

A TOURIST IN
OTHER PEOPLE'S
REALITY

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SŁAWA HARASYMOWICZ

JOANNA RAJKOWSKA

CURATED BY OLGA OVENDEN

VESTRY HOUSE MUSEUM

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mnemoscape
PUBLISHING

VESTRY HOUSE MUSEUM

A TOURIST IN OTHER PEOPLE'S REALITY: ARCHIVE RE-IMAGINED.

BY OLGA OVENDEN

HISTORY IS A PACK OF LIES ABOUT EVENTS THAT NEVER HAPPENED

TOLD BY PEOPLE WHO WEREN'T THERE.

— GEORGE SANTAYANA

The startling sound of a screaming voice yelling out at high pitch breaks the silence of Vestry House, a local museum in Walthamstow and former workhouse. With its bucolic setting and gardens, Vestry House seems to be under an attack, an attack that is both menacing and sudden, whose perpetrator is nowhere to be seen. The source of inhuman sound, that keeps coming at the visitor in varied levels of amplification, is impossible to locate or to identify. Violent reverberations of weeping, gulping, shouting, sobbing, singing, swallowing, gasping for air, all happening simultaneously, echo through the dark corridors and creaky staircases of the 18th century building.

Such is the effect evoked in the visitor by the sound piece of Joanna Rajkowska, *Song from the Workhouse*, 2013. Performed by Aleksandra Kozioł, who uses an archaic technique typical of folk traditions of Belarus, Poland and Ukraine, the piece forms part of the exhibition *A Tourist in Other People's Reality*, which took place at Vestry House in Walthamstow in June-September 2013.

Built as a workhouse in 1730, Vestry was a home for the poor for the first hundred years of its history. A local museum since 1931, it now houses a historical archive made up of Waltham Forest parish documentation and donations from local residents.

Through alteration, appropriation, adjustment and re-positioning of objects borrowed from the archive as well as by creating new works, the three artists engage with the divisive history of the place and its political and social pretexts.

The work of Cecilia Bonilla, Sława Harasymowicz and Joanna Rajkowska reveal the invisible, the missing and the fragmented histories of the past lives, and project fictive outcomes from the interstices of history.

Joanna Rajkowska's sound pieces that make up the major part of her contribution to the show began as an intuitive investigation into the possibilities of representation of the former inhabitants, the poor of Walthamstow. It emerged from the discovery that most of the objects in Vestry archive relate to the 'post-workhouse' period. All that remained of the paupers were medical and accounting records, and a single pair of shoes. The realisation was truly Foucaultian, a demonstration of 'discipline'¹ preserved in time. All complex processes and strategies that shaped the modern system of state's domination manifested itself to the artist in one simple piece of evidence, or, rather the absence therein. Ostracised, shut away, subjected to a strict supervision and discipline the paupers were denied all expression of their individuality and left without trace. Interested in mining the elusive threshold between the past and the present the artist offers us an interpretation that resonates within both realms. The artist describes the piece as a "revolt of a body, its membranes, throat and voice strings"², seeking to bring meaning from the past into the present lives. The choice of language and performing technique point to the current tensions of the world. History for Rajkowska is a contemporary presence³. Hence, the extreme physicality of the performance – the voice of the performer is revolting against past and present injustices.

In this sense, *Song from the Workhouse* becomes a truly political work – as much an engagement with the history of social coercion (the unjust and cruel "discipline" of the poor) and its reverberations in the present, as it is a disruption of the deliberate emptiness of the archive.

In *Clogs*, 2013, another work in the show, Rajkowska uses the only object that was left from the paupers' era – a pair of wood and leather shoes. An enactment of the sound of marching feet in wooden shoes on stone pavement, it is yet another demonstration of Rajkowska's poetic

- 1 As defined in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979).
- 2 Artist's statement in this catalogue.
- 3 In her text Rajkowska cites the words of Walter Benjamin from his book *About the Concept of History*: 'History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now'.



abilities to invoke times long past. Rhythmical and continuous, the sound of *Clogs* reminds us of the highly regulated routines of a workhouse. *Architecture of Labour*, 2013, on the other hand, is an engagement with the visual aspects of the building, a proposition as to how it might have looked at the time.

Intention to re-imagine, disrupt and create new layers of meaning – a dominant leitmotif of the show, becomes especially apparent in the work of Sława Harasymowicz. Interested "to reveal possible links, hidden clues, narrative fragments, as well as new associations that actually take place in the present"⁴ the artist borrows objects and documents from the archive, and freely mixes them with her own work. The viewer is invited to believe, but at the same time not to trust, the artist who sends us on a treasure hunt around the room. A feeling of confusion is intensified by her choice of display method. Central to the exposition is the museum style glass cabinet, which contains one part of the series *Idle, Abusive, Unruly*, 2013. The trust invoked speaks of the authenticity of its contents. It turns to be a false expectation however. Inside, there is an assemblage of objects and documents from Vestry archive, as well as drawings by the artist.

The drawings, that are evidently illustrative and delicate, seem to follow a certain meaningful thread within the fragile fabric of venerable records. Interventions by the artist, including one portrait of a young woman, are positioned next to records reporting unruly behaviour and punishment of the workhouse inmates. The tactics of appropriation and careful re-positioning employed by Harasymowicz allow for a new meaning to emerge. A mute and faceless mass of paupers becomes personified. A face that is hard to like nevertheless calls for compassion, as it stares at us from beneath lowered eyebrows.

Other works in the show pursue the same latent agenda. *The Correction of the House*, 2013 is a selection of re-photographed glass lantern slides portraying the ritual of witch hunt. Originating from the Victorian period when the building housed the local historical society the sequence strangely fits with the evidence from the glass cabinet. The big architectural drawing of yet another workhouse (part of *Idle, Abusive, Unruly*, 2013 series) built in the style of a Panopticon rests on the mantelpiece consonant with the idea of a home.

The role of imagery in our perception of contemporary reality is at the core of Cecilia Bonilla's contribution to the show. The series of collages made from a London newspaper

- 4 Artist's text in this catalogue.



originated from the artist's discovery in Vestry archive of a personal scrapbook dating from World War Two. This book contained newspaper cuttings of dramatic events of the time, as well as a singular image of 'frozen' waterfall. For Bonilla the random character of such juxtaposition was a demonstration of how imagery in the public domain may be appropriated to create a personal narrative. A certain act of liberation, the gesture appeared to be in line with her artistic pursuit. Collages in the series *METRO*, Wednesday, 29th, 2013, are made from 'second-hand' images of that date's newspaper. The headline of the day was the news of a 'sewage baby' – a horror story of a baby found alive in a sewage pipe in the building somewhere in China. Miniature works, the collages are constructions of the same image of a baby mixed with other characters depicted in the newspaper. The result is a continuous and simultaneous flow of shapes and faces which resist recognition.

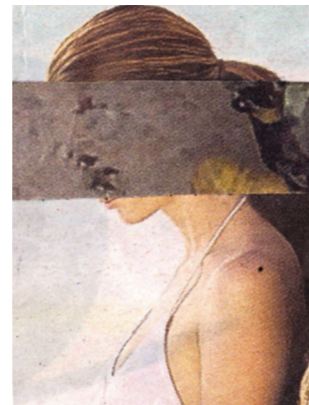
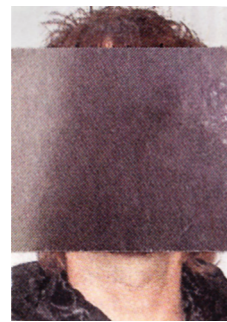
Similar to the unknown owner of the scrapbook, the artist appropriates the newspaper sensation to her own means. The piece becomes a homage to the inhabitants of the workhouse who, in her own words, 'were metaphorically "buried alive"⁵.

However seemingly disparate, the works in the show may appear, it is their relationship to each other that makes our reading of them so potent. Brought together as a result of the artists' decision, they become an intervention in the fabric of power structures of society as well as the authority vested in a historical archive. Provocative and disturbing, this collective gesture encourages and reveals lines of conflicts, but also serves as a platform for dialogue. ◀

5 As stated in the artist's text in this catalogue.

CECILIA BONILLA

INTERVIEW BY ALESSANDRA FERRINI (MNEMOSCAPE)



Cecilia Bonilla
METRO, Wednesday, May 29th, 2013
collage on card, 1:1

Alessandra Ferrini For the exhibition, you have produced a collage piece, *METRO*, Wednesday May 29th. From our previous conversation, I know that you are not apt to work with archives. So, I am very interested in the process that led you to produce this work. What was your initial reaction to the collection and the site? What was the point of origin of your research and how did it progress and merge with your own working methodology?

Cecilia Bonilla Initially, I was looking at the donated photographic archive and, despite being used to working from 'borrowed' images, I struggled to find material that I could work with. When going through the Object Archive, I came across a series of First and Second World War scrapbooks that immediately caught my attention. Perhaps because, similarly to my own collages, the scrapbooks were composed of mass-produced images that had been re-assembled to create personal narratives. However, I was still struggling, as I would have had to reproduce the material in order to manipulate it. A few days later, as I was sitting in a café, I saw a copy of *METRO* newspaper in the bin. I suddenly became curious about the idea of making work 'about the past' from images from a current newspaper.

On the front cover of the paper, there was an image depicting a 'horror story' of a baby, found wedged in a toilet pipe beneath a shared bathroom in a residential building in China - I instantly related the article to what happened to the former inhabitants of the Vestry House. This unwanted baby - buried alive - related to the situation of the inmates of the workhouse, which, in my eyes, were metaphorically buried inside the building; unwanted, left and forgotten. I feel that articles, like the one about the 'sewage baby', play on the same kind of morbid curiosity that is triggered when researching the history of Vestry House as a former workhouse. The 'sewage baby' article also focused on the

idea of rescue, on how many people had offered to adopt this child. When Sława and Joanna started to focus their research specifically on the history of the building as former Workhouse, I felt as if they had the desire to 'rescue' the former inmates.

AF In a way your work is both a response to your engagement with the Vestry House Museum archive and with Sława Harasymowicz's and Joanna Rajkowska's approach to the archive.

CB Yes, in a way it is. This was a collaborative project and our pieces do intertwine. My reaction to their work was instigated by the fact that the project took a sudden turn towards the historical facts related to the workhouse. This was quite a challenge for me, as I am not specifically interested in historical issues.

AF Alongside *METRO*, Wednesday May 29th you have decided to display a specific spread from a scrapbook that you found in the archive. What led you to choose this particular spread out of the many that you found in the archive?

CB It was because of the way the images were combined: two images related to the war are pasted on the left page, while a picture of a frozen waterfall covers the right page. I felt that the latter was a sidetrack from the main focus of the scrapbook - the war. This spread seems to include a rather 'superfluous' element, yet for me, this is the most significant. The image of the waterfall detracts from the historical facts and this creates a very personal, visually poetic, narrative.

AF Also, I find very interesting that, while the war was happening, someone took great care in making these visual pieces.

SOME OF THE IMAGES THAT I MADE TURNED OUT QUITE SINISTER, SOME RATHER POETIC. HISTORY (THE PAST) HAS A ROMANTIC COMPONENT TO IT AND SOME OF THE IMAGES THAT I PRODUCED ARE ALSO EVOCATIVE OF THAT.

THE WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION COMBINED GENERATE A CROSS NARRATIVE FIELD WHICH EMPHASIZES THE FICTIONAL ASPECT OF THE SHOW; ALL THE WORKS COMBINE TOGETHER TO CREATE FICTION.

CB Yes. I did ask Anna Mason, the museum's curator, about why they were made. My sketchbooks are generally very personal, I do not like people to go through them. However, apparently these were different, they were not made to be private. Although Anna did not give me specific answers, she said that they were made to show friends and family, as a record to share. I kept wondering if they were produced for posterity, but it seems that they were actually made in the present, for the present. They did not have a specific historical agenda.

I think people needed a cathartic project to take them through the war, to take their minds off the stressful reality they were facing. Also, I guess that they spent a lot of time indoors. I was thinking, as well, that newspapers were probably not so easy to get hold of, hence the images and articles became more valuable, almost collectable.

AF Although you claim not to be interested in historical events, I find that your choice of focusing on scrapbooks from Second World War seems to reinforce the link to Harasymowicz's and Rajkowska's interests in historical facts. After all, when considering the history of the Vestry as a workhouse, parallelisms with other historical situations of marginalization, segregation, and dispossession of identity, like the Holocaust, come to mind. The reference to the Second World War is especially important here. Were you consciously making a reference to this particular historical event?

CB Most of the scrapbooks in the archive belonged to this historical time. However, I did not select them because of this reference, but because of the way that they were assembled. I was not so interested in the relation to the Second World War. For instance, the spread that I chose to display is a combination of newspaper clippings related to the war and a picture of a frozen waterfall. As I went through the scrapbooks I was looking for something other than the war, I was trying to find out what else was going on in these people's lives, something beyond the war.

On the other hand, perhaps I guess that I was unconsciously influenced by this link to the Holocaust. There were other scrapbooks that were not related to specific historical events, they had just random pictures of dogs and flowers for instance. However, I did not find them interesting as they were more thematic rather than related to personal narratives. I am not concerned with historical events but rather, with historical times. For instance, my main interest is in the present times. I think that it was perhaps an unconscious decision that led me to pick the specific spread

that I displayed – after all it related to the subject that Slawa and Joanna were researching. That, again, is the collaborative aspect of the project which comes into play. The artworks seem to combine and merge together. It generates a cross narrative field which emphasizes the fictional aspect of the exhibition; all the works combine together to create a fiction.

AF I find the way you have created analogies with a present event very fascinating. Rather than focusing on past events, you have projected them in the future (our present times). Simultaneously, this process is enacted from a very personal point of view: it is your own subjective chain of thoughts that has allowed you to find this analogy. The analogy seems to be triggered by the way you have felt fascinated by dramatic and gruesome stories (the museum's history and the 'sewage baby' news story). Could you expand on this?

CB I have mixed feelings about the idea of digging into the past of people who have had terrible lives. We - the artists - were tourists in other people's reality, as the title of the exhibition suggests. I'm not sure how 'ethical' this is. I think that there is a morbid fascination with other people's ordeal. In that respect I had very mixed feelings in relation to researching the history of the workhouse. I wondered: why are we doing this? Is it okay? Who is it for? What is this going to bring to the present?

I was very conscious, as Joanna's and Slawa's works evolved, that the exhibition had to be anchored in the present. I did not want it to fall into a 'vintage state', verging towards the nostalgic. I wanted to make a point that this work has been made here and now, from a present perspective. I was very keen on departing from traditional approaches to history and the archive. There is no need for me to be stuck in the past as I feel that this oppresses the present.

AF I feel that this idea of 'projection' actually goes further in your work. You have used random pictures of 'characters' from the METRO newspaper and you have hidden their identities by masking them with cutouts of the 'sewage baby' news story. As the references to these people's identities are not present, the images become metaphors for the Vestry's past inhabitants. It feels as if you have tried to project an image onto them in an attempt to 'give them a face' and provide them with an identity. This is emphasised by the format and the size of the images, which are reminiscent of passport pictures. At the same time, there is a feeling of impossibility, as if we will never be able to recover them. Was this your intention?



Scrapbook compiled during the Second World War
Vestry House Museum Archive

I THINK THAT THERE IS A MORBID FASCINATION WITH OTHER PEOPLE'S ORDEAL. IN THAT RESPECT I HAD VERY MIXED FEELINGS IN RELATION TO RESEARCHING THE HISTORY OF THE WORKHOUSE. I WONDERED: WHY ARE WE DOING THIS? IS IT OKAY? WHO IS IT FOR? WHAT IS THIS GOING TO BRING TO THE PRESENT?

CB The idea of identity, in terms of lost and stolen identities, was lingering all the time. When researching about the former inhabitants of the workhouse it is impossible to get away from this. Simply, these people did not have an identity. In a way, the idea of working with 'masks' was linked to that, but at the same time I did not want to be too serious about it. I guess there is some 'morbid humour' in the work. I did not want to be over-dramatic. Some of the images turned out quite sinister, some rather poetic, which is also a concept that can be linked to the archival; history (the past) has a romantic component to it and some of the images that I produced are evocative of that – romanticising about the past. However,

this is not something I did consciously, it is a retrospective thought. In fact, I try not to think too much before and whilst making the work, I initially rather work intuitively, keeping the 'making' separately from analysing and intellectualizing. Then of course, there is stage two – the evaluation. At this point, sometimes, I also like to involve other people. For instance, I consulted Slawa when selecting which portraits to use for this exhibition, as I made many different ones, and only a small group is on display. I think that it is sometimes important to get a fresh approach from someone else – what is the work telling them? Ultimately, the works have a life of their own, and they become what they mean to others! ◀

SŁAWA HARASYMOWICZ

INTERVIEW BY ALESSANDRA FERRINI (MNEMOSCAPE)



Sława Harasymowicz
Idle, Abusive, Unruly, 2013
drawing on paper, 29 x 37 cm

Alessandra Ferrini For the exhibition, you have produced two works, the *Idle, Abusive, Unruly* series and *The Correction of the House*. I am interested in the process that led you to these works. What was your initial reaction to the collection and the site? What was the point of origin of your research and how did it progress?

Sława Harasymowicz At first I didn't know that the Vestry House Museum, alongside the local history and objects archive, and the photographic collection, contained the 'other' archive of documents related to its original history as a workhouse. This is a completely different archive, focused on a specific period of time, and it contains no images, only administrative documents. It is located in one of the oldest parts of the building, upstairs.

I spent quite a lot of time there actually, looking at the documents that it contains: lists of letters, minutes from the workhouse committee meetings, purchases of coal, orders of removal, examinations and associated papers. All kinds of administrative documents and paperwork, regulating bodies, fuel, food, time. Lists of things, lists of people. Basic categories: men, women, boys and girls. What we get are their names, age, date of admission, and date of either death or discharge. Their workhouse uniforms had a badge on the right sleeve and a number on the inside. People were put through a sort of machine. I was quite amazed by how precise the administration was and it immediately made me think of the concentration camp administration.

Initially I was trying to separate all this material, and to divide it into potential threads, or stories. There were some papers that were related to examinations of people. That led me to the fact that I needed to know more about the law of the time. And all this was uncannily linked to the contemporary debate, the discussions about social benefits, and how much they cost, all related to the questions of how to 'manage the poor'. The idea of putting the 'paupers' (the

poorest of the poor) in the workhouse was the cheapest thing to do: bunching them together in one place basically. So rather than offering something that they called 'outdoor relief' which was like a 'benefit', paid in money or in kind (food, coal), they put people in a workhouse instead.

One of the worst things that I found were the stacks of records of 'voluntary examinations' of women. All exactly the same. For instance: Sarah Beacon of Walthamstow, 'single woman taken on hold before me (...) this examined does declare that she is with a child and the same child is likely to be born a bastard'. It's just so inhuman. And, of course, the word 'voluntary' immediately suggests the possibility of the opposite.

The only trace of the workhouse inmates, literally their 'imprints' within all this mass of administration is something like 'the mark of Sarah Beacon', an 'x'. As the illiterates' signatures, these marks are actually extremely varied. Some are much neater than others, some are expressive, almost flamboyant, some appear to even attempt to imitate actual handwriting. Some are barely there, like the absolutely miniature scraps of writing, as if by someone unsure how to even hold a pen. To me these signatures show different characters, they are kind of miniature traces of individuals.

AF I was talking with Joanna Rajkowska about the fact that there seems to be two main ways of working with an archive. Her approach is more of an embodied, instinctive reaction to the space while your approach seems to be more thorough, like a process of excavation, to find different histories and traces of the inmates.

SH I haven't really worked through the archive that thoroughly, I mean, I did not work in an organised manner at all. I wanted to experience the archive, to see/feel the paper. Some of the 18th century manuscripts on translucent paper look like skin, and all these documents are so perfectly of their

WORKING WITH HISTORY AND MEMORY MEANS OF COURSE ALWAYS
WORKING WITH FRAGMENTS AND ALWAYS PRODUCING FRAGMENTS.



Sława Harasymowicz
Idle, Abusive, Unruly, 2013
 screen print on paper, 100x70cm

time that they really seem almost too perfect, as if made up to look real, like props. I later actually also used photocopies of some of those documents made for me by the Vestry Museum archivist, but in the end my approach was almost random. I was just pulling things which were interesting to me, from within this very specific context. It was not important to create a cohesive archival record or to make sense of the whole archive. I think in my case it may be a combination of both the instinctive approach as well as the 'archeological'.

At a certain point it was just too much, I kept going through all these documents, and felt caught up in this trap, the documents repeating over and over, and all ultimately related to death. It was a relief to be able to find those few cases that caught my attention. For example, the 'madness certificates'. A blank certificate like this bears the possibility of it still being used. Then there are the few cases of those people who rebelled against the Masters of the House, like Sarah Plummer, and I felt like I wanted to find out more about her. So I tracked her down in the archive, from the one sentence listing her misbehaviour and the decision of the subsequent punishment, in the committee meeting notes, across to the admissions book for the same year, and that's how I found out that she was 14. I suppose one of my approaches could be called zooming in on the fragment, of a personal story. It is interesting because it is working with a complex and traumatic history, but through a very subjective re-reading.

AF Within the whole body of work that you have produced for *A Tourist in Other People's Reality* you have presented a series of archival material from the Vestry collection together with some drawings that you have made. These different elements are not strictly related to each other, rather, you leave the viewer the choice to draw different connections, creating different and multiple narratives. As such, there is a sense of openness. Could you expand more on this choice?

SH I generally work with sets of images, but they never aim to create a linear narrative. I am interested in how images can relate to our understanding of memory, whether and how they can carry memory. I choose them intuitively but they have their own inner logic, I think I just reorder it. A

final 'arrangement' is always a result of many attempts. Even though these assemblages appear open and maintain a sense of openness that invites reinterpretation, they are also, to me, very specific. It is just that that 'specificity' is not singular.

Working with history and memory means of course always working with fragments and always producing fragments. In the Vestry, there were hardly any 'material traces' left of the workhouse inmates - apart from the 'x' marks and a pair of clogs. So I am re-imagining the traces, so to speak, and making these fragments look 'real'. It is like a recreation of a dream: ambiguous but extremely specific at the same time. The different elements of a dream make a lot of sense to the person that dreams. These history fragments are just the same: they refer to reality, but you need to make sense of them. All these possible links, narrative connections and new associations actually take place in the present, and have to be made by us, now.

AF Another issue raised by the openness of your pieces, is that of projection. As the viewer is entitled to interpret the material that you have selected and created as he/she sees fit, this process becomes very personal, relating at once to the subjectivity of the viewer and to his/her rootedness in the present. In a way, the viewer is turned into a historian: he/she is presented with clues about the past and left free to create a narrative. This sets the scene for a critique of historiography and the subjective, narrative nature of the interpretation of the past. Can you explain how you have approached the issue of 'the archive' in relation to historical reconstruction and interpretation?

SH Who is talking about history? Who is speaking? One could say that sometimes you need to subvert things in order to access the 'real picture'. But 'real' to whom? These questions of multiple points of view, of subjective interpretation, of translation of the past, are to me incredibly interesting and complex and definitely something that I am working with.

It is complex, as are the questions of 're-imagining' history, when, of course, this interpretation is contemporary, I am 'playing' with history. It is also linked to questions of speaking, communicating, translating, and all the 'grey areas' contained within, both in the visual and linguistic sense.

AF In *The Correction of the House* you have created a projection of still images comprising material from the Vestry photographic archive. This piece differs from *Idle*, *Abusive*, *Unruly* and from your main practice, as you do not generally work with moving images. I am interested in why you have chosen to use this medium in this piece. Could you please expand on the process behind this particular work and on its format?

SH It was a result of finding yet another collection within the Vestry House Museum's photographic archive. The Vestry was built as a workhouse, then became a police station, then an educational institution devoted to science and finally a local history museum. Actually, I just remembered, it also was a family home some time along the timeline, in between the police station and the scientific institute. The lantern glass slides must have belonged to the time of the Vestry as a scientific institution and were used for educational projections, also for entertainment. Most of them are neutral, they show botanical or astronomical illustrations, 'exotic voyages', children's illustrations. But among these nice images, suddenly there was a photograph (transferred on a glass slide) of an authentic 'ducking stool', a real object, which was used for 'ducking' presumed witches, and a crude woodcut of a scene of a witch 'ducking'. I think it is a fairly well known image, actually. It shows a small group of people on the river-bank, a witch tied to the ducking stool, and a church in the background. I selected other images to build a dream-nightmare sequence, for example bird eye view photographs of a building/landscape, images related to astronomy or factory work, empty domestic interiors, and what looks like a huge library door, firmly shut - and others. They are all, apparently, pulled together by the witch trial images. But the more you look at the slideshow, the more other images become interesting, and you start to question the 'point of gravity' of the projection. Making a slideshow seemed to make sense, as it is elusive: a 'film' as a 'dream'. It was the perfect medium to show a sequence about the Other, and the outcast.

The title, *The Correction of the House* is a name of a specific form of punishment that one of the 'rebels' was given. This phrase implies both the action of 'correcting the House', reinterpreting its history, rearranging its ghosts, as well as literally, the House correcting those who did not comply. You

need to find something that speaks to you, in my case it was the idea of the outsider, the outcast and the 'domestic'.

AF I feel that there is actually a strong focus on the repression of women in this body of work. For instance, you have only drawn female characters and focused on the figure of the witch. At the same time, the only two names that emerge from the archive - and that you refer to in your accompanying text - are female. I was wondering if you could expand on this.

SH Yes, that's right. However, in the case of the names, it is rather coincidental, as there were only three cases of rebellion listed in the archives, two committed by women and the other by someone anonymous. Their gender was not that important to begin with, not as a separate 'subject', but definitely, this is something I work with anyway. In the context of the workhouse, and the 18th-19th century, a female 'pauper' (the poorest of the poor) would have been the least privileged of the least 'privileged'. And the most horribly banal reason why a woman would have been sent to the workhouse was that she was pregnant and not married. In the case of men often it was related to old age. I think that this means that for men it was more of a refuge rather than imposed social isolation.

AF Your work refers to the fact that the Vestry House Museum was a site of repression, control and detention. Within both *Idle*, *Abusive*, *Unruly* and *The Correction of the House* you have also specifically referred to 'madness', pointing out the different ways in which this issue has been dealt with in the past. Moreover, in both pieces you make explicit references to the central role of religion and belief in the control of behaviour. What has drawn you to focus on this specific issue?

SH Thinking about categories and decisions, I installed the Medical Certificates - that decided, with three signatures, that a person was to spend their life in an 'institution' - next to the witch-dream-nightmare projection. One of the signatures on the certificate had to be by a priest. It is quite simple - institutionalised religion as an administrative body, an organisation of power, control. If you take the drawing-based screen print of a gate to a 'rural workhouse for 500 persons' that I made for the exhibition, to me this also is an image of madness. It is about madness as a collective 'symptom' and goes back to the questions of 'who is insane'? ◀

I SUPPOSE ONE OF MY APPROACHES COULD BE CALLED ZOOMING IN ON THE FRAGMENT, OF A PERSONAL STORY. IT IS WORKING WITH A COMPLEX AND TRAUMATIC HISTORY, BUT THROUGH A VERY SUBJECTIVE RE-READING.

BLIND
 DESTITUTE
 LOST THE USE OF HIS LEGS
 BLIND
 DESTITUTE
 DESTITUTE
 DESTITUTE
 INFIRM
 INFIRM
 RUPTURED
 READMITTED, BEING FOUND
 DESTITUTE
 PREGNANT
 PREGNANT
 PREGNANT
 DESTITUTE
 DESTITUTE
 INFIRM
 WOULD NOT STOP
 CHILD DIED
 DESTITUTE
 WOULD NOT STOP
 MOTHER DEAD
 ILLEGITIMATE
 FATHER DEAD
 REMOVED HOME WITH MOTHER
 MOTHER DEAD
 FATHER DESTITUTE
 MOTHER DEAD
 ILLEGITIMATE
 DESTITUTE
 BORN IN THE HOUSE
 DESTITUTE
 DESTITUTE
 DESTITUTE
 MOTHER DEAD
 ILLEGITIMATE
 ILLEGITIMATE
 DESTITUTE
 PARENTS DEAD
 LEFT HER PLACE

3 MEN AGED BETWEEN 33 TO 60
 12 WOMEN AGED BETWEEN 27 TO 82
 5 BOYS AGED BETWEEN 1 TO 11
 12 GIRLS AGED BETWEEN 4 TO 14

The *Song from the Workhouse*, performed by Aleksandra Koziol in Joanna Rajkowska's project, listed the reasons for admission to the Workhouse and described its residents in 1745. The performer sang using the "white voice" technique typical for folk music in Poland, Ukraine and Belarus.

JOANNA RAJKOWSKA

INTERVIEW BY ALESSANDRA FERRINI (MNEMOSCAPE)

Alessandra Ferrini For the exhibition *A Tourist in Other People's Reality* you have produced three works, *Song from the Workhouse*, *Clogs* and *Architecture of Labour*. I am interested in the process that led you to these works. What was your initial reaction to the collection and the site? What was the point of origin of your research?

Joanna Rajkowska When I entered the space my first feeling was very claustrophobic. If you keep in my mind the number of people that were squashed in there, you cannot avoid thinking that there had to be a crowd of people who were bumping into each other and that had no privacy whatsoever. I felt that bodies were squeezed in between the walls. Everything in there limits your physical presence and your movement.

The only object that I found was a pair of clogs. This was such a poor find, such a catastrophic lack of evidence. It led me to think that the history, the archives, the physical remains belong to the owners. Not to the bodies, not to someone who is actually deprived of the right to possess. Rather, history actually belongs to those who have the right to own objects, because objects talk when you die.

So I focused on what I had. I saw that they had a metal frame – like a horseshoe - on their sole. I thought that perhaps I could recreate or re-enact the sound of the clogs. I tried to put the clogs on my feet but they were too small. So I had to crawl with them on my hands and I did it many times, experimenting with different patterns of walking, trying to imagine how the women would walk to the church. According to the archive, every Sunday they walked to the church before the villagers and they sat in a designated area. After the end

of the service they would wait until the last person left. Only then they were allowed to leave the church.

AF In *Song from the Workhouse* you have collaborated with Polish artist Aleksandra Koziol, who uses the archaic technique of the 'white voice' in her practice, a tradition of Central and Eastern Europe. How did this work come together and what drew you to choose this particular technique?

JR 'White voice' is a technique of scream-singing, it is a completely different articulation which sets up the human body for a different scale of empathy, a different resonance. I feel that British culture rarely expresses itself in a dramatic, profound way – I don't mean something overtly, emotionally exaggerated but rather a non-analytical, primal language, something beyond cold analysis, something that is rough, raw, and naked and which belongs to the body.

The body and the suffering of the body, are the things that are closest to me. This led me to this ancient way of singing. At the time when I was preparing the work for the exhibition, I met Aleksandra Koziol, who was a student at a workshop that I led. I found out that she was singing using the 'white voice' technique, which I was already familiar with. When she started to scream, as this is actually a form of screaming, shivers ran down my spine. Her face and her whole body changed while performing. I thought, 'this is fantastic, I have to work with her'. When I came back and I entered the Vestry House Museum, I immediately saw (or heard) her there. I wanted her to be in the basement, but there was no basement, not even an adjacent room, so I decided to hide

I AM TOTALLY CONCENTRATED ON PHYSICALITY, NOT ONLY OF THE HUMAN BODY, BUT ALSO THE PHYSICALITY OF ARCHITECTURE AND OF LANGUAGE.

IT LED ME TO THINK THAT THE HISTORY, THE ARCHIVES, THE PHYSICAL REMAINS BELONG TO THE OWNERS. NOT TO THE BODIES, NOT TO SOMEONE WHO IS ACTUALLY DEPRIVED OF THE RIGHT TO POSSESS. RATHER, HISTORY ACTUALLY BELONGS TO THOSE WHO HAVE THE RIGHT TO OWN OBJECTS, BECAUSE OBJECTS TALK WHEN YOU DIE.

her behind a wall partition. I would have loved the sound to have come from beneath, from the ground.

A day before the actual performance, we started to work on texts from the archive. Language really matters in this project. The 'white voice' technique is all about the structure of your mouth and throat and the work of your diaphragm. It is suited for Eastern European soft pronunciation and strong physicality, if you like, or strong body engagement. English was a really alien element in Aleksandra's performance. When I observe how people talk English, I see how they distance their bodies from the sounds. I wanted Aleksandra to do something exactly opposite. And she indeed was able to charge the sounds with her extreme body power, and literally throw these foreign sentences and syllables out of herself. She became a medium, a sort of messenger. I kept recording her and reducing the text. It was better to minimize the trauma in the text and to keep it to her performance. So we decided to use only two texts – the list of reasons for admission to the workhouse and the number of people that were at Vestry House at a specific point in its history.

AF The body of work you produced for *A Tourist in Other People's Reality* strives to document the presence of the paupers while offering them a way to revolt against the rules and constraints of the workhouse. I would like to go deeper into this and, at the same time, go back to the idea of invisibility. I am fascinated by the way you have played with this notion of absence, as human presence is only evoked in this body of work. This strategy resonates with the lack of documentation related to the life of the paupers. Can you expand on the way you have approached

and worked with notions of absence and anonymity?

JR From my first, immediate idea – *Clogs* – I felt that I needed a more invisible, but deeply felt, presence, something that would 'shake' the building, as no one really rebelled against the situation. It calls for it: burn the building, kill the mistress, do something! That's because, of course, I am imposing our political paradigm onto a situation from the 18th-19th century. But really, you cannot imagine living your life like that. If they didn't revolt, I thought, I had an obligation to do it.

I am totally concentrated on physicality, not only of the human body, but also the physicality of architecture and of language. Thinking about the workhouse, I felt people sweating, stinking, mumbling and dozing over the oakum vapours. The energy of boredom. The circling of their bodies and thoughts always inside the same structure must have created a toxic relation between them and the building. Imagine how they must have slept nestling close to the walls. Or imagine a cross-section: bodies-wall-air.

This is what I felt Aleksandra captured in the *Song from the Workhouse*. And it wasn't 'evidence', a 'testimony' or a 'reference': it was her body in revolt! Naturally, I didn't want to show her because the paupers' bodies were not there either. The sound was enough to understand the dynamics and the trauma going on within her body.

If you listen to opera and to the 'white voice', you will be able to recognise a clear cultural difference. Fundamentally, the 'white voice' is an elemental scream of pain, in which you can hear the membranes trembling. This was one of my concerns that I wanted to tackle. The other was the profound

'WHITE VOICE' IS A TECHNIQUE OF SCREAM-SINGING, IT IS A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT ARTICULATION WHICH SETS UP THE HUMAN BODY FOR A DIFFERENT SCALE OF EMPATHY, A DIFFERENT RESONANCE.

misunderstanding in terms of what Eastern Europe is, how the current situation has been evolving for years as an aftermath of the War. We Poles call this phenomenon a 'blind-spot'. We are culturally too close and too far away at the same time. What Britain is sensitive to is the Middle East, the Far East, former colonies, everywhere else but Eastern Europe. Finding all possible connections and addressing these differences is precious for me and sooner or later I would like to do a project called *'My Dream About England'*. What I would like to achieve is a better understanding of this phenomenal piece of Europe that is completely misconceived. The comprehension of what happened after the Second World War, when the Nazi Final Solution completely wiped out the cultural landscape of Eastern Europe, is absolutely fundamental to understanding

was negotiated and used. This is the only 'physical' piece that you have made for the exhibition. Could you please expand on the process behind this particular piece and on its format?

JR This is a very interesting question, because, as an artist doing almost exclusively public work, it is my attempt to come back to the gallery. What I am interested in is the translation of these public-only projects which, brought back to the gallery as set of images, can create a slightly different narrative. I mean the whole process of conversion of a multidimensional public situation which you are not able to grasp as a full narrative. Well, perhaps except for writing, as for me writing is the tool of re-enactment. This is where I think I can possibly have the wide, 360° vision of what was happening. But apart



Workhouse clogs
Vestry House Museum Archive

Europe as a whole, as a culture. The Iron Curtain is still well installed in the British vision of Europe.

AF When considering the history of the Vestry House Museum as a workhouse, parallelisms with other historical situations of marginalization, segregation, and dispossession of identity, like the Holocaust, come to mind. The choice of giving an Eastern European voice to the paupers, does reinforce this parallel. Were you consciously making a reference to this particular historical event?

JR Yes, but I did not want to be too direct. Rather, I wanted to touch on and re-enact the cultural difference that made the Holocaust possible and thinkable. As, when you read the stories about the way the Nazis behaved in Eastern Europe, you are confronted with a phenomenon: the atrocities that were unthinkable in the West were thinkable there. And this unthinkability/thinkability is exactly the area that I am interested in. I feel that this element, this raw nerve of difference, became present in *Song from the Workhouse*.

AF Finally, I would like to ask you about Architecture of Labour which specifically looks at the interaction and relation between the paupers and the building. Instead of solely focusing on archival material, you have delved into the specificity of the site trying to project the way the space

from writing, recreating a story is almost impossible and this impossibility is a fantastic challenge. In the public work – public performances or situations – of the 1960s-70s, the documentation was very minimal. You may only have two photographs and between these two images you have to build a bridging narrative. This is fascinating and this minimal way of telling a story is actually very good.

Architecture of Labour has been exactly a point of translation. I knew what happened in the Vestry House, however this knowledge was fragmented, in the same way that I know what happens during my public projects. I attempted to re-enact this situation of a workhouse through drawings. Since we found a lantern projector amongst the Vestry Museum's old pieces of equipment, with sets of glass slides, I simply created another set.

I wanted to get to the essence of what was happening through a very schematic way of representing this claustrophobic architecture with bits of writing squashed into it.

There was a very real political reason behind it as the place was all about classifying, segregating, isolating, silencing and producing an income. The inmates had to work hard, and this happened there, in the same place where they lived. In the title I wanted to emphasise that, in the end, it was all about labour. ◀

CHASING SHADOWS, MATERIALIZING ABSENCES, SHAPING VOIDS AN ETHICS OF TESTIMONY AND RETROSPECTIVE ACTIONS

BY ELISA ADAMI

A MUTE APOSTROPHE IS FLYING THROUGH TIME TO REACH US,
TO BEAR WITNESS.

— GIORGIO AGAMBEN¹

In a secluded side street, in the heart of the quiet London borough of Walthamstow Village, sits the Vestry House, a two storey building of brown stock brick constructed in 1730. Today a museum devoted to the history of Waltham Forest, the Vestry House was once a workhouse run by the Vestry, a place where those unable to support themselves were offered accommodation and employment. Concealed beneath this benevolent façade of humanitarian aid and Christian charity, lies a very different reality of segregation, harsh life conditions, disciplinary violence and social control. Workhouses were Foucauldian institution of surveillance and punishment. They instituted an administrative form of biopower aimed at the regulation and management of the poorest of the society². When admitted to or brought in the Vestry House, paupers were separated from their families, dispossessed of their few belongings and forced to wear a uniform with a WP badge on the right sleeve. The material relief was dearly paid for with loss of personal identity and reduction to a forced anonymity. Paupers were segregated, muted and isolated – in other words, they were made invisible.

The exhibition *A Tourist in Other People's Reality* sets off on a journey into this forgotten history of confinement, control and repression. Using the archives as a point of departure, the artists Cecilia Bonilla, Sława Harasymowicz and Joanna Rajkowska have reflected on and experimented with the possibility of unearthing the invisible, the missing and the fragmented from within the history of the Vestry House Museum. To a more or less explicit extent, they all have tried to challenge the depersonalizing bureaucratic system of the workhouse and to overthrow the invisibility to which its inhabitants were condemned. The fuzzy shadows of the Walthamstow Paupers deserved redressing in the first place; they required visibility.

Digging into the archives, the artists could not find any trace left to testify the paupers' lives. Their expectation and desire for material traces of a human being was set against disappointing piles of administrative records. Far from returning the colour and vibrancy of a human life, the cold and impersonal accounts reported in bureaucratic papers did nothing but reinforce the analogy between paupers and goods. This lack at the heart of the archive has been challenged and partially filled in by the artists. They have put in place a dynamic caught between frustration and coercion, resignation in front of a lack of evidence and conscious fabrication of false recollections, artificial memories, deferred acts of rebellion. At stake in this enterprise, there is what Agamben would define as an 'aporia of witnessing'. In absence of survivors and testimonies, the artists themselves assume the belated task of bearing witness for those who were silenced and repressed. Bearing witness is not just an act of historical reconstruction, but it is a form of ethics. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben clearly defines the act of testimony as the practice of remaining human, of enduring inhuman conditions³. On the basis of this reading, the testimony, even if made-up and untrue, seems to offer the most appropriate strategy to challenge the inhuman form of biopower exerted in the workhouse. To reverse a power which tended towards the reduction of human beings to anonymous numbers, the artists bear witness to the stubborn residual humanity of the victims. In an effort of re-humanizing the de-humanized, they give an identity, a face, a voice to the Walthamstow Paupers, no matter how imaginary that can be.

- 1 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books: New York, 1999; 104
- 2 In this essay, I consider the institution of the workhouse as a place where forms of biopower were exercised. According to Foucault's definition, biopower refers to those techniques which, within the modern nation states were used "for the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations". Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol 1* p.140 (1976)
- 3 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books: New York, 1999



Looking back from the walls and the cabinet in the gallery space, Sława Harasymowicz's drawings are imaginary faces for faceless shadows, scraps of individuals filling an oppressive and mute void. From the archives, Harasymowicz unearthed fragments of private stories, personal cases of insubordination, administrative papers and bureaucratic forms. The resulting piece, entitled *Idle, Abusive, Unruly*, is a collection of heterogeneous and unrelated archival materials. The archive seems to have exploded and its fragments are scattered all over the room: some arranged in a cabinet, others displayed on the walls, interspersed with artist's drawings and prints. They link to one another throughout the space, resonating together sometimes harmoniously, sometimes dissonantly. Harasymowicz does by no means close in on a single reading of the archive. She does not force a common meaning upon the disparate documents; rather she invests in indefinite openness and encourages permanent clash. The apparent passivity and univocity of the archive are reversed and its contents offered for constant and continuous reinterpretation. This openness leaves room for new associations that take place in the present, that are made by us in the here-and-now. The visitor is invited to fill in the gaps in archival information with fictional narratives, imaginary tales; a way of substituting missing testimonies.

I will propose one possible interpretation, a personal reading of Harasymowicz's 'profanation' of the archive. The documents in display seem to dramatize the opposition between the depersonalizing machine of the Vestry House and the fragments of individuals caught up amongst its cogs. On one side, Harasymowicz exhibits disciplinary devices and bureaucratic forms. Blank certificates of insanity, enlarged and reprinted on Bible paper, hang on the wall and unmistakably denounce the central role of religion and belief in the control of behaviour. A framed copy of Victorian architectural plans for a panopticon rural workhouse is ironically placed above the mantelpiece. A mockery of a 'family home' display, the print points to the similarity of workhouse architecture and prison design. On the other side, the remaining fragments attest the existence of individuals. There are drawings of faces, a letter reporting an extreme case of child abuse, a 'photo' on a page of the Victorian scrapbook which shows the re-creation of an artificial family inside the workhouse. This dialectic between discipline and resistance, depersonalization and residual individuality is also supported by the very title of the piece. *Idle, Abusive, Unruly* refers to a few recorded cases of individual rebellion performed by the Walthamstow paupers. These acts of dissent and insubordination are nothing but techniques through which the inmates themselves managed to affirm their identity as human beings against the behavioural control technology of the workhouse.

Cecilia Bonilla's approach to the history of the Vestry House as a former workhouse is more lateral and tangent. The piece *METRO*, Wednesday May 29th does not contain any explicit or self-evident reference to the location where it is exhibited, although the Vestry House historical archives triggered its creation. To be precise, the work was formally inspired by a collection of scrapbooks made during WWII, which mainly consists of annotated newspaper cut-outs, combined with personal memorabilia, maps and drawings. A specific spread from one of these sketchbooks is on display in the exhibition, functioning as a sort of model and mirror of the

↑ Vestry House Museum
Walthamstow, London

Men	19
Women	22
Boys	14
Girls	13
	<u>68</u>

Archival document relating to Workhouse records
Vestry House Museum

actual artwork. Bonilla has produced a similar series of collages using cut-outs from a recent edition of the Metro Newspaper. Portraits of different 'characters' extracted from the newspaper are overlaid with pieces of an image illustrating the shocking news of a baby, found wedged in a toilet pipe beneath a shared bathroom in a residential building in China. Bonilla sees in the 'sewage baby' article a relation to the history of the Vestry workhouse. The baby is reminiscent of the Vestry House inhabitants who were metaphorically 'buried alive'. The anonymity and interchangeability of the newspaper characters, blurred and made indefinite through a process of layering, also alludes to the fact that the inmates were all masked beneath the same unifying state of Walthamstow Paupers. The resulting ambiguous portraits look like an attempt to challenge and win the invisibility and the absence of the inhabitants of the workhouse. Like Harasymowicz's drawings, Bonilla's collages are possible incarnations for invisible spirits. Using random images of characters found in a newspaper, Bonilla projects an image onto anonymous and forgotten shadows; she 'gives them a face' and provides them with an identity. The blurred and layered faces become substitutes for the Vestry's past inhabitants. Yet, their ambiguity – which makes them unrecognisable – is a warning about the impossibility of this task, a mere acknowledgement that we will never be able to recover them.

While Harasymowicz's drawings and Bonilla's collages visualize invisible ghosts, Joanna Rajkowska's attitude tends to be more tactile and acoustic. Rather than in representing absences, she is more interested in making them materially and physically perceivable. In her piece, *Architecture of Labour*, she considers this absence/presence spatially. In a set of glass slides, the artist deals with the problem of overcrowding and lack of space in the workhouse. The artist examines the mutual relationship of the paupers, and their relation with the spaces of life and labour: the way in which they were squeezed inside the building, while being exploited for their labour. Browsing through the glass slides in the empty room, a claustrophobic sensation starts to emerge, an unpleasant feeling of invisible bodies pressed against ours. All of a sudden, the weight and mass of invisible phantasms become disturbingly tangible. The work *Clogs* also aims at making the intangible tangible. What Rajkowska intends to manifest in this piece is the invisible inhuman order to which the paupers of the Vestry House were subjected. The steady, unchanging rhythm of the day, the rules that had to be obeyed, assume a phenomenal, to be precise sonic expression in this audio-installation. *Clogs* re-enacts the march of the women from the workhouse to the church, which they had to perform every Sunday. It is therefore through an application of the law, through an over-identification with the oppressive regulatory framework of the workhouse, that the inhuman order becomes visible and palpable. Moreover, we should not overlook the fact that a pair of clogs was the only object belonging to the paupers that the artists could find in the archive. In the words of Rajkowska these clogs 'asked to be used'; they wanted to bear witness, to speak for the paupers who walked in them.

The use of sound generated from a hidden source is crucial to summon up the idea of a phantasm, or a series of phantasms haunting the place. This 'phantasmagorical effect' is resumed and even intensified in the performance *Song from the Workhouse*. This piece was performed by the Polish artist Aleksandra Koziol using the so-called 'white voice' technique, typical of Central and Eastern Europe. During the performance Koziol was not visible – her voice came from a closed room, giving the sensation of resonating walls, of a speaking house. Again, as in *Clogs*, it was an inanimate, inhuman entity that took responsibility for witnessing in absence of human survivors. The obscuring of the performer also refers to the status of invisibility of the inmates, the fact that they were segregated from society. The immobility of the body, its impossibility to escape is contrasted by the movement of the sonic wave, by the ability of the voice to traverse physical barriers and enclosures. The piece can be read as a revolt of the human body to the particular form of biopower incarnated by the workhouse. In front of a technology of power that tended to the subjugation and control of the body, the revolt itself has to pass through the body, to become an embodied revolt. The temporal moment in which the revolt takes place is also fundamental. The paupers' voice surpasses not only physical but also temporal barriers, until it eventually reaches us in the present, in the moment of the performance. Re-enacting, or better enacting, the revolt of the paupers in the here-and-now, *Song from the Workhouse* suggests the possibility for a belated transfer between the victims of the past and the artist who works in the present. Rajkowska revolts for and in place of those who were not allowed to do it; she literally gives a voice to those who were silenced.

Yet what is the significance of this belated revolt? What is, ultimately, the meaning of the retrospective and anachronistic actions performed by the three artists? Who needs a reparation which comes too late, a redemption for souls lost long time ago? *A Tourist in Other People's Reality* is an apostrophe which reaches us from a three century distance and bears witness to an already faded world. Yet a retrospective and posthumous gaze is able to illuminate unnoticed

recurrences and unsettling analogies. When we consider the history of the Vestry House as a workhouse from the perspective of the present, we cannot avoid a cold shiver of recognition going down our spine. Parallelisms with other historical situations of marginalization, segregation, and dispossession of identity, strike our mind. The disciplinary institution of the Vestry workhouse preposterously emerges as a precursor to the extreme biopolitical experiment of the extermination camps. Thus the gesture of reparation towards the past is not just an empty formality, an assumption of a retrospective and powerless responsibility. By rendering new lines of examination from old conflicts and illuminating disquieting analogies, this act offers a platform for dialogue into the present. It serves as a universal warning to the violence hidden behind the most unsuspected practices and institutions.

Though necessary, the attempt to bear testimony of a faded past is doomed to remain vain to a certain extent. The exhibition both attempts and wilfully fails to represent the 'true' history of the Vestry House. The very existence of this 'true' history is challenged and questioned through continuous openings towards the fictional and potential, and the stress put on the partiality of the fragment. In the last instance, the archival documents themselves are 'unruly, idle and abusive'. They in the first place resist the creation of a unifying and all-explaining picture. In this impossibility of returning to a unique and authentic image of the past, a cast of the past as it happened, we can discover the true meaning of witnessing. The task of bearing witness is at base a task of bearing witness to the impossibility of witnessing. The attempt of making visible (or audible) the phantasms of the past should not miss the point that they were and are invisible (and silent). The artists magisterially maintain a subtle balance between absence and presence, visibility and invisibility, testimony and lack thereof. The drawings of faces are fragmentary, the collages blurred and unrecognisable, the voice universal and indefinite. Only by maintaining this opacity in the representation, only by admitting the intrinsic impossibility of the task, can the artists avoid betrayal of the past. ◀



Both pages

Archival document relating to Workhouse records
Vestry House Museum

16 Barrowes

10. New S

20 Old S^o

12 PickHoes

13 Shovells

2 Water S^o

15 Long Planks

1 Maddox

CECILIA BONILLA

BY CECILIA BONILLA

Whilst visiting Vestry House Museum's Archive, I came across a series of scrapbooks, most of them made during World War II. These books mainly consist of annotated newspaper cutouts, combined with personal memorabilia, maps and drawings. Resonating with my own interest in using 'public' images in my work, I was immediately drawn to these scrapbooks, in particular how the appropriation of mass-produced images is used to create records of personal history during particularly significant periods.

Alongside the piece created for this exhibition, I have chosen to display a specific spread found in a scrapbook from the museum's collection. I am most interested in how it combines articles and images from World War II with a seemingly 'random' image of a frozen waterfall. What interests me is how these public images, through collage, create a subjective personal narrative.

The piece *METRO*, Wednesday May 29th, both reflects my creative research into the archives' scrapbooks and the history of Vestry House itself as a former workhouse.

The collages in the work were made from cutouts from a recent edition of *METRO* Newspaper. The images are constructed by combining cut-up pieces of a photograph depicting a 'horror story' of a baby, found wedged in a toilet pipe beneath a shared bathroom in a residential building in China. These cutouts were then combined with random images of 'characters' found in the same newspaper.

For me, the 'sewage baby' article, somehow related to the history of Vestry House as a former workhouse, where its inhabitants were metaphorically 'buried alive' and following this, the characters depicted in the collages are all masked beneath the 'horror story', alluding to the former inhabitants of the Workhouse.

I wanted to keep the work within a certain degree of abstraction combined with a level of macabre humour. Whilst visiting the former Workhouse, and getting to know its history, despite its tragic nature, I experienced an uncomfortable sense of fascination, not dissimilar to my reaction towards the 'sewage baby' article.

These works promote no political agenda regarding the history of the workhouse, nor how *METRO* chooses to portray its news. They are however, an observation into the media's way of selling news, and our relationship and reactions towards them. ◀



Opposite page

Cecilia Bonilla

METRO, Wednesday, May 29th, 2013

collage on card, 1:1

SŁAWA HARASYMOWICZ

BY SŁAWA HARASYMOWICZ

Somewhere in the minutes from the 18th century Vestry Committee meeting I found a quick decision to send Sarah Plummer to 'solitary confinement with only bread and water' for her 'unruly' behaviour in the workhouse. I tracked her down in the admissions book for the same year - she was 14. There was also note of Anne Edmunds punished for being 'idle and abusive', and another record of 'an incident', a brick thrown at the Master of the House. Reading this, perhaps especially the last, anonymous entry, was a revelation to me. It was evidence that the workhouse people were not just a passive, obedient, mute mass. So the title of my series *Idle, Abusive, Unruly* is a tribute of sorts to these few (recorded) cases of 'individual' rebellion, and my work is also an attempt to pull them out of their haunting absence/presence.

The cabinet is a central piece in my series as it opens up and questions the archive, and asks what happens when an archive is 'pushed around': rearranged, re-activated, released.

The 18th century letter in the cabinet reports a case of an extreme child abuse. But the document mentions a boy and the faces looking back are female, there is no literal connection between the images and the text. The cabinet links out to the other images throughout the room. The archival 'photo' on a page of the Victorian scrapbook is not even a real photograph, but a copy, an odd image transfer, although it does hint at another reality, another social 'order'. The cabinet contents do not corroborate or 'confirm' each other, but work across multiple layers to reveal possible links, hidden clues, narrative fragments, as well as new associations that actually take place in the present, that have to be made by us, now. While the real, existing archive is my key starting point, and intuition a key working method, I am particularly interested in the permanent clash, an incongruity, within the apparent passivity of archives, which 'allow' for their content to be reinterpreted.

The mental image of people who are brought in, bathed in ice-cold water for disinfection, given a coarse uniform with an obligatory "WP" badge (*Walthamstow Pauper*) on the right sleeve and a number on the inside, who are visibly isolated from the society, made to live, work, and move within a limited space as a strictly controlled group, always 'together', brings to mind other instances of history, of confinement and control (the workhouse system had a special angle of its own: charity). And yet... the framed picture, which sits awkwardly on the mantelpiece is my take on a 'family home' display. It is a drawing-based screen print of an entrance gate I made using Victorian architectural plans of a panoptic 'rural workhouse for 500 persons' as direct reference. The print and its positioning fits in with my questions around the ambivalence of the original Vestry as, simultaneously, a place of confinement and trauma, and a refuge, 'home'.

Most of the workhouse documents are in manuscript, some sheets illegible, faded, some crossed over, again and again, and overwritten, some surprisingly neat. I found two or three printed documents - medical certificates of insanity - blank, as if still ready to use. It would have been sufficient for three people (one of them a priest) to sign such certificate to commend a person (for instance, a 'pauper') to the 'house for the insane'. I re-made these certificates as wall announcements on Bible paper. *The Correction of the House* (the title is taken from the specific type of punishment Anne Edmunds had received) is a dream/nightmare/film based on the original lantern glass slides I selected from the Vestry photographic archive, re-photographed and reordered into a sequence about the outcast, the 'Other', and about madness. Among the images is the photograph of an authentic 'ducking stool', and an engraving of a group watching a 'witch' drowning on such a chair, the crude, childish lines of the image mirroring the clumsy cruelty they represent. ◀



Sława Harasymowicz
Idle, Abusive, Unruly, 2013
image transfer on card, 12x6.5cm

JOANNA RAJKOWSKA

BY JOANNA RAJKOWSKA

Song *From the Workhouse*, *Clogs* and *Architecture of Labour* are three projects referencing the history of Walthamstow's Vestry House Museum as a workhouse. This long episode in the history of the house has left a trace on its aura and identity. I decided to work with the aura and the idea of a revolt of the human body. "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now. [Jetztzeit]" (*About the Concept of History*. W. Benjamin). If so, I thought, we should revolt instead of these people.

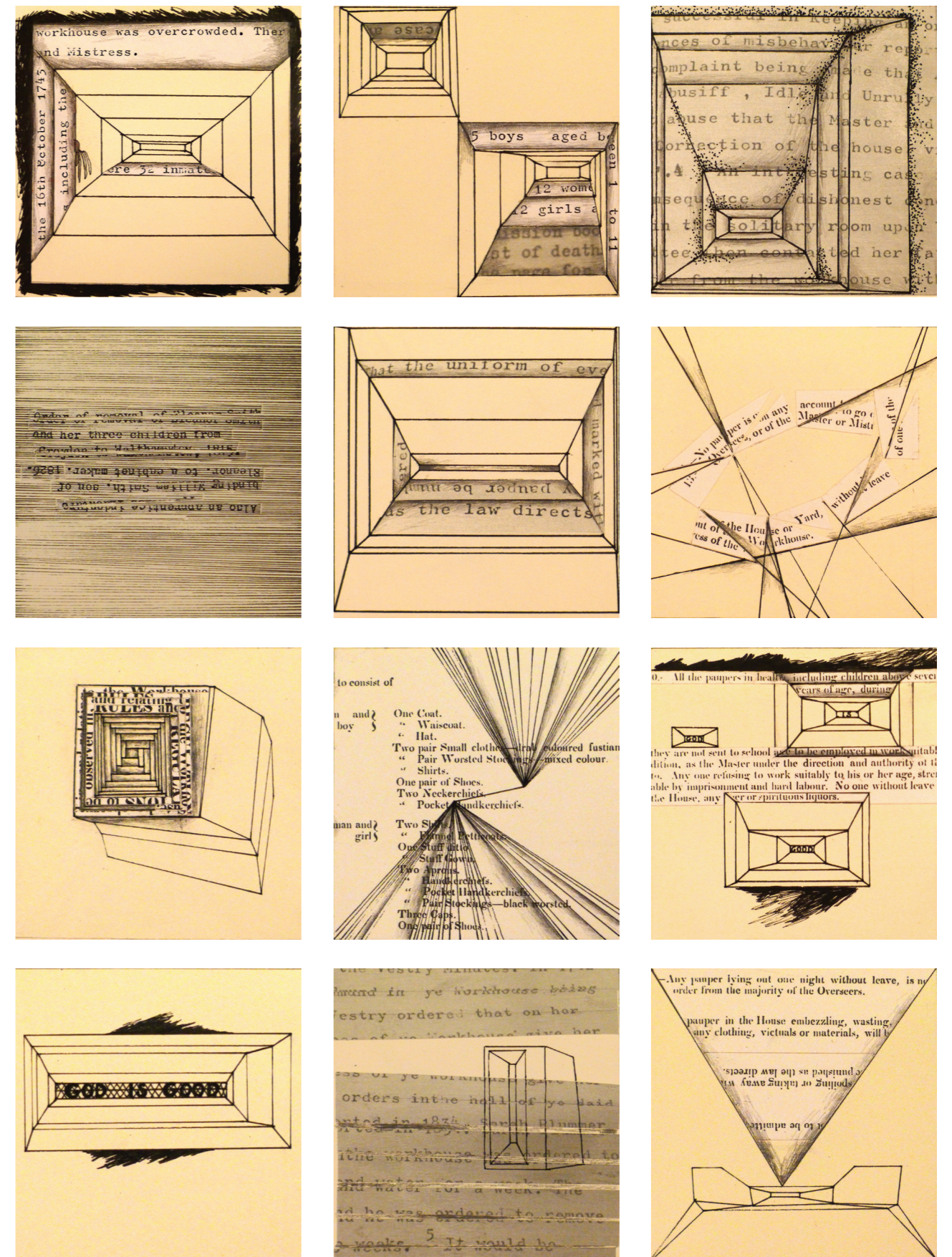
When I first entered Vestry House, I had a very strong, claustrophobic sensation of a crowd squashed inside. It was probably generated by the number of objects, narratives, maps, props and documents in the cramped space of the building. In the archival documents I read about the lives of the paupers in the workhouse: how squeezed these people were there, what possessions they were allowed to have, what rules they had to obey. The steady, unchanging rhythm of the day, the work, the separation, the confinement, the invisibility, the obedience – all these restrictions must have created a sense of inhuman order. Some of the paupers revolted against it, but not many. Nothing is left to testify to their lives, not even a single drawing or an everyday object. Just a pair of clogs. Culture, which works through the materiality of objects and documents, belongs to those who have a right to own them.

Is it at all possible to (re)create a situation in which the human body, unfree, squashed and confined, could revolt? I decided to try it with a "scream-singing" performance.

Song From the Workhouse was performed by a Polish artist, Aleksandra Koziol, who uses archaic singing techniques in her artistic practice. I asked her to perform several songs using the so-called 'white voice' technique, characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe (Poland, Ukraine and Belarus) folk music culture. This archaic "scream-singing" (śpiewokrzyk) is essentially a technique of screaming in which air is pushed slowly through the diaphragm and the throat stays completely open. Using all the body's resources as membranes to give the sound maximum clarity and strength, the white voice produces a strong, raw and 'dirty' sound. My intention was to experiment not only with an alien technique of singing but also with the language. The list of names of the paupers and the instructions regarding their everyday life became the verbal content of the songs. During the performance Aleksandra was not visible – her voice came from a closed room, to give the sensation of resonating walls. *Song From the Workhouse* was my response to the situation of the complete invisibility of the paupers. An invisible body can at least produce sounds. The scream-singing became the revolt of a body, its membranes, throat and voice strings.

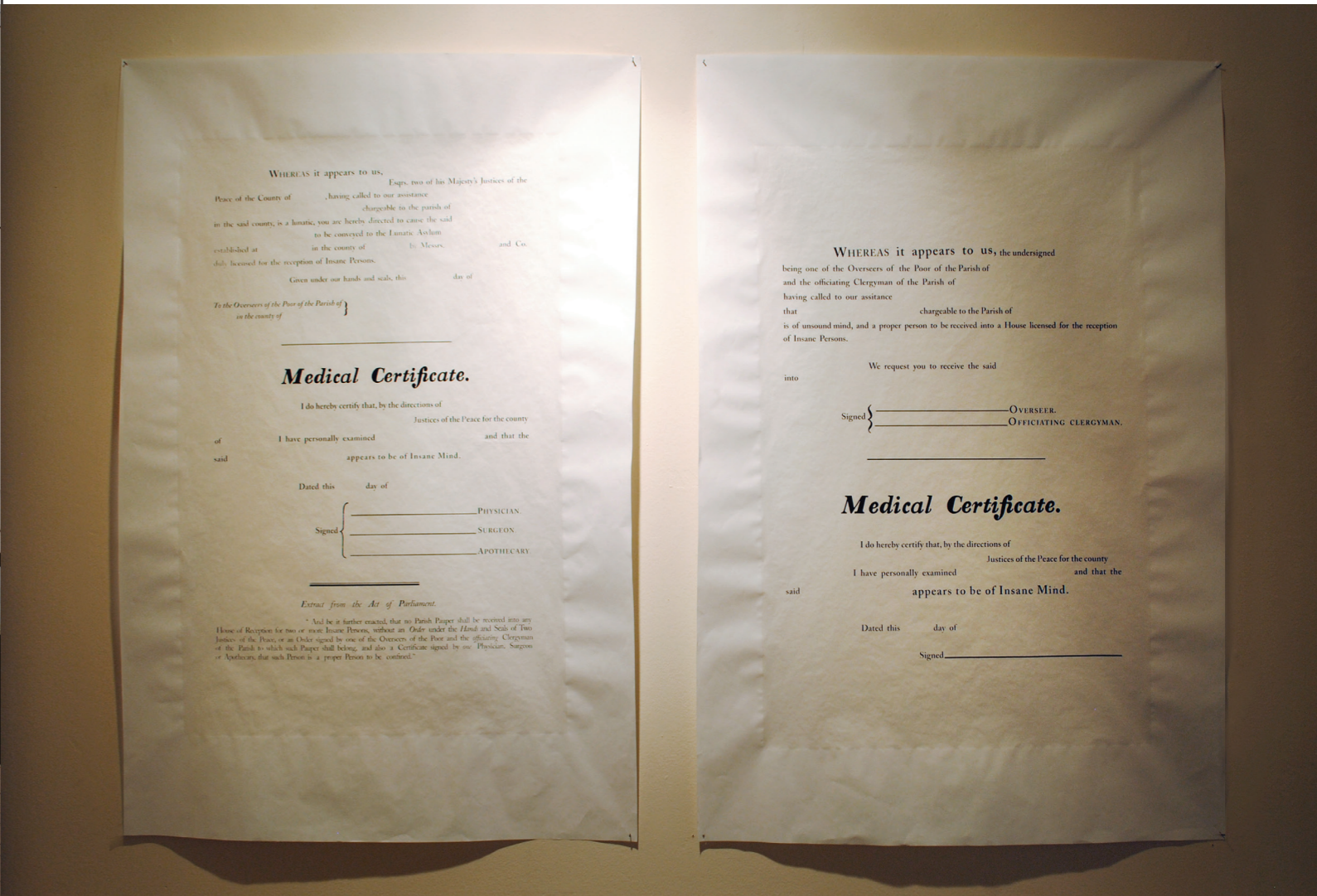
A pair of clogs, the only object that we could find from the history of the workhouse, asked to be used. The outside sound projection, *Clogs*, re-enacted, or rather enacted the march of the women from the workhouse to the church, which they had to perform every Sunday.

And finally, a set of glass slides dealt with a visual aspect of the workhouse violence: a lack of space. Up to 80 individuals resided in the space of a two-storey building. In *Architecture of Labour* I tried to examine the mutual relationship of the paupers, their labour and space to which they were sentenced. ◀



Joanna Rajkowska
Architecture of Labour, 2013,
 glass, wood, light bulb, dimensions variable
 Courtesy Żak | Branicka Gallery









Next page
Sława Harasymowicz
Idle, Abusive, Unruly, 2013
archival documents from Vestry House, drawings, display cabinet, dimensions variable

Particulars Accounts
of general expenses
commencing the 1st of
1827

1827
March
1827
2
of 1827

CC



loyalty



optimus

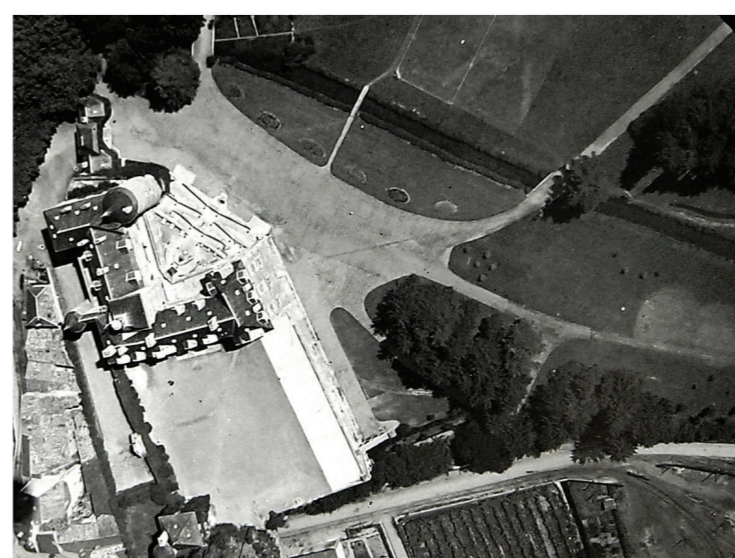
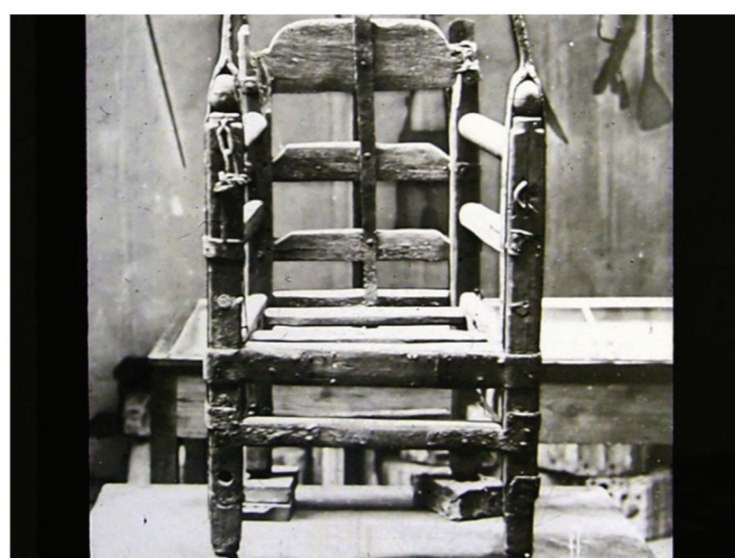
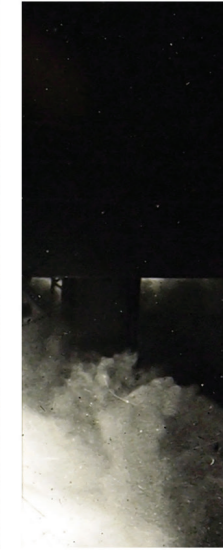
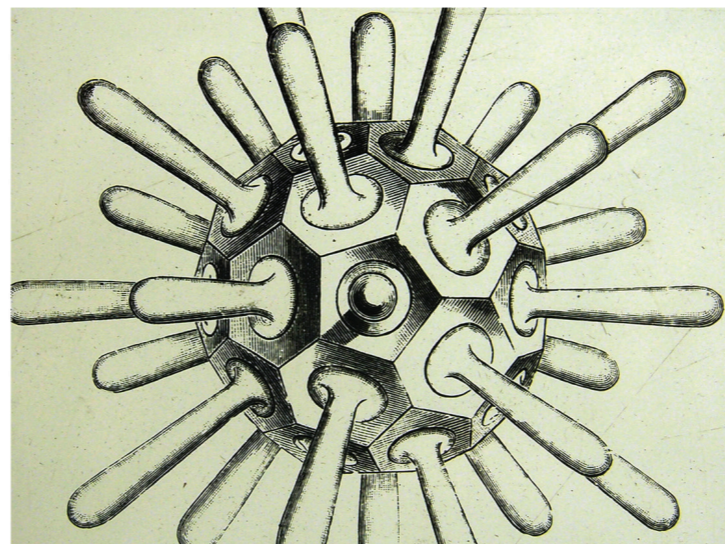
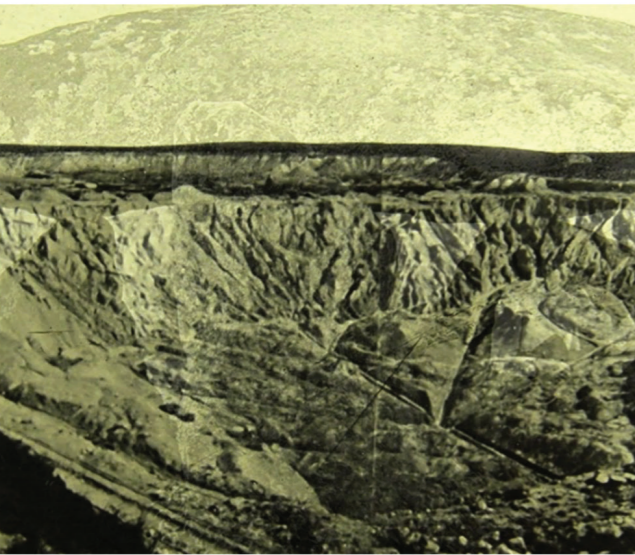
12, Duke Street, St. George's
I am sorry that I was not in the way
when your Superior called on Saturday
at the Mansion House answering
a summons from the Corps of Artillery
for all beating him, the result of which
I here send to you for the information
of the gentlemen of your Regt. whom
I understand have been written to on the part
of the mother. The case made out by the
was one of the greatest pieces of villainy
ever brought into court, it was no other
than a charge of intending to murder
him, which was done by pulling
his ears, striking him with an iron bar
over the head, striking him down stairs
threatening to knock his brains out with
a mallet &c &c all of which were
proved to his Lordship's satisfaction to
be true.



Richard
Earl of the...



Cecilia Bonilla
METRO, Wednesday, May 29th, 2013
collage on card, 1:1



Slawa Harasymowicz
The Correction of the House, 2013
selected stills from digital projection, 5'37"

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