

## ENCOUNTERS: REFLECTING ON THE TRAJECTORY OF AN ART OBJECT

Marion Wassenaar

This essay explores how the meaning of an art object can be altered depending on the context in which the object is represented and encountered. By detailing the provenance of the object, I am able to describe the multiple stories attributed to the object through a material culture framework. The item selected for this study is an artwork titled *Dreamwork*. The work, as art, and its provenance provide documentation to support a historical, symbolic and environmental perspective that explores how the setting for an object affects perception. I present through a personal lens, as artist-maker, a dialogue on my subjective relationship with this object.

The art object in question takes the form of an unconventional artist book consisting of the carbonised remains of a copy of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, stored in a reagent bottle with the book's title laser-engraved onto the glass surface. The book, in its original, tatty form, was a 1921 edition translated into English by AA Brill and published by George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London. My copy became available for purchase through a secondhand auction website on the Internet.

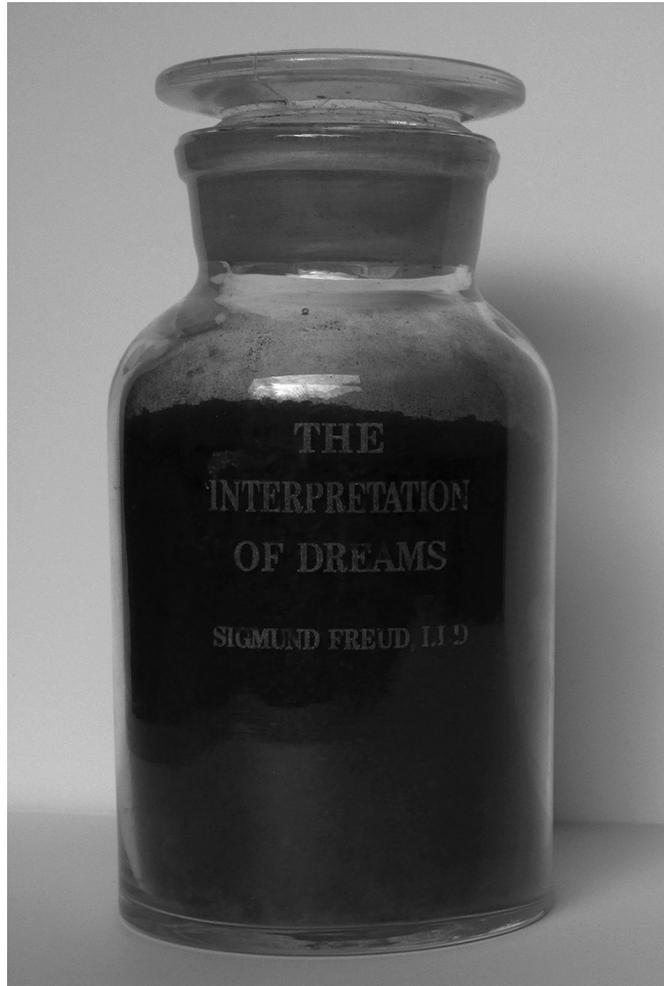


Figure 1. M Wassenaar, *Dreamwork*, 2014,  
carbonised paper and glass,  
170 x 93mm.

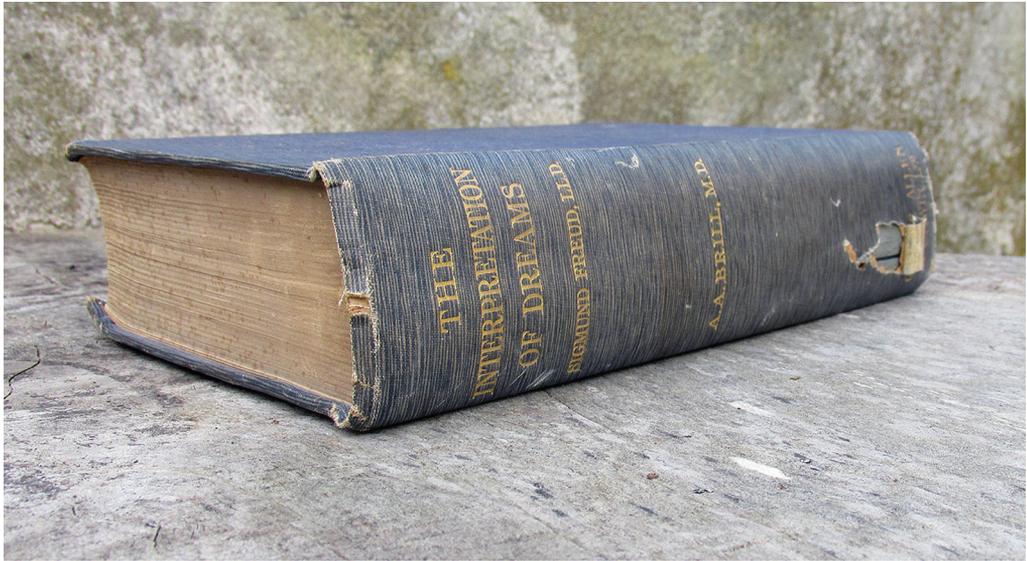


Figure 2.

Prior to acquisition, no data is available on the almost one hundred-year provenance of my copy of the book, from its journey from the publisher to New Zealand, or the possible number of readers influenced by this copy. The book was transformed into charcoal in a home woodburner. Once combusted, ink residue on the burnt pages makes the text barely discernible.

There is no ash contaminating the charcoal, nor is there any smell of incineration. The carbonized residue of the pages is crushed into small flakes and powder. The charcoal remains of the book including the cloth cover almost fill the bottle. The clear glass 500ml reagent bottle I used, with a wide neck and glass stopper, can be purchased as standard laboratory equipment. A text stating the bottle's storage capacity of 500ml is moulded into the top of the stopper. There is no seal making the lid easy to remove. Where the stopper and neck make contact, an etched surface is visible. Laser-etched text on the exterior of the bottle simulates the stamped text that appeared on the spine of the book, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and includes the author's name and the letters LLD (Doctor of Laws). The text is scaled up from its original size.

## CONTEXT

I accept that book lovers may dread the thought of book burning, not only as a crime against culture but also as a symbolic loss of knowledge. I do not condone the deliberate and violent destruction of books because of war, prejudice or censorship. I employ the burnt book in my art practice in a cyclic transformation of organic form in order to engage in altered perceptions of the context in which the book was originally set. I also acknowledge the many uncharred books sourced in my research, and personally prefer to choose the tactility of handling the physical object as opposed to onscreen reading. Turning the pages of a new book, with the smell of the fresh ink escaping from each page, gives as much pleasure as rummaging through shelves of secondhand books in opportunity shops. The fact remains that we are a product of the world we live in, at nature's mercy, in a world predicating warfare over welfare and devastation over conservation. I question what insight society has actually achieved over many centuries and what humanity has gained from this prior knowledge. Earlier this year, news unfolded of the unprecedented massacre of innocent men, women and children in Christchurch, with the loss of many lives. On 15 March 2019 Aotearoa, our long white cloud, darkened.



Figure 3.

This dark tragedy prompts me to contemplate earlier horrors that include censorship and book burning during the Second World War 2, in particular the publications of Sigmund Freud, widely known as the father of psychoanalysis. *The Interpretation of Dreams* is a classic work by Freud that sets out his theories on dreams and the unconscious. In choosing to burn his book, I reflect on humankind's negative actions, either through carelessness or intentional destruction, and the fragility of knowledge from the past that passes into our technologically driven future.



Figure 4.

Elaine Gurian, a consultant and advisor to museums, questions the power of the object, asking what is real and whether the object is the image or the story attached to it. Of the many items available to be collected in our mass-production culture, she notes: "Which of these objects to collect often depends not on the object itself but on the associated story that may render one of them unique or important."<sup>1</sup>

The same can be said for the multiple copies, editions and formats of Freud's book, whether they exist in hard copy or are available for download. The book itself, while nearly a century old, is not a first edition and was acquired over the Internet on an auction website. Does the transformation into its carbon state then make the object any less or more important and, in this transformed state, can it still be referred to as a book? In what follows I seek to demonstrate the book's significance in its current carbonised state.

## PROVENANCE

*Dreamwork* was originally exhibited in a group show at Fresh and Fruity Gallery, George Street, Dunedin, as part of the White Night Gallery Crawl, an event in the Otago University Student Association's Art Week, in July 2014. The gallery space was set up in the entry foyer to several artists' studios, so was restricted in size. With seven artists represented, the brief for the exhibition was to respond in some way to the term 'compact.'

The artists' statements in the exhibition catalogue explained their response to 'compact.' For *Dreamwork*, I saw the concept of condensation as informing the work. I first listed a number of dictionary definitions: *compact* –



Figure 5.

“to make more dense; compress; condense;” *condensation*: “Psychology – The process by which a single symbol or word is associated with the emotional content of several, not necessarily related ideas, feelings, memories, or impulses, especially as expressed in dreams.” These definitions were followed by a sentence stating: “The reagent bottle containing the charcoal remains of Sigmund Freud’s book symbolises suppressed hopes and dreams.”

The work sat on an old fold-up desk with a reading lamp shining on the bottle, and was positioned in a small alcove in the entry foyer.

*Dreamwork* showed again in “Les morgue des ouvres” (The book morgue), an exhibition looking at the book as art object, curated by second-year students from the Print Studio, Dunedin School of Art, at Dutybound bookbinding, Dunedin, in October 2014. The space houses large printing and bookbinding machinery. The exhibition displayed book works sitting on a yellow shelf suspended from yellow cords in the centre of the public shop space. *Dreamwork* sat on this hanging shelf with a number of other artist books.

The exhibition coincided with the Art + Book symposium held at the Dunedin School of Art to support Dunedin’s bid for recognition as a UNESCO City of Literature, held in conjunction with the Otago Arts Festival. The artist presented a paper at the Art + Book symposium titled “The Burnt Book as Art Object” which was later submitted as a chapter in *Art and Book*, edited by Peter Stupples and published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. The book chapter includes a reference to *Dreamwork*.<sup>2</sup>

The Museum of Prehistory and Archaeology of Cantabria (MUPAC) in Santander, Spain, was host to the most recent viewing of *Dreamwork*. The work was submitted by proposal for the Artists’ Book exhibitions included in the Impact 10 International Print Conference held 1-9 September 2018. The theme of the conference was ‘Encounters.’ The curators selected my work for exhibition in MUPAC due to the historic reference of the book. The work travelled with me on my journey to attend the conference and returned to New Zealand by post.

MUPAC is located in the centre of the city, beneath Santander’s Mercado del Este indoor market. The museum houses a collection of art dating from the Upper Palaeolithic era, with the oldest pieces, retrieved from the El Castillo Cave, more than 100,000 years old. Material from Cantabria is highlighted in the collections, including several giant discoidal Cantabrian stelae. *Dreamwork* sat on a plinth within a glass case in the central space of the museum overlooking the stelae.



Figure 6.

## SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

Working with the burnt book has allowed me to engage in a transformation that exposes the cyclic, organic nature of sustainable materials. Although published in 1921, the book's provenance includes my purchase in 2013, proving that this particular copy escaped the 'biblioclasm' that occurred during the Second World War. The etched inscription on the reagent bottle reproduces the title of the book taken from the spine; this provides the only clue that the charcoal within the reagent bottle relates to Freud's text. In the first exhibition at Fresh and Fruity Gallery, the work was displayed on a desk with a reading light illuminating the object, suggesting a psychoanalytic reading – as if the contents were under scrutiny, ready to express the unconscious in a symbolic gesture.

The book takes on a new form and meaning in its compacted or condensed state. In a transference of meaning, the reagent bottle containing the charcoal remains of Freud's book conjures suppressed potentials. Living in the Anthropocene, climate change and carbon emissions are at the forefront of our political and environmental agendas. The book, processed into charcoal, demonstrates that ongoing carbon emissions into the atmosphere are not inevitable, thus giving some hope for an optimistic future. In its context in the group show of artists' books at Dutybound, *Dreamwork* reveals a situation where there is no turning back.

Kazimir Malevich's essay "On The Museum," written in 1919, proposes, perhaps somewhat ironically from an avant-gardist standpoint, the notion of the pharmacy as a solution to the impending destruction of Russian museums and art collections by civil, political and economic unrest. Malevich's pharmacy contains the incinerated remains of history, stored in apothecary bottles on a chemist's shelf, in what appears as a radical archive. Malevich suggests that these remains will incite the creation of progressive ideas, hypothesising a vitalising agency in the transformative character of the burnt book as art object.<sup>3</sup>

The book, as organic matter, has the potential for transformation into charcoal, almost pure carbon, through the process of pyrolysis or gasification. This involves controlled incineration in the absence of oxygen. Charcoal has the capacity to convey intimate connections between being and decay, and birth and death. While Malevich was referencing the impact of political unrest in relation to his pharmacy, I use the notion of the pharmacy as a way of responding to the effects of climate change in order to contextualise a framework in material culture that can be utilised to consider long-term sustainability.

With the object situated in MUPAC, displayed among artefacts dating from the Upper Paleolithic and the Iron Age, the burnt organic matter of charcoal is a reminder of mortality. The book in charcoal form conveys the futility of existence, raising the question of the uncertainty of the planet's continuing existence following the demands placed on natural resources by human activity. Near Santander is the Cave of Altamira where Paleolithic polychrome cave art, created using charcoal, ochre and hematite and dating from 35,000 to 11,000BC, has been relatively well preserved. The cave was rediscovered in 1868 but, over time and with increasing public viewing, the artworks sustained damage. In 1977 the cave was closed to the public, with a replica 'neo' cave opening in 2001. Visiting the neo cave as part of the conference and seeing the reproductions of bison and other animals in charcoal and other materials, I am reminded of the cyclic nature of charcoal and the immense duration of time that this art has endured. Could *Dreamwork* possibly survive 11,000 years?

**Marion Wassenaar** holds a Master in Fine Arts from the Dunedin School of Art and specialises in print practices. Her research focuses on the collision between humans and their environment. She lectures in the Print Studio at the Dunedin School of Art and is collections coordinator of the Otago Polytechnic art collection. She is currently undertaking a Postgraduate Diploma in Museum Studies.

- 1 Elaine Gurian, "What is the Object of the Exercise?," in her *Civilizing the Museum: The Collected Writings of Elaine Heumann Gurian* (London: Routledge, 2006), 33-47, at 38.
- 2 Peter Stupples, ed., *Art and Book* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016).
- 3 Kazimir Malevich, "On the Museum," in his *Essays on Art 1915-1933*, trans. Troels Andersen (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1971), 68-72, at as 70.