In conversation – Frances Spalding with Valerie Sinason

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Art historian, critic and biographer Frances Spalding discusses her work with psychoanalyst and poet Valerie Sinason.

Valerie
And of course . . . what we are surrounded with that feels such a shocking different part of history, it is also invisibly inside us through generational transmission. If we think we are each carrying huge years and generations of invisible history, there is the way in which we all link in to the discussion today. Can I ask first how many people have seen the exhibition before coming? Ah, right, so a lot of people have and others will see it after. Can I also ask how many people have read any of the many books that Frances has written? *(Many hands go up.)* Ah, right.
So one of the pleasures of connecting these issues today is seeing that there was something immediately similar in Frances to the three wonderful artists here. That on the train, having had the privilege to meet her through doing this, and travelling with her, and I just mentioned one piece in one of her books about Stevie Smith that quoted a colleague of mine who'd seen Stevie Smith and she [Frances] was instantly reading it with enormous pleasure going to what the imagery stirred up, going on how that showed something about Stevie Smith and similarly, the three artists here were very quick to show the paintings of the artists they have rediscovered - and in all four of them since they are both involved in a certain kind of biography, their own person was invisible or obscured.
That their delight was in how they brought the other to life and sort of midwifes, in a way, to bringing people back to us. The artists were talking about the generational transmission feeling of these women who could be grandmothers but once they had found the structures of the mind, that they could actually see what was similar.
And what Frances does in all her writing is to take us right back there as if she was there and knew them.
So I wanted to start with asking Frances when you look at a painting , you are obviously doing something different to somebody that could never write a biography about artists or a biography that uses art as well. Do you feel you are meeting a person when you are looking at portraits, how do they grab you?

Frances
This is a difficult one because it's about the separation between art and life and whether or not it exists and whether it's possible to be a good person or a bad person that paints a good picture and all that kind of thing.
I think it is a bit of an area where you have to be weary of collapsing the life into the art and therefore looking at the art to deduce things too immediately to say about the life that would be incorrect. I think that when I wrote about the poet Stevie Smith and the reason I wanted to do that particular book, was she wrote a series of letters in the 1930's which were so immediately in tune with her first novel 'Novel on Yellow Paper', which is about a gossipy office girl who works for a magazine company but I thought well if she isn't an autobiographical poet, anything that you discover about the life must feed into your understanding, all complexities, the nuances around the actual life.

But what I am rather proud of in this book is perhaps the recognition where you must very definitely pursue the separation between the two, and it's in that separation that I think artifice comes in and the whole complexity of making a work of art of some kind or poems and so on. It is both, yes, knowing about an artist's and writer's life can definitely enrich your approach to an understanding of their works of art but you have to be weary of that gap as well.

Valerie
You have a very respectful gap in your books over not making assumptions, lending yourself out to the other with as much good information as you can get, being like an auxiliary memory for them.

Frances
I do remember that James MacGibbon who was Stevie Smiths' executor and who lived at Manningtree, which we came through on the way here, told me that he had gone to some body called Marghanita Laski to ask if she would write the life of Stevie Smith. I couldn't have thought of anything worse because Marghanita Laski was a real bluestocking, very often on radio, the *Brains Trus*t and things like that . . .
a very highly articulate, confident, opinionated lady and really to be a good biographer you need to be a bit like blotting paper, slightly feeble. But having said that, it's not just mopping up, as we were talking on the train, and she [referring to Valerie] said 'You don't put your own voice into it much', and one reason for that is that I think biographies are polyphonic , particularly if you are writing about somebody in living memory .
By polyphonic I mean that you got to have a lot of voices coming in. I feel if don't quote the actual subject at some point, [I don't] let their voice come through. Often when you are reading a biography, if you get a jolt between hearing the subjects own voice and that of what the biographer is saying, than you know there is something not quite working very well.
And you also want, when it is someone in living memory, the voices of the people who knew them or were related to them and so on. It is a collaborative effort. I am proud to have my name on the cover but really as you go to the acknowledgement pages and immediately saying thanks to so and so . . .
Valerie reminded me on the train that this poet Jeni Couzyn had been important in getting Stevie Smith to the Roundhouse. I completely forgotten that, so I rapidly go to my own book to find out what exactly . . . and the most wonderful little description. Can I read that description? And this is of course not me at all.

Valerie
But [it is] your selection, just as the artists in selecting, it is also them.

Frances
This is about the event at the Roundhouse. [Reading from her book] The accident [which Stevie just had] did not prevent her from appearing Saturday 9th May at the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm in London, in an event organised by Jeni Couzyn as part of the Camden Festival Fringe, 'Twelve to twelve', as the event was called, ran from noon to midnight. Twelve names were billed to appear, among them Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Stevie Smith, and in between members of the audience were invited to come up on stage and read.

The event was tumultuous; cabbages were thrown and there was much jostling for the microphone. Jeni Couzyn, wearing a [then predictable] feather boa, took charge of Stevie.
They first met at the party following the Festival Hall poetry event in 1969. Jeni Couzyn, astonished by the eccentricity of Stevie's performance, had attempted to express her delight in it. 'Whereupon' , she has written, 'she [Stevie] instantly turned her back on me with a little hiss, and then spent the evening flirting with my escort with the most alarming success . . . That night I realised that the little eccentric spinster was part played by a highly sophisticated and professional woman. You could admire Stevie Smith, you could be stimulated and surprised by her, you could even dislike her, but you could never, never, patronise her.'
[Then she goes on to say] At the Roundhouse Couzyn experienced other sensations. When Stevie, waiting to go on stage, took hold of her arm, [she was by then quite old by then], as Couzyn has said, Stevie had become for her 'a symbol of that which is most poignant in contemporary woman . . . standing in all her loneliness as one standing on a great height . . . I could find nothing to say to her, but with her thin, claw-like hand in clinging to my arm waiting to go on stage I felt both humble and immensely proud. '
And I thought that was a moving description of her experience of Stevie Smith.

Valerie
But of course, the biographer as supposed to the novelist or the person writing a book totally in their own voice is getting a real thrill and pleasure in the voice of others which is quite different to which curating does, which teaching does, and which therapy does. Because if you are trying to rephrase something that a patient had said and your language is wrong and it's not their life and has been an unwitting assumption in your response, then you cause that discrepancy which feels very similar.
There is a way all three are in the service of the other in which we are all involved but if we don't put the other first as you say not blotting paper but a synthesis of everything around and I thought that the exhibition did something that so beautifully [is] there in all your books in terms of the draws showing the layers of planning, all the memorabilia of the time which helps to make the period come alive.
When I was looking at your Virginia Woolf book and just even a sentence about 'War clouds were on the horizon' . . . and there she is sitting in her study on her chair, it was a kind of way that you'd had to know the whole history that was happening to be closer to your subject.

Frances
If I could just say, that the Virginia Woolf book is not really a biography, it does cover the live but it was written in connection with an exhibition I recently did for the National Portrait Gallery but it does take you from A to B. Please, I don't think I used the cliché of 'The war clouds are gathering'.

Valerie
I have to find that bit! But I got a whole sense of a period of history drawn in just two sentences.

Frances

I wanted in that exhibition to begin with a surprise and everybody thinks 'Oh . . . !' Virginia Woolf is rather familiar to many people nowadays and I didn't want people to go 'Oh it will be Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group . . . here we go again'. So we had a wonderful picture of Virginia Woolf down the corridor, to draw you into the exhibition and then the very next one next door to it, equally was blown up and large, was at 52 Tavistock Square, a house she lived in between 1924 and 1939, where she wrote six or seven of her most famous books, completely guttered by a bomb, and so immediately this rather sort of striking image of a completely guttered house.

What was fascinating for me was the discovery, it's there for anyone to find in the diaries, that she went up to London from Sussex and saw this house completely guttered, she passed some children queuing up to get into the tube platform for their nightly protection. She saw this gutted house and then she went round the corner, because in the late summer of 1939, just before the war began, was a hell of a lot of demolition noise in Tavistock Square and they knew they were going to build a brand new hotel on a very large scale.

So they decided to leave that house before the lease ran out and they went round the corner to Mecklenburg Square. So all their belongings had been moved out but they have not taken down the wall decorations on the wall. You could still see one of them on the one wall that was left in that photograph of 52 Tavistock Square.

Going up to see the damage, Virginia Woolf then went round the corner to Mecklenburg Square, it hadn't had a direct hit, but a bomb had landed nearby, the ceilings had come down, bookcases had been knocked over, most of the windows have been blown in. She rootles around among the debris and dust, for among other things her diaries, and she had filled some over 30 notebooks by that stage with her diary.

I thought this is extraordinary because when it was published in 5 volumes, an edited version in the late 1970's and 80's it was a publishing event. It was an event in British publishing, it was so important. It not only tells you a lot about her, her creativity, her thinking; because she and Leonard Woolf lived close to the political, social and cultural centre of life in Britain, that diary tells you a lot about British life at that time, so to have lost that, would have been absolutely formidable, because Virginia Woolf wrote and wrote and wrote and wrote, she poured out words every day, despite the fact of her mental illness, that she had earlier.

She is a formidable worker and a formidable brilliant wordsmith. It would have been a huge loss, and the image of her rootling around the dust to extract these notebooks was so extraordinary.

Then they took them back to Sussex , she dies the following year, Leonard will have put them into the vault of Westminster bank in Lewes and then a few years later he goes to them and thinks 'I must do something, extract some extracts from them', very carefully chosen and that brings us five biographers knocking on his door saying 'Please can I write the life of Virginia Woolf' and the enormous hunger to understand more about her, to get close to her, some way to possess something of her, which has continued from then to this day.

With something that I think that is partly acknowledged in that decision, in that opening section, to begin with the history of those diaries and finally show the full published series of them.

Valerie
With you having tackled people that are so cared about by thousands over, Stevie Smith and Vanessa Bell, Virginia Woolf, how, what attracted you, what made you go to the others you have written about?

Frances
Well, I would like to say that although a biography of Virginia Woolf had appeared by Quentin Bell just before I wrote my biography about Vanessa Bell her sister, there was no story of her out there, certainly not of her life.
So one of the fascinations was precisely, what you three have been doing, which is bringing to the fore someone, who to that point remained rather silent or obscure in some way hidden. And in all these three books, particularly the Gwen Raverat, … Charles Darwin's granddaughter, there is almost nothing again, apart from her own book called 'Period Piece' about her Cambridge and Victorian childhood.
I am very interested as you three in [Prunella] Clough. Clough is the first book too. I don't know if it is quite a biography, but it is there, again from start to finish, cradle to grave, but mostly about her work. I am interested in the bringing to the fore people who haven't been looked at or read or known about, in quite the same way, one feels they deserve.
So, I am delighted to be here, to be sitting alongside these three artists, who have had this magnificent idea of going to the Ipswich Borough Council collection and instead of just yet again seeing the famous Constables which we have in this building, finding these works by women artists, who many of them for several decades, I believe, have not been shown. And then the wonderful idea of talking about time through putting past and present , their own work in among these pictures . . .
One of the fascinations for me as a biographer is this dialogue between the past and present. I can almost remember one moment when I felt pushed towards biography. I was an art historian by training and that was during a PHD on Roger Fry, being told to go and see a woman who lived in Hampstead, who had some of his paintings, because she had known Roger Fry's sister.
I arrive at this rather beautiful house with antique furniture, rather sparsely furnished, very very tall thin women, probably in her early 90's, rather elegant, and she showed me all the paintings . We sat down and had cups of tea in beautiful china cups, of course, and I remember the sun light glinting through the room.
I can't remember what question I asked her but her reply was 'During the war I worked for the Quaker war victim's relief fund in the district of the Mill and the Merse'.
I suddenly realised 'the war' which of course, my parents when they talked about 'the war', was exactly the Second World War but was for her the First World War. There was some incredible ribbon of time stretching back from the late 1970's, back to those horrific stories, an awareness of these villages erased to the ground.
People still trying to continue their lives with the chimney coming up from the cellar or basement area, which was the only bit in the home that remained to live in and so on . . . and that ribbon of time vibrating, all the way to Hampstead in the 1970's.
It seemed fascinating and ever since I have been convinced that by going back into the past and bringing new information on your paintings into the future, into the present, is that you enrich, you unthicken, and in some ways perhaps you challenge the present by this dialogue between the past and the present.

Valerie
From an analytic point of view we will know, that the past is alive in the present in all of us, even in ways that we don't know. I am thinking of Jane Goodall in some works with generations with chimps found that particular ways is of tickling the baby went from grandparent down three generations, where no one would have known, if they hadn't been there to witness it, that gesture was an inherited one and when we look at portrait galleries and we recognise people now in them we are seeing that ribbon.

That's part of what you were doing with your colours up there, the way the interior scenes of Jacquie, the abstracts and the semi solid figurative ones, the abstracts of Claudia and the semi solid figurative ones of Hayley are picking up through colour, texture, scenery, linking and being influenced by and wondered in your similar role at this point before we open up to questions and comments any of you have got, whether there are particular questions you wanted to ask Frances over the links?

Hayley
I have been dying to ask . . . I am very intrigued the choices about what you leave out. How you make choices about editing and what the material that you find. Are they about best representing someone, are they about protecting people, [their] privacy . . . . How much of your choices affect to construct what we understand about someone? I am quite interested about that.

Claudia
Shall we just focus this on Prunella?

Frances
I think the one thing I do leave out is . . . well, it is an interesting question . . . but I mean ideally if you are writing a biography of someone who has died you want as full a picture as possible.
With Gwen Raverat, when I began, the daughter said to me, could you not mention the anti-Semitic remarks in her husband's letters? I thought, no . . . but I was thankfully in a position to be able to say 'that would be very foolish' because some of them had already been published, they were out and people knew about them, they were out there in the public world and to silence that, would be totally wrong.
And what I wasn't going to necessarily do, was to seek in any way to excuse them, but you can to some extend explain them by talking about the history around them, the strong Anti-Semitism in French newspapers, he was a French man, what he had grown up among and so on and the Dreyfus case and everything.
So there was a possibility of putting them in context, but not excusing them or explaining them away. You certainly don't want to sort of try and leave out anything, particularly what makes up the whole person, everything, from all aspects of their side, how they do with their finances, their sex live or whatever, but there is an element of shaping and perhaps a critical whip behind you have got to keep the reader reading in terms of written books, a biography rather than fiction, the same with a painting, you have got to make every bit work , you have got to try and give it a vitality , a thing that has a completeness . . .
I have been criticised in the past [*facing Valerie]* would it be, is your term, 'for being an anal retentive'? I remember in the Vanessa Bell, I was so fascinated by all the detail particular in the letters between the two sisters, between Vanessa and Virginia,

there is one moment where Virginia she writes to Vanessa, please could you bring my spongebag, I forgotten it, for some reason that even got in that book .
My critics said this belongs to the spongebag field of biography. It was a term that was picked up to my embarrassment and used . . . 'Ah, there are the spongebags of others people's works'. I was horrified to be the cause of that.

Claudia
But that made it so interesting reading about Stevie Smith, what colour socks she wore. I loved this bit because you don't read it normally . . . what colour socks a person wears. How she has her hot chocolate made, she doesn't make it herself she must ask somebody. Just these little facts . . . life is a sponge bag, too.

Valerie
And that takes us to the visual part which we are centred on here with the gallery and the biographies of artists that whereas some of us remember through words or sound others of us are much more visual and we probably have a range here, so that some children have got an incredible visual memory going back far further than words and just your description of meeting the ninety year old talking about the war you instantly had the sun glinting in the crockery of the woman, I would have remembered only a word she'd said because I tend to be word minded.
That's what gets me, a line in a poem, a phrase in someone's conversation, and a visual would be very rarely my first thing so it is a part of why you are obviously suited to be an artist's biographer as well as making that bridge between and you are picking up obviously as artists the colours and textures and period through a visual means

Frances
Can we ask Jacquie, you do these small paintings with little figures in them? They strike me as coming from a very interesting terrain, it is not a realistic, and not immediately something that one associates with. Can you tell us how you arrive at them?

Jacqueline
They are drawn from art historical autobiography, my own family biography, brought together in these set of spaces. They are nonlinear, so they are bought from different periods of time.

Frances
And the flat back ground often seems to help to lift them out of any too specific moment so they gather associations and memories more easily?

Jacqueline
Yes.

Valerie
That would be a lovely comment to have typed under the painting.

Frances
I mean the other reason why I am so pleased to be here today is through doing this Virginia Woolf exhibition at the National Portrait gallery I read the 'A Room of One's

Own' again and 'Three Guineas' a little bit more carefully than when I first did it and of course she was a tremendously important voice about the way women have been disabled by a lack of opportunity particular in her day when certain professions were closed to women, certain aspects of education were closed to women and they grew up in a house where as in other places Arthur's Education Fund meant that most money was spent on sending the boy away to school, and the girls were expected to be educated at home and whatever where it was possible.
'The Room of One's Own' is the most extraordinary perceptive book in looking at this problem as to why patriarchal society has women kept out of site or obscure in the way that you pointed out through doing this exhibition.
When she went on to do 'Three Guineas' it became more fierce and angry about it and she kept folders of notes and cuttings out of newspapers, so she would notice for instance, I think it was in 1936 or something, in the New Year's Honour list, a 147 men received honours and only 7 women. And she noted things like 'Hitler's demand that women should be involved with Kirche, Küche and Kinder [church, kitchen and children].
And all kinds of extraordinary information coming in from various perspectives including the fact that Pippa Strachey, the sister of her friend Lytton Strachey, she was actively working with a particular women's organisation to get women in the civil service paid the same wage as the men doing exactly the same job. This push and desire to try and improve the position of women made her a proto feminist before the feminist movement really took off and made her such an important influence on many of the women writers and thinkers who contributed to that movement.
And yet, sometimes today when you read particularly about violence to women and rape and so on, you do wonder where the progress has gone. So it is very good to see these pictures brought out and a statement about the need to look back and bring to the fore.

Valerie
Hayley, how are you feeling about those women, some of whom were known, others really weren't and now being in a room with Constables?

Hayley
I am delighted; I think it is fantastic to be showing them in that space. The less comfortable thing felt putting our own work in there. We felt a little nervous whether that was ok and that felt . . . it is quite hard when people aren't here, isn't it? You are making decisions for them; it equally maybe brought a new and different light to their work. And you can't account for how they would feel about that.

Frances
I like the way you broke with the usual methods of hanging alongside or a hierarchy, your scattergun approach as Malevich did when he first put his Supremacism up. And that somehow throws the eye up and down and round the wall in a way it breaks with the notion this painting being more important than that painting as could have happened with what you pulled out.

Hayley
I think that was really deliberate, avoiding of the hierarchy and it also really linked with the conversation we had with Valerie when we were developing the project

about trying to extend the process to the audience as well and trying to make it an active thing and a different experience to how some exhibitions are hung.

Valerie
And Claudia, one of the things you said that really moved me. There is this chest of drawers and it is the different structures like the layers of the mind and in one of them you said 'this painting is really fresh and it looks as if it has just been done because it has never seen the light before' and of course that it just like our memories, when one memory comes back and we hadn't got it before and then it's all bright because it hasn't had all the years of mental work, cosmetic editing, changes and distortions. Whose work was that?

Jacqueline
It was Connie Winn's.

Valerie
So we have all the layers upstairs of both the old artists , the grandmothers here today as well as how it's effected descendants . . . Now it is open for thoughts, comments , questions to the artists or to Frances from you. We have got a nice amount of discussion time.

Audience
When I read the Vanessa Bell the thing I took from it is who she constructed her daily life cooking, feeding everybody and fitting her art into it, even so she had lots of help it was down to her to organise everybody and you don't often get that detailed description which is the reality of every woman.

Frances
I am glad you liked that. You welcomed the details about daily life that went on in Vanessa Bell's domains. It enabled her both to paint and yet to be in command of domestic matters. It is fascinating, when they first edited Dorothy Wordsworth diaries, and I am sorry I ought to remember the person who did edit them.
They cut out all her detail about the domestic life because they thought that was boring, it was obviously a male editor who thought it was irrelevant to learning about her relationship to the great brother , the great Wordsworth, and how her ideas got a little bit into his poetry and their endless walks that originate . . .
So nowadays, thankfully Dorothy Wordsworth is a complete genius. Her diaries have been reprinted in whole and of course what is fascinating is precisely exactly what you described about the Virginia Woolf.

Valerie
The sponge bag.

Audience
Hayley . . . one of the artists had lived in your mum and dad's house, is that right? How did you feel? That must have been quite an astonishing connection.

Hayley
I couldn't believe it actually! Effie Spring-Smith, [who did] the self portrait. I just found this an amazing fact. It's odd because I think that was one of the sad things we found

when we did a lot of research you really couldn't find out much about a lot of the artists . . . There was very little information on her but one of the weird bits of information there was that she was born in Woodbridge, the illegitimate daughter of the cook which is amazing in itself. She was born in the house.

Valerie
And you didn't know that when you selected her? That was the point, these coincidences actually happen.

Claudia
And Hayley's parents are here too. They live in the house.

Audience
Quite an astonishing connection.

Hayley
Yes, I could not believe it. This is quite amazing.

Frances
. . . We have here an artist called Judith Tucker. Judith you work a lot with memory or have done in the past. Could you just talk about that? . . . moving between . . .

Judith
For ten years I worked on a project called painting and post-memory drawing on Marianna Hirsch's work which some of you probably know about.
It is [about] intergenerational memory, thinking about it with photography and painting but tying it in with my own experiences of being a daughter of a refugee from Germany that came over in the war and decided how to manage that without being too literal?
So I used the holiday resorts where she had gone in a very difficult period in the 1930's as a Jewish child in Germany. I revisited them and I used that as an indirect way of working and then thinking through photography into painting, using iridescent layers, allowing where some things can show and others can't. . . .
I was rather relaxed . . . enjoying this event

Hayley
No one relaxes in this room.

Valerie
Any other artist present that have got a thought about the link between memory that would like to comment?

Audience (Annabel Dover)
Yes, I am researching Anna Atkins who is known to be one of the first persons to have [made] a photographic book even before Fox Talbot and who developed the cyanotype process from her father's friend Herschel.
She is still presented rather frustratingly as a naïve craftsperson or as an amateur scientist. And just from researching her I think probably she cut her specimens and created these sort of fake specimens which she then presented to scientific institutions like the Royal Society and the Linnaean Society but in a kind of sneaky

way by saying ‘I am just a woman and these are my pathetic offerings’ and then they took them in and then . . . it’s carried on from the 1850’s to now.
Brian Dillon did this lovely show but presented her as a naïve idiot that made these things and I suppose that is why it is so fantastic reading about your books but also your show and the way that you . . . it seems slightly subversive having it in there and then hidden but then not and alongside. Lots of things like that made me think of fake. You didn’t have any desire to do any fake things, like fake findings or anything? . . .

Hayley
That is the next project. . . .

Audience (Anabel Dover)
And I wonder if you ever have the desire to put not exactly fake things but [something] to embellish the story?

Frances
Well, my only sin as frequently mentioned earlier to Valerie I get confused with Hilary Spurling. People come up to me and say ‘I so enjoyed your book’ and say ‘I wonder which one’ they say ‘Matisse’ and I just say ‘Thank you very much’.

Hayley
Could that work in your work, Valerie? Not really?

Valerie
Except that you are hearing what someone’s own perception of their perception of their own truth is which might not match an external objective person’s but in the room is the truth. The task is to be with whatever is there and it’s not doing external checking unless there is a kind of research project that’s looking at origins of this or that and is bringing in external detail, you are totally in the present which is of course rich with the past.

Frances
But you have worked a lot with ‘disassociation’ haven’t you? Or the Freudian term ‘displacement’ where some activity or concern actually doesn’t relate directly to what they might talk about but something else.

Valerie
You are looking at the layers, like the drawers in the chest upstairs [in the Woolsey Gallery] and like the historical detail you collect around the period. You are looking to see where is there a gap between a feeling and something that’s been presented. . . . What is missing but is there in some form or another? Some strong feeling that you are picking up that doesn’t fit the words being said.
We are all trying in a way not to be taken in by a surface, appearance, to respectfully except what the surface is but to be aware there could be thousands of things underneath that surface.

Audience
So you discovered something through your feelings . . . ? I suppose that's the correlation between all of you . . . You've discovered something new by not trying to be neutral but by having a feeling, a sense?

Valerie
Yes, and it is all . . . by lending yourself out that we lend ourselves out when we are reading a novel, and we entered that , when we read a book and we are in these biographies, when we look at the paintings, it's a live relationship between us and the other .

Audience
Do you think somebody that is painting might be unaware of what is been revealed, what is not conscious in their painting?

Valerie
Absolutely . . . and at one level what their own unconscious meaning and feelings are in a painting unless they choose to know about it is irrelevant to the pleasure everyone else's unconscious gets from it, because once the art is out there, it's in its own unique relationship with everyone looking at it.

Audience *(*Marguerite Horner)
Walter Benjamin says in 'Illuminations', the viewer brings his own associations, that's why a static painting has a value over the moving image. He wrote this whole thing about film stars, how you can't bring your associations because the next image comes along, so it says something like, the public need entertainment, they need to be distracted from themselves but art requires concentration, so you actually grow through looking at art but remain static watching films because it is taking over you, it's dictating you.

Valerie
We probably would get different views from someone that's seeing the power of moving film over changing consciousness in art. But if we think of what Anna Freud and Melanie Klein did as the first, and Montessori , all realising . . . that if you had little toy animals, a child would be able to say what was worrying them when the child would not be able to think about 'I am upset by granddad, uncle or mum' , but to say 'daddy pig is doing this' could displace it onto the visual image more easily when it was outside giving some extra privacy.

Audience (Ruth Philo)
I wondered what the experience was like for you as artists of taking your pictures . . . having them looked at together? Was that revealing?

Jacqueline
We did quite a bit of planning . . . we did a mock-up of the hang and . . .

Audience (Ruth)
No, I mean when you took your pictures to Valerie. Did you find things revealed that you hadn't seen?

Frances
Oh through listening to her talk about them?

Jacqueline
You [Valerie] talked about texture and it did not occur to me. Then I remembered that I remember every texture of people's dresses and fabric and how that felt, the knobbles and things. Then I realised my paintings are quite knobbly. There is lots of texture on there . . .

Claudia
You made reference to play. And it really made me think 'what did I do?' when I was 3 or 4 years old and I felt 'well, I have not changed that much really'. I am still playing in the same kind of way.

Hayley
I think that for me was somehow . . . our conversation got to early play, didn't it? . . . It was quite hard to remember about what was really significant about early play, I remember it was a very sensory experience . . . quite a visual . . . I liked pouring things. I think you kind of realise that's what I believe that is what I am getting when I am painting. It was really interesting. We were looking at them [the paintings] in quite a different way.

Valerie
But the comments on a painting is the hypothesis or it would be real arrogance and sort of a colonial use stealing position because the genius and the richness is in what has been done and another looking at it can do their homework but can never know exactly if the other hasn't told them what it is for them.
You can make general comments around what looks similar or would appear to show but it wouldn't be respectful if it was more than that, and I think you have been very careful of that.

Frances
Yes . . . I wonder if I could pick up on what you said earlier about giving yourself to the other. I remember once some kind of literary event , the novelist Bernie Rubens, we'd just been discussing or someone had been talking about Martin Amis's novel 'Time's Arrow: Or the Nature of the Offence' which describes a concentration camp but does it all backwards, instead of the guards taking the gold out of the prisoners teeth they seem to be putting it back which is a kind of perverse description of what actually happened and Bernie Rubens got up and said she did not think anyone who was not Jewish should ever write about the Holocaust .
I remember at the time feeling very disturbed by that remark because one thing that you are trying to do as a biographer is to understand about what it was like to live in perhaps a different time to yourself, perhaps someone of a different race or colour and to expand your sympathies and understanding through reading about this other way of life even if it is from a different country or period of time or a person with a different gender to yourself.
So I don't think I would agree that you have to have specific background or experience to write about things. It is that challenge to try to move into another area that hopefully increases your tolerance, understanding and sympathy.

Valerie
That is totally different, a biography. I was responding to: here is three people that privileged me, by coming and seeing their paintings. For me such a context is to say 'oh I wonder if that could be this' would be downright invasion, that's what I mean, in that context, I am looking at something from three artists and I am thinking, gosh your textures come over really vividly, does that mean as a child your have always been interested in textures?
So an observation gets linked to a question and when the question is answered one way that's totally different to the responsible role of a biographer who is going in, if you like, for a really long analysis with the subject and the history and those whole debates of where you can't . . . if you are a female therapist you can't work with a man, if you are white and middleclass you can't do this because you wouldn't understand and that none of us know the other .
The each other is a total universe of their own until we found the bits that are links and not links. So I absolutely agree that making that sort of prescriptive thing although understandable doesn't serve artistic freedom . . . Question? Comment? . . Thoughts?

Audience
We have not talked much about Prunella Clough.

Valerie
Yes, now she is a good last one to focus on because she is in a way the key link between you and the exhibition.

Frances
She was a very difficult person to get to feel . . . not exactly intimate relationship . . . to begin to understand. There were certain terse comments that were so immediately recognisable as hers because she could be very off hand and slightly witty.
For instance she once wrote on somebody's private view invitation card which she sent to an artist's friend of hers, this was a very major show because it was towards the end of her life, the Camden Arts Centre put it on, a huge display of her work for the last 10 years, and she wrote on it: Don't cross the road for this one. Absolutely typical. I suppose that is not really supporting your cause, is it?

Hayley
I love that. In a way that's what intrigued me especially about her because she seemed like an extraordinarily private person. She didn't give much away so I wondered what it felt like . . . you used letters quite a lot from her.

Frances
When I started that book somebody at University said 'I don't know why you are doing that, you won't get anything , you won't find out anything on her . . . she is a very private person you weren't get any understanding . . .or anything' . . . .
I am just writing a monograph, it is not a biography but of course then when I did go to look at the papers she had left, I discovered quite contrary to what everybody believed, that there was an extensive and often very private correspondence with certain people and what she had done earlier on in her life was to recognise that her aunt who was a very famous [furniture] designer and architect called Eileen Grey,

who had been forgotten after her early radical work in the 1930's and before that and she thought she needed to try and revive her aunt's reputation so she went to an architectural critic and said 'Do you know my aunt?' and he thought 'Oh, here we go', he was a minor watercolour painter and he said 'Who was your aunt?'.
She said 'Oh, it's Eileen Grey' and he said 'of course I know her, she was an extremely important innovative modernist architect and designer from the early part of the 20th century but she has surely been dead quite a long while now?' and Prunella Clough said 'No, she is alive and living in Paris, will you write an article on her?'
And this was a man called Joseph Rykwert and he did that and it then led on to a phenomenal rise of interest in her and Prunella Clough was very responsible in relation to her aunts' documentation, her archive, she made sure the photographs were ready to give out to people who came to find, she helped people to mount exhibitions in many countries including a big one in the V&A and then going to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.
So by the time Eileen Grey finally dies aged 98 in the 1970's her reputation was sky-high. Now, in that process, Prunella Clough had become very aware of the importance of the archive. She therefore turned that attention without telling anyone on her own.
And yes, I am sure there was stuff she threw away or vetoed nevertheless she kept a lot of stuff that was intensely personal and she had been returned a lot of her own letters to one of the persons she was closest to which she could have get rid of but she didn't. There was much more there than I thought.

Audience
So basically, she brought somebody out, didn't she?

Frances
Yes, in the war she has done office work, her studies were interrupted as an art student and she had to learn to type and so there after it was her vehicle for communication and she when she began going to Paris after her, every fortnight, to check up on her aunt and everything was going well, she would immediately, she got home, she at once went to the type writer to record and she would just type up the most brief terse notes but it seemed to her important, to make a record what had gone on, how she liaised over some furniture been reproduced by a certain firm you'd come to see them.
So I think she thought if you do something of importance, you must keep a jolly good record of it and not devalue yourself as artists by not seeing that as part of your professional duty to yourselves and your work to keep that ongoing.

Valerie
I just wondered if you want to close the event by talking about what happened with getting that painting of Prunella's up there.

Hayley
Yes, that was probably a bit of a challenge for us because there was some resistance to us having that one on the wall. I don't know if it is in the perception of other people, is it the scale of it or may be the area it was made, that is had such a strong contrast with a lot of the other work that we selected. It was an interesting little battle but a good one.

It was interesting, Emma, the curator, was really pleased in the end but surprised. There was something difficult about that one.

Audience
I thought it was really part of it

Hayley
Yes, she was pleased with how it looked. I think she could not picture it at all for a while. She could not picture it as part of that and so it was quite interesting. It was someone we had all had been interested in from the beginning and when we saw it come out in the store we were quite shocked by how beautiful it is. I have not seen that one before.

Frances
By having your abstract works nearby talks to it.

Hayley
Yes, we got in there, surround it.

Claudia
It is interesting the politics here. It goes up and down because it would have been okay about ten fifteen years ago to show a Prunella Clough in this room but now it I so much stricter again. It needs to be fought for all the time.
We can't take it for granted and it is quite something that we show next to the Constables and Gainsborough but I must say it was too big as this wall is only meant to support the Gainsborough and Constable. That is what this wall is meant to do.
I think it does support it very well but with my understanding. That was the problem Emma had because she had to justify it but I think she trusted us, that we meant well, and she did because there is a resistance which is quite something I must say. It is too big in that room. Shocking.

Valerie
Has anyone got any more questions?

Hayley
Shall we finish here? We would love to say a really big thank you to Valerie and Frances work, we are so pleased to have you here and for giving up your time to speak to us. And thank you everyone for coming.