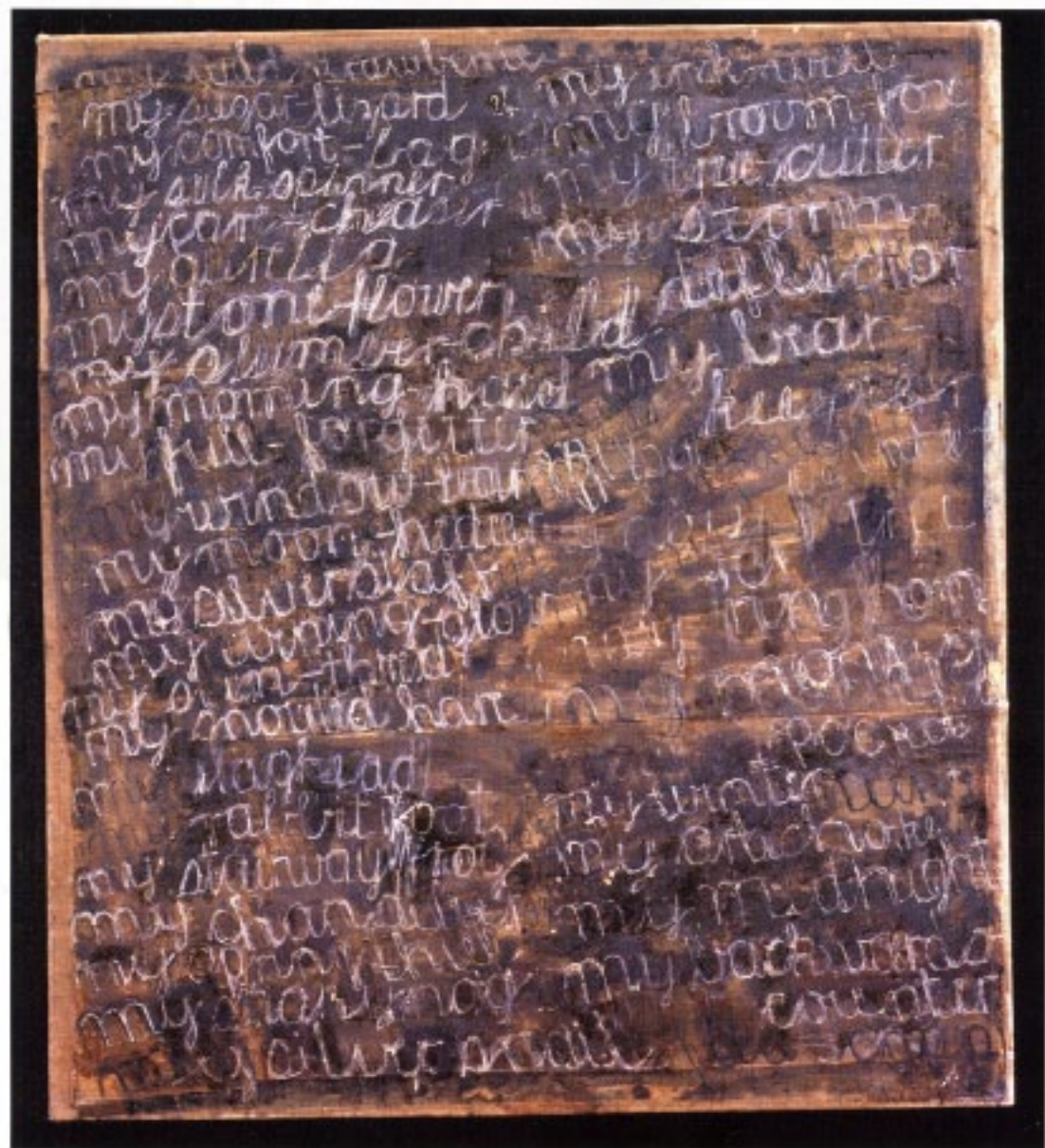


# Exhibition Review

Vivienne Koorland: *Reisemalheurs*  
(Travel Woes)



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## *Vivienne Koorland: Reisemalheurs (Travel Woes)*

**Freud Museum, London**  
**March 22 to April 22, 2007**

"... what matters is the first sentence ... the very first sentence, do you understand that," wrote the Austrian poet Friederike Mayröcker, "the sentence with which a book begins, that is what matters, and whether it forces the person, who opens the first page, to read, forces him to read and continue reading, that is what matters ..." (Mayröcker 1988: 7).<sup>1</sup> Vivienne Koorland's *Poem Painting III* (Figure 1) powerfully draws in the viewers and forces them to read and continue reading. White handwritten fragments of an untitled poem by Mayröcker—an important inspiration for Koorland—drift in and out of legibility. Inscribed into thin layers of grey, blue and roseate paint that have been applied, removed and reapplied, the words float over traces of previous writing. "... writing until exhaustion ... to spend life writing and re-writing one and the same book, to continuously begin anew ..."

Koorland's canvases, made of linen or burlap, are painstakingly

worked, sized with rabbit-skin glue, sometimes primed with lead white, and then layered with oil paint. They have been cut up, stitched back together and reworked with paint, glue, wax or tar (Figure 2). The stretcher bars are often pieced together with off-cuts of wood (Godfrey and Koorland 2007: 39–42). Piecing and stitching together, layering and reworking, writing and rewriting—these strategies are akin to the processes of stratification, rearrangement and retranscription that Sigmund Freud recognized as defining the workings of memory (Freud 1896, 1924). "... to superimpose images that are stored in our minds, to create a kind of double, triple, multiple superimposition, that is how our fantasy works, our memory, our semi-awake consciousness ..." And just as memories are arranged and rearranged "in accordance with fresh circumstances" (Freud 1896: 233), Koorland's textual and visual motifs appear and reappear in different paintings,



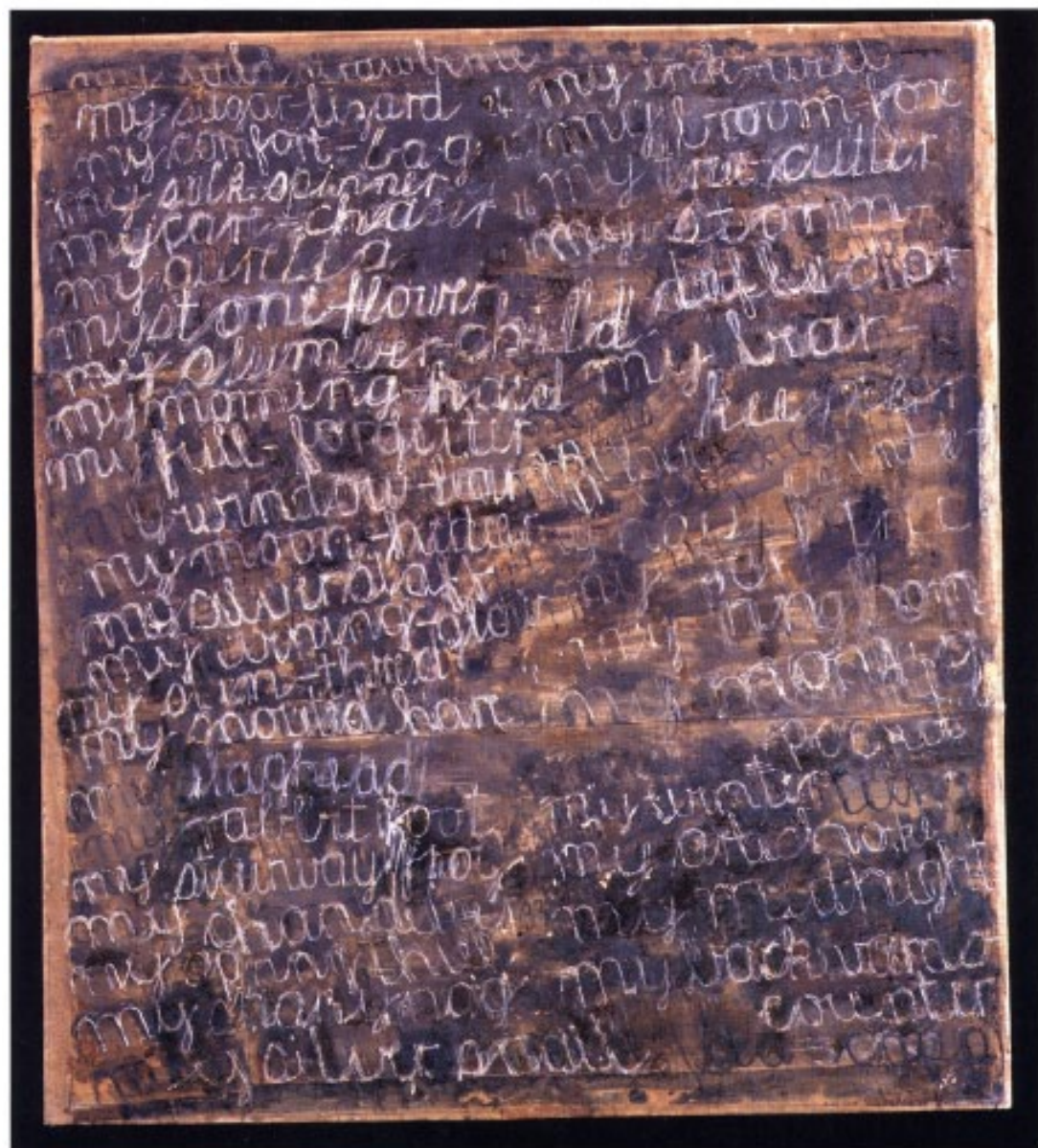


Figure 1  
Vivienne Koortland, *Poem Painting III*  
(*Shadow Painting*), 2006. Oil on linen,  
130 x 114 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

in similar or fresh circumstances and superimpositions. Thus, fragments of Mayröcker's poem appear in further *Poem Paintings*, but also, together with other verbal fragments, in a work

entitled *Wishlist* (Figure 3). Here, too, the writing—quotes culled from different sources—has been carefully inscribed and reinscribed into layers of partly washed-out paint. Underneath the hues of red,

Figure 2  
 Vivienne Koorland, *This Is The Picture We Saw (Little Hans) II* (underside), 2006. Oil on linen, 61 x 69 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



brown, orange, yellow and green, traces of other writings, of other marks are visible. Here, too, the canvas has been stitched together, the seams running vertically and horizontally through it like scars. More than a painting, this work is a tactile object that carries memories in its very materials. Its canvas is made of recycled burlap sacks, previously used to transport spices from the East to the United States. Faint traces of the sacks' inscriptions are still discernible underneath the layers of paint, evoking memories of travel and movement. The quotes in the work, too, conjure up real and imagined journeys and geographies: "from Cape Town to Kathmandu," "a Siberian dream map," "circle the sacred mountain," "Unser

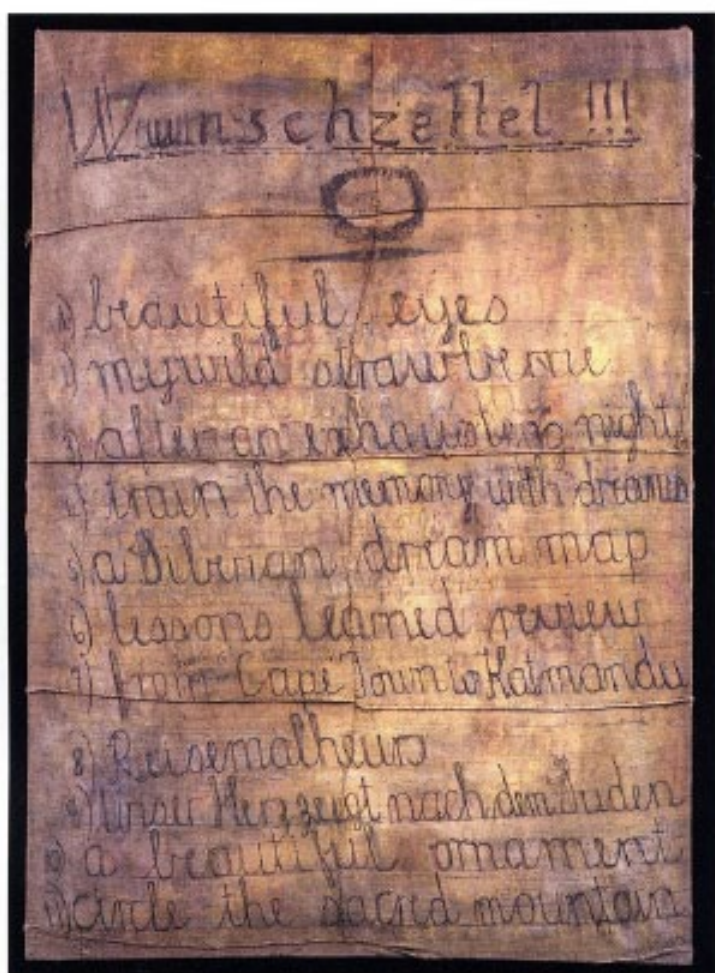
Herz zeigt nach dem Süden" (Our heart leans towards the south), "Reisemalheurs" (Travel woes).

*Reisemalheurs*, a term drawn from Sigmund Freud's travel correspondence, was used as the title of Vivienne Koorland's exhibition, aptly presented at the Freud Museum and accompanied by a display on the psychoanalyst's voyages. The term denotes the small mishaps and inconveniences that occur on journeys, but also the more fundamental stresses and anxieties related to movement and displacement. It stands for Freud's own complex relationship with travel that was marked by a mixture of desire and fear (Garb 2007).<sup>2</sup> Koorland's *My Heart Leans Towards the South* (Figure 4), inspired by another of Freud's phrases,

captures those ambivalences. A lone house precariously balanced on a cliff-top speaks of the yearning for and insecurities of travel, of longing and unbelonging. In *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (1995–2007), a paper plane is collaged over stitched burlap and linen. Creases in the material and frayed seams create a wounded, barren landscape. A few isolated houses—one of the visual motifs that keep reappearing in different works—strewn over the canvas intensify the sense of uncanniness, of being at once at home and not at home. Vivienne Koorland's tracings of "unhomed geographies"<sup>3</sup> are also drawn from the artist's own experience of migration. Born in South Africa, Koorland studied in Berlin and Paris, before moving



Figure 3  
 Vivienne Koorland, *Wishlist*, 2006. Oil  
 on burlap, 274 × 198 cm. Courtesy of  
 the artist.



to New York. Ragged maps of Cape Town (Figure 5) delineate her birthplace as an imaginary, rather than an actual place, a place rearranged and retranscribed by memory.

While Koorland's wanderings were voluntary, her life and imagination have also been shaped by the involuntary displacement of her mother, a child survivor of the Holocaust, who was sent from

Poland via France to South Africa. *This Is The Picture We Saw (Little Hans) II* (Figure 6) is based on a reproduction of a Czech child's drawing of Bolsheviks brutally chasing the civilian population away from train carriages used for the deportation of Poles. *War Drawing Eva: Seder II* (Figure 7) interweaves two reproductions taken from a Russian booklet on children's drawings from the

Figure 4

Vivienne Koorland, *My Heart Leans Towards The South*, 2006. Oil on linen in wood frame, 119.5 x 101 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



ghetto camp of Theresienstadt. Appropriately hung in Freud's dining room, the painting replicates two girls' memories of family Passover ceremonies—ceremonies commemorating the Israelites' liberation from slavery—held in homes they had lost. Koorland's materials, worn burlap and linen overlaid with oil, wax and tar, and her technique, tearing apart and stitching together, palpably reproduce the bruises and injuries, the damage wreaked upon those lives.

It was Theodor Adorno's "reflections from damaged

life," *Minima Moralia*, which adopted homelessness as the condition for critical thinking, that informed Koorland's decision to work with reproductions, rather than original drawings. The exiled philosopher's contention that, after the Holocaust, in late industrial society, all life had become standardized and administered, all experience had become mediated, led Koorland to work "at one remove." She copies, transcribes, repeats as an act of "refusal to recreate the drawing in an uncritical way," as a refutation of "any notion that you can have

a direct experience of something" (Godfrey and Koorland 2007: 46–9 and Adorno 1951/1974).

In Koorland's case, the insistence on the impossibility of direct experience is also an acknowledgment of her spatial and temporal removal from the persecution that irreparably damaged the lives of the survivors. At the same time, her work's content shows that that generation's experience has left an indelible mark on those born after, a mark that is akin to memory. Marianne Hirsch has described the memory of





Figure 5  
 Vivienne Koorland, *Cape Town 1957 (II)*,  
 1995–2002. Oil on burlap over linen,  
 215 × 200 cm. Private Collection,  
 London. Courtesy of the artist.

those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own stories are displaced by the stories of the survivors of collective trauma, as “postmemory.” Characterized by belatedness, postmemory’s “connection to its object ... is

mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.” It is therefore, as Hirsch suggests, not merely a personal identity position, but a “space of remembrance, more broadly available through cultural and public ... acts of

Figure 6  
Vivienne Koorland, *This Is The Picture We Saw (Little Hans) II*, 2006. Oil on linen, 61 x 69 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 7  
Vivienne Koorland, *War Drawing Eva: Seder II*, 1992. Oil, wax, tar on burlap over linen, 156 x 246 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



remembrance, identification and projection" (Hirsch 1998: 420; Hirsch 1999: 8–9). It enables multiple interconnections across generations and cultures—"from Cape Town to Kathmandu"—yet is always modified by the admission of an unbridgeable distance separating the survivor from the one born after.

It is due to that spatial and temporal distance from the original trauma that, for the following generations, the act of mourning and incorporating loss, too, is "at one remove." Vivienne Koorland's torn and scarred canvases bear witness to the impossibility of repairing the damage experienced by those who came before, to the impossibility of completing the process of mourning. "... writing until exhaustion ... to spend life writing and rewriting one and the same book, to continuously begin anew ..."

### Notes

1. Translations from Mayröcker (1988) are my own. All quotes that are not otherwise attributed stem from this book.
2. In her excellent catalogue essay, Tamar Garb, the curator of the exhibition, reminds us of the various interpretations offered as to the causes of Freud's travel neurosis: separation anxiety, unresolved Oedipal issues, ambivalence towards his Jewishness, as well as the actual displacement suffered by Freud's family when fleeing the anti-Semitism of Moravia and moving to Vienna in 1859 (Garb 2007: 3–4). I have also very much benefited from reading Michael Molnar's

unpublished manuscript on the subject of Freud's travel correspondence, "... scattered scraps of information" (2002), which he kindly shared with me.

3. I borrowed this concept from Irit Rogoff, who employed it to redefine "issues of location away from concrete coercions of belonging and not belonging determined by the state" (Rogoff 2000: 4).

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