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SLAWA HARASYMOWICZ – INTERVIEW

Interviewed by Alessandra Ferrini.

Here is the interview with Sława Harasymowicz, the third artist behind the exhibition A Tourist in Other People's Reality currently on view at the Vestry House Museum (London). Within the exhibition catalogue, we are publishing a conversation that aims at excavating the work produced for the exhibition, while here, the focus is on Sława Harasymowicz's general practice – her working methodology, her approach to the Vestry House Museum collection as well as to ideas of memory and 'the archive'.
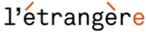

Sława Harasymowicz, *Idle, Abusive, Unruly*, 2013, archival documents from Vestry House, drawings, display cabinet. Detail

AF: In the exhibition *A Tourist in Other People's Reality* you have collaborated with two other artists, Joanna Rajkowska and Cecilia Bonilla. Together, you have explored the Vestry House Museum, and, in particular, its archive, producing an exhibition inspired by the venue. Could you tell me about what motivated you to take part in this project and how it came together?

SH: I have lived in Walthamstow for a couple of years and I was aware of the Museum. Cecilia and I had worked together before, and wanted to make new work in response to a specific archive. I invited Joanna to join the project, and Olga got on board to curate it.
The Vestry seemed an interesting place, 'domestic', inviting, and at the same time weirdly tight, claustrophobic. It is a small museum that no one really knows about. Its display seems a haphazard set, replicas of objects, for example, a wartime rations diet, military uniforms and a bikini set, and a wedding dress. All these objects seem to have been stuck on, added on. Tiny

staircases. A piano brought from somewhere else, and then a real prison cell. You just don't know what all this is supposed to be, it is all not only 'historical' but even within this, already as if out of date. But there was an opportunity to work with the Museum's archives and photographic collection, and the Museum was interested in the project, so, basically, we went there and started digging.

At first, we were just going through different little objects such as part-scrapbooks and part-diaries from the Victorian and Edwardian times, family albums and single photographs, fragments, memory residue, basically, from the Victorian era up to the 1970s-80s. But then getting to the fact that the Vestry House was built specifically to be a workhouse, and that the workhouse people left no photographs, absolutely no images, became key to me – both 'grounding' the project and opening it up, massively.

AF: 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?

SH: At first I didn't know that the Vestry House Museum, alongside the local history archive and the photographic collection, contained the 'other' archive -an archive of documents related to its original history as a workhouse. This is a completely different archive and it is located upstairs, in one of the oldest parts of the building. I spent quite a lot of time there actually, looking at the documents that it contains: lists of letters, minutes from meetings, purchases of coal for the poor, orders of removal, examinations and associated papers. All kinds of administrative documents, paperwork regulating bodies, fuel, food, time. Admission notes, lists of things, lists of people. They used to separate them into men, women, boys and girls. Their names, age, date of admission, and date of either death or discharge. It is all very precise. Their workhouse uniforms had a badge on the right hand 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 stories. There were some papers that were related to examinations of people.. And all this was uncannily linked to the contemporary debate, the discussions about social benefits, and 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', they put people in a workhouse instead.

One of the worst things I found, were the stacks of notes of 'voluntary examinations' of women. For instance: of 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, in addition, 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 almost 'flamboyant', some appear to even attempt to imitate actual handwriting. Some are barely there, like the absolutely miniature scraps of writing, as if someone was unsure how to even hold a pen. I feel all these signatures actually show different characters, they are kind of miniature traces of individuals.
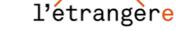
Sława Harasymowicz, Idle, Abusive, Unruly, 2013, drawing on paper, framed, 42.5x59cm

AF: I was talking with Joanna Rajkowska yesterday about the fact that there seem to be two main ways of working with an archive. Her approach was more of an embodied, instinctive reaction to the space while your approach seems to be more thorough. It seems to be a process of excavating the archive and trying 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 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. At times I felt a guilty about being so vague in my research, and questioned spending time at the archive, and requesting various sets of documents from the archivist when I knew that they were almost (but not quite) totally random. I was just pulling things which were interesting to me, from within this very specific context. But then this was my research. I do need to know 'enough', but 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 'archaeological'.

At a certain point it was just too much, I kept going through all these documents, and felt caught up in this trap, the dust, the labels, the documents repeating over and over, and ultimately all 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 working with a complex and traumatic history, but through a very subjective re-reading.

AF: I would like to know more about your working methodology, in particular with archives and also about the relation between practice and research. How does your work with archives usually evolve? What kind of strategies do you put in place in order to translate your research visually and negotiate the gap between practice and research?

SH:Working with archives is working with something that contains traces of the familiar, but at the point of disintegrating and becoming more and more alien. It is a total paradox that the Vestry, as a workhouse, a place that repressed and wiped out personal stories and identities, is now the repository of the history of many local families. Family albums, of previous generations, continue to be brought in to the Vestry. The workhouse people are literally buried under hundreds of images of others.

This project was really interesting as rather than working from 'found images' as my starting reference, I was creating those 'images' based on archival records and my re-imagining of history. The way these images are 're-set' is a result of instinctive, intuitive work, so the strategies would be, I suppose, deconstruction, and reconstruction of narrative, juxtaposition, play, re-ordering. I remember a quote from the Polish writer Witold Gombrowicz, who said that he wanted his writing to be based on observed reality, which he then 'cuts up' and reassembles, so the final result resembles reality, but is its skewed 'version'. I had actually thought about something similar, in relation to art, but when working with history and archives the 'material' is already' cut up. And I am not sure, if 'reassembling' is then the key stage, and if it the same as 'manufacturing' of narratives? Research, in its facts – and – knowledge-gaining sense, is important, because I like to work with real contexts and history, and I like to know – even if just enough.
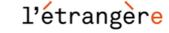
So, yes, I generally work with sets of images, but they never aim to create a linear narrative. I am interested in how images can relate to our understanding of memory, whether and how they can carry memory. I choose them intuitively but they have their own inner logic, I think I just reorder it. I think I need to add that these images or archival material I use are never 'neutral': I mean, they are neither empty on an emotional level, nor devoid of any possibility of new meaning, or a personal reinterpretation. 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.

As a quick example into a hands-on working method, I often screen-print my drawings, made using photographs as references. In a way, through this process, I get rid of the 'personal' drawing and return to the photographic print, or a 'transfer' image, in-between, neither an archival photograph nor a hand drawing. I have been very interested (or obsessed with) in the idea of transfer, and transmission, and right now I am questioning how this approaches relate to my work with the intersections of personal and familial history with public history, the distance, and return.

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, I work with ghosts and I make them look real. It is a 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: Do you think that ideas of memory and remembering are necessarily bound to material objects?

SH: The archive is not passive – it gradually reduces and transforms the material that it preserves: the familiar becomes unfamiliar, museum stock, and then yet something else. This is true both in case of public as well as personal archives, such as, for example, a family album: what happens, what emotions are triggered, when the personal and 'alive' history of your family becomes part of archive? As an artist, why do I need to disturb the archive, to play, to push the archive around? The material objects, sooner or later, all become fossilised orphan objects, representative of death. Re-using them, reordering meaning, memory, narrative, proposing new re-interpretations these objects can be made to trigger – seems the only way to stop them being representative of death and loss, and nothing else.