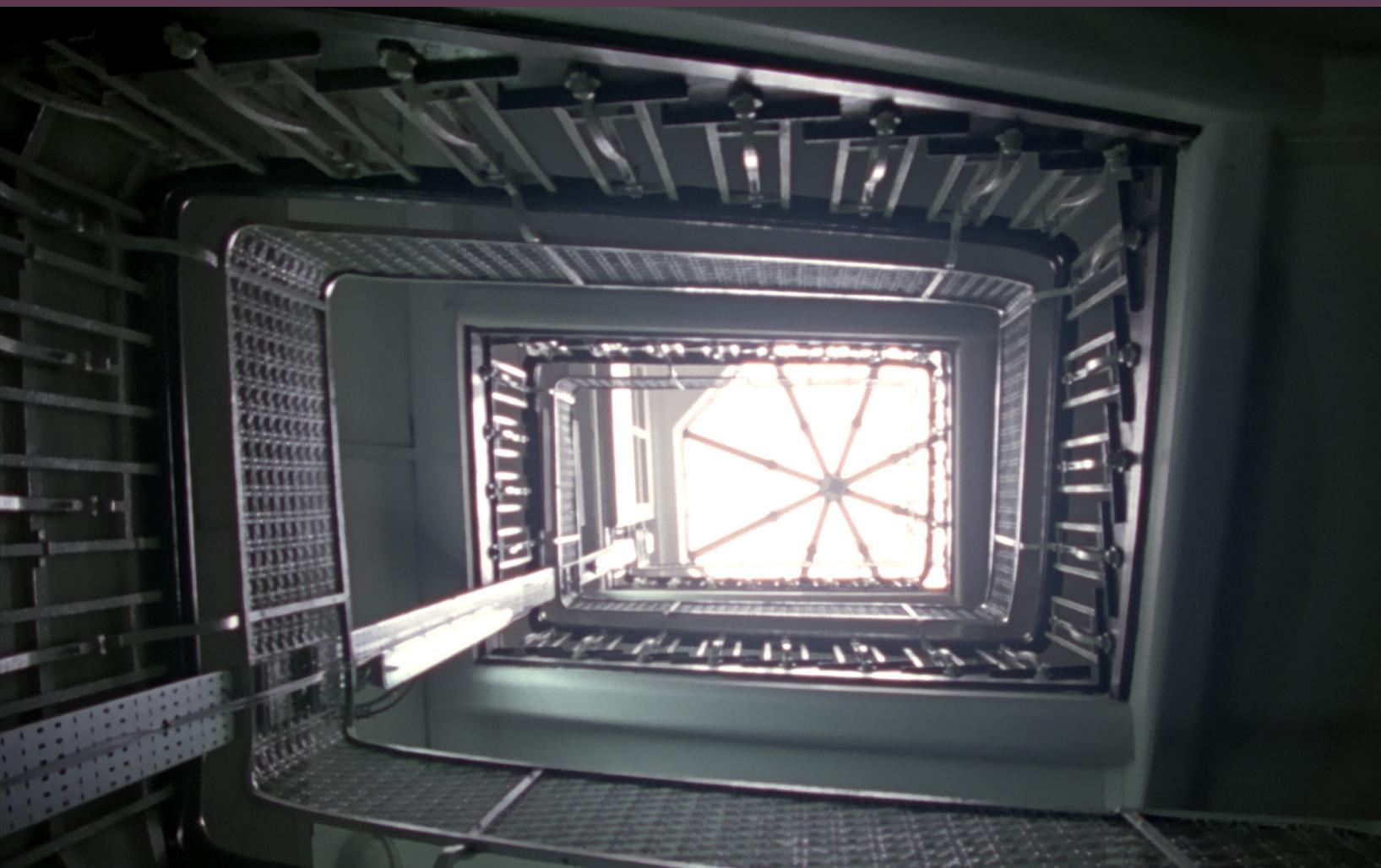


University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Royal London

By Catherine Yass



Project Details

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| Name of Researcher: | Professor Catherine Yass |
| Name of Output: | Royal London |
| UCARO link/s: | https://research.uca.ac.uk/5434/ |
| Output Type: | Q – Digital and Visual Media; artist’s film and light-box photograph |
| Year and mode of dissemination: | <p>FILM</p> <p><i>Living with Buildings</i>, Wellcome Collection, London, 4 October 2018 – 3 March 2019</p> <p><i>Falling Away – a prelude</i>, London Festival of Architecture, LFA Digital 2020, 1 June – 30 June 2020. Online event in anticipation of the 2021 exhibition (event reformatted due to the COVID-19 outbreak).</p> <p>Upcoming: <i>Falling Away</i> solo exhibition, 2021 London Festival of Architecture, Ambika P3, London (rescheduled from 2020 due to the COVID-19 outbreak).</p> <p>PHOTOGRAPH</p> <p><i>Frieze London</i>, 3 – 6 October 2019</p> |
| Key Words: | Hospital demolition, verticality, Wellcome Trust, film, disorientation, unusual perspectives |
| Funding: | Commissioned by Vital Arts, NHS Supported by the Wellcome Trust - £6,000 |

Synopsis

Royal London is a research output by Professor Catherine Yass comprising a short film and light-box photograph of the Royal London Hospital as it was being demolished. In the film, the camera follows the demolition process from inside the building, eventually being covered by rubble and ‘dying’ with the hospital. Both film and photograph focus on the building’s central staircase.

Royal London was made during a Vital Arts residency at the hospital and funded by the Wellcome Trust as part of their enquiry into the effect of buildings on health. The project builds on Yass’s concern with public institutions and her ongoing focus on verticality. By witnessing the demolition, the artist raises the increasing challenges facing NHS services, a message that remains painfully relevant in the light of the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The film was first shown at the Wellcome Collection,

London, within the 2018 *Living with Buildings* exhibition. The photograph was first shown in *Frieze London* in 2019. It was planned that the film would be exhibited in 2020 at Ambika P3 as part of a solo show of Yass’s work, in parallel to London Festival of Architecture, but due to Covid-19 these events have been postponed until 2021. Instead, London Festival of Architecture held an online event titled *Falling Away*, during which *Royal London* was shown. The event focused on the idea of verticality in Yass’s films. It was curated by Michael Mazière, director of Ambika P3, and Davide Deriu, reader in Architecture and Cities at Westminster University.

This supporting portfolio outlines the output’s underpinning research context, aims and methods. It is illustrated with the photograph and images from the production and realisation of the film. It includes the essay by Christopher Kul-Want which was presented alongside *Royal London* in the *Falling Away* prelude.

Context

Royal London is shaped by ideas of ascent and descent. The project builds on existing works such as Yass's Turner Prize nomination in 2002 for a film focused on a London construction site, as well as her more recent work *Last Stand* (2019) in which a crane is used to pan to the top of a 12 storey building in Nine Elms, London where Yass stands alone in protest at the privatisation of the sky. Her work thus centres around construction and deconstruction, dereliction and demolition.

Royal London also furthers Yass's concerns with public institutions and the role of buildings and memory. For example, her recent film *Aeolian Piano* (2017) paid homage to the iconic BBC Television Centre during its conversion into residential property. Just as *Aeolian Piano* considers the shifts that have occurred within the media and draws attention to the replacement of the BBC building with yet more 'luxury' developments, *Royal London* was made against the backdrop of social and political upheaval engendered by threats of cuts and part-privatisation in the NHS.

The research began with an Artist-in-Residency project in 2013, where Yass researched the demolition of some of the superannuated buildings at the Royal London Hospital. Royal London has occupied its Whitechapel site for over 250 years, but in 2009 a new mega-hospital opened behind the Royal London, prompting the redevelopment of the site. Yass focused in particular on the Grade II-listed Georgian building and explored the deserted wards and corridors before it underwent renovation work as part of Tower Hamlet's new Civic Centre.

Royal London Hospital was one of four hospitals built around 1740 to provide free health care for the poor, and the façade, which has been left standing, has become an iconic symbol. The hospital was built near the onset of industrialisation and marked the beginning of the idea that the state holds some responsibility for the health of its citizens. At the time when much of the building is now being demolished, so is the idea of a national body that cares for its citizens under threat, with private firms increasingly taking on these services for profit. The film is partly intended as a metaphor for this process.

For Yass, the hospital is a living organism, and while some of its buildings are being rebuilt another part of its body is being demolished. The hospital is a place equally about life and death, as a place that has witnessed births, deaths and all the states in between since 1740.

KEY TEXTS

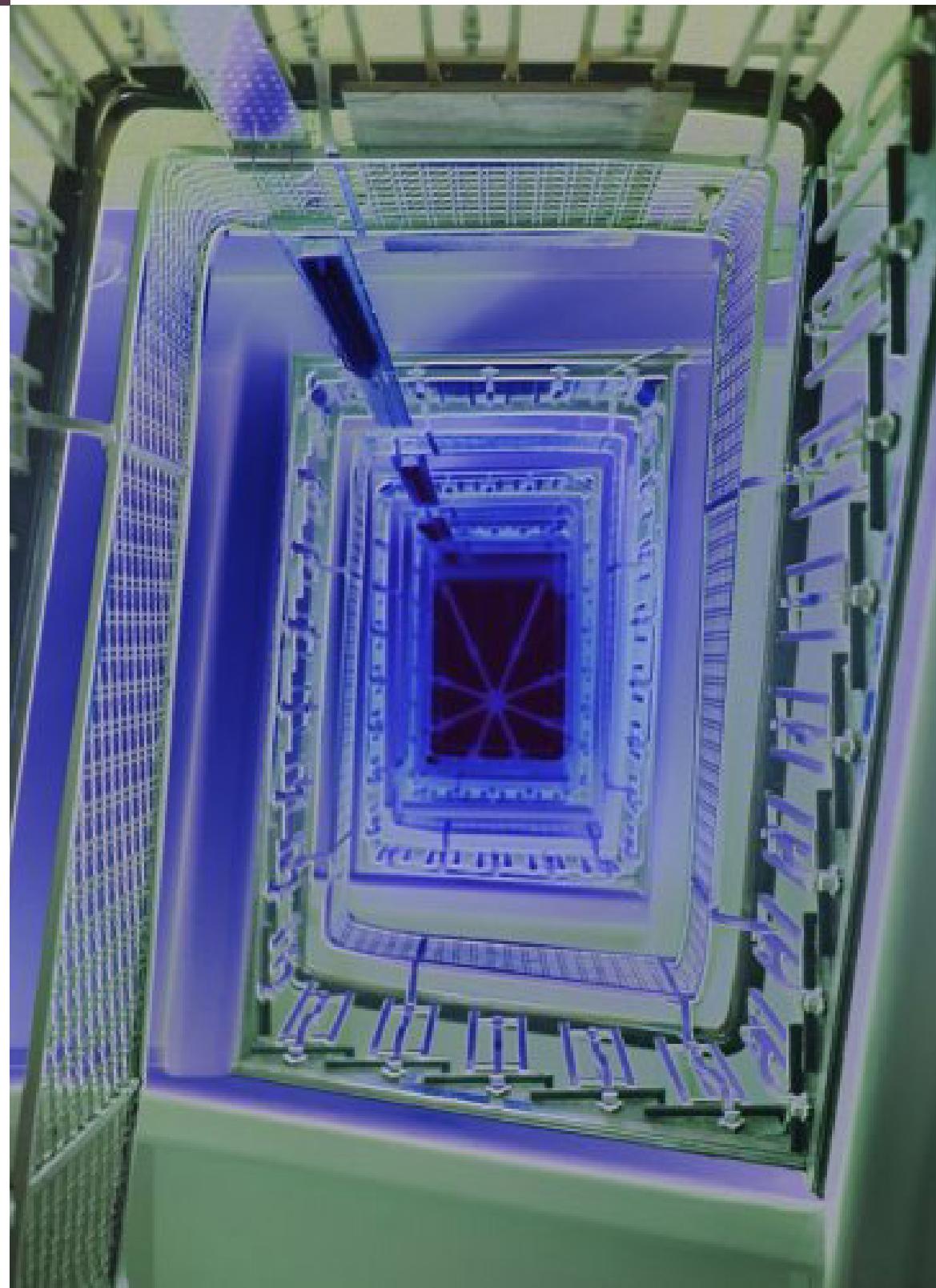
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*Catherine Yass, Royal London
(stairwell), 2013. Duratrans
transparency, lightbox.*



Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

The research prompted the question of how to develop a visual and aural language that expresses the physical and psychological state of falling apart. This could be through the materiality of the film, the way the camera was used and adapted, finding equivalent sounds, montage and colourisation.

The research also investigated how to open up wider political and social questions in a non-didactic way. Yass's hope was that by subjecting the camera to its own kind of demolition and damage, it would not speak or preach from a position of authority. Rather, the viewer would identify with it and engage with what it means for a body or a system, or a state, to collapse.

At the time of making the work the future of the listed part of the building was in discussion. Yass's research took place in the context of debates about ensuring that the building was kept for public use and not sold off as real estate. It has now been decided that the building should become Tower Hamlets Town Hall; it has been kept in the public realm.

Research aims:

Yass's foremost aim was to make a record of the Royal London Hospital being demolished. The original building façade and staircase were preserved but most of the buildings were demolished to make way for a much-needed new building.

Royal London aimed to use the demolition of the hospital as a metaphor both for our own dying bodies, and for our National body; its struggling NHS, and other contemporary threats and challenges.

Research Methods and Process

Yass's residency enabled both access to the site and the ability to undertake archival research. She spent 7 days on site, with health and safety supervision. The Barts Health and Royal London archives, made accessible through the residency, were a source of historical information and provided visual references.

Yass experimented with technical innovations. She looked at early black and white films that used extensive *chiaroscuro* in order to find a visual language. Unusual camera angles and dramatic lighting were drawn from the camerawork in films such as *Man with a Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov (1929) and the Odessa steps sequence in Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

Yass then adapted her cameras to produce four types of shot. The first was a conventional camera, the second a turning lens installed into the camera, the third a camera on a revolving pole that also telescoped up and down, and the fourth a camera lying on its back in a hole under the demolition, looking up through a glass plate as rubble fell onto the surface. Using this fourth type of shot Yass treats the camera as a protagonist, falling downstairs, looking up at falling rubble and being buried under it.

Yass's research is equally into the materiality of film and its impending obsolescence. She is interested in damage,

decay and entropy as constitutive of modernity; and film, as a medium that grew out of modernism, seems to offer a language which embodies these qualities. Yass has previously experimented with damaging still film in a demolition site, in her commission for JW3, a Jewish Community Centre built on a site which required demolition of the existing buildings. In *Royal London* the damage to the film itself is more implied, as the camera was underneath a glass plate. However, the camera was shaken in the process and the final part of the film bears the traces of the damage.

For the film's soundtrack, Yass recorded very tiny objects falling down the stairwell, such as pins, water drops, and bodily sounds. The use of these small sounds alongside the very noisy process of the demolition internalised the way the film was experienced and gave it a psychological depth to its viewers.

The light-box photograph uses a deep blue negative embedded into the image to open up a spatial depth as the camera looks upward from deep down in the basement at the bottom of the stair-well. Yass developed her technique of taking two photographs one after the other, on 5x4 plate film. One was cross-processed to produce a blue negative and overlaid onto the regular slide. The stairwell spiralling around the image produces a sense of dizziness and disorientation which is exacerbated by the abstracted colour.



Sound recording off site using the acoustics of a gymnasium

Research Contribution and Recognition

Insights and contribution:

Yass's filmic techniques demonstrate how particular viewpoints can be disorientating, producing effects that confuse which way up the camera or building is, and blurring vertical and horizontal trajectories and viewpoints. This contributes to a feeling of loss of control that can sometimes feel productive but in this context also feels deadly and deathly. In developing a visual and aural language that responds directly to its subject matter, the film encourages the viewer to identify with the camera as a protagonist. The viewer experiences the issues raised physically and emotionally, rather than as theoretical or political polemic.

In the film it is not only the hospital that is being dismantled. The letters NHS are just discernible on the dust sheets coming down with the rubble, obliquely hinting at the steady erosion of NHS services. Amidst this collapse, the hospital's title, Royal London, suggests that both London and our sense of statehood are under threat of destruction, especially in these historical moments of uncertainty (post-Brexit and amidst cultural reconfiguration). The current public health crisis only heightens the relevance of the piece.

The film and photograph have become a documentary record of the central staircase in particular, with its winding carved banisters and vertiginous stairwell. However the film is not a direct record, but rather a portrayal of the staircase as a symbol of the hospital building and its history, an organism that interacted with staff and patients, living and, in part, dying with them.

The work considers the hospital as a body, an organism that lives and dies. It was partly a mourning for this iconic building which had seen so many lives and deaths within it, and which was so integral to the lives and history of East London.

Research Contribution and Recognition

Dissemination:

LIVING WITH BUILDINGS

Royal London was first shown at the Wellcome Trust exhibition *Living with Buildings* in 2018. *Living with Buildings* examined how the structures that surround us shape our mental and physical health, in both positive and negative ways. The total number of visitors to *Living with Buildings* was 48,383.

As the curator Emily Sargent has suggested, *Living with Buildings* brings *Royal London* into dialogue with other works of art and architecture on this subject. For example, in the room before Yass's piece, visitors encounter 'a large model of a 1930s hospital, an archetype of a "modern" hospital used for fundraising and philanthropic events. Inside the model, you can see the x-ray rooms, the operating theatre and the wards: a true vision of modernity at the time. Immediately after, you encounter [Yass's] demolition video – the end of life for that building. The juxtaposition is revealing and thought-provoking' (<https://architecturetoday.co.uk/living-with-buildings/>).

FALLING AWAY

The film was screened in the online *Falling Away* event with a dedicated essay by Christopher Kul-Want.

Falling Away is co-curated by filmmaker and Ambika P3's curator Michael Mazière with Davide Deriu. The event is situated within *Vertigo in the City*, a project led by Deriu, which started in 2015 with a series of conversations between the sciences, arts and humanities. The preliminary phase, funded by the Wellcome Trust, culminated in a first symposium at which Yass delivered the keynote presentation. This new exhibition builds on the foundations laid by those early activities and is part of a wider public engagement programme that focuses on vertigo and verticality in relation to the built environment.

Research Contribution and Recognition

Follow-on activities:

EXHIBITION

The full *Falling Away* exhibition will be shown at the underground gallery of Westminster University Ambika P3 as part of Yass's solo exhibition in 2021, with a series of related screenings at the Regent Street Cinema. The exhibition will feature as one of the London Festival of Architecture's highlights. The exhibition and festival are postponed from 2020 to 2021 due to COVID-19.

SYMPOSIUM

As part of the London Festival of Architecture there will be a symposium in which the films in the exhibition and the related theme of vertigo and verticality in Yass's work will be considered (also postponed due to Covid-19).

TALKS

The film and light-box have been discussed in Yass's artist lectures at the Universities of Newcastle and Sheffield, Chelsea School of Art and most recently at UCA.

Yass also discussed the work in an 'in conversation' event with George Vasey, Curator at the Wellcome Collection, 30 April 2020 (<https://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/news/art-consultancy/artists-conversation-catherine-yass-discussion-george-vasey/>).



*Royal London as shown at the
Wellcome Collection*



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FRONT AND BACK COVERS
Film stills

