

Title: Brass Art: *A house within a house within a house within a house*

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Abstract

Performances from Brass Art (Lewis, Mojsiewicz, Pettican), captured at the Freud Museum, London, using Kinect laser scanning and Processing, reveal an intimate response to spaces and technologies. 'A house within a house within a house within a house' links historical and cultural representations of the double, the unconscious and the uncanny to this artistic practice. The new moving-image and sonic works form part of a larger project to inhabit the writing rooms of influential authors, entitled 'Shadow Worlds / Writers' Rooms'.

Keywords

archive

the double

the uncanny

the unconscious

Freud

Kinect

The messenger

Love, most beautiful

Of all the deathless gods. He makes men weak,

He overpowers the clever mind, and tames

The spirit in the breasts of men and gods. (Hesiod 1973: 27)

A small information card beside the statue of a diminutive winged figure states that this figure alone was sent on as a forward party in advance of the Freud family as they fled Nazi persecution in Vienna. Easily overlooked in his glass case – Eros: the love force who emerged after chaos; competitor with the Thanatos death drive; the triumph of self-preservation over self-destruction; the fetish object undergone transfer from material object into the sphere of the divine: a fitting herald.

The collector

It must be kept in mind that, for the collector, the world is present, indeed ordered, in each of his objects. Ordered, however, according to a surprising and, for the profane understanding, incomprehensible connection [...]. It suffices to observe just one collector as he handles the items in his showcase. No sooner does he hold them in his hand than he appears inspired by them and seems to look through them into the distance, like an augur. (Benjamin 1999: 207)

Walter Benjamin describes the conflation of an object's history, provenance and, in Freud's case symbolic meaning forming a 'whole magical encyclopaedia, a world order' for the true collector. Freud's study is famously full of the antiquities he collected, with many positioned along his desk in two rows, like sentinels. These objects clearly embodied a greater significance and meaning than a mere scholarly pastime for the psychoanalyst. Their original set-up in Vienna was captured for posterity by photographer Edmund Engelman (1998), at the behest of August Aichhorn. Doubtless, this photographic documentation helped Anna Freud to ease her father's transition to London, configuring his spatial set-up with as little disruption as possible to his work, but it can also be read as an insurance against their destruction, specifically a doubling which works against death.

The specific relationships (instigated by Freud) between the objects, and their relations to each other, as they were rearranged on his desk, were contingent on his mood and preoccupations. Even on holiday he was unable to part with his collection of antiquities, packing up hundreds of the most favoured pieces to travel with him, and arranging them in his new destination as a child might carry and arrange a transitional object. Michael Molnar, former Director of the Freud Museum, reported that Freud habitually handled the pieces whilst speaking, savouring both the look and feel of them. Freud himself stated in 1907:

As people grow up, then, they cease to play, and they seem to give up the yield of pleasure which they gained from playing. But whoever understands the human mind knows that hardly anything is harder for a man than to give up a pleasure he has once experienced. Actually we can never give anything up; we only exchange one thing for another. (1989: 437–38)

The body's material interaction with objects from the past, grasping a remnant of another time and place, provokes the mind and the imagination into flights of fancy. Encountered in the here-and-now, the collected figures signify both an uncanny familiarity and an unknowable past:

It is though, as collector, Freud assembles and arranges these enigmatic objects from 'elsewhere' in order to map and reorder his whole (psychic) world. (Calderbank 2007: 10)

Our interest in Freud's London home originates with the 'saved' collection and belongings – ostensibly in exile and elevated to mythical status due to its perilous journey. Had they not been allowed to leave Austria, it is worth considering what substitutes would have been created or collected in their place. Freud himself was unwilling to trust that his collection really would be safely shipped out of Nazi-occupied Austria, remarking, 'There is often a slip "twixt cup and lip"...' (1992: 247). The possibility of obliteration is omnipresent, and we can read Freud's fear for his collection as part of the wider trauma of persecution.

The artists

Time and again we have crossed the barrier, peeked behind the scenes, stayed beyond closing time, accessed parts unseen by the public-at-large. Our presence does not make a mark or leave a trace,

except for the data or the image captured during our sojourn (Figure 1). Our collaborative entity emerged from a shared desire to occupy inaccessible vantage points. Assisted by digital compositing, shadows, drawings and model making, we created our doubles to dance and loom over imaginary landscapes (Brass Art 2000/2005, 2007, 2011). The artist is often afforded privileged access by dint of their audacity to ask, and ability to reanimate a collection with a fresh perspective. Thus, we interject, interpose or interrupt the equilibrium, the narrative, the silence, and the spaces between and beneath. We enter a dialogue to discern what we can touch, move, displace, juxtapose, unlock, open up or reveal.



Figure 1: Brass Art, Freud's couch, performance still, Freud Museum, London, 2014.

At the Museum we occupied Freud's vantage point at his desk, face-to-face with his collection, opened his drawers and found non-invasive ways to insert ourselves momentarily into his space. The winged antiquities drew our attention, reminding us of the metamorphosis we have assumed in our phantasmagorical cut-and-paste depictions of reality and fantasy (Brass Art 2012, 2013). In Freud's study, we selected and slowly rotated a sculptural figure, Eros, picked out by the laser, to 'cast' an

occluded shadow on the wall. Freud's artefact – so reminiscent of the figure in our installation *Moments of Death and Revival* (2008, 2010), and its brief transformation into a winged form at the moment of the light's turning – is both one thing and another: inanimate and moving, dead and alive, revealing a double truth.

The uncanny twin

Within Freud's house we can experience most clearly the *mise en abyme* – an important motif within our collaborative practice – in this instance the *house within the house*. The artefacts and furniture from the original study in Freud's home on Berggasse in Vienna were transposed to Maresfield Gardens in London to create *a house within the house*. When it became a Museum (in 1986) it became *a house within a house within a house* – a threefold recursive frame. Freud Museum Director Carol Seigel (2014) suggests that we can take this a step further: the status of the analyst's couch, chair and desk (with attendant statues) forms such a distinct core of the Museum, and of the publics' interest in Freud's work, can be seen as an additional casement to the Museum, and consequently then produces a fourfold recursive framing of the housed collection – *a house within a house within a house within a house*.

The positions of major items, such as consultation room furniture and cabinets of artefacts, in the London study mirrored those in Vienna as closely as possible. This mirroring of London and Vienna is significant for our approach to working with the Freud Museum and returns again to the idea of the copy. The flat in Central Vienna – the symbolic seat of Austrian psychoanalysis, and the site of Freud's groundbreaking studies and writing – haunts the house in north London. The return of some of Freud's objects and furniture to Vienna in the 1970s undertaken by his daughter Anna, restates his presence on Berggasse, but essentially proclaims absence.

Inge Scholz-Strasser, Former Director of Freud Museum Vienna, confirms this:

There is no replacement, no reconstruction; one just realizes that there are empty rooms [in the Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna], and one has to find one's way through them. [...] The

challenge of the last 25 years has been to communicate through space (rather than objects) and ask questions of space, its histories etc. (Scholz-Strasser cited in Morra 2013: 89)

Art Historian Joanne Morra, writing on the differences between Freud's two former homes and collections, follows Scholz-Strasser in suggesting that the Freud Museum Vienna is a 'conceptual museum' – largely empty of any objects or archived collection. Her suggestion is that we consider the 'empty' Museum as a living archive of the Freud family's life and work, and that ultimately the Viennese Museum can be understood as 'modeled [*sic*] on conceptual art' (2013: 89).

Our approach to the house in Maresfield Gardens, full as it is of artefacts, furniture and books, has been to attempt to open up the space. A virtue of using laser capture is that it has a limited range and depth of field so that artefacts become part of the architecture, and multiple viewings are required to discern domestic features and objects of significance. The Museum itself has a long-standing dialogue with contemporary art, inveigled within the confines of a domestic scale museum. We recall images of Freud's rooms; of artworks (by Bourgeois, Rego, Lucas) inserted there to challenge received twentieth-century gendered narratives. Siegel (2014) described visitors unaware that artificial tree-stumps¹ in the consulting room were neither part of the house nor of the psychoanalyst's *oeuvre*. It seems pertinent that these visitors were seemingly unperturbed by their presence – perhaps already expecting to be unsettled by the unhomely in Freud's house.

These Museums – empty or full – are bound together, each orbiting the other on a helix. We can view the two archives, collections, Museums, homes as inextricably linked, but it would be unproductive to see them as binary opposites. As uncanny twins they are each present in the existence of the other. The lexical ambivalence of the uncanny means that even in negative connotations, it remains in the unconscious. Anneleen Masschelein maintains that, 'denying something at the same time conjures it up. Hence, it is perfectly possible that something can be familiar and unfamiliar at the same time' (2011: 6). The unhomely is accessed and understood only *through* the homely. It is these 'multiple significations' of the *unheimlich* that Anthony Vidler claims were most interesting for Freud, returning, as it did, to the scene of the domestic: the home and dynamics of the family. Furthermore, as Freud approached the *unheimlich* through the *heimlich*, he 'exposed the disturbing affiliation between the

two'; that their interchangeability was perhaps the most uncanny aspect of all (Vidler 1996: 23).

'Shadow Worlds | Writers' Rooms'² (2011–) as an investigation of domestic spaces creates the possibility of thinking about the everyday, the ordinary and the familiar as the most vivid potential sites for uncanny revelation and transformation. In reanimating the 'familiar' domestic spaces of our authors – familiar in the sense that we all understand what a bedroom is, or what a staircase is for – our sojourns invite a re-evaluation of these spaces, their particularities and peculiarities. Our performances with laser-capture technologies create an unfixed and constantly evolving form: a direct copy of the original space – a double – but with shifting and unexpected points of view in immeasurable time periods, and our doubles the surprising and submerged occupants.

Up the staircase

In 1899, Freud wrote:

I was very incompletely dressed and was going upstairs from a flat on the ground floor to a higher storey. I was going up three steps at a time and was delighted at my agility. Suddenly I saw a maid-servant coming down the stairs – coming towards me, that is. I felt ashamed and tried to hurry, and at this point the feeling of being inhibited set in: I was glued to the steps and unable to budge from the spot. (Freud 1976: 335–36)

The hall staircase at 20 Maresfield Gardens, Freud's London home, is the central, pivotal element in the house. Stairs, with their vertical axis, offer a literal passage up or down. They are measured against and designed for the body. Thus, in moving vertically through space we are able to incrementally measure ourselves against the flight of time: moving up or down, either ascending or descending. A staircase is a structure of everydayness. It is no place: a transitional or liminal zone between two or more distinct zones that offer a division between a public and a private realm. However, dreaming can transform these seemingly characterless domestic byways into sites of vivid power. Morra suggests that: 'Through dreams the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days' (2013: 84). And therefore in our sleep, paradoxically, we sometimes recall specific interconnected passageways as both intimate and personal symbols of cherished sites in our past.

Can we consider that a dream *is* an archive? In dreams, our ability to consciously construct and measure time is lost. However, there is a rich suturing between our lived-experience and dreaming. For Freud, dreaming necessitates the loss of one of our mental activities ‘namely our power of giving intentional guidance to the sequence of our ideas’. He states, ‘not until we wake up does the critical comment arise that we have not experienced anything but have merely been thinking in a peculiar way [...]’ (2001: 50).

We did not deviate from using the main staircase, with its 90° turns, as a feature of our performative work (Figure 2). In our consideration of the ‘atemporal pursuing the temporal’, and our established interest in the Uncanny, we wanted to see if it was possible to mimic one another in a two-step ‘dance’, using this formal structure as our measure. In reference to Freud’s theory of the Unconscious, we sought to be responsive to the spaces of the house³ and allow them (and the artefacts contained therein) to guide and shape the sequence of our performances. We sought ‘to turn belatedness into becomingness’ (Foster 2004: 22) and reanimate the archive and museum. A new feature of this performative work was the bespoke software, developed for our Freud sojourn by Spencer Roberts⁴.

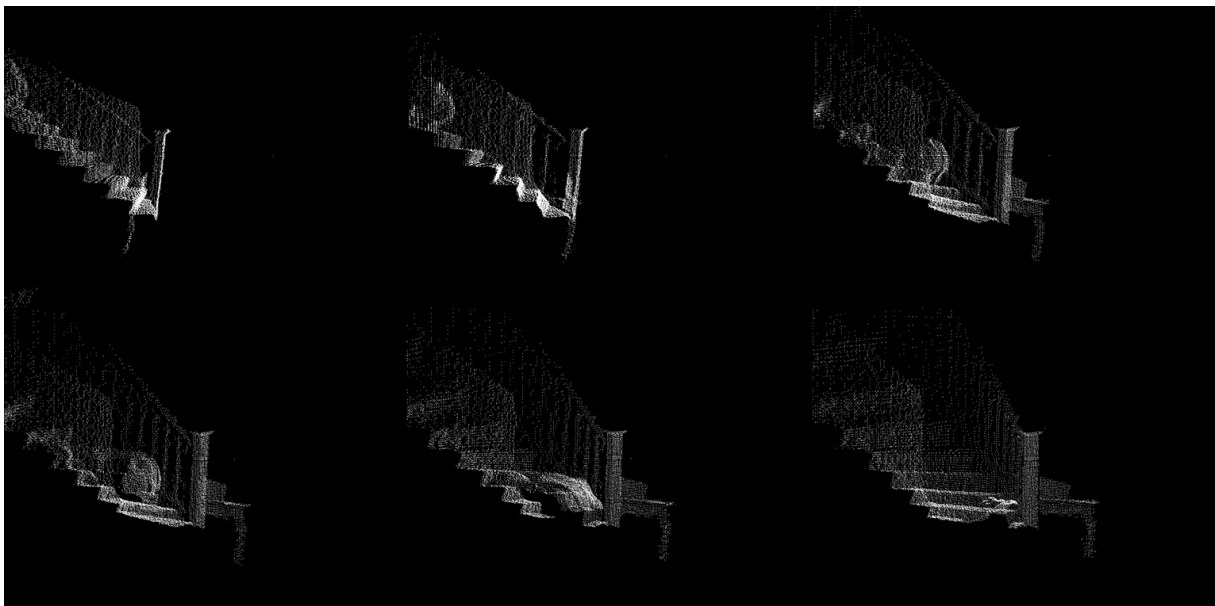


Figure 2: Brass Art, stills from ‘Shadow Worlds | Writers’ Rooms’ (Freud’s House: The Double), 2015.

In dreams, 'Steps, ladders or staircases, or, as the case may be, walking up or down them, are representations of the sexual act' wrote Freud, and rooms are usually denoted as female – '*Frauenzimmer*'. In the Maresfield house, we wanted to extend the possibilities afforded by the laser-capture technology and experiment with 'threshold' performances: by conjoining and editing data, captured by several Kinect devices located at different points within a scene, we could move freely between rooms, thereby fully animating the house as the lasers logged points of entry and exit. Simultaneously, composer Monty Adkins coaxed sound recordings from the largely silent spaces. These binaural recordings (designed to give the 'natural' sense of hearing in stereo) highlight the realistic affect of intimately heard voices, whilst simultaneously heightening the unnatural sensibilities of the moving image – archaic-looking digital revenants.

'I'll dance with you... wearing a river's disguise' (Cohen 1988)⁵

To perform 'the double' we donned the same androgynous disguises. Doubling has provided a motif for us to examine intimate ideas and move beyond the private self. As Marina Warner posits, 'Doubling offers another disturbing and yet familiar set of personae in ways of telling the self; permutations of inner and outer selves catalyse uncanny plots about identity' (2004: 163). Our intention to copy and perform *others'* actions was important from the outset. The idea of using repetitive actions and sonic refrains meant that we gave ourselves the opportunity to create a piece that would flow through the spaces of the house – moving both in and out of step with time. Thus, 'the double' in this work is a signifier of the uncanny experience, triggering a sense of the familiar yet strange. Attempting to mimic each other's movements and gestures results in a mirror-image performance where the protagonists 'refuse' to replicate their doubles. Thus, in the editing and redrawing process⁶ something surprising occurs – the protagonists switch, move in and out of step with linear time, and extend the dream-like register of the piece. Retrospectively we cannot always be sure who is cast in a particular role, and thus the doubling succeeds in ungrounding us. In terms of our creative process this playfulness is crucial.

'To make the invisible visible is uncanny' (De Man 1986)

The laser creates a direct trace. It deliberately fashions space more precisely than a photograph which Susan Sontag suggests 'is not "an interpretation" of the real; it is also a trace directly stencilled off the

real, like a footprint or a death mask' (1990: 154). This notion of 'stencilling off the real' creates a second doubling – an opportunity to copy that which is real through a light-based inventory. Having established through research for our ongoing 'Shadow Worlds I Writers' Rooms' project that processed Kinect cloud data gives the appearance of 'seeing round corners', we foresaw opportunities to extend the reach of the technology capturing performances that bridged conscious and unconscious movement – revealing what the naked eye cannot see. Thus, the films unfold sculpturally through intimate touch: ourselves converging on the spaces and holding archived objects, and the lasers stroking all in their range. This haptic 'measuring' elicits something new that bisects a literal (measured) and an oneiric (poetic) view of the space.

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Contributor details

Brass Art is Chara Lewis, Kristin Mojsiewicz and Anneké Pettican, a collaborative trio based in Manchester, Glasgow and Huddersfield. Working together since 1999, they have exhibited in Berlin, New York, Washington as well as Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Bloomberg Space London, the Tatton Park Biennial and The Whitworth Gallery, Manchester. They have presented their artistic research at numerous conferences including ISEA and Siggraph.

Chara Lewis, Kristin Mojsiewicz and Anneké Pettican have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.

Notes

¹ Artwork by Matt Collishaw for Hysteria (2009), curated by James Puttnam. 'In the context of the study, Collishaw's tree stumps allude to theories of repression, loss and the nature of memory developed by Freud' (Freud Museum 2009).

² The work produced at the Freud Museum can be seen as a second iteration of a larger project; 'Shadow Worlds | Writers' Rooms' (2011–), an ambitious, ongoing project in three chapters: Chapter 1 – the Brontë Parsonage, Haworth, Chapter 2 - The Freud Museum, London, Chapter 3 – Monk's House, Rodmell (former home of Virginia Woolf). Brass art used a Kinect scanner to capture their movements through the interior space of the Brontë Parsonage and Wycoller Hall during a series of nocturnal visits between 2011 and 2013. They realized the potential to exploit its 'flaws' to produce

their own shadow plays. The shadows are formed when an object obstructs the laser, and the resulting occlusion appears as black shadow but is in fact a lack of data – something the eye cannot perceive. The shadows cast by the artists' figures and 'seen' by the lasers are entirely unseen by the eye during the process. The video reveals the scene but simultaneously records an unseen shadow realm.

³ We remained conscious of 'the landing': a special feature of the hall staircase that was designated as 'the Womens' space'.

⁴ This allowed us to use Processing to seamlessly edit the material (data) captured from each of the three Kinect sensors, positioned around each scene.

⁵ The lyrics of this song are Cohen's translation of Federico Garcia Lorca's poem 'Pequeno Vals Vienés'. It was written for a tribute album compiled to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Lorca's murder by Franco's fascist soldiers in 1936.

⁶ In this instance 'drawing' refers to the treated laser capture. The bespoke software created in Processing apprehends a set of x, y, z points and plots them as marks in space and time. This is why we allude to this as drawing, and the editing as redrawing.