Courtesy of the Freud Museum, London
Breathing in the Archives

Amelie Hastie

Thoughts were things, to be collected, collated, analyzed, shelved, or resolved.
—H. D., A Tribute to Freud

Housing collections of past experiences, shoring against that which is perpetually evanescent, the memory is an archive. One of the many things I have collected in mine over the years is a series of repeated viewings of, or returns to, the home movies lodged at the Freud Museum in London. In an upstairs viewing space that is part classroom, part home theater, part family lounge, two videos play on a loop. These screenings are therefore technologically designed as a series of returns, seeming to echo Freud’s own theories of repetition: like the now frayed (and clichéd) string unwound and wound back around a wooden spool, familiar family narratives of loss and recovery play over and again in this room with a garden view. One video is a documentation of still photographs taken by Edmund Engelman (at the behest of Freud’s colleague and friend August Einhorn) just before the family left Vienna to escape Nazi occupation. The photos were intended as a record of Freud’s workspace in his Vienna home; from these images, family and friends reconstructed his office in
Hampstead Heath, and it remains in basically the same condition as part of the home-museum today. The other video is a compilation of home movies shot in Austria, France, and England during this same time period. This footage is narrated by an elderly Anna, Freud’s youngest daughter, the renowned child psychoanalyst who lived in the London family house with her partner long after her parents were gone.

At the opening of the video, Anna Freud notes that these are home movies made for family members and not intended for public viewing. Though she says this apologetically, nothing could be better from the viewer’s point of view. Even though home movies always entail a performance of the institution of the family, these images—and, even more important, their narration by Anna Freud—display an intimacy, either despite the genre or because of it, and they invite an affective engagement with Freud’s personal history. This affective presence and possibility derives in part from the fact that the “father” (of Anna, of psychoanalysis) is in front of the camera rather than, as is more typical of home movies, behind it, in part because the daughter narrates what we see, and in part as a result of the space in which viewers sit to see the images and hear Anna’s voice. As we look, she tells us what and who is before us. In one sequence marked “Occasion of Golden Anniversary,” she points out members in the crowd, including, “This is one of my father’s sisters, one of those who died in concentration camp, Mitzi Freud.” And a moment later: “That’s me in the background.” Over an image of their Vienna house covered with a Nazi flag followed by footage of crowds on the street, she comments, “And this is the crowd cheering Hitler. That is how it looked.” A woman steps in front of the camera: “That’s some stranger,” Anna almost grumbles. Many of the other images throughout the compilation are of Freud’s dogs, whom Anna also duly names and describes.

Watching the video is like looking at a family album with Anna Freud. Her father’s daughter, she alternates everyday details of a family with telling commentary on the everyday (the commentary itself seemingly mundane at times). Seeming to imitate a child who points herself out in a photograph (and who equally dismisses out of hand those who are not important to the story she
is telling), Anna also acknowledges her role in history—of the war, of her family—in order to share what she sees as significant. And what is important is not only the reason why they left—to escape Nazi persecution—but also some of the initial, everyday effects this exile had on the family. Most important, from the vantage point of these home movies, was the (temporary) loss of Freud’s dog, Lun, who had to be exiled herself in a six-month quarantine, and for whom Jumbo was substituted (if, perhaps inevitably, unsuccessfully, for Freud did not take to him, Anna tells us). Such alternation—between dogs, between the everyday and its analysis, between the narrating subject as child and as family historian—produces a register that is at once transitory and permanent, one that pierces the viewer. Central to this sensation for me is not just Anna’s voice but her very breath. Many of her statements are punctuated by her audible breathing (a testament to the amateur quality of this film, as well as to her age during its compilation). Over the 1932 footage of her father sitting with a friend in a garden, she says, “In this picture neither of the two men knew they were being photographed, and that is why it is so natural. [Deep breath. In. And out.] My father didn’t like to be photographed. . . . I think this is really the best picture in the whole movie.” Her breath is an unintentional sonic close-up, an indication of her presence. As I watch and listen, I have the sense (maybe I will this sense to take place) of Freud’s daughter’s breath coursing through me.

The room next door to the viewing space houses rotating exhibitions. In 2006, an exhibition featured Freud as a collector: of neuroses, dreams, and objects. One placard included a passage from the analysand and poet H. D.’s *Tribute to Freud*: “He said his little statues and images helped stabilize the evanescent idea, or keep it from escaping altogether.”¹ I wonder if this is, in a way, the function of the breath, itself a definitively evanescent thing. Is my return to the museum, my repeated viewings of the videos, an attempt to stabilize the evanescence of the breath—not to collect more experiences but perhaps to recollect one that was not my own in the first place?²

What I propose to archive for a feminist future is the very evanescence of experience, the experience of affect, an intimacy
and empathy possible from each. For me this lives in Anna Freud’s
breath, layered across images of her father, screened in their house,
which has now become an archive itself. If memory is an archive,
it is one that is jumbled, disorganized, sometimes a little chaotic.
Experiences fade into one another, like a palimpsest (or Freud’s
“Mystic Writing Pad”); other experiences become incomplete,
like crumbling paper worn from years of handling or neglect.
And sometimes the memory opens up again to discovery, like the
moment one might experience in a material archive, enjoying the
(mistaken) sensation of being the first to see this lost piece of his-
tory, forgetting that someone before had placed it there in the first
place, even if that someone is me.

My return to the museum is also, of course, a return to
Freud. But my return to the videos on the second floor is a return
to him via his daughter. Anna Freud is the historical figure
who sought to keep her father’s history—and the history of his
ideas—intact in the most official way. Given her own work and
her life, the museum is the Anna Freud house, as much as it is the
Sigmund Freud house. As I visit it—or her—I realize that Anna
Freud is also, in a sense, a stand-in for the feminists who came after
her. Thus I admit that what I want to keep in our archive is also
Freud’s work—designed for repeated returns, if not reiterations.
For our archive, then, must be the returns to and transformations
of his methods and ideas by feminist scholars. As we return to and
rethink Freud, we might also look back to those women around
him (Anna, H. D., Princess Marie Bonaparte) who began that work
long before us.3

The subject, now multiplied, that I wish to archive for
the future is ultimately a provocation: affect, lasting and evanes-
cent, which we feel as scholars—for moving images, for schools
of thought, for historical figures. This wish and this contribution
therefore reflects on the very project of writing a history for a femi-
nist future, the personal urgency feminists feel in our intellectual
work, and the tension between ephemeral and material histories
embodied in a space like that of the archive, or of the academic
journal itself. This particular archival project, in the space of the
pages of Camera Obscura, allows for both the dwelling of and on
objects and for a revisitation of the things, ideas, and figures we have decided to place here. Built over the span of several issues, these ongoing archives give us the time to catch our breath, to hold it as we write and read in these pages, and to release it as we continue to imagine how to build and inhabit our feminist legacy.

In the last image of the film, we see Freud exit his final birthday party, Anna taking his arm, and Jumbo the Pekingese following. Anna says, “My father goes back to his studio to have some peace and quiet. And Jumbo follows.” The house they enter, of course, is the house in which we are now sitting, watching him.

Notes

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2. In Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination, new ed. (London: Verso, 2002), 49, Annette Kuhn describes the purpose of photography, especially family photos: “Why should a moment be recorded, if not for its evanescence?”


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