

Freud's Therapeutic Boxsprings

Date : November 10, 2006

The Couch: Thinking in Repose, Sigmund Freud Museum, Vienna, Austria, Exhibition Review 5 May - 5 November 2006

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On Sunday, 5 November 2006, the [Sigmund Freud Museum in Vienna](#) closed the doors to “The Couch: Thinking in Repose,” a special exhibition commemorating Freud’s 150th anniversary this year. Using a cross-disciplinary approach, curator Lydia Marinelli focused on literature, art, science, and design from the mid-nineteenth century until today in an illuminating exploration of the most intimate and complex relationship between neurology and—well—a divan conspicuous by its own absence. The exhibition encompassed paintings, sculpture, photographs, books, furniture, china, and tableware as well as interviews and music. The original psychoanalytic couch, however, was missing. Complete with Oriental rug and cushions, it is to be found at the London Freud Museum, in the house where Freud and his family found refuge after their 1938 emigration.

Maybe it was precisely the original’s absentia that unleashed a flow of free associations in Vienna. Spencer Finch’s “Ceiling (above Sigmund Freud’s couch),” four elliptical pastel colour fields in different shades of beige on paper, recalled the patient’s limited range of sight during therapeutic sessions. To help clients relax and speak without inhibition, Freud always sat at the couch’s top end, vanishing from their perception as they reclined. In addition, most of Freud’s vast archaeological collection of antiquities, his books and papers, retreated from the patient’s view. In setting up the exhibition, Marinelli and her team found themselves in a similarly empty space of references. They produced a broad, if not comprehensive, discussion of the sofa as an eclectic piece of furniture that has been appropriated by its diverse usages over the years as much as it

has participated in their gestation.

Apart from Finch, photographs of Andy Warhol's sofa at the Silver Factory and a Rachel Whiteread sculpture were on display in a portion of the Freud family's private quarters. They completed a historical survey of the sofa's social connotations from bourgeois sexual trap to avant-garde muse. A set of 1840s Paul Gavarni lithographs, turn-of-the-century woodcuts by the Swiss painter Félix Vallotton, and nightmarish Surrealist figures by Max Ernst together with literary excerpts from Honoré de Balzac, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Gustave Flaubert and Gottfried Keller documented the sofa's disputed identity in history as furniture of questionable repute.

Nineteenth-century artists shared a concern for the sofa with bourgeois homemakers and medical doctors treating modern illnesses from alcoholism to tuberculosis. In the rooms of apartment 7, Berggasse 19, one floor up from Freud's domicile, the exhibit continued to examine the relations between private intimacy and public intrusion, creative freedom and social discipline. Here, Jewish attorney Adolf Mathias had lived with his wife and cookbook author Stefanie until their deportation to concentration camps during the war (Adolf died in Theresienstadt in 1943, Stefanie's fate is unclear). In the 1950s, the apartment was remodelled with fashionable wallpaper and flooring. Today in the possession of the City of Vienna, it has been made available to the Sigmund Freud Foundation. A tiled stove, a bathtub, a set of built-in mirrors in the wood-panelled salon, the fifties wallpaper and colorful bits of flooring remain as the ruins of bygone domesticity. For the exhibition, the movable furnishings and light fixtures were removed. In their stead, antique daybeds that survived decades of household usage before launching a museum career, a selection of 1920s conduct books with recommendations on couch propriety, and small-scale patent sofa models from the collection of Siegfried Giedion carried on the story of the sofa at home as a battlefield of technology, taste, decorum, and emotion.

The apartment's bathroom, formerly the place of bodily cleansing, introduced psychiatric practices of the past. A short silent film, part fiction part documentary, showed a mental institution with patients apparently consumed by the drink: utterly confused, they were submitted to physical torture and forced to lie in cage beds, similar to an historic example on view. Later treatments administered by neurologists in private sanatoria like the Westend built by Josef Hoffmann in Purkersdorf around 1904 included electrotherapy, hypnosis, massage, electric light baths, art and music cures, as well as fattening diets and a lighter version of enforced reclining: resting cures, for example, to fight tuberculosis. A 1916 deckchair from the Swiss Davos Sanatorium brought to life the numerous scenes in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* of Hans Castorp lying down for regular "Liegekur" sessions on his sunny balcony set against the backdrop of an alpine panorama. Sigmund Freud took up the neurological tradition of employing the sofa as a medical instrument. But instead of curtailing his patients' physical mobility he was interested in the sofa's potential as a trigger of artistic, social, and psychological associations, an emotional place where all boundaries could break down and suppressed memories would emanate freely. Fashioned with an Oriental carpet and surrounded by the silent witnesses of antiquity en miniature, Freud's divan was intended as a safe retreat from the daily turbulences of modern urban life. In interviews, contemporary psychoanalysts testified to the couch's continued usefulness in today's therapy settings. Photographs by Shellburne Thurber depicted individual descendants of the psychoanalytic

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couch currently at work in New England and Brazil offices. Comparatively empty by comparison to Freud's study and consulting rooms, the spaces captured by Thurber's camera seem to imply that the couch's capacity in embracing body and soul without the aid of any other material stimuli has expanded through generations of practise. Even though it escapes one's view when in use, the sofa still inspires our imagination.

An exhibition catalog entitled *Die Couch: Vom Denken im Liegen* published by Prestel accompanies the exhibition. To date, it is available in German only.

Links: www.freud-museum.at

[Photos from the exhibit](#)