

Transcription of Sarah Wood, *Correspondence*, 2020

Dear Alfred Wallis,

After my father died I found a note written in pencil on the back of a pad he kept by his bed for the time he was ill. Three words written in an otherwise empty notebook. I imagine he wrote them so he could return to their meaning at a time when his mind was clearer. I'm returning to them now: duty of care.



This summer I've been working on a film for a gallery. The country has been in lockdown for most of that time because a virus has gone beyond its usual territory and caught us out. The idea of 'taking care' has been at the forefront of everyone's minds. A surprise is how kind people are as soon as the danger of the virus is admitted. Community forms where no community has previously been. Thresholds become important but so do our imaginations and our hearts which navigate new paths to transcend them.

Downstairs in the gallery will be an exhibition of your paintings; upstairs will be the film. For now we're notional neighbours. I can imagine the room and the gallery and your paintings but I can't see them. I'm still quarantined like many people are at this time. Instead of the usual activity that goes into putting on an exhibition I rely on a curator.



In this world where carelessness reigns, curation is one occupation where care is respected. The care of an artwork or artefact. It's a role that began with the *curatores* in charge of the Roman Empire's aqueducts, their bath houses and sewers. The fact that many still stand today reveals how much care went into their making. It's the same care that meant that when the world was quarantined and scared by the first worldwide plague, the Christian curates had their work cut out for them in holding up the structures of belief for their ravaged congregations. Fast-forward to here and now. Upstairs and downstairs, even in this difficult time, curators are working to put on our exhibitions. Yes, people care for art. It's hopeful. Against all the odds. Art is a model of care.



I read that you began painting after your wife died 'for company'. Susan Ward. She was double your age. At twenty years old you became a father to a whole family of her sons and lived the hard life of a deep-sea fisherman to provide for her and her boys. Weeks after your marriage you set sail on voyages I can only imagine how dangerous to bring home pay

good enough to care for a family. At sea you lived by a rule made in response to that danger: *leave no one behind*.

When we make an artwork it's like starting a conversation, but without the certainty that anyone will respond. It's a hopeful hopeless act. In the aftermath of loss *you* started to paint from memory. You painted the world of sailing ships when they were already a thing of history. You wrote how you paint 'what use To Bee out of my memory what we may never see again...'

Hopeless. Hopeful.

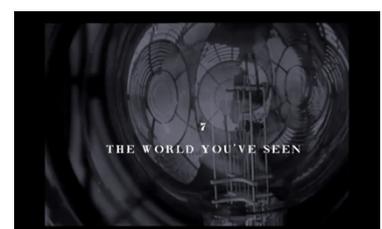
Like falling in love you never know when someone will hear what you're saying with what you make. You cannot anticipate the person who you'll find quite suddenly standing by your side, looking with you to translate from your painting what lives in your mind's eye. In this aftermath world you found this in Jim Ede.

I think of the house he and his wife Helen made. A house of art. A small revolution. What they did was open the door to their home, invited anyone to cross the threshold. Welcome they said. Here is a site of art. And with that welcome invitation created a site of care.

Their house is on one of the few hills in Cambridge. It looks out over a road whose constant movement is like the tides of the sea. Inside the house your paintings bring the movement of waves. A dialogue is starting. You painted, but you were poor. Ede saw your paintings and wondered if he could help you live. The start of a conversation.

Duty of care is a phrase used bureaucratically now to calibrate the power relationship between someone in need and someone who can provide care. Its formality seems lumpen when you think of the possibilities of someone simply listening carefully to what someone else needs.

This is my letter to you, dear notional neighbour, with gratitude for the vision you shared. It's also an invitation to the imagined crowds who will stand in front of your pictures, now housed smartly and carefully in a well-lit gallery space. I imagine the journey those paintings have made from your home, from your history, made from these visions of a life once lived, and ask the notional viewers now to listen with you, permit the curiosity of the imagination as you described to your new friend Jim, something of the world you've seen.



*Island port near beach*  
*The old house*  
*And a bit of Back Road*

*The next is the harbour*  
*And the old sayne baits*  
*And two saynes shoot with pilchers.*  
*What used to be*

*And the old reakwater*  
*You will be able to share what use to be*  
*Whin saynes was shoot*

*Most I do is what it used to be<sup>1</sup>*



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<sup>1</sup> This italicised section is a found poem constructed by Sarah Wood using phrasal extracts from Alfred Wallis' letters to Jim Ede, which are held in Kettle's Yard's archive.