

# ART PAPERS

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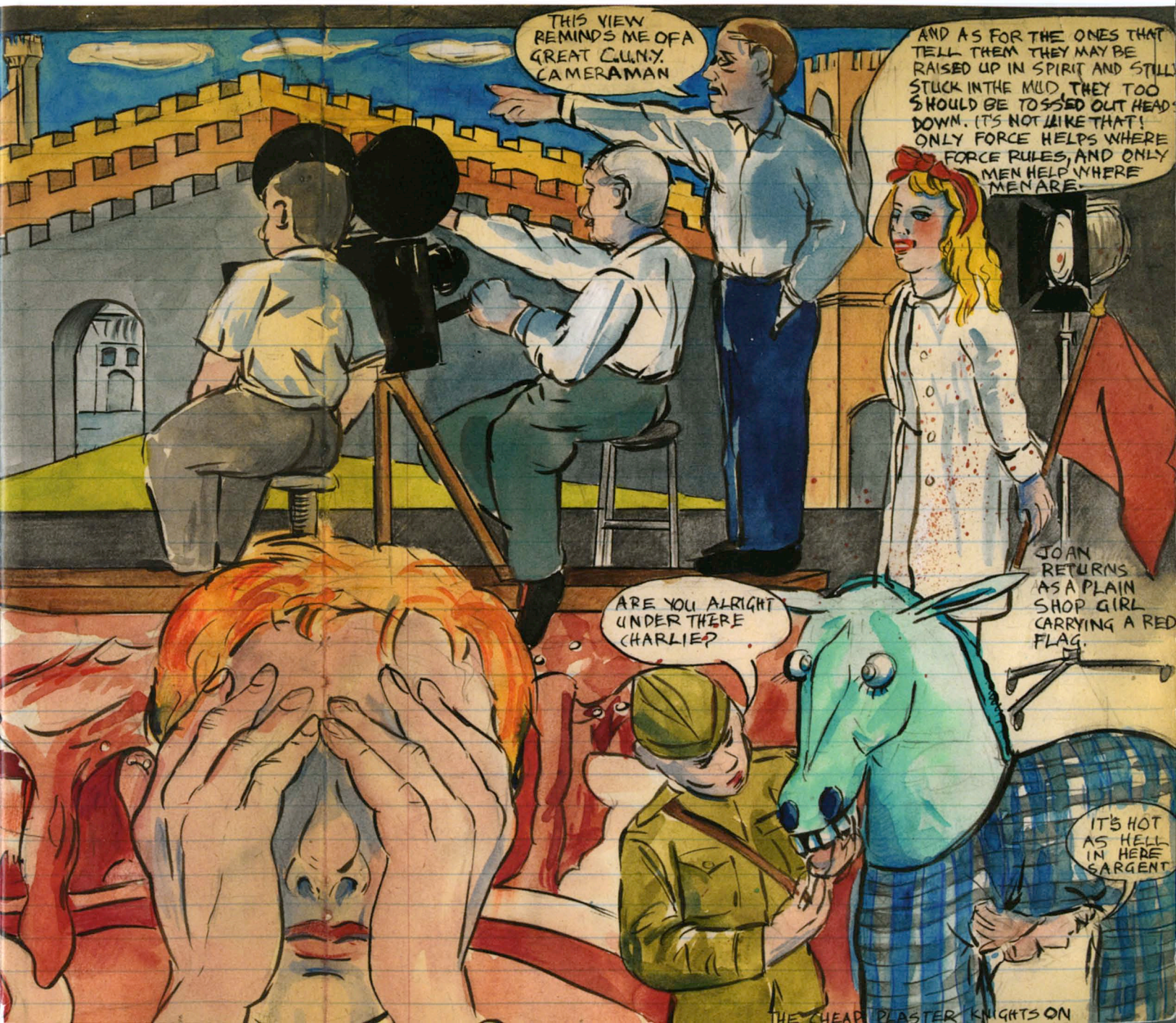


DESIRE  
AND ITS INTIMATE  
POLITICS: ZOE BELOFF

BLINDNESS  
AND FUTURE PEDAGOGY:  
NICHOLAS LOBO

EVIL  
REPRESENTED:  
THE NAZI FETISH

GEOCRITIQUE  
AFTER ACTIVISM:  
BRIAN HOLMES



# Dreamland: the Intimate Politics of Desire

Zoe Beloff in conversation with Niels Van Tomme

**Niels Van Tomme:** *Dreamland: The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society and its Circle 1926-1972*, 2009-2010, reveals an ingenious tale centered on an amateur psychoanalytic film club supposedly active in Coney Island throughout a significant part of the twentieth century. The project constructs a working-class utopia in which psychoanalysis mirrors socialism's public promise to change the world. How did you get involved with such an atypical topic?

**Zoe Beloff:** I've been coming to Coney Island just for fun ever since I moved to New York in the early 1980s. Spaces like this are very evocative for me. Many of my works conjure up a world where science meets spectacle or sideshow. In the late 1990s, I created a live film projection performance using 3D images shot in the ruins of Asbury Park's amusement park. *A Mechanical Medium*, 1999, was about Thomas Edison's search for a machine to communicate with the dead. In Coney Island, there is life amidst the ghosts.

In 2007, I read Norman Klein's short story *Freud in Coney Island*, 2006, which relates Freud's visit to Coney Island in 1909. I thought it was great and gave a copy to Aaron Beebe, the director of the Coney Island Museum. The next day, he called me up and asked me if I would do an exhibition to celebrate the centennial of Freud's visit. His idea was to invite artists to do projects, incorporating objects from the Museum's collection in ways that might reveal new meanings and hidden connections. I had no sense of what I would do, but the idea seemed so perfect for me that I had to say "yes."

I thought about it for months. I didn't simply want to illustrate Klein's story. So much

work has been done on Coney Island's heyday in the early years of last century. Most significantly, in *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, 1978, Rem Koolhaas describes Coney Island as a concrete articulation of the collective unconscious through irrational architecture and performance. I was also inspired by the great short story that Delmore Schwartz wrote in the thirties. For me, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* vividly presents Coney Island as the locus of the unconscious—of infantile fantasies projected from the dark womb of a movie theater onto the screen. I very much hoped that Schwartz himself might have been a member of my Amateur Society, but unfortunately I've been unable to find any evidence to support this.

I realized that I wanted to explore Freud's legacy in Coney Island, to make visible the unconscious of those who lived, worked, and played there throughout the twentieth century. I kept thinking, if only these people had kept records of their dreams. Then, all of a sudden, I discovered the perfect framework: The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society. At that moment, everything fell into place. That being said, it became a huge job to bring to light an entire archive! It's actually still in progress. In a sense, I think of myself as the society's last surviving member—the last amateur psychoanalyst.

**NVT:** There's an interesting quote that Klein directly attributes to Freud: "I have often wondered if the shape of Coney Island parks resembles my model of the mind. By that I mean, does real space reproduce unconscious space?"<sup>1</sup> In taking that quote as your cue, your project points to interesting relationships between intellectual analysis and popular

imagination. How can you, as a visual artist and filmmaker, show the ways in which unconscious processes interact with architectural structures?

**ZB:** The idea of creating diagrams, or models, of mental processes is something I had already explored in earlier projects. For example, my installation *The Influencing Machine of Miss Natalija A.*, 2001, is premised on the case history of a woman who, in 1919, believed that her mind and body were influenced by a mysterious apparatus in another city. I created my own version of this imaginary machine—a large-scale stereoscopic model based on both her description and diagrams of early mechanical television.

I knew right away that members of the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society would have been involved with making models of the mind, using their woodworking and machine-shop skills. Originally, I wanted to show a series of Freudian-inspired theme parks created by different members of the Society, but I ran out of time. So viewers will only see one. I designed it, but my partner Eric Muzzy's technical skills brought it to life.

**NVT:** A significant part of the project consists of the dream films produced by the Society, but there is indeed also an architectural model, a series of drawings, and documentary material. How did you start structuring the exhibition?

**ZB:** It all began with the founder of the society, Albert Grass. I thought it plausible that he discovered Freud's writing while serving in the Signal Corps in France during the First World War. He may have stumbled upon Freud's

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Zoe Beloff, *A Brechtian Dreamer part one*, from "The Adventures of a Dreamer" by Albert Grass; Zoe Beloff, "Sketch for the 'The Dream Work Factory' by Albert Grass," all images from *Dreamland: The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society and their Circle 1926-1972*, 2009-2010 (courtesy of the artist)



writing in one of the hospitals where his comrades were treated for shell shock. When he returned to Coney Island, he was hired to design amusements at Steeplechase Park, Coney Island's great Pavilion of Fun. I figured that once 16mm amateur film came on the market, he would have encouraged his friends to start recreating their dreams on film. Like most amateurs, I pictured him reading *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1913, very literally. And that, coupled with his skills at designing amusements, made it quite natural that he would want to rebuild Dreamland amusement park, which had been destroyed by fire in 1911—I imagined that he would have planned to reconstruct it as a great theme park, explicating Freud's theory of dream formation through a series of pavilions, "The Unconscious," "The Psychic Censor," "The Dream Work Factory," and "The Consciousness," linked by a "Train of Thought" and revolving around "The Libido," a fifty-foot tall prepubescent girl.

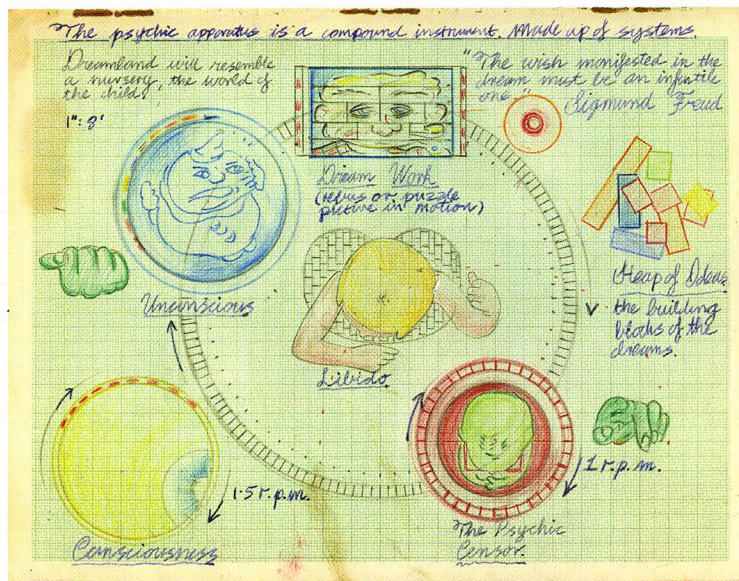
I felt it important to show not only his plans and sketches, but also his fundraising letters along with a rather curt rejection from Edward Tilyou, owner of Steeplechase, who wrote, "I do not believe that the public would enjoy your medical attractions which appear to cater to rather prurient tastes." You get a sense of some of the barriers that he faced. For example, I also exhibit a carbon-copy of a letter from Grass to Lillie Santangelo, the proprietress of the World in Wax Musée, the Coney Island wax museum mainly dedicated to local homicides. From the correspondence, it's evident that he had been trying to persuade her to exhibit a wax figure of Freud with one of his famous patients—the Wolf Man or the Rat Man—and that she had taken his suggestions too literally. The Coney Island Museum has a wonderful collection of slides taken just before the World in Wax closed down, which I exhibit along with Grass' letter under the heading "Was there a figure of Freud

at the World in Wax Musée?" I incorporated many exhibits from the Coney Island Museum's archive. By the time the show went up, even the Museum interns couldn't figure out what was part of the museum's collection and what was not.

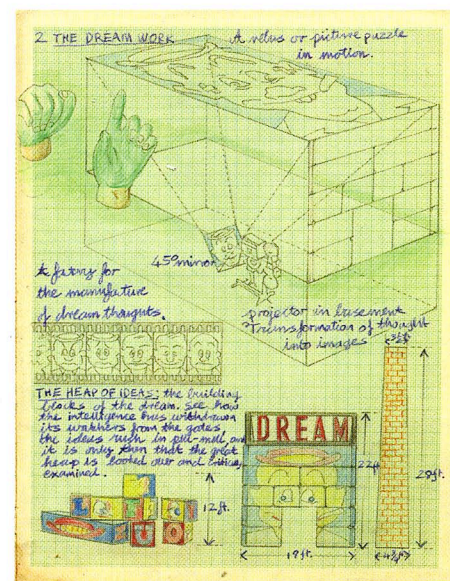
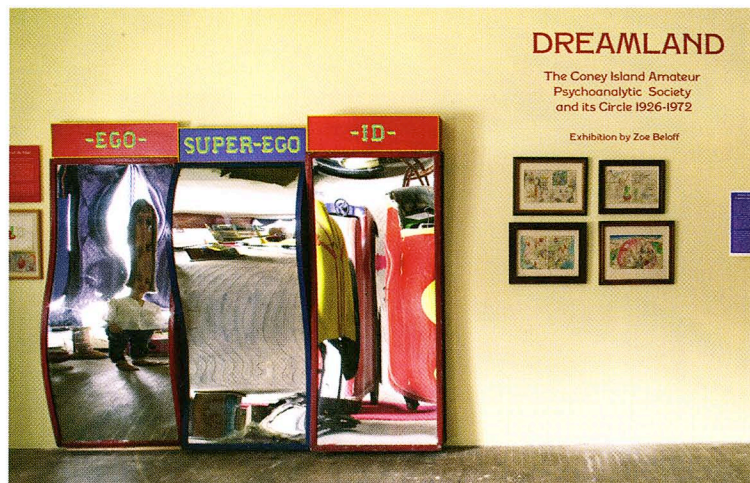
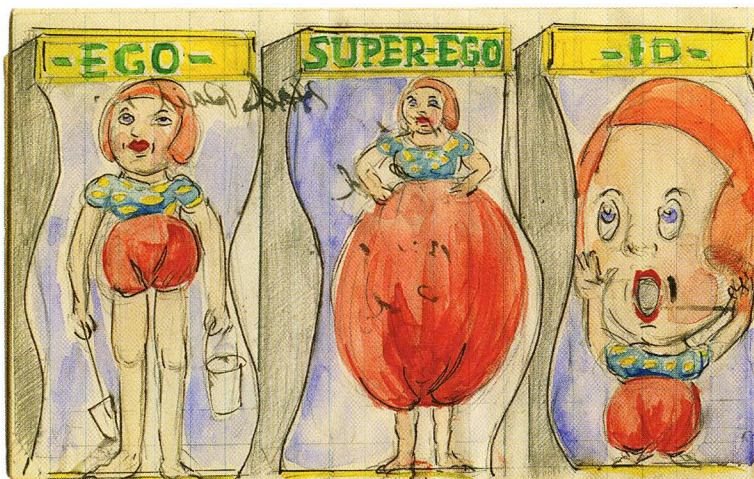
NVT: Whatever Freud might have thought of Coney Island, your project suggests that Coney Island definitely liked Freud. Reading the fictionalized biographies of the Society's members, you realize that they were mostly outcasts—sexual, societal or political. These people found protection in the emancipatory realm of psychoanalysis. Conversely, many of the biographies can be read as a compendium

of Jewish trauma, as they relate to experiences of exile, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust. Isn't there an interesting parallel between psychoanalysis and Coney Island, in the way that it provided a protected environment for these working-class Jews?

ZB: Freud was concerned that all of his followers were Jewish and that, if they didn't attract gentiles, psychoanalysis would end up being regarded as a Jewish science and not taken seriously. Hence, he courted Jung and took him on his trip to America. As we know, that didn't work out. You are right though, there was a strong Jewish community in Coney Island. I imagined that they would have formed the



ABOVE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Zoe Beloff, "Model of Albert Grass' proposed Dreamland amusement park"; Zoe Beloff, "Albert Grass' plan for Dreamland, a theme park constructed according to Freudian principles"



backbone of my amateur society. The project can be read, in part, as an homage to the Jews of my grandparents' generation. I have one set of grandparents who were Russian Jews. The others were German refugees who came to London to escape Hitler. So many Jews of that generation were non-religious, working people with enormous faith in education and social justice. I really admire them and it was they who inspired my alter ego Albert Grass.

NVT: Collaborating with the Coney Island Museum, which also hosts the exhibition, your project is staged far outside the confines of the art world. You are addressing an entirely different audience—mostly tourists visiting Coney

Island for the day. How has this setting influenced your relationship to your own work?

ZB: More than ever before, I actively thought about the audience. I did a performance at the Museum where I also attended a number of talks, so I had a pretty good idea of the kind of people who frequent the institution. They are tourists and local families with children out for a day in the amusement park. In the summer, the Freak Show and burlesque performances attract hipsters to the museum. Coney Island still is "the people's playground." As an artist, I think one should welcome the opportunity to make work for a popular audience. It's perfectly in keeping with the democratic spirit of the

Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society itself.

I guessed that most people would not have heard of Freud. I teach in the Media Studies department of a four-year college and none of my students have even heard of psychoanalysis. Right from the start, I knew it should be colorful and incorporate sound and motion, so that even small children would have fun. Sexuality had of course to play a part in it. Even though the archive is artificially constructed, I did want people to learn about both local history and psychoanalysis. It's a serious historical show, just not a literal one.

Each time I've gone out to the show and someone from the Museum introduces me to a

ABOVE, TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: Zoe Beloff, "Sketch for funhouse mirrors by Albert Grass"; Zoe Beloff, "Mirrors of the Mind," at the Coney Island Museum; ABOVE, BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: Zoe Beloff, view of *Dreamland: The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society and their Circle 1926-1972*, 2009-2010, at the Coney Island Museum; Zoe Beloff, "Elevation of 'The Dream Work Factory' for Albert Grass' proposed Dreamland amusement park"



The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society 1301 Surf Avenue Coney Island NY. Telephone CO 6-0466

September 21, 1930

Dear Mr. Edward F. Tilyou,

Enclosed please find a brief prospectus of **DREAMLAND**: its History and Purpose, Plans for the Future, the first amusement park ever devoted to the elucidation of dreams in accordance with the discoveries of Doctor Sigmund Freud M.D.

Now for the first time, the masters of our nightly perambulations, the "Psychic Censor", "Consciousness", the "Unconscious", the "Dreamwork" and the "Libido" will be assembled into pavilions, in a style both orderly and gay. A "Train of Thought" linking each funhouse, fueled in its endeavor by an ample supply of ideas will be set in motion. Once established, **DREAMLAND** will grow to literally undreamed of proportions for the enlightenment of this and future generations.

The deep interest in the park by members of the Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society as well as other public-spirited citizens suggested that a permanent organization should be effected and in June 1929 a Board of Trustees as well as officers were elected. An application to the Board of Regents, University of the State of New York for a provisional educational charter was granted in the same year.

Now the groundwork is done. There are few uncertainties. The plans for the future are clearly outlined. It is in the light of these developments that the Trustees cordially extend an invitation to invest in our venture as chief underwriter of **DREAMLAND**.

I look forward to a long and profitable partnership.

Sincerely,

Albert Grass

Albert Grass

President pro tem

tions about its members' current whereabouts. Besides, I felt that by the 1970s, counter-culture, with its emphasis on Eastern philosophies and self-help therapies, replaced psychoanalysis in the popular imagination.

Although the project appears to be about the past, it also looks to the future. I've always been fascinated by a sentence written by Walter Benjamin, "The history of the dream remains to be written, and opening up a perspective on this subject would mean decisively overcoming the superstitious belief in natural necessity by means of historical illumination."<sup>3</sup> I think he means that we should understand dreams from a social and historical perspective, not just from that of individual psychology, like Freud did. This call for a kind of intimate politics of desire really attracts me. That's what I'm trying to articulate in my project.

NVT: And this type of desire is most prominently manifested in Coney Island?

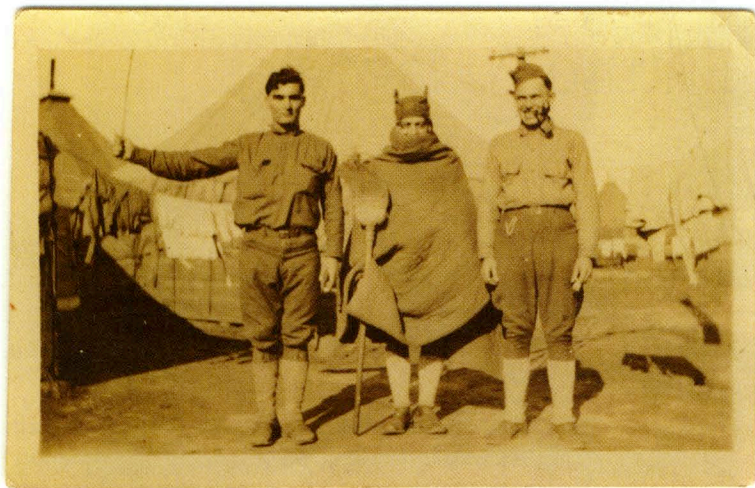
ZB: Yes, indeed. People had been coming to Coney Island for just this purpose since the 1870s. There used to be an elephant-shaped hotel on Surf Avenue that had such a reputation as the site of illicit affairs that the phrase "seeing the elephant" became a Victorian euphemism for having sex. From the days when it was known as "Sodom by the Sea" to its heyday as a hang out for gay men in the 1960s, Coney Island was a place where normal rules were suspended and you could reinvent yourself. This idea was very much part of my project's conception—

visitor, I find myself surrounded by people who want to discuss, ask questions, and share their own memories of Coney Island. It's a very lively, engaged audience.

NVT: The Society was allegedly active from the mid-1920s until the early 1970s, which coincides with decisive developments at Coney Island, such as the closure and demolition of some of its seminal attractions. As such, a thread of nostalgia runs through the project, which is

embedded in "contemporary history and local memories"—as Svetlana Boym put it in her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, 2001.<sup>2</sup> Were such notions of nostalgia on your mind while developing this project?

ZB: My choice of dates was based on quite practical parameters. Basically, they cover the era when home movies were shot on film. Were I to have extended the work of the Society to the present day, the project would have raised ques-



my project reinvents history. In this context, upstairs from a freak show, I would expect viewers to wonder if they should take what they see at face value. Last summer, a big sign opposite the Museum advertised "Snake Girl." I mean, do people believe in Snake Girl?

NVT: Like other projects of yours, *Dreamland* investigates ways to visually represent psychological processes and their intersection with various cinematic technologies. Conceptualizing the home movie as a psychoanalytical object, what can it convey about the unconscious processes of the mind?

ZB: For a great many years, I have thought of the home movie in the same way that Freud thought of dreams, jokes, and slips of the tongue—that is, as revealing more than the amateur filmmakers ever intended. For example, in my film *A Trip to the Land of Knowledge*, 1994, I incorporated one family's home movies from the 1950s. On the surface, they portrayed typical birthday parties and so on. But, much like Warhol, the father would keep the camera running and running, and the children were forced to act or act out, way past the point where it was funny. The family documented themselves in ways that exceeded their conscious awareness, I believe. These films are perhaps an extreme example of a living-room theater of hell. In the Coney Island *Dream Film* series, I tried to show the repressed desires and daily traumas that are visible in all home movies if we know how to read them.

NVT: Both of your parents are renowned psychologists. Your father is the late parapsychologist and philosopher John Beloff and your mother the visual psychologist Halla Beloff. I assume that they had a significant influence on your artistic practice and intellectual development?

ZB: It is true that my parents were psychologists, but I should add that they were academics, not therapists or, indeed, Freudians. They loved art and my mother in particular was a great cinephile. Of course, thanks to my mother, I saw *Freud*, 1962, with Montgomery Clift at an early age. Going to museums and films, I had an incredible education, but it was hard not to feel stupid with such brilliant parents. Growing up, one wants to strike out on one's own. It was only in my late thirties that I got to my own reading of the books that had been on my father's bookshelf, particularly works on the history of psychology like Henri Ellenberger's *The Discovery of the Unconscious*, 1970. In the last ten years of his life, my father and I had many very inspiring conversations. However, my reading and interpretation were very different from his. For example, he was interested in whether psychic phenomena were scientifically provable, whereas I was interested in what people imagined or wished to believe and how these desires intersected with the history of media and melodrama.

I recently showed my mother the Coney Island book. I think she was just a little sad when I told her that it was not exactly historical

fact. She said, "But surely Albert Grass was real." She took this in very good spirits and came to hear me when I spoke about the Society at the Freud Museum in London.

#### NOTES

1. Norman M. Klein, "Freud in Coney Island," *The Coney Island Amateur Psychoanalytic Society and Its Circle*, ed. Zoe Beloff, New York: Christine Burgin, 2009, 30.
2. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, 33.
3. Walter Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch," *Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 1: 1927-1930*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005, 3.

Niels Van Tomme is a curator, researcher, art critic, and frequent contributor to ART PAPERS. The Director of Arts and Media at Provisions Learning Project in Washington, DC, he lives in New York and Washington. His independently curated exhibitions have been shown internationally.