

THE ROMANCE OF DERELICTION

4 - 19 MAY 2013

OXFORDSHIRE

art
WEEKS

OVADA
oxfordshire visual arts development agency

With thanks to St Peter's College Art Fund



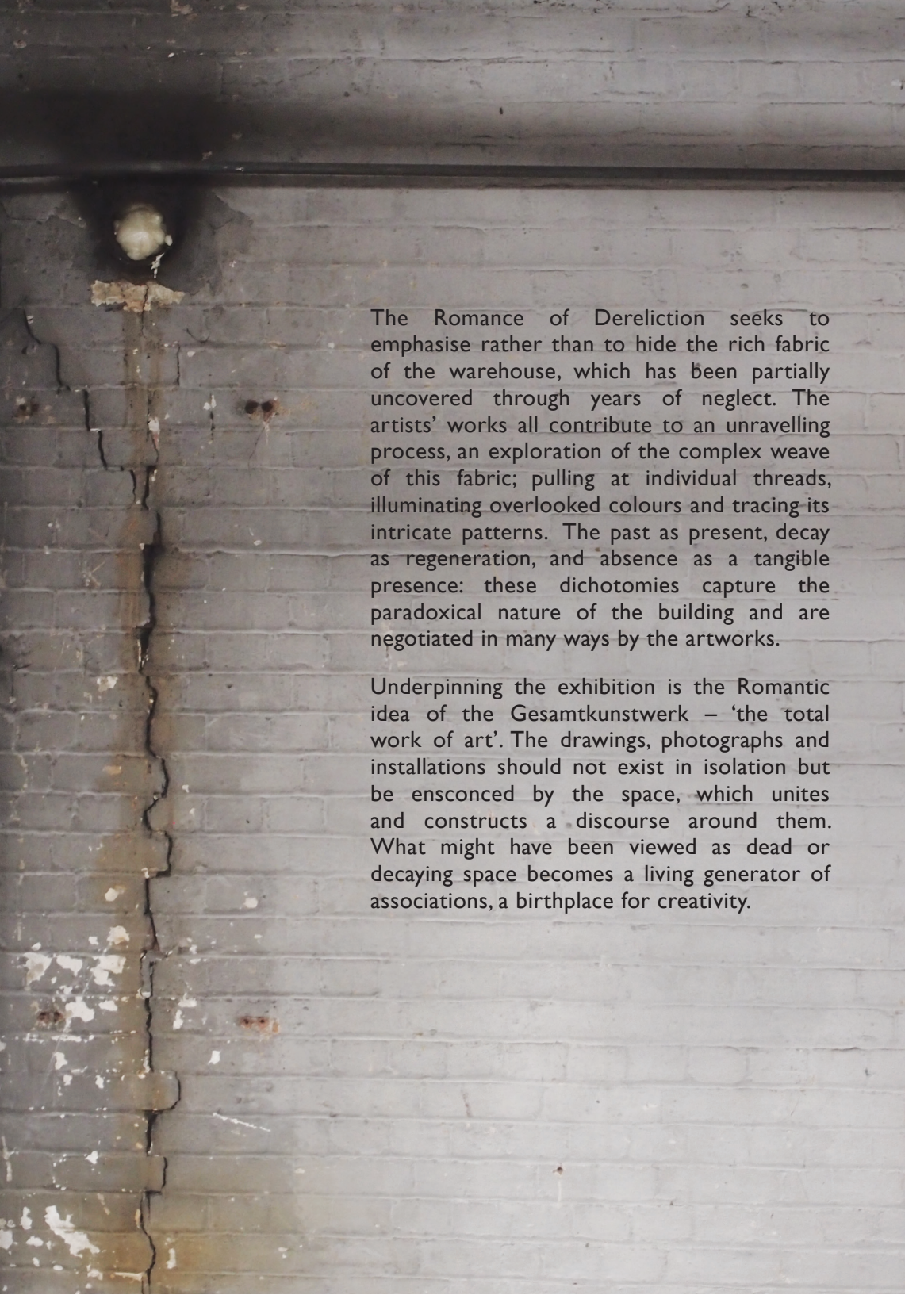
The Romance of Dereliction as a concept for this exhibition was inspired by the warehouse space. It is a blank canvas in terms of the opportunity and possibility it contains, and yet also a palimpsest, its textured walls asserting a myriad of presences. The space is a paradoxical one; its dereliction offers up the promise of creativity.



Vein-like cracks, scabbing paint, raw brickwork – these corporeal elements are the lifeblood of the building and a fertile source of inspiration. Three of the exhibiting artists, Zsuzsanna Nyúl, Emma Papworth and Mary Robinson, have generated works in direct response to this space, and in diverse ways they explore processes of recollection; lost narratives are imagined and a beauty is uncovered in the dereliction.



At the same time, the works of Aliko Braine and Robert Rapoport enter into a dialogue with the space, heightening our sensitivity to both their own materiality and that of the derelict warehouse. The building is not a passive backdrop, subservient to the artworks; it shapes and enhances the viewer's experience of them. The works in turn affect our encounter with the space. Robert Rapoport's short film, projected directly onto the walls of the warehouse, perhaps best exemplifies this relationship: the wall becomes a part of the artwork. Aliko Braine's technique of damaging photographic negatives draws attention to the technicality of the chemical process, reminding the viewer that photographs are material objects. Parallels can be drawn between the artist's method of destroying the negative, rendering the medium exposed, and the way that the derelict building, injured more gradually by time, is unmasked, its insides laid bare.

The background of the image is a photograph of a grey brick wall. A prominent vertical crack runs down the left side of the wall. Near the top left, there is a small, irregular hole in the brickwork, possibly from a nail or a pest. The bricks are aged and show some discoloration and wear.

The Romance of Dereliction seeks to emphasise rather than to hide the rich fabric of the warehouse, which has been partially uncovered through years of neglect. The artists' works all contribute to an unravelling process, an exploration of the complex weave of this fabric; pulling at individual threads, illuminating overlooked colours and tracing its intricate patterns. The past as present, decay as regeneration, and absence as a tangible presence: these dichotomies capture the paradoxical nature of the building and are negotiated in many ways by the artworks.

Underpinning the exhibition is the Romantic idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk – 'the total work of art'. The drawings, photographs and installations should not exist in isolation but be ensconced by the space, which unites and constructs a discourse around them. What might have been viewed as dead or decaying space becomes a living generator of associations, a birthplace for creativity.

ALIKI BRAINE, *Circle/Square (Homage à Wals)*
Colour photograph, sticker on the negative
35x35cm, 2011



"I HAVE ALWAYS LOOKED UPON DECAY
AS BEING AS WONDERFUL AND RICH AN
EXPRESSION OF LIFE AS GROWTH."

Henry Miller (1891-1980), American writer and painter

Dereliction is the outcome of neglect. It implies an organic process of gradual collapse in the absence of human activity – a derelict building is stripped down to a shell of its former self, which is looked upon negatively by society. This decay is considered antithetical to creativity.



The photographs of Alik Braine subvert this negative perception of dereliction. Braine's works are created by rupturing the surface of the photographic negatives through cutting, drawing and applying stickers. The damage is consciously enacted by the artist as a purposeful agent. 'Dereliction' in Braine's case is a wilful act of destruction; however, this demolition is paradoxically the creative process. As the deterioration of the warehouse is a part of the space's beauty, so destruction is intrinsic to the intrigue of Braine's work.

Dereliction does more than reveal the physical layers of a building's structure; it also draws our attention to its past lives. Through rendering a building incomplete – breaking down its façade – dilapidation reminds us of its existence in other moments. Fragments always prompt visualisation of the once-upon-a-time whole. The temporal aspect of dereliction is explored in Braine's photographs. John Hilliard's essay 'Wilful Damage' discusses how Braine's work resists becoming a conventionally 'complete' picture. In violating the photographic surface Braine destroys the illusion of an image as whole and sacrosanct, a timeless window onto another world. The photograph's existence as an object with its own trajectory through time is foregrounded.

ALIKI BRAINE, *Circle/Square Series*

Black and white photograph, sticker on the negative

120x120cm, 2011



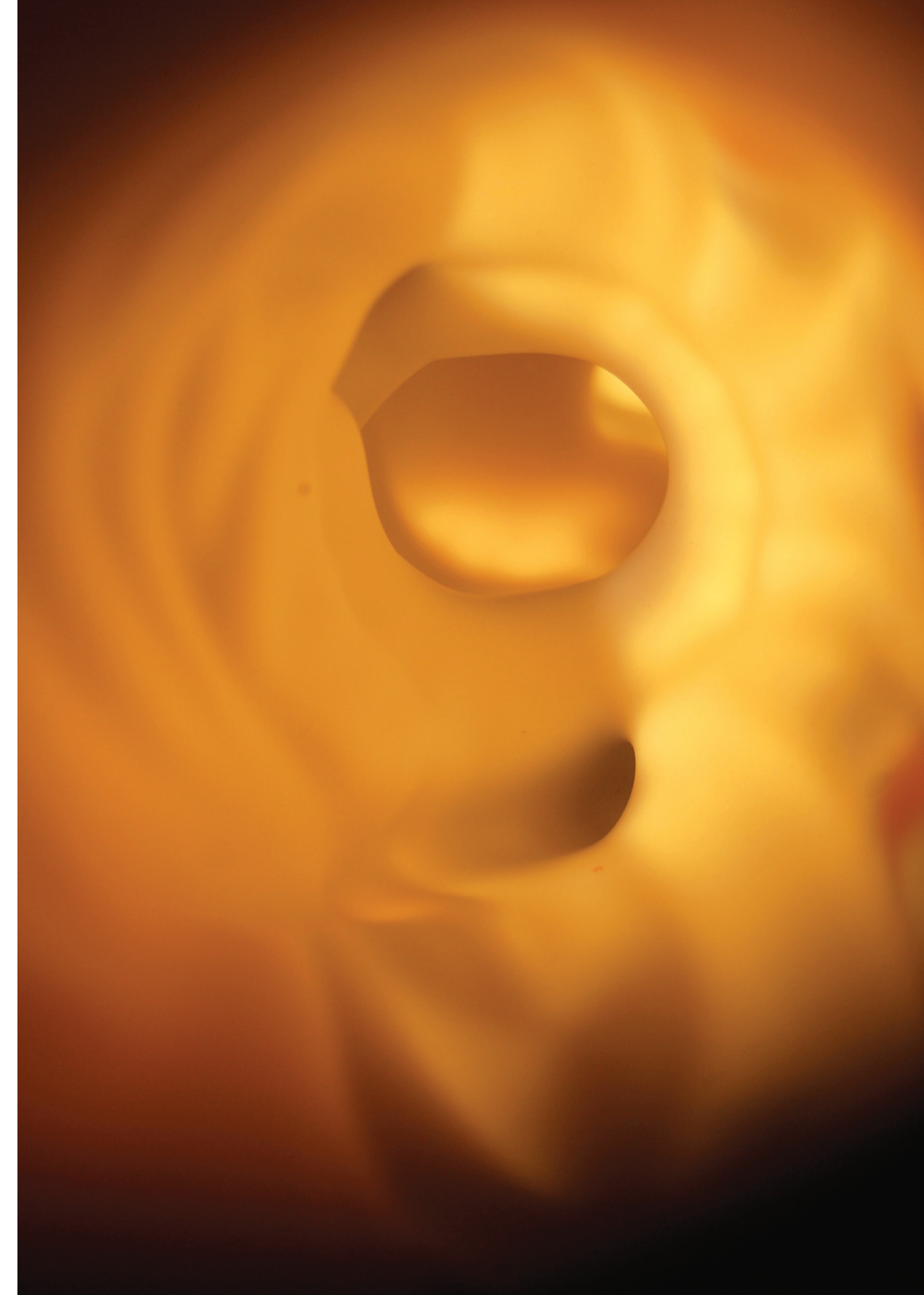
Braine's 'incomplete' images are ambiguous: the interventions on the negative create an effect that is not immediately recognisable to the viewer - we are uncertain of what it is we are looking at. Where Braine has manipulated the negative there is an absence of the original image that the viewer is incited to compensate for by engaging his or her own imagination – just as the derelict warehouse space calls upon its visitors to fill in its gaps and conjure up its previous existences. Herein lies the romance of dereliction, which always appeals to our imaginative faculty: responding to dereliction is always a creative undertaking.

"THROUGH MEMORIES, OR AT LEAST BY LOCATING THEM, I CAN FIND A PLACE WHERE I EXIST."

Zsuzsanna Nyúl exhibiting artist

Dereliction is often associated with emptiness and an absence of human presence, yet the derelict space is not necessarily barren. On the contrary, many of the exhibiting artists' works negotiate the paradox of this absence as an articulated presence.

Upon visiting the space Zsuzsanna Nyúl was immediately struck, not by the bareness of the building, but its fullness. For her it is brimming with lived traces and lost narratives. The potential within an empty space to explore streams of association and recollection led Nyúl to cast multiple black grout sculptures from the insides of hollow porcelain figures, which contain memories of her childhood in Hungary. This process is intensely personal for Nyúl whose preferred method of producing site specific art is always an act of searching for connections to the places she encounters. In giving solid form to the voids within the figurines, their supposed emptiness becomes tangible. For Nyúl, the cavity within the figures, like the space of the warehouse, is saturated with memory and it is this that she desires to give configuration to.



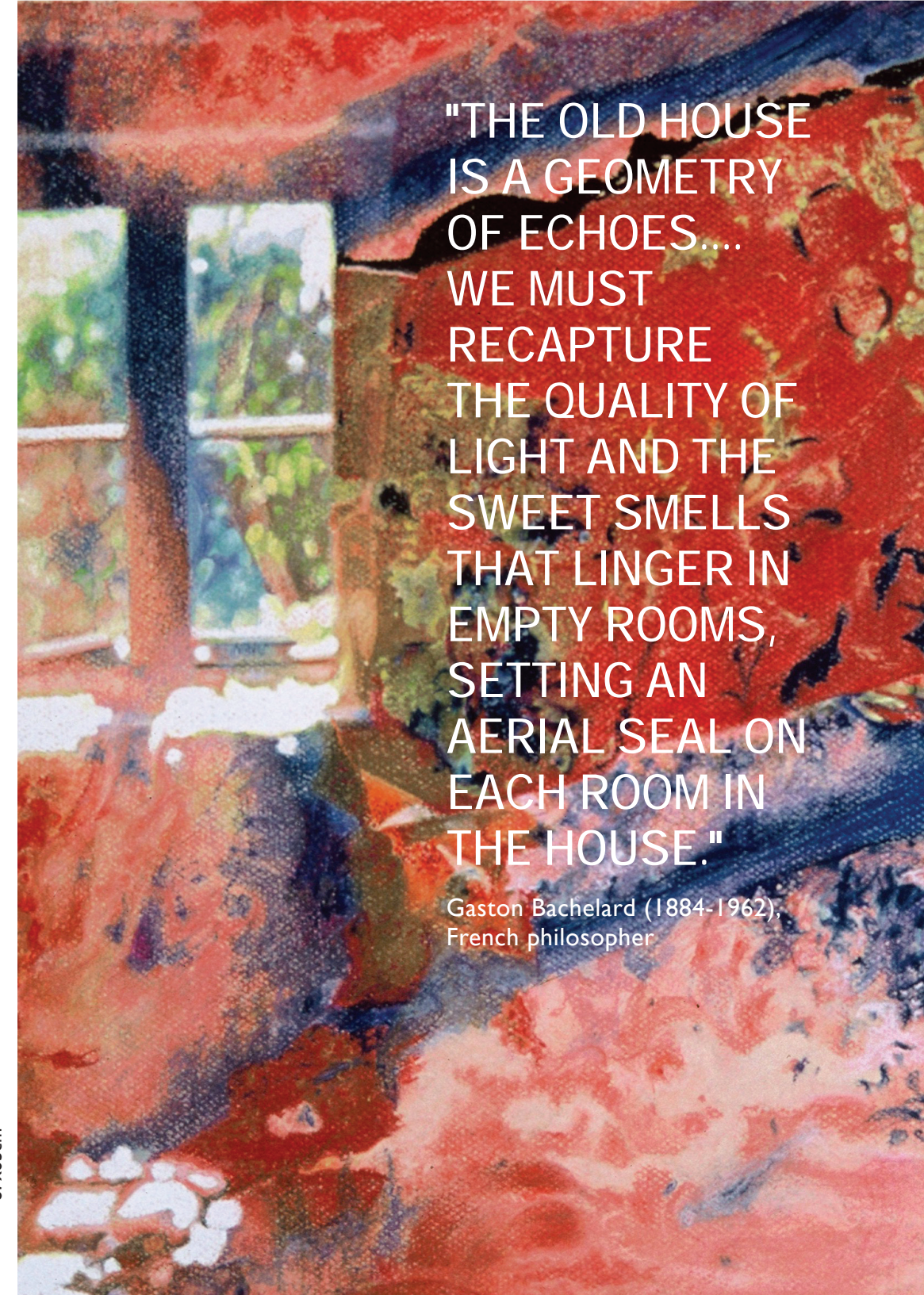
ZSUZSANNA NYÚL

Black grout sculptures

Variable dimensions, 2013



Accompanying Nyúl's sculptures is a piece of video. Recalling an endoscopy, the abstract shapes are in fact footage of the insides of the porcelain figures prior to casting, rather than the internal organs of a human body. The less tangible medium of video alongside the quantifiable black grout sculptures embodies the dichotomy of absence and presence, emptiness and fullness that is so central to Nyúl's work. Yet, the recording of the hollow space within the figures shows it to be the opposite of empty. The camera charts a womb-like tunnel pulsating with colours and light; we encounter the space as a living entity bustling with memory. This returns us to the idea of the emptiness encountered in dereliction as something not dead, but full of vitality and the potential for creativity.

The background is a painterly, impressionistic image of an interior space. On the left, a window with a dark frame looks out onto a lush green landscape with trees. The interior walls and floor are rendered in warm, textured brushstrokes of red, orange, and brown, suggesting a rustic or aged environment. The overall mood is nostalgic and evocative, complementing the text about the 'old house' and 'echoes' of the past.

"THE OLD HOUSE
IS A GEOMETRY
OF ECHOES....
WE MUST
RECAPTURE
THE QUALITY OF
LIGHT AND THE
SWEET SMELLS
THAT LINGER IN
EMPTY ROOMS,
SETTING AN
AERIAL SEAL ON
EACH ROOM IN
THE HOUSE."

Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962),
French philosopher



Mary Robinson's works relate to the philosophical musings of Gaston Bachelard in his *The Poetics of Space* (1958). Bachelard reflects upon the ways in which we experience our environment, focusing in particular on the importance of setting as both a trigger for our memories and an active force in shaping them. For Bachelard, space must be foregrounded, elevated to its rightful place in art. Robinson adopts the same outlook, probing derelict space as a stimulus to recollection. The title of her pastel drawing *The Oneiric House* alludes directly to Bachelard's house of dreams, which is the crystallisation of his thoughts about space and memory. Robinson's ambiguous depiction of an interior space weaves together abstract forms and colours, evocative of the intertwining memories that a 'poetic' space is capable of arousing.

The works highlight an aesthetic of dereliction. In addition to her existing body of work exploring worn out buildings and Bachelardian ideas about setting and recollection, Robinson has produced a number of drawings that respond directly to the warehouse. These delicate drawings illuminate the visual appeal of the architectural details, unearthing the intrinsic beauty that can be found in the state of decay. *The Wallpaper* teases out a pattern from the stains and fractures that decorate the walls of the warehouse. The disrepair is reconsidered and romanticised from the starting point of its distinctive aesthetic. Robinson's photographs *Wall Rose* and *Wall Spine* equally pick out specific forms for the viewer to appreciate. *The Romance of Dereliction*, in its entirety as an exhibition, shares this intention of accentuating the visual quirks of the warehouse's dereliction.



MARY ROBINSON, *Wall Rose* and *Wall Spine*, Colour photographs

ROBERT RAPOPORT, Frames from short film *A Social Script*, 2010



"THE TERM DECAY AS APPLIED
TO ARCHITECTURE IS COMMONLY
ACCEPTED AS A NEGATIVE STATE
FOR A BUILDING TO EXIST IN."

Zach Fein, photographer

In Robert Rapoport's film, *A Social Script*, the negative connotations of dereliction are once again subverted; an otherwise defunct space becomes the locus for imaginative play and Romantic creativity. Shot in a redundant slaughterhouse-turned-art space, the setting has affinities with our warehouse.

Decay once again becomes a stimulus for creative engagement. The ancient architectural fragments scattered across the floor allude to a continuing fascination with tracing a past through the crumbling and incomplete remnants that survive. In the meantime, the writing on the peeling walls quite literally resembles a palimpsest and also recalls the 'script' of the film's title. The building becomes the situation for a social experiment involving human bodies and material objects. Together, the props and the space are the script, the raw material with which the actors improvise.



Once again the ambiguous nature of an empty, derelict space creates the sense that something is missing; the difficulty in identifying what is absent relies on the imagination to take control. The pinhole aesthetic leaves the boundaries of the room in darkness, outside our visible range; the dancing shadows on the wall accentuate the sense of mystery intrinsic to a defunct space. Cuts between an empty room to shots filled with people clapping and jostling, making all manner of noises, explores the inherent dichotomy of presence and absence within derelict spaces. Even when unpopulated, the space is not empty: it is not full of actual shadows, but shadows of the past. In Bachelard-esque fashion, the anonymous actors participate in the social script, they each bring themselves to the space, continually altering it.

Projected onto the wall of the warehouse, Rapoport's film illuminates the experiential nature of the filmic medium. Although the reel of film is an object, as an art form it is an encounter that happens in time and in space, irrevocably intertwined with the environment in which it is viewed. The materiality of the warehouse and its derelict condition is highlighted by the film's projection onto its walls, actively provoking an understanding of the film in the light of decay and creative regeneration.



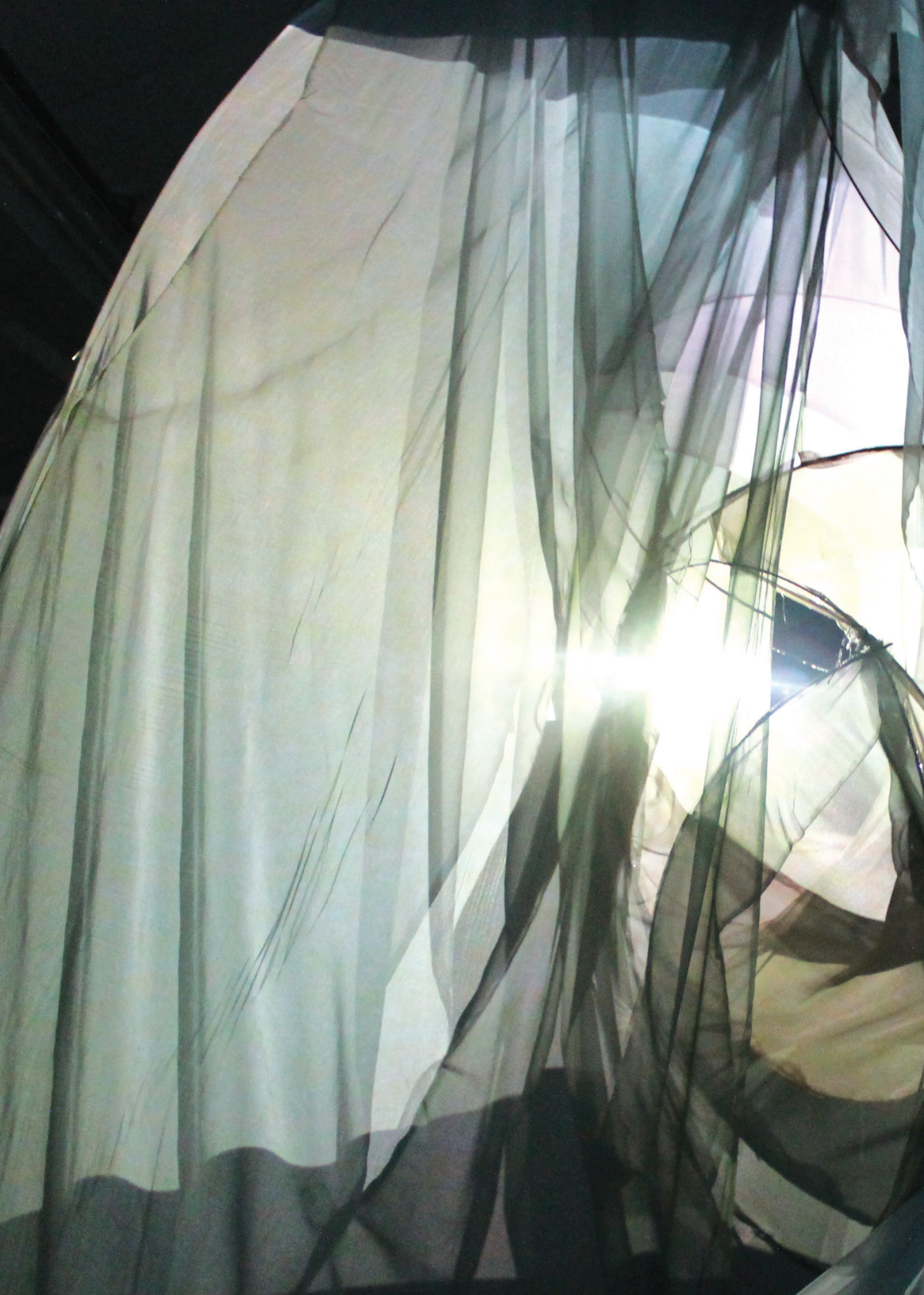
EMMA PAPWORTH


Wire, fabric and light projection
Variable dimensions, 2013

A kin to Nyúl and Robinson, Emma Papworth explores paradoxical elements within the warehouse: the sense of something intangible as very much present, concrete and real. Papworth's textile-based, wire-suspended sculpture utilises the open space as a material in itself. The hanging draws our attention both to the emptiness of the interior and the structural elements to which the installation owes its support.

The billowing and somewhat otherworldly nature of the sculpture is distinctly Romantic. The projection of light creates a flickering effect on the gauze-like hangings, throwing rippling and unintelligible forms across the warehouse walls. The result is ethereal; the indefinable colours and shapes dissolve across the surfaces of the building.

Papworth's installation is crucial to the transformation of the space into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Hanging from the beams, her works connect the two levels of the warehouse and weave together the various exhibits.





THE ROMANCE OF DERELICTION: AN ALTERNATIVE TO WHITE CUBE CURATION

We visited the warehouse and quickly felt that this curious space needed to dictate our curatorial approach. As students of the History of Art we are accustomed to the 'gallery space', the 'white cube' where the environment is neutralised and devoid of character - subservient to the artwork. This is the norm in central Oxford; it is rare to find exhibition space that has not been sterilised and this potential really captured our imaginations.

We have sought to highlight the visual quirks of the warehouse. This exhibition is moulded by the beauty and visual interest of the dereliction, not covering up the building's rich fabric but instead encouraging artists to create in response to this.

By emerging curators, Hannah Clark, Emma McKinlay and Rosemary Turner

BUILDING NOTICE.

CITY OF OXFORD



THIS IS TO GIVE NOTICE,

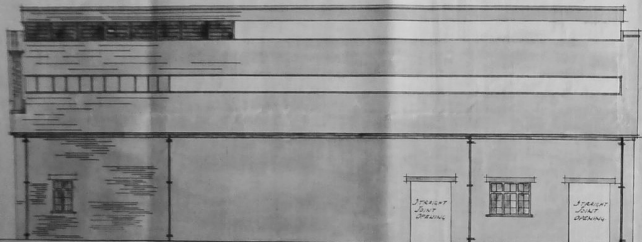
That it is my intention to commence building in accordance with plans deposited herewith, and with the following description —

1	Nature of intended structure	- - - - -	<i>Proposed Additions to "Hide & Skin" Market.</i>
2	Situation of ditto ditto	- - - - -	<i>Osney Lane Oxford.</i>
3	Level or intended level of Cellar, or lowest floor, with reference to surface of Street	- - - - -	<i>As Existing.</i>
4	Width of frontage abutting on Street or Road	- - - - -	_____
5	Open Space at the rear exclusively belonging to the site	- - - - -	_____
6	Materials with which walls will be built	- - - - -	<i>Bricks & Mortar.</i>
7	Materials with which roofs will be covered	- - - - -	<i>Slates.</i>
8	How the property is to be Sewered	- - - - -	_____
9	What Provision is to be made for the Surface-Water Drainage	- - - - -	<i>In 15 Existing.</i>
10	Subsoil Drainage, if any	- - - - -	_____
11	How supplied with Water	- - - - -	_____
12	Number of Waterclosets	- - - - -	_____
13	Name of Owner	- - - - -	<i>Messrs Underhills.</i>
14	Address ditto	- - - - -	<i>158 Edmund Str. Birmingham.</i>
15	Name of builder	- - - - -	<i>Not yet decided.</i>
16	Address ditto	- - - - -	_____
17	Remarks	- - - - -	_____

N.B.—The plans to be sent with this Notice must be delivered before 11 a.m. on the Thursday preceding the second and fourth Monday in each month, and be drawn in ink on cloth or tracing linen to a scale of not less than one inch to every eight feet. They must include a block plan drawn to a scale of not less than one inch to every forty-four feet.

Where there is a public sewer in the street or road near the site, the closets and sinks are to be in all cases connected with the same, but the water from the roofs and yards is to be drained off separately.

Signature of Applicant.....*J. R. Wilkins*.....*Architect*
Residence.....*4, Magdalen Street Oxford.*..... Date.....*May 18th 1950.*

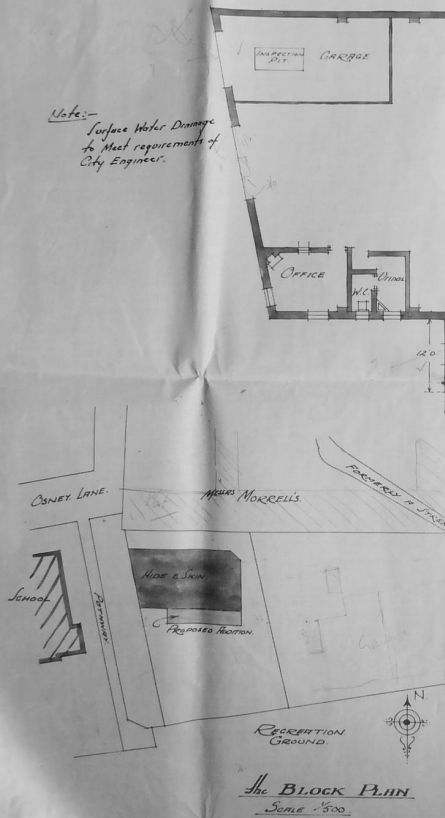


THE SOUTH ELEVATION

PROPOSED ADDITIONS TO

OXFORD FOR MR.

Note:—
Surface Water Drainage to meet requirements of City Engineer.



CITY ENGINEER

REPORT ON BUILD

Deposited by.....*J. R. Wilkins*.....
For.....*Additions to "Hide & Skin"*.....

Class of Building.	- <i>Market</i>
Requirements as to Building Byelaws.	<i>Surface Water to</i>
Building and Improvement Lines.	<i>Col</i>
Drainage and Sewers.	<i>Surface Water to</i>