



Multimedia artist Ilona Sagar examines our uneasy relationship to public healthcare

Words Daphne Milner

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7 February 2018

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London-based artist Ilona Sagar works across disciplines like film, performance and text. In her most recent project *Correspondence 0*, which is currently on display at the South London Gallery, she uses archival footage and video installations to explore the history of the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham.

Peckham's wellness centre was set up in 1926, 22 years prior to the NHS, by the biologists George Scott Williamson and Innes Hope Pearse. The duo gave 950 local families access to the centre, which included facilities for physical exercise, games and workshops as well as an annual medical examination. "The Peckham Experiment was at the forefront of a dramatic shift in the public perception of health but its significance has been historically overlooked. The institution was built around principles of self-organisation, local empowerment and a holistic focus on social connection as fundamental to health," Ilona tells It's Nice That.

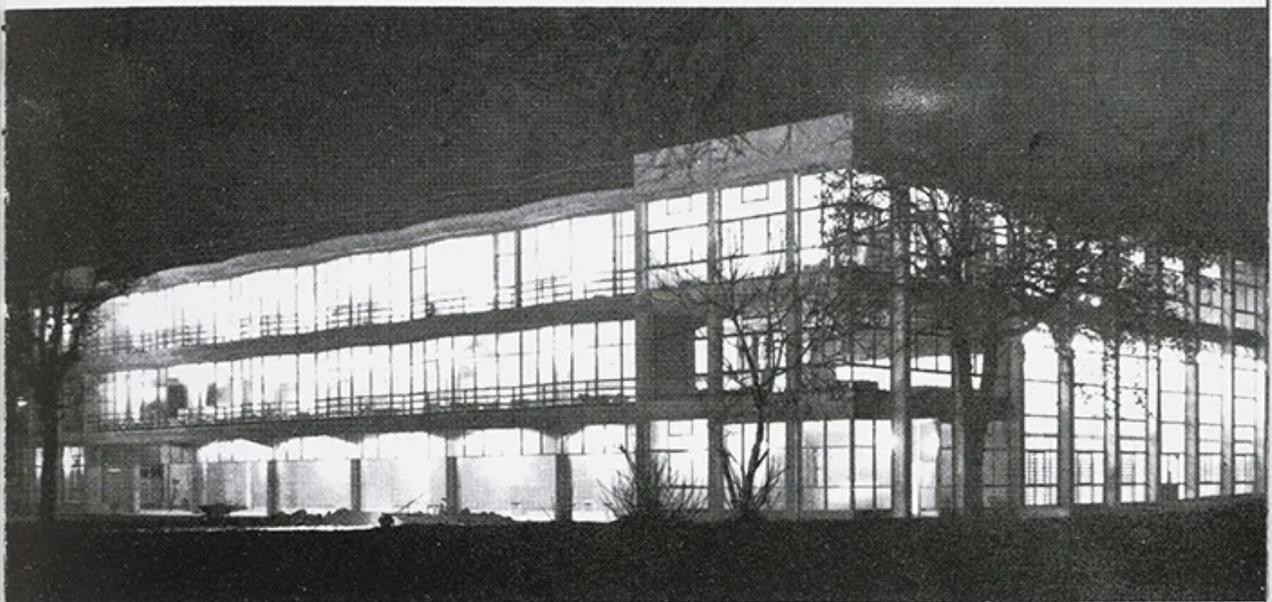
Ilona's work draws on information she sourced from a variety of archives, local communities, charities and from inside the Pioneer Health Centre itself. With no

trained camera technician available at the time, the footage Ilona stumbled upon was a “disjointed mesh of body parts, glass, water, rope, architecture, small moments of interactions and activities.” Influenced by this amateur footage, Ilona’s own videos have no linear narratives as they guide the viewer through the artist’s streams of consciousness and reflections on public health. “The Pioneer Centre footage became a key overarching structure for *Correspondence o*. It inspired the rhythmically edited sequence of rapidly changing events in my films that are bound only by layered sound design and voice-overs,” the artist explains. Ilona’s videos are screened across two channels and depict the artist walking around the wellness centre, swimming, running and undergoing medical evaluations.

By exhibiting her archival findings alongside her modern-day representation of the centre, Ilona implies that similar concerns regarding social welfare are equally relevant today. “*Correspondence o* is not simply a historical account, it is a speculative installation that examines our uneasy and increasingly precarious relationship to public health, labour and wellbeing,” Ilona says. Her project feels particularly poignant in light of the increasing cuts to public health services and the struggling NHS.

“I am deeply troubled by companies such as Babylon Health Care, who is piloting the ‘GP at Hand’ app. E-Health and advances in user-driven technologies threaten to shift our social agenda from collective interests to networks of individual desires. Whilst we become more focused on the individual, internal narratives and mental wellbeing, our relationship to the public domain becomes increasingly distant,” the artist tells us. Ilona’s installations serve as a reminder that public welfare should be cherished and her work opens up a much-needed dialogue about the future of the NHS and the implications of its digital commercialisation.

A pictorial presentation of FAMILY LIFE in the Centre





Above

Pioneer Health Centre at Peckham. Pamphlet: "Health of the Individual, of the Family, of Society."
Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection and Pioneer Health Foundation.



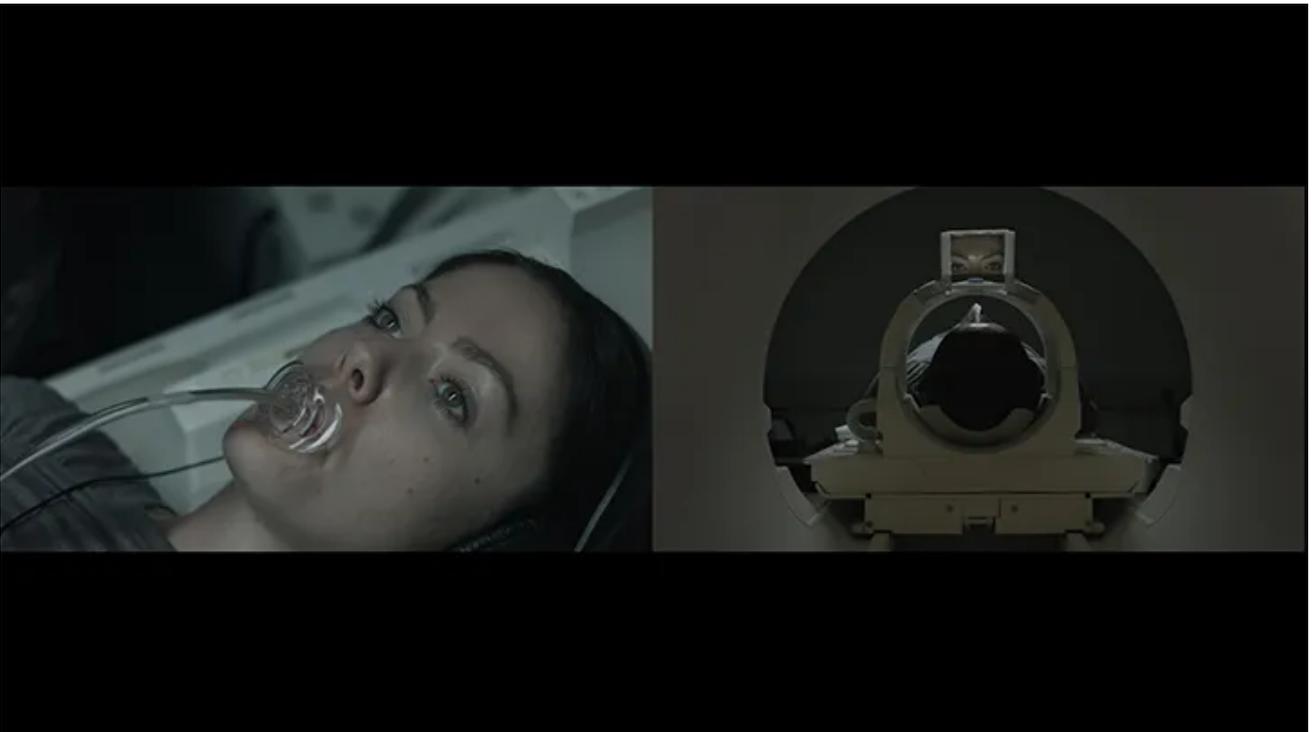
Above

Still from Correspondence o, Ilona Sagar 2017.





Above
Pioneer Health Centre, Peckham. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection and Pioneer Health Foundation.



Above
Still from *Correspondence 0*, Ilona Sagar 2017.





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Pioneer Health Centre, Peckham. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection and Pioneer Health
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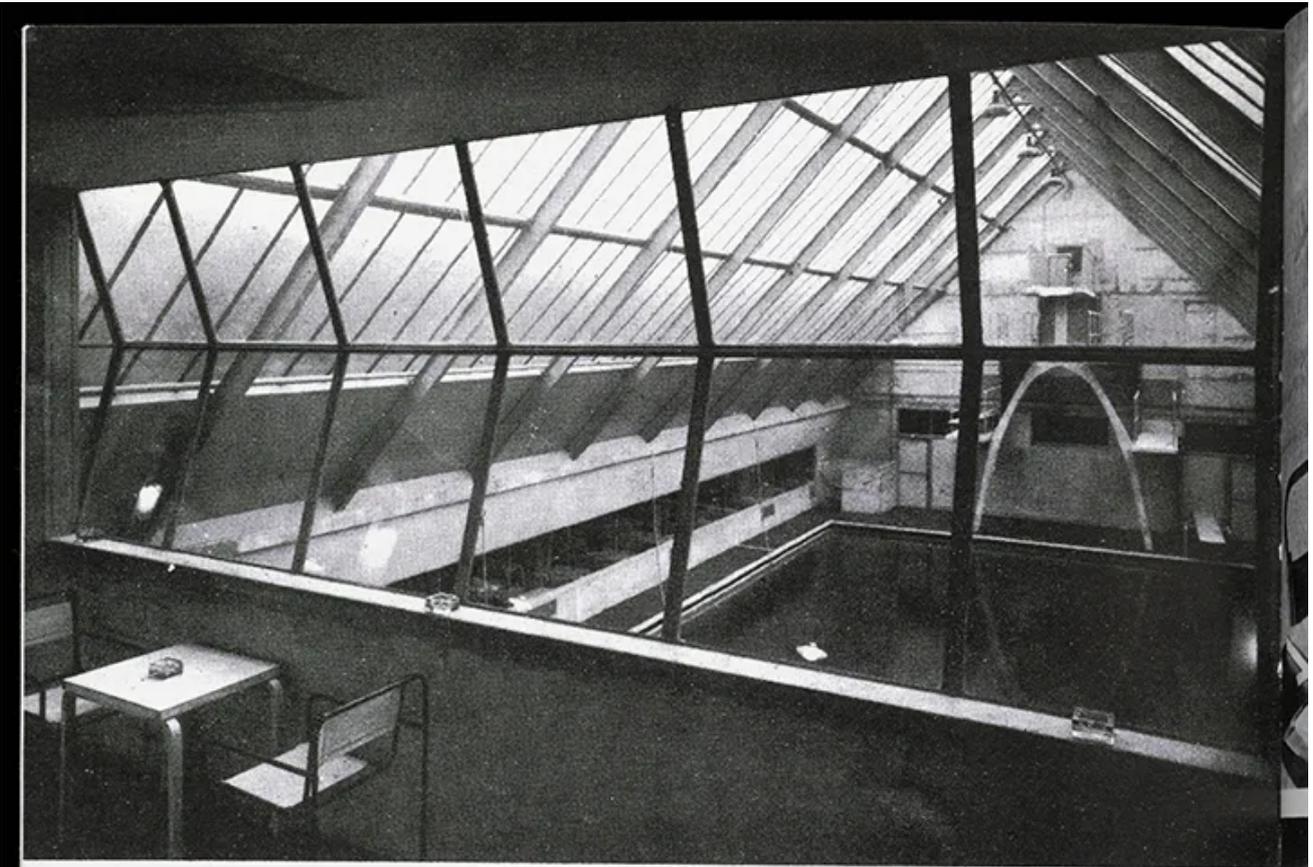


Above
Still from *Correspondence* ©, Ilona Sagar 2017.





Above
Still from Correspondence 0, Ilona Sagar 2017.



Swimming pool and cafeteria seen from billiards room

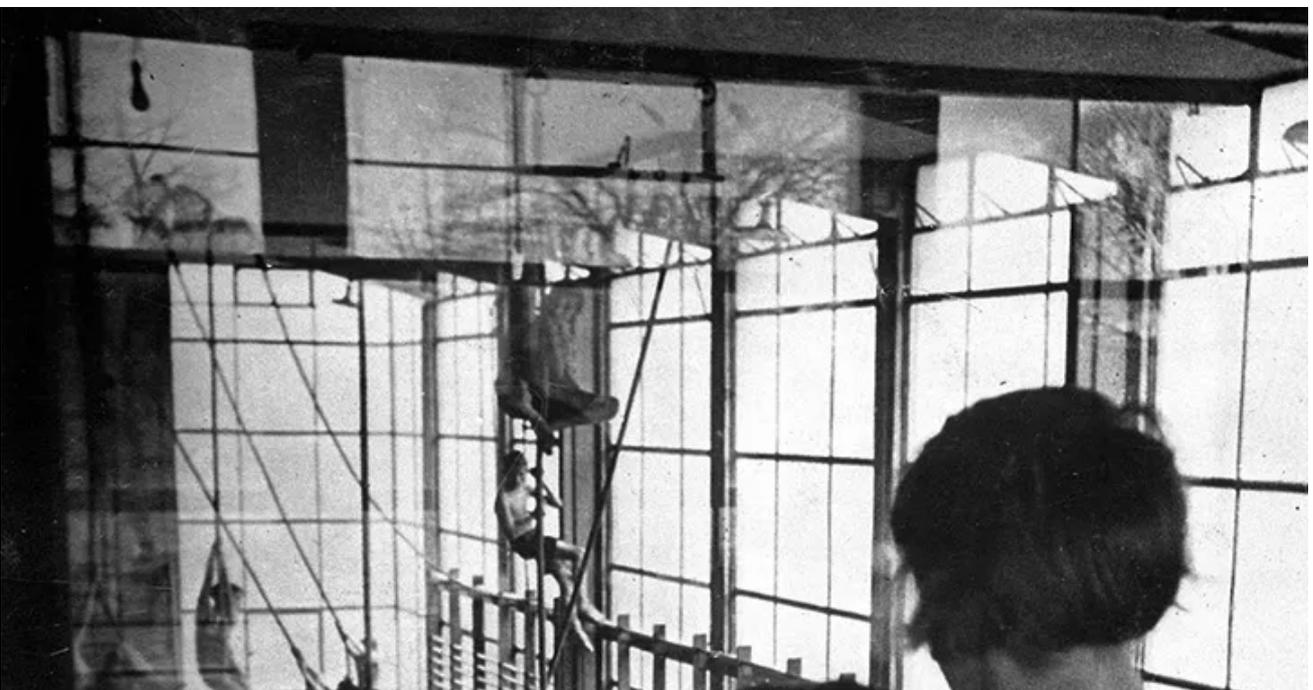


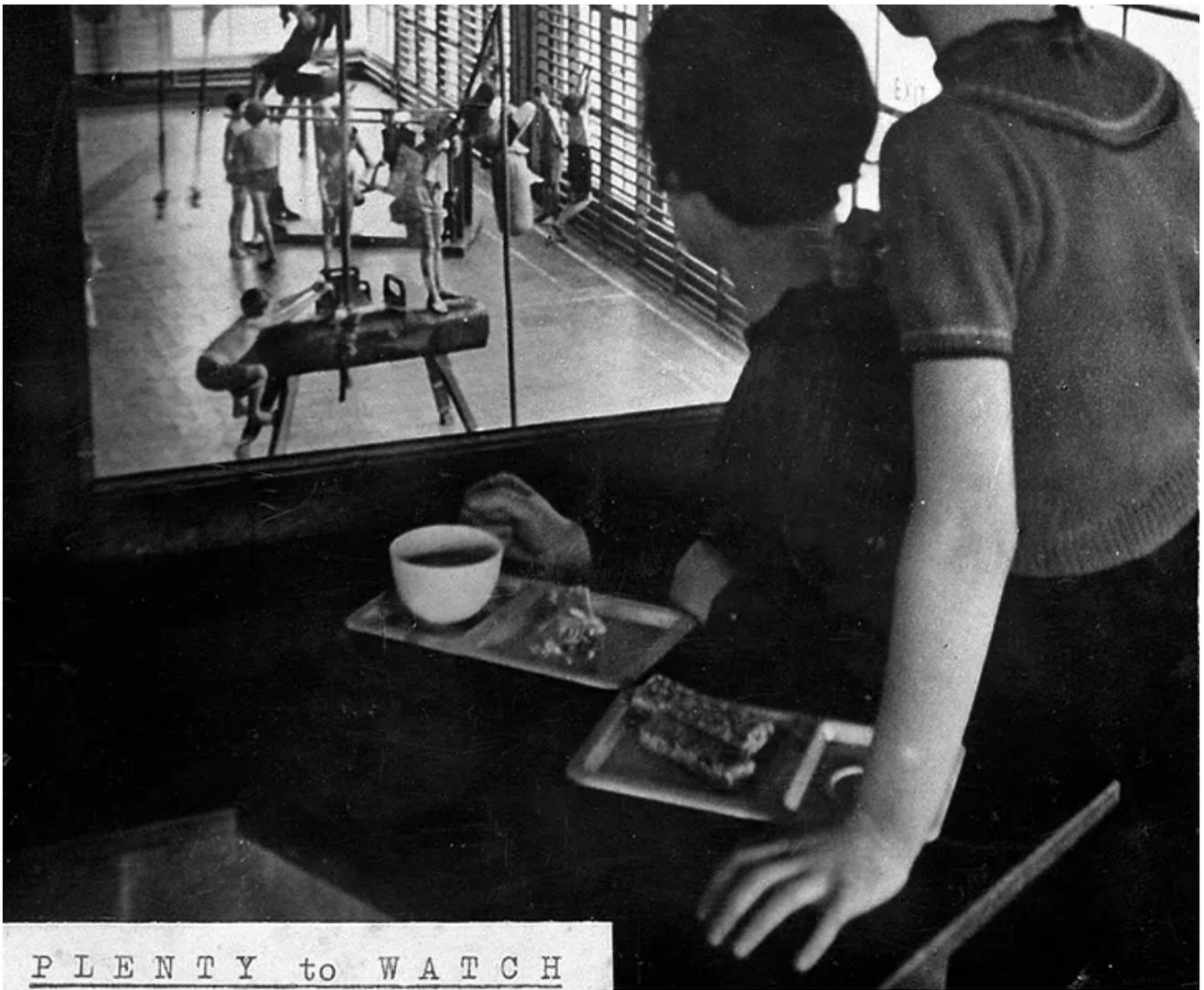


Above
Pioneer Health Centre, Peckham. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection and Pioneer Health Foundation.



Above
Still from Correspondence 0, Ilona Sagar 2017.





Above
Pioneer Health Centre, Peckham. Children in Gym: Mother watches while she and her daughter have their tea. c. 1940s. Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection and Pioneer Health Foundation.



Above
Still from Correspondence 0, Ilona Sagar 2017.

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Daphne has worked for us for a few years now as a freelance writer. She covers everything from photography and graphic design to the ways in which artists are using AI.

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