During a period of residency, Brass Art inscribed themselves into the domestic space of Sigmund Freud's former London home. Using Kinect laser-scanning to capture intimate-scaled performances throughout the rooms, staircase and hallway, the artists developed a visual response to the notion of the uncanny using strategies of repetition and simultaneous 'doublings'. They remained open to the unconscious influences that determined their actions, behaviour and movements. During the sojourn in Freud's house, electroacoustic composer Monty Adkins captured ambient audio. He recorded fleeting and involuntary aspects of the performances and coaxed sounds out of long-dormant objects. The resulting work takes the form of a two-screen 'double' digital video installation. This pixelated and seemingly fragmented re-imagining of Freud's house reveals exactly what is there and what is 'unseen'; the Kinect footage appears to bisect walls and reveal the obverse of the scene. Measuring the space through their bodily presence and a virtual 'peeling back' of the architectural layers, Brass Art create a dynamic exploration of the domestic interior as a site of creativity. Experienced binaurally, the soundscape evokes the intimacy of being in the space itself. This temporal interplay and its creative potential lie at the heart of Brass Art's exploration of Freud's House.

for an invisible presence, and extends the invitation to take Freud's place. This vantage point however is denied the contemporary viewer - the replica chair is classed as a Museum artefact in its own right. As part of the Freud Museum Collection, the doubled chair gains its own status by association with, rather than contiguity to, Sigmund Freud. The crating of both the artefact and the screen in the Gallery reinforces their status as archive objects in this context. The crates also reference the journey of the original chair, transported after the family fled to London under threat of extermination, binding both histories and objects together into a discrete and exclusive, spatial relationship.

Freud's House: The Double does not present the miniature museum of Freud's study desk or his anthropomorphic chair – these will emerge in future works – but the proximity of Freud to his objects is a key feature of our holistic approach to working with the Museum spatially. The objects Freud handled, and spoke to,²⁷ were intimately and immediately accessible to him. The range of his reach was not dissimilar to that of the Kinect sensor²⁸ and we have used this aspect of haptic intimacy to bring objects, furniture and figures in and out of visual range; objects and figures can recede and emerge on our commands, called forth and dismissed again, to return and repeat. Returning to the principles of figure-ground perception we bring artifacts and objects to the fore as touchstones and points of orientation in the black, negative space of the video as it moves through Freud's former home.

In a curious misrecognition, Freud conflated the function of the Osiris-like figure on his desk (representing transition and resurrection) with Egyptian *Ushabti* funerary figures, telling his friend Hilda Doolittle, "They are called the 'answerers', as their doubles or ka-s come when called"²⁹. The mistake may seem small - both represent death and reanimation - but it can be read as indicative of Freud's own fascination with his collected antiquities and how they functioned in his creative life and works. Our collaborative concerns are mirrored then in this foregrounding of the uncanny double. A *doppelgänger* - returning to animate life, with the (seemingly mute) object-interlocutor - creates a double effect: on the one hand protecting the author/ the ego, and on the other reminding us that the subject is always already divided and fragmented from within. The spectral aspect of the Kinect sensor reveals a residual affect as these temporal *doppelgängers* appear to haunt the past, shadow our present, and disrupt possible futures.

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²⁷ Michael Molnar quotes Hanns Sachs (1944) for a description of how Freud handled the objects when he himself was speaking but not while he was listening to others. See Molnar, M. (2006) *Halfway Region* in Wood, J. (2006) *Freud's Sculpture*, Leeds: Henry Moore Sculpture Trust.

²⁸ Created at a domestic scale for home use

²⁹ Molnar, M. (2006) attributed to HD [Hilda Doolittle] (1985)



fig 3.

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Images:

fig 1. Brass Art: video installation **Freud's House: The Double Mirror** (2015); Brass Art: video still **Freud's House: The Double** (2015)

fig 2. Brass Art: Freud's chair [copy]. Loaned by the Freud Museum, London

fig 3. Brass Art: research image, Freud Museum (2014); Photo credit: Silvana Trevale. Thought Positions in Sculpture, Huddersfield Art Gallery (2015)

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