

As it were... So to speak



A Museum Collection in Dialogue with
Barbara Bloom



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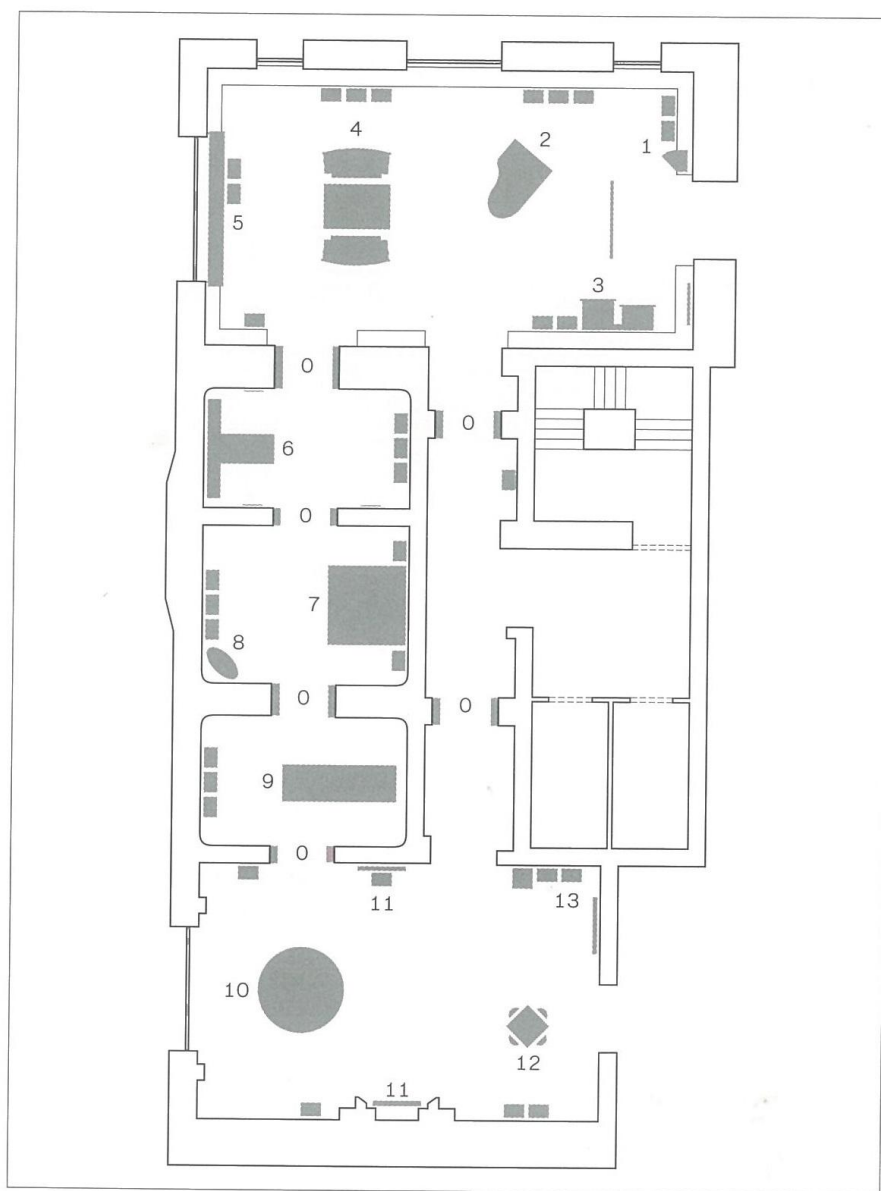
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GUESTS AND HOSTS

It seems appropriate that this project should begin with an invitation to a home—of sorts. The invitation came from the Jewish Museum, asking me to peruse its collection of many thousands of ceremonial, decorative, and fine art objects, and to then conceive and create an exhibition incorporating my selections.

The exhibition was to be installed in the museum's second-floor historic rooms, which are still imbued with a intimations of the former residents, the Warburg family, and the lively social life they led there. While developing a framework for the exhibition, and selecting objects, I came upon a structure within which to understand the collection—the Talmud and its unique structure and design.

On each page of the Talmud, an original text is complexly framed by centuries of debates, discussions, and commentaries, as if the scholars—who lived hundreds of years apart, in variety of locations—were conversing with each other in the same room. The entirety forms a dialogue that transpires independent of, and unaffected by, either time or space.

Bad taste is real taste, of course, and good taste is the residue of someone else's privilege.

Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar*

In order to achieve an atmosphere of timelessness and ephemerality, everything in the museum's Neo-Gothic rooms was painted in a shifting shade of grey-blue-green.

The emptied rooms were filled with “ghosts” of furnishings—abstracted furniture-like structures with traces of specific detailing, designed in a style lying somewhere between Donald Judd and Biedermeier. These furnishings doubled as display cases.

Wary of stepping over that precarious threshold into the world of interior decoration, I moved cautiously.

As it were ... So to speak

“As it were”—A phrase used to indicate that a word or statement is perhaps not formally exact though practically right. The mood is subjunctive. One would say it, if only he could mean it ... as if it were really so. “So to speak”—Curious parenthetical phrase—as one might say; something said a certain way, even though the words are not exactly accurate ... in a manner of speaking. These are common phrases that call little attention to themselves or their oddness. Used often together, they suggest that what you are about to hear, or have just heard, is not exactly what it appears to be.

Opposite page:

Digitally distorted image, Warburg mansion parlor

The second floor consisted of three very large rooms and the long hallway that connected them. The three rooms opened into one another as well as into the hall, so that each room had at least two, or sometimes three, doors. This plan is repeated on the third and fourth floors, and to a certain extent on the fifth, so it is the basic pattern of the whole house.

The room to the right of the stairs was the Music Room. It was well-proportioned and very formal, with a painted beamed ceiling and large vitrines on the inside wall in which father kept his rare books. Tapestries hung on the other walls; there were also a few rather undistinguished paintings, and there was a concert grand piano ...

Edward M.M. Warburg,
1109 Fifth Avenue—The Warburg House,
An informal tour of his former home.



Each “furniture-case” housed a grouping of objects that were selected for their historical resonance, their implicit narratives, or marked with traces of past lives.

Each display was accompanied by what appeared to be book pages floating off the walls. On these pages were illustrated texts—invoking imagined pairings of historical figures from diverse times. The texts were from a variety of voices:

Lou Andreas-Salomé and Leonard Cohen sing sultry lyrics together, Michael

Bloomberg and Maimonides have a dispute over what constitutes charity, Arnold Schoenberg and George Gershwin play a harmonic and dissonant game of tennis, and Jesus, Nefertiti, Émile Zola, and Amy Winehouse sit and play a number of parallel games together.

The combination of the objects

and the cases offered the visitor an opportunity to observe the subjects implicit in their positioning, and the meanings that reverberated and ricocheted off of each other.

And so I found myself playing host, but oddly, to two parallel sets of guests:

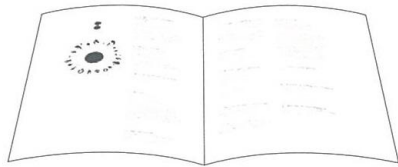
One group was the envisioned historical guests, personages from diverse times grouped around a piano, a bed, a table, engaged in imagined dialogues, toasts, songs, arguments ...

The other group of guests was the museum visitors who could think of the exhibition as a visit to a party, where they might wander about and figuratively eavesdrop on dialogues between improbable combinations of figures who never actually met in real life.

There is ground for taking the house as a tool for analysis of the human soul ... Not only our memories, but the things we have forgotten are “housed.” Our soul is an abode. And by remembering “houses” and “rooms,” we learn to “abide” within ourselves ...

...The old house, for those who know how to listen, is a sort of geometry of echoes. The voices of the past do not sound the same in the big room as in the little bed chamber, and calls on the stairs have yet another sound. Among the most difficult memories, well beyond any geometry that can be drawn, we must recapture the quality of the light; then come the sweet smells that linger in the empty rooms, setting an aerial seal on each room in the house of memory. Still farther it is possible to recover not merely the timbre of the voices, “the inflections of beloved voices now silent,” but also the resonance of each room in the sound house. In this extreme tenuousness of memory ...

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

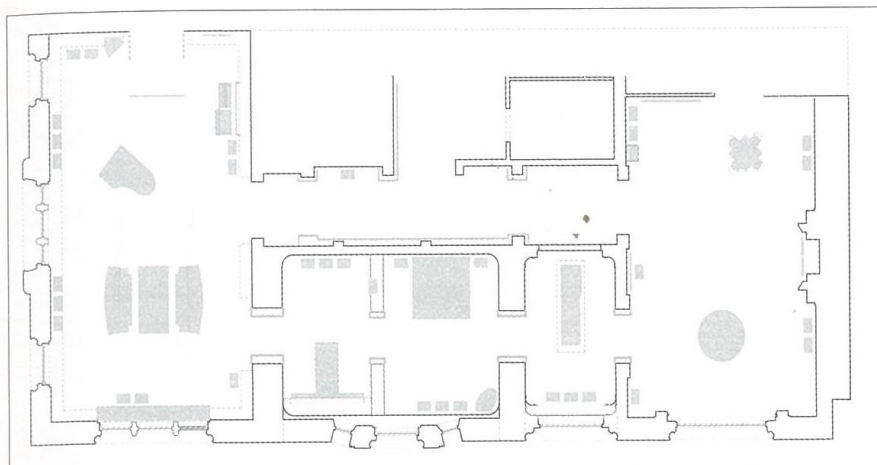


The sense of distinct times being overlaid, temporalities interleaved ... cut across worlds and not just years, that the author and the narrator, while they couldn't face each other, could intuit each other's presence.

Ben Lerner,
The Golden Vanity

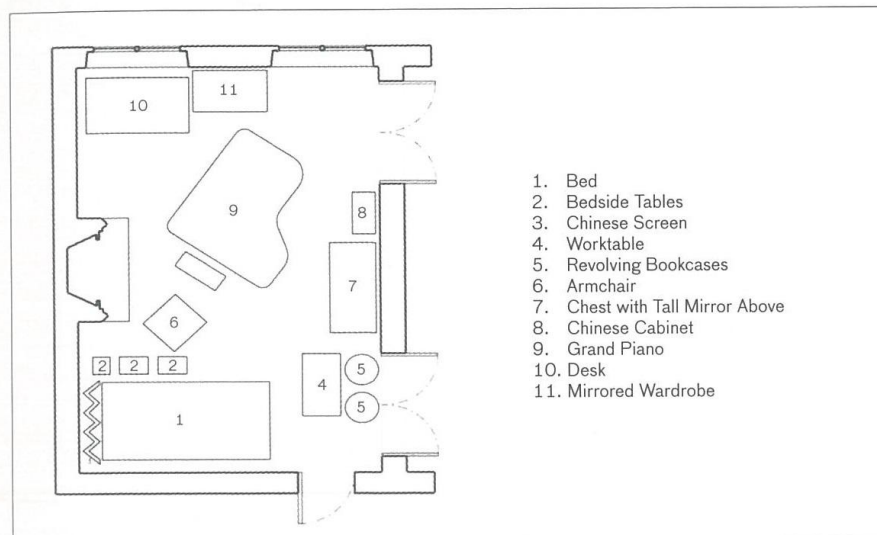
To take the wrong door means indeed to go against the order that presided over the plan of the house, over the layout of the rooms, over the beauty and rationality of the whole. But what discoveries are made possible for the visitor! The new path permits him to see what no one other than himself could have perceived from that angle. All the more so because I am not sure that one can enter a written work without having forced one's own way in first.

Edmond Jabès,
In Place of a Foreword



Plan

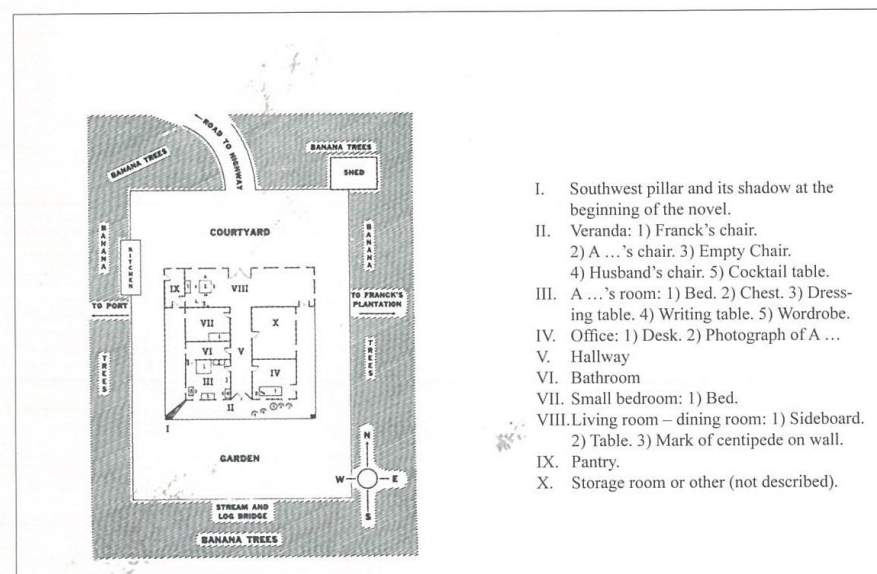
Second floor
The Jewish Museum, NY
As it were ... So to speak
March–August, 2013



Plan of Marcel Proust's bedroom

In his bedroom, clutter left little space for maneuvering. His mother's worktable blocked easy access to the bookcases, her grand piano was pushed so close to the wardrobe that its doors were never opened. From the fortified corner of his bed, Proust could monitor all three of the room's entranceways and the two windows, assuming a position of defense against threshold and aperture.

Diana Fuss,
The Sense of an Interior, 2004



Alain Robbe-Grillet, map on frontispiece, *Jealousy*, 1957

You know the genre—there are an A and B characters, referred to as A and B—and they look out windows, sip drinks on verandas, and stare despondently into space.

Robbe-Grillet might describe an object at length, but the eraser or venetian blinds would prove to have scant relationship to the characters' inner being and no moral import ... Perhaps he loves the eraser more than the girl.

- I. Southwest pillar and its shadow at the beginning of the novel.
- II. Veranda: 1) Franck's chair.
2) A ... 's chair. 3) Empty Chair.
4) Husband's chair. 5) Cocktail table.
- III. A ... 's room: 1) Bed. 2) Chest. 3) Dressing table. 4) Writing table. 5) Wordrobe.
- IV. Office: 1) Desk. 2) Photograph of A ...
- V. Hallway
- VI. Bathroom
- VII. Small bedroom: 1) Bed.
- VIII. Living room – dining room: 1) Sideboard.
2) Table. 3) Mark of centipede on wall.
- IX. Pantry.
- X. Storage room or other (not described).

WEIMAR ON THE PACIFIC

Sonntag, den 15. Juli 1950 7:30

Swerling	Chodorov	Abbott
Henschke	Chaplin	Hilde Kohn
Jerry Abstein	Morton Levine	Lennart
Elisabeth Aspelius	Fleeman	Hansbaum
Lloyd	Prosschel	Band
Zabori	Manfred Puert	Dr. Spanghel
Bury	Nagelmann	Zeichner
Schneider	Holgers	Teulinka
Adler	Honig	Vigorena
Lester Koenig	Kentzsch	Viertel
Dickinson	Ferdinand Kohn	Weil
Gina Kaus	Eva Hermann	
Laughton	Dudley Nichols	
Lang	Reymann	
Forster	Vlastimil	
	Houzen	
	Hobinson	
	Desoir	
	River	
	Sirk	
	De Silva	
	Wesley	

Lester Koenig
Dickinson
Gina Kaus
Laughton
Lang

Guest list:

Invitees to one of the Feuchtwangers' famous parties at their home on July 22, 1950. The list includes Lester Koenig.

Lester Koenig was a writer and producer principally known for being second in command on William Wyler's films through *Roman Holiday*. He was blacklisted on the grounds that he had been named as having questionable ties to the Communist party, and upon being subpoenaed, he refused to name names. The result was that he was unable to work in the film business.

He went on to found the jazz record label Contemporary Records, which recorded many of the best musicians of the time.

Lion Feuchtwanger, German-Jewish novelist and playwright, was a prominent figure in the literary world of Weimar Germany. He and his wife Marta escaped Germany, first for France, and later to the US, where they were granted political asylum. The Feuchtwangers settled in Los Angeles in Villa Aurora, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Their home would become a focal point in the lives of many intellectuals and artists who had fled from Germany, and their American friends. During the McCarthy era, Feuchtwanger and many of these friends became the targets of suspicion and further threat from the US government.

Among the guests at readings, concerts, and social gatherings at Villa Aurora were Bertolt Brecht, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Franz and Alma Werfel, Alfred Doeblin, Ludwig Marcuse, Arnold Schoenberg, Kurt Weill, Hanns Eisler, Fritz Lang, and Charlie Chaplin.

I grew up in the neighborhood where these renowned immigrants lived and gathered. In my childhood home there were political conversations, but except for the foreign accents of some of my parents' friends, I had little inkling of these unseen intellectual networks. At the time, the 1950s and 60s, Los Angeles scarcely had a public cultural life, so these were private gatherings and salons, attended by greatly talented exiles, refugees, expatriates, and the politically radical.

While rummaging around online, I came upon this guest list of invitees to one of the Feuchtwangers' famous parties. Those invited included: Kurt Weill, Charlie Chaplin, Salka Viertel, Charles Laughton, Douglas Sirk ... and also Lester Koenig.

Lester was the father of my friend Vicky and her brother John, and then husband of the artist Catherine Heerman, my teacher. They lived up the street from us in West Los Angeles. We reached each other's homes through a eucalyptus-filled ravine behind our houses that we referred to as "the gulley."

When I encountered this guest list, I was struck. Not so much as a document and proof of a one-degree separation between myself and these intellectuals and luminaries. It was something else, something that has held a life-long fascination for me: the traces of unlikely and invisible meetings.

Georgi Gershenov

Wolfgang Pauli

Arnold J. Rosenberg

Sigmund Freud

Nikola Tesla

Emma Goldman

Anna Freud
Mr. Dunitz

Albert Einstein

Wile Kra

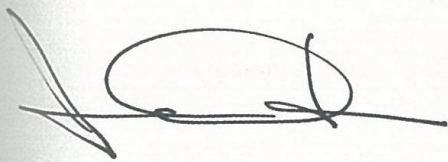
Vladimir Nabokov

Anne Frank

Silver Heart H.D.

Leonard Cohen

Lou Andreas



Oscar Levant

Friedrich Nietzsche

Kim Saylor

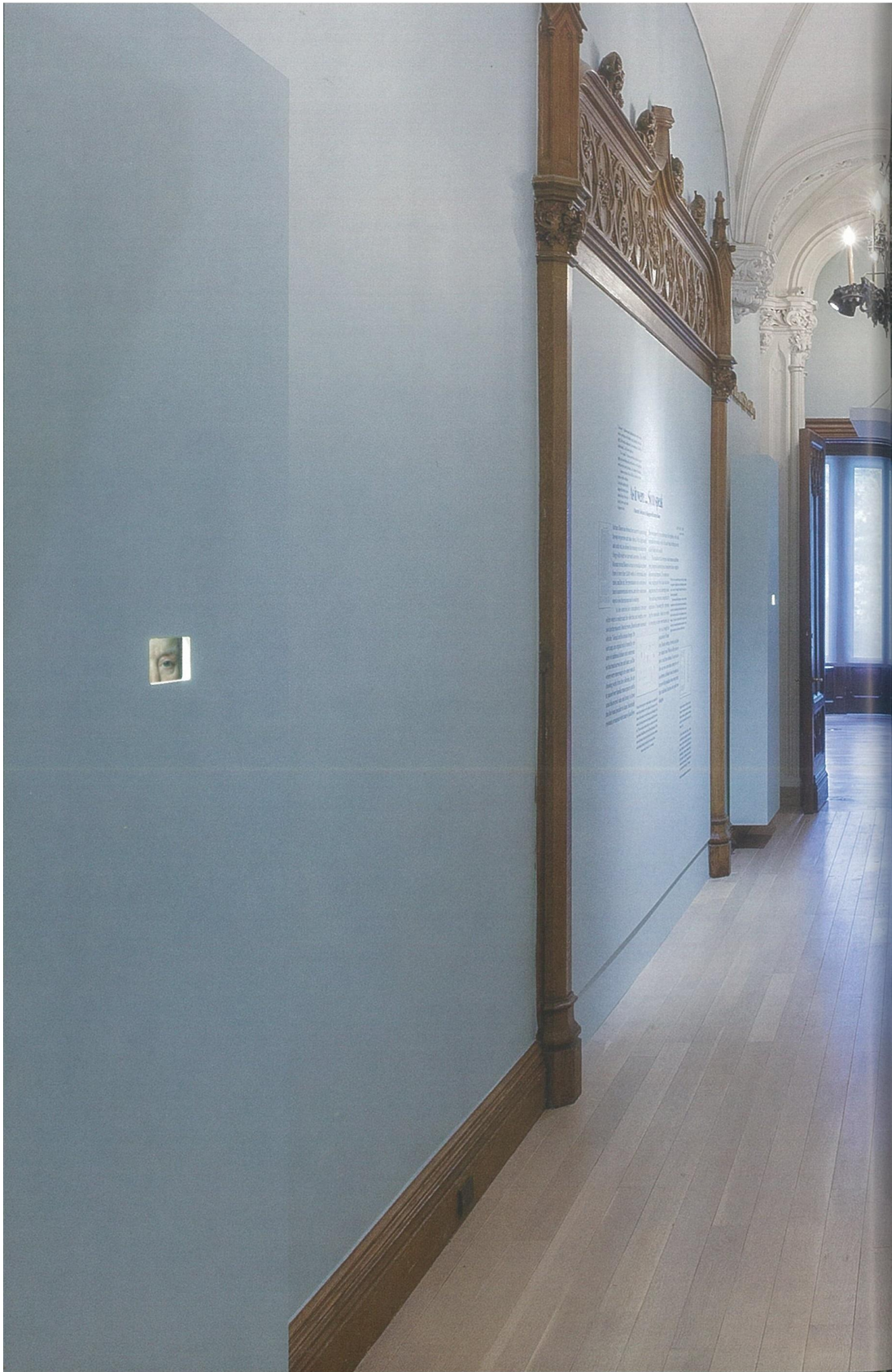
♥ Amy

Jonny Seinfeld

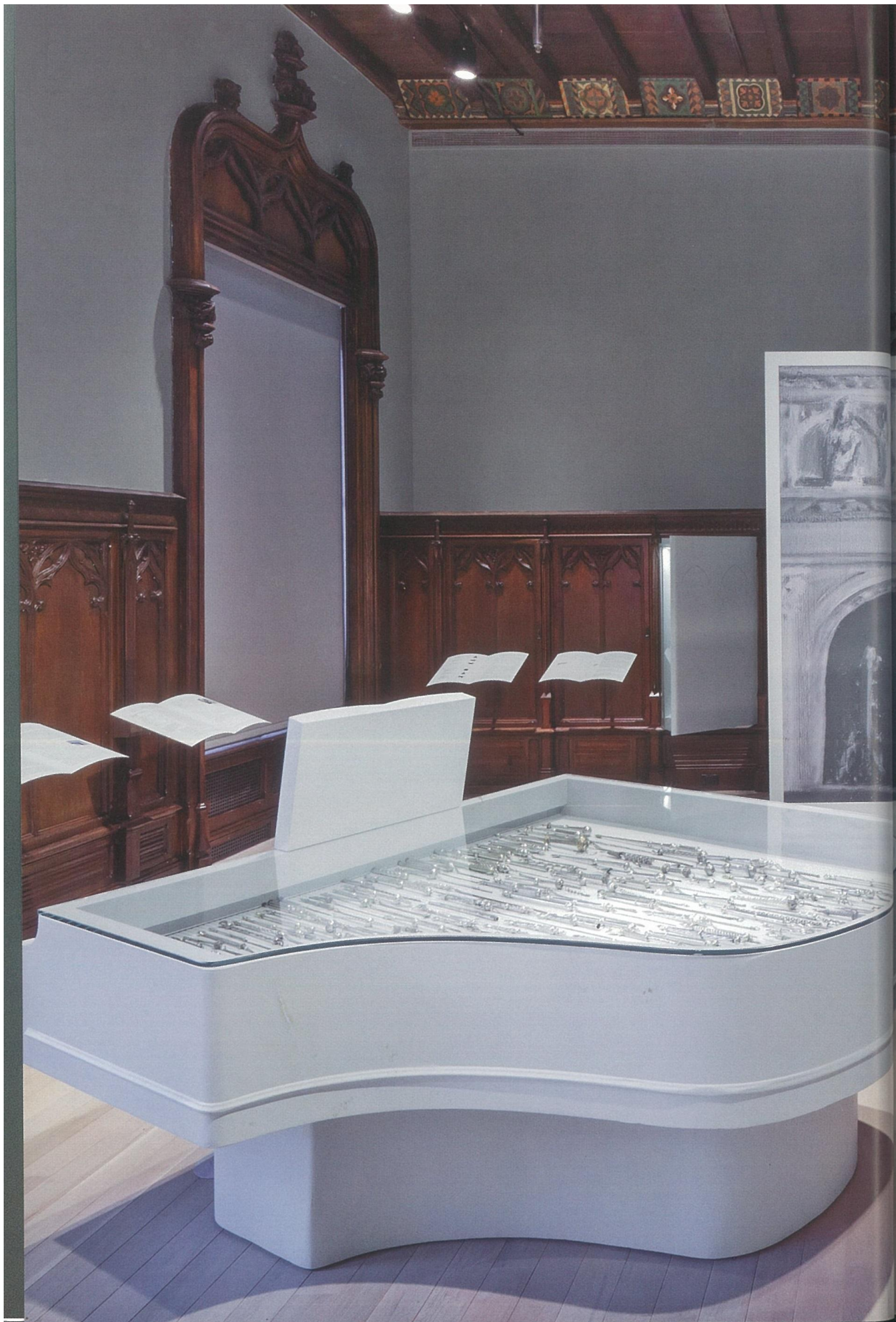
Liam Neeson

Lenny Bruce

Marcel Fournier







Joseph & Fanya Heller Gallery

