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‘Envisioning the Past: Art, Historiography and Public History’<sup>1</sup>

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Though the roots of public history in the UK lay outside the academy, public history is becoming an established feature of our discipline.<sup>2</sup> Whereas in the United States, ‘public historians’ are practitioners working at heritage sites and museums and handbooks of public history books are directed at ‘nonspecialists’ (those outside the academy), several departments of history in England now have posts and programmes in public history and the growing scholarship is written by and directed at practising professional academic historians.<sup>3</sup> The wider purpose of history is not a new subject, of course. Marc Bloch begins *The Historian’s Craft* (1954) with the question, ‘Tell me, Daddy. What is the use of history?’<sup>4</sup> Yet there is no doubt that recent developments in ‘public history’ – listed as a field of research in both the Research Assessment Exercise of 2008 and the Research Excellence Framework 2014 – are a direct response to wider policy changes of the UK government from at least 2007. This was the context for the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s (HEFCE) decision to assess the wider societal ‘impact’ of academic research in REF2014.<sup>5</sup> Professionally and discursively, UK academic historians are not segregated from a defined body of ‘public historians’.

This does not mean that all academic historians are public historians, even less that they should be. It does invite historians to engage thoughtfully with the question of the purposes of public history, though. Whilst there is a growing body of work on the uses of history, this is a fast-moving field of practice and many works are already out of step with important developments in this area, notably the co-produced and collaborative projects that

differ in substantive ways from public history as dissemination or as contributions to public debate.<sup>6</sup> We are familiar with the scepticism, even downright hostility, aimed at the new ‘impact agenda’ of REF 2014.<sup>7</sup> In this essay I wish to discuss the uses of public history within a broader and less sceptical frame of reference of ‘public engagement’.<sup>8</sup> I will focus on the uses of public history both for the public and for historians. First, I will argue that we need to extend our understanding of public history and its uses by moving past the dominant focus on ‘learning lessons’, ‘public debate’ and ‘transferable skills’. Public history can and should draw more directly on the arts elements of the discipline, providing inspiration for creative thinking in the public sphere. Second, I will argue that public history can invite academic historians to consider the nature of their discipline anew and to refresh their own practice.

The abiding theme of recent work on public history in the British context is public political debate. John Tosh’s important *Why History Matters* (2008), describes a number of different forms of public history: the dissemination to the public of academic research, the involvement of professional historians in community-based ‘amateur’ history projects (where those academics are usually ‘peripheral’) and history written for corporations and the state. Yet Tosh focuses specifically on what he calls ‘critical public history’: ‘historical writing which addresses a general readership with the intention of fuelling public debate’.<sup>9</sup> He exhorts academic historians to inform the electorate, to give historical perspective to current issues, to underline ‘the practical claims of their discipline’ and to make history once again ‘a citizen’s resource, essential to social awareness and political choice’.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Tosh sits in a well-established British tradition in which, following professionalization during the later nineteenth century, public history delivered specifically national and political history.<sup>11</sup> According to Raphael Samuel it was precisely this professionalized disciplining of ‘History’ that flattened the potential of public history, aiming to restore the past as it happened whilst

leaving the imagination of the historian to one side.<sup>12</sup> Inspired by these earlier exemplars, Tosh's vision nonetheless brings public history into the twenty-first century. Historians should not provide historical certainty but informed historical debate as a vital component of the broader feature of democracy, popular debate and argument.<sup>13</sup> Responding to Pat Thane's calls for historians to be more engaged in policy decision and public debate, Pamela Cox argues similarly that a generation of History researchers schooled in cultural history and relativism can contribute in part by emphasizing that the discipline 'delivers partial rather than complete knowledge'.<sup>14</sup> Taking a critical view of such evidence is essential in, she says, 'a world that is increasingly ruled by evidence'.<sup>15</sup> Keeping the critical skills of historians central to public policy is vital. Yet we come to an understanding of the world not only through a sceptical assessment of evidence. Evidence-based ways of knowing are mediated or accompanied by – even subordinate to – others. This is as true of the 'public' as it is of academic historians. It is these other ways of knowing the past that I wish to explore further in the rest of this essay. I will focus in particular on the value of art's expressive power and its ability to pose new questions and provide new answers for our understanding of the past.

To do so, I draw upon my recent experiences of being 'Academic in Residence' at Bank Street Arts (BSA) in Sheffield. BSA is an arts centre housed in a row of buildings originating from the late eighteenth century. The residency was prompted by my research on men and the house in eighteenth-century England and my initial curiosity about exploring this within the physical space of BSA. Since September 2011, I have collaborated with the Director (John Clark) and over twelve artists working on three dedicated exhibitions, several other related displays of artworks and a co-produced book, the creation of an archive at BSA and (to date) seven student placements, all centred on the history of the buildings. Whilst museum curators and heritage practitioners are practised at artist-academic collaborations, professional academic historians do not routinely collaborate with artists. Our position is a

distinctive one, I would argue, partly because the practices and outputs of art seem to differ so wildly from our own. My collaboration with BSA was distinctive also because of the nature of BSA as an organization. It is a small and thoroughly independent arts centre that generates its own income (through renting studio and gallery space, for example) and applies for short-term project funding from a range of sources. The result is a freedom of operation for those working at the centre and an extremely flexible external partner, but also very limited resources. The 'Artists in Residence' programme offers no funding, for example, but instead access to studio and exhibition space. Whereas I am in a permanent salaried position, the artists mentioned in this essay gave their time for free.

The residency has several aims, though these were refined during the project.<sup>16</sup> First, we sought to improve the visibility of and cognisance of history at BSA. This reflected a genuine interest on the part of Clark to find out more about these buildings, whose interest was 'absolutely on the history side', but it was also designed to support future external funding applications (notably to the Heritage Lottery Fund).<sup>17</sup> We also wanted to explore the model of Academic in Residence and new kinds of relationships between historians, artists and arts centres. Finally, we sought to generate an archive of material for current and future artists, enriching their site-specific work at Bank Street and thereby making the general visiting public better aware of the history of Bank Street and its immediate vicinity. The project began with research on the buildings and their inhabitants. Undertaken by myself and seven History MA students (conducting Work Placements at BSA), this historical research traced the owners and occupiers of the buildings from the 1790s.<sup>18</sup> The work engaged histories of work, gender, class, suburbanization and professionalization but is a valuable piece of restorative local history rather than a historiographically significant study relevant to these wider fields. Nonetheless, the findings were very important for BSA. First, the work showed that buildings on the site stretched back further than previously thought (the 1830s).

Second, and in contrast to the view that the buildings had been predominantly used for business (as they are now and have been in living memory), the records showed that for most of the time they had been occupied as both home and work, housing a broad mix of trades and occupations. Third, it was clear that constructing a complete and final list of past residents was more difficult than Clark had envisaged. Gaps in the historical records, uncertainties about changes in house numbering and a complicated history of construction across the site meant that the historical research would likely be incomplete and patchy. I felt it was important to underline this in my ‘official’ history of the BSA buildings, ‘history is always provisional and contingent. It is limited by an archival and documentary record that is itself already socially constructed’.<sup>19</sup> These three findings were communicated in the preliminary exhibition, ‘The History Room’, in January 2012.<sup>20</sup> Amateurish in materials, the exhibition nevertheless showed not just results but the gaps in our knowledge. Conforming to many works on public history which advise showing the process of academic history to the public, it was an investigative display that showed rather than hid the mechanics of research.<sup>21</sup>

Alongside this programme of historical research and dissemination ran the second strand of the project, the creation of new art works inspired by the past. This artistic strand had two phases and I will discuss examples from each in what follows. Yet it is important to note that from the beginning, all the work with the artists exceeded any simple uni-directional model of ‘dissemination’ or ‘knowledge transfer’. These were practised artists who had no interest in simply presenting other completed work in a new medium. From my perspective, their aim was to use their own artistic techniques and styles to interpret the past – or the historians’ reconstruction of it – for themselves and others. Collaboration was a touchstone for the group, as is often true for public history, particularly public engagement and co-produced projects, as well as for much of our historical research practice.<sup>22</sup>

In the first phase, I worked with three artists to create the exhibition, ‘The House of Secret Histories’ (May-June 2012). The collaboration with three artists – Angelina Ayers (a creative writer), Ian Baxter (a sound artist) and Katherine Johnson (a visual artist) – produced work that imagined absence, materialized power and recreated lost soundscapes and it did so in ways that were as effective as any piece of academic historical prose. [FIGURE 1] Previously a nurse, the creative writer Ayers was caught by the juxtaposition of the visibility of the well-known surgeon and obstetrician Jackson and the occlusion of his wife by the historic record. Her curiosity could not be satisfied by the historical research and her response was to use her writing to imagine the life of a real past female resident of the building. She chose Louisa Jackson, the wife of the surgeon William Jackson who practiced at Bank Street in the early nineteenth century. Her installation was a set of Louisa’s letters displayed in a glass cabinet, with the copies fixed to the wall. For this imaginative recreation, she drew upon my historical expertise and also undertook her own research. As she put it, she needed to know the things Louisa would have known: ‘That voice needed to belong to the period.’<sup>23</sup> Not surprising, Ayers reported, ‘I learned lots of stuff about that period ... and I got to create a woman.’ Leaving aside the acquisition of historical knowledge, Ayers also gained resources for her creative practice. Working with an academic on an historical project was a process that ‘broadens your frame of reference’, she said.<sup>24</sup> From my perspective, her installation embodied – but also critically engaged with – the difficulties the researchers had faced in tracing past female inhabitants in the records. Ayers’ imaginative creation of Louisa’s letters in the house filled but also exposed the absence of Louisa from the historical record, in stark contrast to the many surviving documents concerning her husband William.

[FIGURE 2] The first of Katharine Johnson’s installations was an equally powerful response to the argument in my written work that the personal and public authority of men

derived from the house in the eighteenth century was built on quotidian but powerful practices. Persistent writing and record keeping was one important example, recoverable in both archival sources but also novels such as Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*.<sup>25</sup> Johnson read my work and the novel but serendipity also played its part. In conversation, we lightened on a number of material objects that were both personally resonant for Johnson and historically pertinent (such armchairs, which were associated with male authority). Johnson's artistic response was to manipulate a copy of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, place it upon an armchair and pour the long lines of text through the floorboards. This beautiful display materialized male domestic authority: the labour that had gone into creating the installation represented time and the creation of family narratives in the past, as well as the physical presence of men in domestic space. Johnson had captured two chapters of a book in one artwork.<sup>26</sup> [FIGURE 3] Johnson's second installation was interactive, inviting visitors to engage directly with the materiality of the building by depositing a written token through the floorboards and leaving only a button exposed. In so doing they recreated historic practices of deliberately concealing objects within the frame of a house. The research process for this installation involved all four of us on our hands and knees to examine what was beneath the floorboards and behind the fireplace.<sup>27</sup> Samuel bemoaned historians' lack of engagement with the material environment, invoking Marc Bloch and R. H. Tawney putting on stout boots to explore the landscape.<sup>28</sup> Johnson's curiosity about the fabric of the houses and our need to make the installations work in the physical space led me to engage with the building in new ways. Whilst this was possible without the collaboration – historians of material culture and architecture are practiced at researching the physical built environment – experiences such as this undoubtedly serve as additional prompts to move past the textual evidence.



Just as Ayers created a woman's lost letters and Johnson depicted male authority, so Ian Baxter wanted to represent artistically parts of the past that are now lost, intangible or invisible. Baxter's sound installations sought to recreate the aural experience of being in the buildings, hearing noise from the pub next door and conversation in other rooms. These sounds were then played through the walls, ceilings and floors. As with Johnson, Baxter's questions about the nature of past sounds, together with our examination of the buildings with a view to concealing a series of speakers, forced us to leave the certainty of the documentary record and instead to imagine the experience of being in the buildings with all our senses.

These artists undertook their own research, and this continued in phase 2 during 2013-14, when the project expanded to include nine further artist. The visual artist Sylvia Causer investigated the work and materials of the surgeon William Jackson by drawing on her own background knowledge as a nurse and by researching the historical print and manuscript sources.<sup>29</sup> [FIGURE 4] For the works in her exhibition 'Sepsis' (January – February 2014), titled 'Parental Interference', Causer took the sketches of infant heads from the manuscript record of Jackson's autopsy lecture and etched them onto a piece of wood. She recreated a poultice of bread, milk and linseed oil to adulterate the reconstructed silk coat of Jackson. [FIGURE 5] For the pieces 'Wretched Creatures and Lost Limbs', she created a series of distorted patients out of silk fibres similar to those used for surgery stitches. The intersection of the past with her own experience (as with Ayers, also a trained nurse) was significant. Causer's display was held in a gallery directly below her studio, connecting her contemporary practice with Jackson's historic practice in the same space.<sup>30</sup>

For these artists, the resonance of the historical research with elements of their own practice was an important factor determining their participation. This became clear in the later stages of phase 2, during the production of the book of the project, *Tales From the Orchard* (2014). This book is difficult to categorize. As Clark says in his contribution to the

book, ‘It is probably not an artist’s book despite being in part conceived and created by artists. It is probably not an academic book, despite being in part written and initiated by an academic. It is almost certainly not a popular book, so maybe it is a category of one – an arts *centre’s book*.’<sup>31</sup> Such a hybrid book sits perfectly in the context of BSA’s hosting of the Sheffield International Artist’s Book Prize, a prestigious competition attracting hundreds of entries from across the world.<sup>32</sup> The resulting hybrid book brings together the historical and artistic strands of the project. My essay provides an historical context and interpretation of the past inhabitants of the buildings, taking each property in turn, and is perhaps the conventional partner to Clark’s contribution, ‘A collection of interconnecting thoughts, stories, ideas and scenarios, paralleling the rooms of a building’.<sup>33</sup> The essays are interspersed with images that relate in some way to the facing text: some are conventional historical sources used in the research and others are responses to that research by artists resident at BSA. [FIGURE 6] Laura Feltham’s painting ‘Nicholson and Jackson’ references both William Jackson and Widow Nicholson (she one of two female proprietors in the late eighteenth century) and is facing my discussion of how ‘the vagaries of the historical record have made some of the inhabitants more accessible than others’.<sup>34</sup> The interpretation of this juxtaposition of word and image is left deliberately open in the book; my own reading of Feltham is that the layering of different coloured oil paints, the obliteration of colour by apparently clear white and yet the partial remains of darker shapes expresses visually the accretion of the historical record. Other images are harder for me to read. As John Clark responded to my puzzlement at one artist’s contribution to the book, ‘You want an artistic interpretation, you’ve got it!’<sup>35</sup> Yet all the images express integral parts of the process of historical research or of historical interpretation. Nick Hersey’s series of quirky drawings, or ‘Parables’, deploy a recognisably historic visual style but include incongruous details.<sup>36</sup> Linda Kemp’s ‘Bank Street Sonnets’ are tiny illegible pieces of text, but look with a

magnifying glass and I find a sort of poetic archive of my essay.<sup>37</sup> In different ways, this work shows history as constructed. They visualize the blurred distinctions between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, ‘history’ and ‘art’ and ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’, raising crucial questions of epistemology.

The uses of history in this project were several. The artists learned about the history of the space in which they had been working as residents, enabling them to create meaningful site-specific work. For the arts centre more generally, Clark now knows more about his buildings and the past residents. The resonance between current and past occupants has been a particular point of interest. Alongside the surgeon William Jackson, number 32 was for many years the home of John James Henry, a currier and leather cutter, while the illuminators, Honey and Co., operated from 40 ½ from 1916 to 1925.<sup>38</sup> The juxtaposition of these different occupations gives historical context to and the opportunity to reflect upon distinctions between art and craft, ‘product and process ... image and idea ... thinker and maker’; Clark concluded, ‘[t]he polarisation of elite and accessible, intellectual and popular, experimental and readable (or watchable) is as rife today as it was Georgian times and it informs any debate on the Arts and popular culture’.<sup>39</sup> This knowledge and the figure of Academic in Residence also constitute cultural capital that enhances the heritage value of the buildings and can strengthen future funding applications by BSA. Clark reported that the project, ‘give us a much better chance of success and a firmer foundation for such an application’.<sup>40</sup> This means that the buildings are more likely to be managed, preserved and celebrated as public historic buildings, at a time when those around them are being converted back to private domestic use. Clark also reported that the project had contributed to a closer collaborative relationship between the centre, its resident artists and the University – as well as other local partners (such as Sheffield Archives and local history societies).<sup>41</sup>

Yet the most powerful uses of history in this project were the artistic ones, in my view. Most striking has been the power of art to materialize intangible human emotions and motivations. Johnson's *Tristram Shandy* installation uses the minutiae of a man's text to literally occupy the room. The work represented the tenor of the practices that created the many archives I have used in my own research. Causer's wooden carving of the child's head captures the objectification of the child through autopsy but – in its resemblance of a coffin lid – grief at the loss of a child. Art can do the same for the more recent past: the historian of early New York slavery, Leslie Harris, found in an exhibition of this subject that the art made the silences in the archival record almost irrelevant, expressing 'both facts and truths'.<sup>42</sup> I am reminded of Raphael Samuel's comment that, 'perhaps the most disturbing monument to the urban diaspora' was Rachel Whiteread's 1993 installation of a deserted and impenetrable Victorian house.<sup>43</sup> Public history that uses art can convey the physical matter of history, the intangible human emotional responses to this materiality, as well as recreating what is hidden or absent in the historical record.

This moves us some way from the apparent certainties of evidence-based research or the current framing of 'citizenship' as politically engaged. Collaborations with artists prompt us to reengage the literary and imaginative aspects of professional academic history in ways that bolster not just a critical but a creative public sphere. Indeed, even within the case of REF impact, we have as an academy set ourselves very broad definitions of the public sphere. The 'impact agenda' may have been driven by the Warrar Report of 2006, *Increasing the Economic Impact of the Research Councils*, but the criteria for assessing the public impact of research for REF2014 included impacts which might have an 'effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia', touching upon 'the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding' of people.<sup>44</sup> The panel

that included History expected impacts on ‘cultural life’ to succeed in ‘[c]reating and interpreting cultural capital in all of its forms to enrich and expand the lives, imaginations and sensibilities of individuals and groups’.<sup>45</sup> These criteria are a significant landmark in the field of public history in the United Kingdom. In terms of the many uses of history – such as for information or education, for entertainment, for civic action or identity formation – they add, to inspire and creatively imagine. Perhaps the structure of impact assessment in REF2014 focussed too much on outputs and endpoints rather than the process of co-production (often the most impactful work), but the terms of the sub-panel conceptualised impact in terms much broader than critics often claim.<sup>46</sup> In the assessment itself, the sub-panel rated highly both impacts which were planned and those which were serendipitous, whilst the overall panel summarized an extensive range of impacts, from developing technology to enhancing people’s imaginative lives.<sup>47</sup>

Aside from the uses of history to the ‘public’ or external partners, though, what might be the impact of this activity on professional academic historians? Art may not be habitually used or created by academic historians – unlike film, radio and historical fiction – but academics in other disciplines have done so. The archaeologists Christopher Tilley, Sue Hamilton and Barbara Bender, for example, used the making of landscape art as a method to deepen their understanding and representations of a late Neolithic and early Bronze Age settlement on Leskernick Hill, Bodmin Moor. Informed by landscape artists such as Andrew Goldsworthy, these archaeologists manipulated the remaining visible landscape features of the settlement with different materials to simultaneously represent both the past and their experience of the hill. They were aware of the futility of attempting a mimetic recreation of the inaccessible past but through their own response sought to convey the power of place: ‘We believe that art provides us with another way of telling, another way of expressing the powers of stones on Leskernick Hill’, they explain.<sup>48</sup> The artworks showed the past as encountered by the

archaeological academics: material things such as stones, grass and inclines, rather than as disembodied maps and plans. It also exposed the research practices of archaeologists that are usually tidied up and then hidden in publications.<sup>49</sup> They were also able to select and highlight particular features in the landscape or things that are now lost or hidden or use the art to highlight those stones that they knew – archaeologically – to have been most significant to the prehistoric inhabitants of the settlement.<sup>50</sup> The work shows how art enables us to ‘know’ in visceral ways, communicating feelings, scale and texture.

Such engagements with the past through art might be described as ‘heritage’. They utilize the material remains of the past in recreations of that past; they are not intended primarily to teach about the past but to produce encounters – for fun, improvement, leisure or commerce – in the present. When David Lowenthal published *The Heritage Crusade* in 1968, heritage was commonly seen by professional academic historians as ‘defiling the pristine record that is our rightful legacy’.<sup>51</sup> Lowenthal rejected the criticism. Raphael Samuel, too, was critical of historians’ hostility to heritage, which he saw arising largely from our disciplinary fetishization of the written word.<sup>52</sup> He imagined how heritage might ‘educate us in the language of looks, initiate us into the study of colour coding, familiarize us with period palettes’.<sup>53</sup> Since then, historians’ interest in material and visual culture has chimed with an emphasis on public engagement in higher education policy, allowing historians to work within the heritage sector without abandoning our knowledge expertise or our sense of faithfulness to the historical record.<sup>54</sup>

Yet the engagement with art I am proposing – and which Tilley, Hamilton and Bender enacted – is one in which professional academics reflect upon their research practice. Art is no handmaiden to history, nor is history handmaiden to art. Instead, there is an affinity between artistic and historical ways of knowing. History is an evidence-based account of and debate about the past; it is not play or fiction. Nonetheless, history draws upon techniques and skills that rely on creativity, aesthetics and the imagination. This was, after all, one of the

most important points of Raphael Samuel's first volume of *Theatres of Memory*, which traced the deep roots of professional historical practice: 'History has always been a hybrid form of knowledge, syncretizing past and present, memory and myth, the written record and the spoken word'.<sup>55</sup> Still striking – despite the alleged cultural turn – is his observation that the discipline's 'refusal to countenance any traffic between the imaginary and the real – is impossible, in practice, to sustain'.<sup>56</sup> Other historians have since made similar points. Ludmilla Jordanova acknowledges the discomfort amongst professional historians when museums move past information and seek to convey 'narratives and values' and 'a sense of the past and its meanings'.<sup>57</sup> Yet Jordanova herself is open to a different view: '[t]he past is essentially open-ended', she says, 'and accounts of it are public property'.<sup>58</sup> Even more important than the selection and use of sources, Jordanova believes, is the act of writing: 'Writing is the foremost act of interpretation'.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps, Peter Mandler wonders, history is as able as fiction to deal with these dimensions of human experience.<sup>60</sup> Such comments are not simply about public history but are broader statements about the discipline; our experiences of public history necessarily engage such historiographical questions. It is as a literary practice that the discipline of history becomes an act of representation; it is as a creative practice that the discipline of history becomes an imaginative way of knowing.

In the BSA history project, the approaches, questions, methodology and forms of representation of the artists overlapped with those I habitually consider through my own practice as a historian. For example, the artists I worked with were concerned about the historical reconstruction of 'what really happened'. Katharine Johnson was unsure whether she should strive to be historically accurate.<sup>61</sup> Ian Baxter also worried about this: 'That idea of anachronism has been in the back of my mind for the entire thing', he said.<sup>62</sup> These concerns were prompted by my presence as the 'authority' on the past. Yet the artists were all struck by my own acknowledgement of the limits of historical knowledge and acceptance of

historical indeterminacy. Baxter reported that to be ‘surprised by the gaps and the space to work creatively’.<sup>63</sup> He found these spaces particularly appealing as a sound artist, because, as he put it, ‘Sound is the ultimate historical gap’.<sup>64</sup> Ayers engaged with this problem directly. Her letters were a commentary not just on the absent wife of the surgeon William Jackson but on historians’ fetishization of the document. Her ‘real’ letters of Louisa Jackson were locked in a protective glass display cabinet, while the photocopies were pinned to the gallery walls. As the project progressed, Ayers identified history as a written form of narrative: ‘The thing that I like about History is that all those gaps get made into a story and that becomes fact’.<sup>65</sup> I was careful to convey, ‘that History too is a creative, contingent process of knowledge production’.<sup>66</sup> The surprise that all three artists reported on encountering both the limits of professional historical knowledge about the past and the range of interpretation should be a cause for concern for academic historians. It is precisely through our critical and creative responses to surviving evidence – in situating what we can know in a larger historical and historiographical context and using a range of interpretive techniques to make convincing arguments – that our discipline is defined. This involves choices that are made creatively. Historians must insist on this role in order to counter mischaracterizations of historians as antiquarians of written facts.

This issue turns to a large extent on the nature of historical truth. History after the cultural turn certainly enables historians to insist that we only have access to partial truths, as Cox has noted.<sup>67</sup> It is now widely accepted that history is always itself a culturally-constructed form of knowledge with a heavily mediated relationship (if any at all, some would say) to the past.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, we should recognize not only historians’ skills in the sceptical evaluation of knowledge but also in the creation of knowledge. Professional historical interpretive practice – the selections of our sources, the techniques we use to communicate our arguments – creates not just partial but what we might call envisioned



truths about past. Both historians and artists are interested in this envisioned past, in how to make something appear ‘real’ – or historically convincing – without it being so. Through discussion the artists and I agreed that details did not have to be historically accurate for the overall effect to be convincing or (even) truthful. Angelina Ayers expressed the consensus: ‘I couldn’t make it real ... but I would try as closely as possible to do that’. As in poetry, her usual art form, she said, ‘a lot of the time to try and get at the truth of something you don’t tell the truth it’s all artifice and you’re creating a certain effect’. The creative writer produces something that may not be historically accurate, ‘in order to create an effect that feels authentic’ or to retain its ‘integrity’.<sup>69</sup> In the same way that film can create its own reflective account of history, its own historiography or ‘historiophoty’, so artworks can be a valuable way to analyse (not just describe) the past.<sup>70</sup> As Clark astutely put it, art and poetry serve as ‘realizations of the hidden history’.<sup>71</sup> This form of public history is not endless present-centred play lacking in historicity but uses imaginative forms to reconstruct historic truths and to enable diverse forms of historical knowing. Art helps people feel and comprehend, not just to be informed, about past lives.

One concern is that the past might become dispensable in such ‘public history’ projects. During this collaboration I confided in my notebook, ‘need to keep the past in the frame.’<sup>72</sup> As ‘The House of Secret Histories’ exhibition opened, I was alarmed by the artists’ decision not to include any historical background on the labels: ‘how will people know it’s not just contemp[orary] art?’, I wrote.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps, as Keith Jenkins has argued, ‘we don’t need a history in order to “place ourselves” in present times, or for thinking about our future.’<sup>74</sup> Yet many want, even if they do not need, the past. Of the exhibition, for example, Clark commented, ‘I didn’t expect the history to end up so hidden’.<sup>75</sup> His reaction echoes a clear impression gained throughout my experience as Academic in Residence and running through my several experiences of public engagement of people’s urge to know themselves through

the past. The past provides a satisfying space for identity formation, creative thinking and imaginative reconstruction, for the public as well as for professional academic historians. I imagine some academic readers baulking with legitimate concerns about anachronism and quality. It is crucial that public history does not compromise the academic standards to which professional historians are rightly held. As Madge Dresser argues, without rigorous academic scholarship, 'public history projects will ultimately betray rather than benefit the public they purport to serve'.<sup>76</sup> Dresser's experiences led her to worry that the publications arising from a HLF-funded project would be dumbing down.<sup>77</sup> I shared that concern to some extent, wanting to be certain that the historical research about Bank Street was as accurate and complete as possible. In the process, undeniable differences in practice between artists and historians emerged. Clark commented that compared to his *modus operandi*, my own way of working is more 'analytical'.<sup>78</sup> Yet to a large extent this was a stylistic difference. A concern for the quality of the historical research was shared by every one of my collaborators. Professional academic historians are not the sole gatekeepers of historical accuracy or scepticism. This shared value of historical research should be reassuring to professional historians and might just give us the confidence to sometimes leave our trademark scepticism at the door. Writing about the humanities, Doris Sommer has recently commented that, 'art's work in the world is not yet a core concern for an academic field that remains sceptical and pessimistic.'<sup>79</sup> Practices of art might certainly seem some distance from the sceptical citizenship and policy-advice discussed by John Tosh and Pamela Cox. This essay has held these two apart. John Clark wonder if we might bring them together: 'How different is the notion of 'constructive sceptic' from the role of contemporary artist; how similar the teller of 'partial truths' to the poet, dramatist or photographer? I wonder if this was Karen's aim.'<sup>80</sup> It was not my aim. But it is, I think, my conclusion.

## Figures

Please note high-res images for all figures are available.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

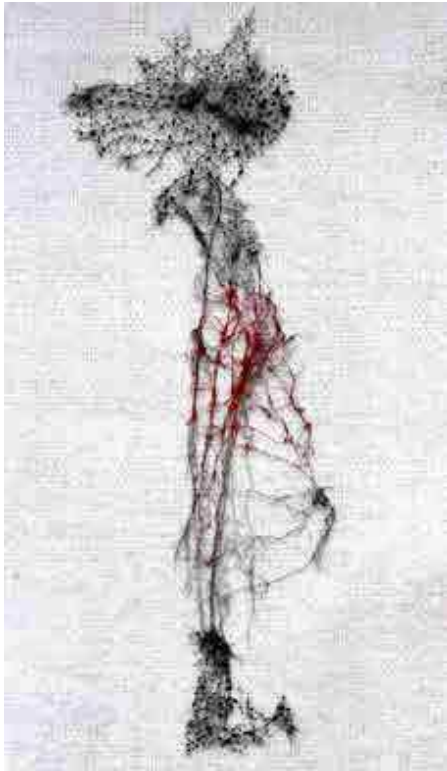


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> I thank the organizers and audiences at the ‘Studies of Home Seminar’, Institute of Historical Research, London, the AHRC-funded conference ‘Custodians of Home’, Geffrye Museum, and Mike Braddick and Catherine Fletcher for their comments. I also wish to thank all my collaborators at Bank Street Arts, including all staff, volunteers, artists and placement students, and especially John Clark. This article is based on projects funded by ‘Arts Enterprise’, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Sheffield.

<sup>2</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory. Volume I: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (Verso, 1994), p. 278. Departments of the universities of Exeter, Royal Holloway (London) and Sheffield, for example, employ a Lecturer in Public History at the time of writing.

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<sup>3</sup> Amy M. Tyson, *The Wages of History: Emotional Labor on Public History's Front Lines* (Amherst, 2013); W. Andrew Achenbaum and Robert W. Pomeroy III, 'Public History's Past, Present, and Prospects (Review)', *The American Historical Review*, 92 (1987), pp. 1162-1174, quote at p. 1162.

<sup>4</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (1954; Manchester, 2004), p.4.

<sup>5</sup> UOS 62 History Descriptor, <http://www.rae.ac.uk/panels/main/n/history/>; 'Panel criteria and working methods', January 2012, p. 80.

[http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/panelcriteriaandworkingmethods/01\\_12.pdf](http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/panelcriteriaandworkingmethods/01_12.pdf). See Richard Watermeyer, 'Impact in the REF: issues and obstacles', *Studies in Higher Education*, 2014, pp. 2-6 on the historical context of impact in REF2014.

<sup>6</sup> For a recent discussion of these forms of public engagement, see Gary Rivett and Laura King, 'Engaging people in making history: impact, public engagement and the world beyond the campus', *History Workshop Journal*, forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Watermeyer, 'Impact in the REF: issues and obstacles', *Studies in Higher Education*, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> One response of the Department of History, University of Sheffield, to the impact agenda was to develop a 'Public Engagement Strategy' rather than an 'Impact Strategy'.

<sup>9</sup> John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (Basingstoke, 2008), pp. 99-119. Quote at p. 103.

<sup>10</sup> John Tosh, 'Citizen Scholars', *History Today*, 62 (2012), p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Black, *Using History* (London, 2005), pp. 48-89; Peter Mandler, *History and National Life* (London, 2002), *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 430.

<sup>13</sup> Tosh, *Why History Matters*, pp. 137-9.

<sup>14</sup> Pat Thane, 'History and Policy', *History Workshop Journal*, 67 (2009), p. 140-5, p.140;

Pamela Cox 'The Future Uses of History', *History Workshop Journal*, 75 (2013), p. 130.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> On this process see Arts Enterprise Evaluation interview with John Clark by Rebecca Oldham, 17 February 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Recording 2: interview with John Clark (Director). The interviews referred to in this article were conducted by a PhD student in 2012. The aims of the project became formal requirements when the project subsequently attracted HEFCE Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) funding, via the Arts and Humanities Faculty 'Arts Enterprise' funding at the University of Sheffield. See: <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/artsenterprise/index>

<sup>18</sup> The MA students were: Matt Blackwell, Tom Bollard, Emily Colley, Catherine McDougall, Liz McDonald, Amanda Smith and David Watkin. For the historical research, see Karen Harvey, 'A History of Bank Street', in Karen Harvey and John Clark, *Tales From The Orchard. The History of Bank Street: Past and Present* (Sheffield, 2014), pp. 10-53.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> 'The History Room', Exhibition at Bank Street Arts, 13/01/2012 - 28/01/2012.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Paul Ashton and Hilda Kean (eds), *Public History and Heritage Today: People and Their Pasts* (Basingstoke, 2012); Ghislaine Lawrence, 'Object lessons in the museum medium', in Susan Pearce (ed.), *Objects of knowledge (New research in museum studies: 1)*. (London, 1990), pp. 103-124.

<sup>22</sup> Jay Winter, 'Public history and historical scholarship', *History Workshop Journal*, 42 (1996), p. 169.

<sup>23</sup> Recording 1: interview with Angelina Ayers.

<sup>24</sup> Recording 1: Ayers.

<sup>25</sup> Karen Harvey, *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 130-132; Karen Harvey, 'The Manuscript History of *Tristram Shandy*', *The Review of English Studies* (2014), 65 (269), pp. 281-301.



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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 64-98, 134-68; Karen Harvey, 'The Manuscript History of Tristram Shandy', *The Review of English Studies*, 65 (2014), pp. 281-301.

<sup>27</sup> Karen Harvey, 'Notebook', 22.2.12. This reflective notebook was kept by the author throughout the project.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 269.

<sup>29</sup> Sylvia Causer, 'Sepsis', exhibition at Bank Street Arts, 08/01/2014 - 08/02/2014.

<sup>30</sup> Author's notes on a meeting with Sylvia Causer, 23 January 2014.

<sup>31</sup> John Clark, 'On Buildings (An Exhibition in a Book)', in Harvey and Clark, *Tales From The Orchard*, p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> For more information see: <http://artistsbookprize.co.uk/history>.

<sup>33</sup> Clark, 'On Buildings', p. 55.

<sup>34</sup> Quote from Harvey, 'History of Bank Street', p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> Author's notes on a meeting with John Clark, 4 September 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Nick Hersey, 'The Parable of the Dressmaker', 'Girl with Crane', 'The Parable of the Sawmaker', 'Parable of the Vault', *Tales From the Orchard*, pp. 27, 41, 49, 102.

<sup>37</sup> Linda Kemp, 'Bank Street Sonnets', *Tales From the Orchard*, p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> Harvey, 'History of Bank Street', pp. 48, 50.

<sup>39</sup> Clark, 'On buildings', pp. 97, 99.

<sup>40</sup> John Clark, email to the author, 27 August 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Clark, email to the author, 27 August 2014; Arts Enterprise Evaluation interview with John Clark.

<sup>42</sup> Leslie M. Harris, 'Imperfect Archives and the Historical Imagination', *The Public Historian*, 36 (February 2014), pp. 77-80. Quote at p. 79.

<sup>43</sup> Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 39.

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<sup>44</sup> Watermeyer, 'Impact in the REF', p. 4; Annex C, 'Assessment framework and guidance on submissions', REF 2014, July 2011, updated January 2012, p. 48.

<http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/assessmentframeworkandguidanceonsubmissions/GOS%20including%20addendum.pdf>. Last accessed 19 August 2014.

<sup>45</sup> 'Panel criteria and working methods', January 2012, p. 89.

[http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/panelcriteriaandworkingmethods/01\\_12.pdf](http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/pub/panelcriteriaandworkingmethods/01_12.pdf). Last accessed 19 August 2014.

<sup>46</sup> See Rivett and King, 'Engaging people in making history'.

<sup>47</sup> Research Excellence Framework 2014: Overview report by Main Panel D, pp. 17-18, 51-56. We should note that within the terms of the REF, the discipline performed better on impact than outputs (27.8% of outputs were 4\*, 36.1% of impact sub-profiles were 4\*). See Research Excellence Framework 2014: Overview report by Main Panel D and Sub-panels 27 to 36 (January 2015), pp. 12, 17, 51-6.

<http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/expanel/member/Main%20Panel%20D%20overview%20report.pdf> [accessed March 2015].

<sup>48</sup> Christopher Tilley, Sue Hamilton and Barbara Bender, 'Art and the Re-Presentation of the Past', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 6 (2000), pp. 35-62. Quote at p. 43.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-62.

<sup>51</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (1968; Cambridge, 1998), p.102.

<sup>52</sup> Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, pp. 268-9.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Karen Harvey, *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London, 2009); Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Look of the Past: Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice* (Cambridge, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, p. 443.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>57</sup> Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2000; London, 2006), p. 129.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>60</sup> Mandler, *History and National Life*, p. 148.

<sup>61</sup> Harvey, *Notebook*, 22.2.12.

<sup>62</sup> Recording 3: interview with Ian Baxter.

<sup>63</sup> Recording 3: Baxter.

<sup>64</sup> Recording 3: Baxter.

<sup>65</sup> Recording 1: Ayers.

<sup>66</sup> Harvey, *Notebook*, 14.2.12.

<sup>67</sup> Cox, 'Future Uses of History', p. 130.

<sup>68</sup> For a superb review of the work of Keith Jenkins and the place of postmodernist critiques (and critiques of this) within history, see Dr Alexander Macfie, review of Keith Jenkins *Retrospective*, (review no. 1266). <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1266>. Last accessed: 18 August, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Recording 1: Ayers.

<sup>70</sup> Hayden White, 'Historiography and Historiophoty', *The American Historical Review*, 93 (1988), pp. 1193-1199.

<sup>71</sup> Author's notes on a meeting with John Clark, 23 January 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Harvey, *Notebook*, 14.2.12.

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<sup>73</sup> Harvey, Notebook, 6.6.12.

<sup>74</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernism* (London, 1999), p. 202.

<sup>75</sup> Harvey, Notebook, 6.6.12.

<sup>76</sup> Madge Dresser, 'Politics, Populism, and Professionalism: Reflections on the Role of the Academic Historian in the Production of Public History', *The Public Historian*, 32 (2010), p. 63.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>78</sup> Recording 2.: Clark.

<sup>79</sup> Doris Sommer, *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2014), p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> John Clark, 'On Buildings', p. 65.