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"Body Missing" at Berggasse 19

We were talking about what a museum is, the functions it can fulfil, the conditions it requires. "I don't think you deserve the name. You shouldn't call yourselves a museum, what you have here has nothing to do with a museum. Museums exhibit works of art or collections, but this. . . . " The participant in the course for aspiring museum experts broke off mid-sentence. The course instructor tried to complete the sentence by explaining the shift in the definition of the concept of museums, which this training course sought to convey. But despite this foray into an extended history of the concept, even the most liberal experts appeared to retain an affective remnant that was triggered by this place.

The reservations expressed concerned the Sigmund Freud Museum in Vienna, which had been branded the product of name usurpation. A more appropriate designation would be memorial site, but not the conceptual horizon of the museum, the participants concluded. No reasons were given for this in the discussion that briefly flared up, but their very unspokenness was immediately understood by those present: It was not a matter of revising the definition of "museum" or of less outmoded objectives for the institution. What was being expressed here was the inadequacy of this place itself, the incongruity between the notion and the location, the idea and the social institution, which initially eluded conceptual systematization. This sense of incongruity is caused by the fact that this museum does not offer to the eye what the associations surrounding the institution demand; instead of satisfying visitors' expectations, it disappoints them.

This paper is the text of an undelivered lecture prepared by Lydia Marinelli for the opening of the "Body Missing" installation by the Canadian video artist Vera Frenkel at the Vienna Freud Museum in 2000.

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The misgivings caused by this incongruity and that arise on arrival provide one of the many links to the work of Vera Frenkel. Her installations and Freud's rooms cross-reference each other on many levels. One level that is related to this sense of unease is her exploration of emigration, placelessness, forced departures, uncertain arrivals and their linguistic and narrative forms of representation. In her installation, " . . . *from the Transit Bar,*" people on video monitors casually relate scenes from their life in exile in off-screen voices that are not their own. The faces do not tally with the voices, the voices do not tally with the stories, and it remains unclear whether these biographical fragments are real or fictitious. This acoustic overlayering of different stories, voices, and individuals, of reality effects and fiction, creates a space between the particular experience of the individual and the collective history that tries to take its place. What at first appears to be straight dubbing proves on closer listening to be a new story in a new language. Language as the medium through which experiences are presented is fragmented into language of the present and that of the past, such as Polish and Yiddish, spoken by unseen actors. While the stories have little in common, the different languages can be wholly aligned.

When psychoanalysis asks what is being expressed in each language, the question also applies to what is being withheld. The transfer of one language onto another cannot take place without the silence that emerges when the translation fails to supply an analogous expression. The impossibility of transferring experiences into a new language occupied Freud during his first weeks in exile. A friend, Raymond de Saussure, expressed his sympathy for Freud's fate in a letter in which he endeavored to understand the emigrant's position and listed the losses an exile incurs. But the list remained incomplete, because Saussure had forgotten one crucial point. Freud answered his letter with the following words: "You left out one point that the emigrant experiences as particularly painful. It is—one can only say: the loss of the language one has lived and thought in and that in spite of all efforts towards empathy one will never be able to replace by any other. With painful understanding I observe how otherwise familiar means of expression fail in English and how even every fibre in me wants to struggle against giving up the

familiar gothic handwriting. And yet one has heard so often that one is not German. And indeed, one is happy not to have to be a German anymore."[1]

While Freud's old writing and new language fail him, his experiences refuse translation, new tenants move into his Vienna apartment. The rooms become the setting for new stories of which little carries beyond the apartment walls; some parts of the apartment are occupied by these tenants until the mid-1980s. Freud never learns of the fate of his sisters who remained in Vienna, all of whom perished in concentration camps in 1942 and 1943.[2] One of the final impressions of the apartment is preserved in Edmund Engelman's recollection. The crates containing Freud's collection of antiquities, books, and furniture had been stored with a moving company and were shipped out of the country with the help of some influential friends. The photographer, to whom we owe the only photographs of Freud's Vienna apartment, returned one last time to the Berggasse. What he found in Freud's empty consulting room was the dark shadow left by the couch on the parquet floor[3]—time had been a slow photographer. This image, which he was unable to capture on film, made a strong impression on Engelman.

The shadow did not disappear as politics had intended. While the official politics of remembering after 1945 sought to strike a balance between forgetting and reconciliation, uninvited guests, mainly from abroad, keep turning up at Freud's address in the hope of seeing something where others found nothing to see. An unimposing Viennese apartment house is transformed in people's memories into a space in which normality, banishment, genocide, and psychoanalytic myths of origin commingle. Here stories converge that in other narratives move apart. For some it is an everyday residence where they have led their day-to-day lives since the end of the Second World War; others confront this life with traumatic memories in which this mundane, everyday life was founded on violence; still others believe that a center of the psychoanalytic world lay buried here.

The different ideas surrounding Freud's abode are matched by different expectations as to what should be visible. One of those who visited Freud's house at Berggasse 19 in the 1960s, and found to his disappointment nothing but a shabby and locked door, was Jacques Lacan. What had he hoped to see

but a house, plain and simple? When a museum was opened in Freud's former practice in 1971, the specter of an eerie shadow remained. The new museum appears on the face of it to be one of many one-man-places (and they are mostly men) of middle-class self-reassurance to have emerged since the turn of the century. The expectation visitors have of such places is to find the remains of an authentic-looking interior, preferably one that creates the impression that the poet, philosopher, etc. has just left the room. The reassurance derived from this participation in the more or less mundane cocoon of bourgeois domesticity creates a continuum between past and present through a suggestive interplay of absence and presence. Things of the past do not seem lost in this context, but rather *aufgehoben* in both senses of the Hegelian term, i.e., both preserved and raised to a higher level. An "authentic" atmosphere is conserved here as in a time capsule by reducing history to one very specific temporal plane. The historically distant becomes sensorily close, everyday mundanities are charged with the particular characteristics of a represented subject.

It is precisely this function of reassurance that the Vienna Freud Museum cannot fulfil. The expectation of finding certain traces of an individual, a particular history, is frustrated. As the mere shadow of the kind of museum found at Maresfield Gardens, London, visitors sometimes experience a shock as if unexpectedly coming face to face with a doppelgänger. They travel to Vienna from afar to see the couch, only to discover it is in England. They find a museum that offers them nothing to see, or at least not what they expect from institutions of this kind. The desire to see can make memory pliant; the frustration of the idea by reality is not easily accepted. To this day, some visitors have such a strong desire to see the couch in Vienna that, time and again, guests come who insist that they actually saw the couch here when they last visited a few years previously. The disruption to the positive construction of meaning inherent in this place thus gives way to a trick of memory. The lacking object is summoned up by the imagination to repress any shame at one's ignorance about the historical course of events. Or, so as not to disrupt the tourist idyll, a "happy ending" is kept at the ready, as in a historical novel, something Freud considered symptomatic of a neurotic fantasy.

Fiction and history, imagination and reality come together in these individual recollections. Freud, who repeatedly has to cross the boundary to the fictional in his reflections on multiple forms of memory, described this rewriting of one's own history as a "family romance" (1909). A person rewrites his or her own insignificant or unbearable background and history to create a more bearable version, so as not to have to acknowledge his or her mortification. Far from suggesting the realm of untruth, the novelistic element brings out an almost unbearable truth. The fictional expresses a truth that is concealed by a simple chronology of facts. What visitors summon up in their imagination is an attempt to fill the gap, a gap that was also palpable in the reaction of the museum experts discussed at the beginning. This gap stretches wide between the legitimising functions of museum institutions and their unstated entanglement in acts of violence and destruction.

If museums generally seek to establish the continuity between the present and the past that societies require for positive self-reassurance, those that do not wish to provide this guarantee soon come up against narrow definitional boundaries. Time and again, visitors involve staff of the Vienna Freud Museum in discussions about why a replica of the couch is not installed in Vienna, why there isn't at least a virtual reproduction, to preserve some idea of the atmosphere of the time. While, in the mid-1980s, the Freud Museum in London preserved the rooms in the state in which they were found and presents them as such, the Vienna museum could not indulge in any illusions of aura. The museum is accompanied by a doppelgänger—two different places now existed, each reminding the visitor of Freud in a different way. One could be described as a memorial site, linked to a positive memory—the site was created by the granting of asylum in the face of imminent destruction, while the other cannot perform this function of positively continuing remembrance. As an empty place, an empty apartment, which has nothing but an address to mark it and serves as a permanent reminder of obliteration and banishment, the room resists the affirmative construction of meaning and remains inherent as a block in traumatic constellations. The story that can be told about it creates no safe horizon that could lend itself to stabilization. In fact, the exhibited emptiness is not merely the

product of history, but is equally the product of a form-giving intervention—as are other undertakings working in three dimensions also. The museum answers the question of what there is to see here by highlighting the moment of disappearance and becoming the signpost to a place located elsewhere.

It is precisely these questions of reconstruction and loss, of deciding what story should be told here and what not, that Vera Frenkel addresses in her work *Body Missing* and passes on to the viewer. The parallels that can be drawn to Frenkel's installation should therefore not be understood simply as analogies; rather they explore the conditions that characterise the museum site as such. The concurrence of artistic reflection with a specific museum culture of remembrance provides an opportunity to readdress the feeling of unease that overcame the visitors described here. Beyond the somewhat tired old formula of the impossibility of representing past events, which is often used as an excuse, Frenkel steps in artistically at the point where the task of "coming to terms" with history is often placed in the hands of the experts and their institutions. This hope, placed in experts, is accompanied by the notion that remembrance is possible without transformation.

Vera Frenkel exposes the zones that mark the inherent aggression in the development of tradition, and whose offshoots are characterised by a superimposing of fact and fiction. These gaps, traces of the violent appropriation that rob the art collections of their aesthetic innocence, cannot be simply documented by assembling materials—the fact of their presence remains. Lost paintings become rumors and ghosts that exist only as remembered impressions, a collage consisting of archival register entries and fictions that are constantly being recreated. On the *Body Missing* home page, Vera Frenkel invites other artists to create their own websites about lost works of art. Among the websites, with meticulous research leading to a system of seemingly endless catalogues and property lists, is a conversation between two artists discussing how they could reconstruct the lost paintings as precisely as possible. They speculatively outline visual concepts that go so far as faithfully to recreate individual paintings. Their attempt at restoration is a homage, but it is not taken beyond the conversation stage. The reconstructed visualization of the paintings proves to be one of

many narratives that do not lead to a collective codification of memory and the exoneration this brings.

The phantom couch that visitors to the Sigmund Freud Museum in Vienna speak of reveals the futility of professional efforts to provide such exoneration. The preconceptions involved in memory mean that it will always be inventive.

Translated from the German by Joy Titheridge

Notes

1. Sigmund Freud to Raymond de Saussure, June 11, 1938. Sigmund Freud Collection, Sigmund Freud Archives, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
2. On the fate of Freud's sisters, see Leupold-Löwenthal (1988) and Tögel (1990).
3. Edmund Engelman in a conversation with the author in Vienna in 1995.

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