Old Anatomy

Jason Ellis

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OliverSearsGallery

Foreword

Jason Ellis' second exhibition in the gallery sees a progression of the sculptor's continued curiosity with figuration.

Having gained access to an extraordinary collection of plaster casts kept by the Department of Anatomy at Trinity College, Dublin, Ellis has chosen a number of items, human and animal, and remade them using varieties of limestone, marble, slate and sandstone. In transforming each piece of *Old Anatomy* into an object of art, Ellis draws references from five hundred years of sculpture. Michelangelo, Japonism, Victorian curiosity and contemporary morbidity are all evoked in fourteen individual subjects. Above all, Ellis succeeds, with all his technical expertise, in bringing the viewer into close contact with elements of their own, human biology and presenting the animal kingdom through a private lens of art history.

Oliver Sears August 2016

The Anatomy House

In the modern era of easy internet access to information and images it is easy to forget that it was not always such. The study of the human form, anatomy, is so vital to the training of artists, doctors and bioengineers that we forget that for many centuries and in many cultures it was forbidden. Even in the ancient past dissection of a body was considered sacrilege. The ancient Egyptians had better knowledge of internal anatomy than other cultures because of the need to remove and preserve organs in the practice of mummification, but the emphasis was on preserving and maintaining the integrity of the remains, not understanding its structure. In India Sushrutha, the father of surgery, knew of the bones of the body but could not dissect. He advocated leaving bodies in rivers until they began to decompose to examine their internal organs. Galen, the most influential early western doctor based his anatomical writings on dissection of animals, including Barbary apes. These descriptions were influenced by glimpses of human internal anatomy he gained as a surgeon to a gladiator school in Pergamum and by the writings of more ancient physicians. Galen, however, wrote with such authority that his works, and errors, were not seriously criticised or amended for a millennium.

There is a myth that the practice of human anatomical dissection was prohibited by a papal bull Detestate feritatis ('Of detestable cruelty') of Pope Boniface VIII in 1299, but in truth this only precluded the boiling of bodies after death. Dispensations for the dissection of bodies for anatomical study were invariably granted and there is no record of the church prosecuting anybody for such a practice. Indeed the first dissections for instruction of students were performed by Mondino de'Luzzi in 1314 in the University of Bologna. At that point Bologna lay, at least nominally, within the Papal States. It is arguable that the prohibition came more of the common fear that to dismember a body reduced chances of resurrection on the last day and the public stigma associated with having the body of a relative treated in such a fashion. In fact the ultimate civil punishment, beyond even

being executed, was to have your corpse fragmented after death. The legal punishment of being ‘hanged, drawn and quartered’ was only fully abolished in the UK and Ireland in the 1820s. The main consequence of the change was that dismemberment of the executed prisoner was transferred by law from the executioner’s block to the anatomists’ theatre.

During the Renaissance, artists too began to study anatomy. Whilst it was possible for them to attend public dissections, it was difficult for them to legally obtain corpses to dissect for themselves. It is known, of course, that many did obtain such bodies surreptitiously, most notably Leonardo Da Vinci who learned anatomy from his artistic mentor Andrea del Verrocchio. It is thought that Leonardo dissected over 30 corpses and more than 750 of his anatomical drawings still exist but these probably represent only a small proportion of his original works.

In the 16th century the University of Padua, which sat within the borders of the Republic of Venice, became famous for its anatomical teaching and its anatomical theatre from 1594 is still preserved. Its fame was such that the great anatomist and surgeon Andreas Vesalius (born Andries van Wesel) travelled from Leuven in the Netherlands, via Paris, to study in the early 1530s. Vesalius advocated learning from experience of dissection and not to rely completely on the works of Galen. His great seven volume treatise, De humani corporis fabrica ('On the fabric of the human body'), remained possibly the most important work on human anatomy until the modern era and reproductions of Vesalius illustrations are found on the walls of the old anatomy theatre in Trinity College Dublin.

The practice of teaching of anatomy by public dissection spread to the other great universities such as Leiden and from there to Britain and Ireland. The challenge of preserving interesting specimens obtained from human and animal dissection was encountered. Whilst findings could be preserved as drawings or illustrations, there was no easy way of stopping organic matter from decomposing. Preparing a translucent solution of alcohol was challenging, refrigeration was impossible and the chemical formalin which is now used for preservation of samples was not invented until 1867. A solution found was, rather than to seek to preserve anatomical specimens, instead to model them in wax. The advantage of wax is that it could be textured or coloured to give it a life like appearance and artists such as Donatello, Michelangelo Buonarrotti and Cellini are known to have produced wax miniatures before starting major sculptures because of its ease of use and malleability. The process of producing beautifully detailed coloured wax models had been used in Italy since medieval times for the production of votive figures called *bóti*. The practice of making such large, lifelike wax figures still persists in places like Madame Tussaud's in London and the National Wax Museum in Dublin.

In the late 17th century a Sicilian monk and artist working in Bologna, Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, started producing life like sculptures representing death and disease. These models could be stored and exhibited; some of Zumbo's work can still be seen at the 'La Specola' museum in Florence. In 1695 he moved to Geneva where he met French physician Guillaume Desnoues who was head of Surgery at the Hospital of Genova and, more importantly, professor of Anatomy and Surgery. Denouses carried out dissections which Zumbo then copied in wax allowing the sculptures to be reproduced and sold. When the two later fell out, Zumbo moved to Paris where he collaborated with other anatomists to make more models. The art of manufacture of models developed and in the 1730s the artist and anatomist Ercole Lelli created the first collection of wax models for the purposes of teaching. It is arguable that this collection by Lelli with other works by the artists Giovanni Manzolini and his wife Anna Morandi, along other skeletal and preserved specimens, represent the world's first anatomy museum. The practice of wax modelling spread to Florence, notably to the La Specola museum, and eventually elsewhere, including Britain and Ireland. In addition to wax models, anatomical sculptures could be made from plaster, which although less lifelike, were less prone to melting or deforming. Likewise as industrial processes improved small organic samples could be preserved in wine, spirit or other forms of alcohol.

The development of such techniques occurred contemporaneously with the opening of the 'age of enlightenment' of the 18th century with the blossoming of knowledge in philosophy, science and natural history. In this context individuals and institutions began to develop collections of artefacts and specimens of scientific importance. In this era of the 'Grand tour', collections would also include unusual or exotic specimens; archaeological artefacts such as Egyptian mummies, unusual anatomical deformities, and other interesting artefacts from around the world. The British Museum

in London was founded based on the collection of the Irish born scientist and physician Hans Sloan. William Hunter's collection became the Hunterian Collection, Museum and Gallery of the University of Glasgow. William Hunter's brother John created the famous collection that now resides in the Royal College of Surgeons in London. Anatomy museums, like La Specola, were created in many great universities including in Berlin, Paris and Basel. Trinity College, home of the internationally recognised Dublin Philosophical Society, was no exception. Such museums were not just considered places of interest for doctors but for any enlightened member of the public. An account of the anatomy Museum from 1773 describes:

'Embryos are young children which are not born, which anatomists, after they come into the world, preserve in spirits of wine in bottles. There is the finest collection of these in the known world in the College Anatomy-house, in Dublin; also many human figures of both sexes in wax, in the fact of child-bearing, a dead shark and an Aegyptian mummy, as old as king Charlemagne'.

These anatomical collections became almost universal in medical schools in the 19th Century. In an era before 'consent' interesting specimens and dissections could be taken and preserved in alcohol for the purposes of education with little consideration of the wishes of the individual or their family. Student's prize winning dissections would be preserved and displayed in alcohol in perpetuity and university academics and graduates could add to the collections as travel became easier and empires expanded.

In the 20th century such collections became less relevant. With the increased availability of photography, particularly colour photography publishing, the need for every medical school to have its own anatomy museum passed. It became easier and less complex to study human anatomy without the need for physical specimens. Some newer medical schools internationally abandoned the practice of dissection completely, relying fully on pictures and models. Many museums were closed, their educational purpose becoming increasingly opaque, their contents destroyed or interred. The inclusion and display of samples taken without consent, even from the distant past, was something that even modern anatomists became uncomfortable with. With the development of the internet and the free availability of information and images, the development of radiology and diagnostic imaging where anatomy is viewed in a different, virtual manner, the era of the anatomy museum seemed to have passed.

But recently things have begun to change. In 1977 a German Anatomist, Gunter von Hagens discovered the process of plastination where water and fat are replaced by various plastics, producing specimens that can be touched, do not smell or decay, and even retain most properties of the original sample. To those with a historical interest, the exhibits or 'plastinates' produced seem very similar the wax models of the 18th century. Large scale touring public exhibitions of these plastinated bodies of humans and animals have proven extremely popular and public anatomical dissections have again begun to happen, this time on television. Those anatomy collections that remain are now regarded as important historical and cultural entities. They can again be used to educate and inspire, and there can be no better evidence for this than in Jason Ellis' work.

Dr J Harbison July 2016

Old Anatomy

“Nothing is superfluous in Nature, nothing is lacking in Nature, Nature is perfect and it will always give you something to imitate.” *Leonardo da Vinci*

The research and teaching collection of the Department of Anatomy at Trinity College has been built up over 300 years and is one of the most important, but also the least known, collections of its type on these islands. Anatomical collections have always held public fascination, but the relationships between academic medicine, anatomical museums and popular culture can be problematic. With the development of microbiology and new technologies – and increasingly sensitive ethical issues around the display of human remains – collections formerly open to broader audiences have been withdrawn from public gaze.

The Department moved to new premises in 2011, and in 2014 I was asked to the old Anatomy Building to advise on the conservation of some 19th century plaster casts in the collection before they went into storage. (One of my areas of expertise as a conservator is plaster of Paris, and the world of conservation frequently brings me to fascinating places.) It is hard to describe the vision of the community of skeletons gathered in ‘the skull corridor’, the pathological specimens and the myriad different models and preparations that greeted me. I was fortunate enough to be granted permission to study some of the plaster casts in the collection and the concept for this exhibition was formulated. The casts were photographed, drawn, modelled in clay and have now been remade in stone.

By their very nature, anatomical collections reflect the conscious choices of curators who selected particular means of preservation and display, requiring both technical and creative skills; their

contents also are informed by the cultural ideas and ideals of the period. The models, some of extreme intricacy and delicacy, are made objects, with their own material interest and beauty; these aspects coexist alongside their cultural and historic significance.

The selection of casts is based on a set of criteria, form being a principal component – an upside-down stomach on a pedestal really is a thing of beauty – but I also want to examine the philosophical viewpoints that prompted their creation, from anthropological to pathological to pure anatomical. Why does the collection include a cast of the inside of Jonathon Swift's cranium or the arm of the bare-knuckle boxer Matt the Thrasher or the bound foot of a Chinese woman? The cast of the chimpanzee's face retains beard hair pulled from the mould taken from the animal itself; how many degrees of separation are we away from the subject, deceased 150 years? Gathering in this very personal selection of objects presents extra layers of meaning in interpreting the resulting sculptures. They are extrapolations and can be read variously as artworks, relics, curiosities, anatomical specimens or anthropological phenomena.

During the 18 months it took to make this work, I would sometimes find my own body – or perhaps my subconscious – reacting in sympathy to the specific organ on the bench. When attacking the marble block there would be a twinge in my liver as it recalled the previous night's alcohol consumption, or my heartbeat would quicken when polishing the heart. My lungs protested at the cigarette smoke and stone dust they were inhaling while carving versions in stone. The immersion became so complete during the weeks that each carving took that the process developed into a symbiotic exchange; the more intensity I gave to the carving, the more the object would respond. This unexpected reaction to the making process suggests to me that there is something about these sculptures that speaks of human frailty and our own mortality.

In making a series of carvings based on plaster 'originals', a juxtaposition occurs between the transience of the cast – be it the fate of the original subject or the fragile and damaged nature of the ancient plaster itself – and the permanence of the finished version in stone, a material with inherent beauty, used since antiquity to represent the corporeal.

Jason Ellis July 2016

2015
Kilkenny limestone
Ht: 9cm

The Devil makes work

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2015
Cornish serpentine, Portuguese limestone
Ht: 10cm

Lotus foot

Old Anatomy
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2015
Cork Red limestone, Kilkenny limestone, brass
Ht: 33cm

Breathe

Old Anatomy
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2015
Portland limestone, slate
Ht: 25cm

Tracey post-mortem

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2015
Butler's Grove limestone, red granite
Ht: 47cm

Pugilist

Old Anatomy
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2015
Cornish serpentine
Ht: 11cm

Third husband

Old Anatomy
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2015
Carrara marble, Butler's Grove limestone
Ht: 33cm

Pietà

Old Anatomy
Jason Ellis

2016
Persian limestone
Ht: 20cm

Bedouin tribesman

2016
Indian sandstone
Ht: 14cm

Spout

Old Anatomy
Jason Ellis

2015
Portuguese & Kilkenny limestones,
Wicklow sandstone, Connemara marble, Valentia slate

Eight kidneys

Old Anatomy
Jason Ellis

2016
Shelly & Butler's Grove limestones, chromed steel
Ht: 24cm

The second brain

Old Anatomy
Jason Ellis

2016
Chinese marble, limestone
Ht: 16cm

362: Dean Swift

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2016
Alabaster, Tinos marble, Stainless Steel
Ht: 15cm

Vermiculation

Old Anatomy
Jason Ellis

2016
Connemara marble, alabaster, bronze
Ht: 38cm

Second cousin, once removed

Old Anatomy
Jason Ellis

Illustrated Catalogue of original casts:

(Items with catalogue entries are from the museum collection, others are teaching models.)

1. Hand & foot of a primate

A zoologist visiting my studio suggested that these may belong to a lemur. I was attracted by the delicacy and small scale. The stone versions are carved 'on the block', i.e., the plinth and the objects are integral, partly because the originals, at only 10cm long, were too fine to survive had they been carved in the round.

2. Left bound foot
Cat. entry: "Guys, [...] May 1874"

This cast raises issues around deformity and beauty. The deforming act of binding a female child's feet so the toe bones break, making it difficult and painful to walk, was a 1,000 year-old tradition in China. Used as a means of control, the bound foot came to signify beauty and class distinction. The object itself is somewhat gruesome, but also powerful. I met a Chinese man recently whose mother can remember clipping the toenails of her own mother's bound feet.

3. A pair of lungs on display stands

A great help during the initial sketching and modelling phase were the written descriptions of each item as found in the 33rd edition of Grey's Anatomy. There, the lungs are described as "smooth and shining. At birth, they are rose pink in colour, in adult life they turn a dark slaty grey, mottled in patches". The Cork Red limestone used for the replicas seemed appropriate, and the plinths are approximations of the originals.

4. Section through the face of a chimpanzee
Cat. entry: "20 – 24"

Comparative Anatomy was popular with 19th century medics in search of the origins of mankind. The collection contains many examples of comparative anatomy, such as primate skulls, or Item 1 above. This field of study developed in many directions, two of the more notorious being Eugenics and Anthropometry, both regarded with suspicion today due to associations with genetic engineering in 1930s Germany and Sweden. This serene chimp has the rictus smile associated with recent death.

5. Right arm of a boxer

There are three casts of boxers' arms in the collection, and theories abound about who the original subjects were. This one may possibly belong to Matt 'The Thrasher' O'Reilly. Oddly, he is wearing a signet ring on his little finger. The powerful nature of the cast and the pronounced musculature suggested to me that the stone version should be in Butler's Grove limestone, the blackest available. The granite plinth has been in my stone store for 17 years, waiting for the right piece to support.

6. A liver on a steel mounting bar

This cast attracted me purely with its shape, a semi-solid flowing form reminiscent of a jellyfish. The stone version is from serpentine, from my home place on the Lizard peninsula in Cornwall. It is no longer quarried in large sizes and this piece came from my mother's garden wall. Bits of her wall make it home with me when I travel there by ferry and I cherish each piece. *Grey's Anatomy* describes the liver as the largest and heaviest organ, weighing in at 1.2 kilos.

7. Liver and associated viscera

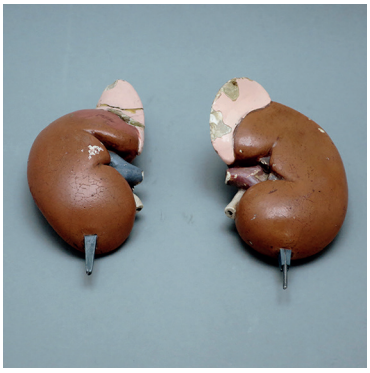
This model turned out to be made from papier-mâché, hence its battered condition and discolouration. Attached to the liver are the gall bladder, pancreas, spleen and parts of the inferior vena cava and the duodenum. When displayed upright on the brass post as intended, it has the appearance of a 'mother & child' figure group, the gall bladder like a weaning infant that has slipped from its mother's arms.

8. Cast of the head of a Bedouin

The subject seems to be recently deceased, and somewhat desiccated, as the eyelids and lips are taught and receding. I found a piece of limestone, someone told me it is Iranian, which partly replicates the original plaster and partly resembles bone. I did a little dentistry to the teeth in the stone version, as the cast has a disconcertingly carious mouth.

9. Adult mouth parts displaying a cleft palate
Cat. entry: "2926"

Like item 2, the Left bound foot, this model depicts deformity, but here it is congenital and not imposed. Today, operations are undertaken at a very early age to overcome this condition, so it is rare in the developed world to see an adult with a cleft palate. By carving the stone version projecting from a large and deep block of sandstone, it gave one friend the impression of a water spout high up on a medieval building.



10. A pair of kidneys with attached adrenal glands

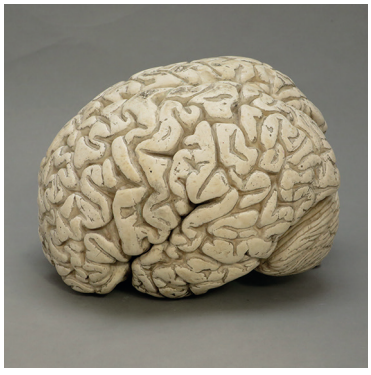
Da Vinci's quote kept repeating when working on the stone versions of these kidneys; I was fascinated by their perfect simplicity. The body is such a marvel of economy and efficiency in design. I ended up carving four pairs, all slightly different. One pair is carved from a sandstone found on the strand at Newcastle, Co. Wicklow, chosen for its colour. It turned out well, but I won't use it again as the high silica content ruined several of my carving tools. However alluring the thought may be, I often regret starting to carve something out of beach stone quite early on.

11. A stomach on display stand
Cat. entry: "27"

This most graceful cast epitomises what I was looking for from the models; elegance of form juxtaposed with the visceral nature of the object's function. It reminds me of the central panel of the Francis Bacon painting 'Second version of triptych 1944'. I found a geologically young shelly limestone to carve it in which appears like a partly-digested meal, and then struggled with making the black socle, but persisted as I wanted to replicate the painted pine original, integral to the object's visual appeal.

12. 362 – Dean Swift
Cat. entry: "362 – Cast of interior of cranium. Dean Swift."

It was a heart-stopping moment when Siobhán Ward opened the display cabinet that housed this cast. The catalogue entry describes it as having been moulded from the inside of Jonathon Swift's cranium. It has been painted in flesh tones and is one of a pair. Swift developed mental illness in his later years. "In 1742 he suffered great pain from the inflammation of his left eye, which swelled to the size of an egg; five attendants had to restrain him from tearing out his eye. He went a whole year without uttering a word."



13. Cast of a brain

Having carved the inside of Swift's cranium, it seemed appropriate to attempt a brain. What I thought would be a simple job became very tortuous. Alabaster behaves differently to other stone types; it is so soft that it runs away from you. I took solace in the thought that this small but dense organ contains 30 billion neurons and is responsible for the advancement of the species.

14. A heart with associated arteries

This cast was chosen partly for the challenge it presented in making a decent carving with limited technical skills. The aorta nearly got the better of me. The 'reclining' orientation of the organ is the way that it is found in the body, nestling between the lungs. It is one of several copies in the collection, has been crudely repainted and is worn and chipped from having been passed around numerous anatomy classes. It took a long search to find a suitable piece of stone, and I wanted to make a more fitting mount, hence the rather regal appearance of the new alabaster socle.

Acknowledgements

This exhibition would have never come about without the help of several key individuals, namely: Prof Martina Hennessy, Prof Joe Harbison, Siobhán Ward, Philomena McAteer and Susie Bioletti of TCD, and I am in their debt. Siobhán really was the linchpin; initiator, facilitator and driver. Immeasurable thanks are due to her.

Thanks to Ros Kavanagh for his expertise in photographing the sculptures.

Photos of the casts are by Jason and Deirdre Hardiman took the photo of the Museum Room in 2011.

Thanks to many friends for their support.

The most thanks are due to Rachel and her 30 billion neurons.

Biography

Ellis has been working full-time as a sculptor for 10 years now. He studied sculpture in the 1980s but spent 20 years working in conservation. The allure of working with stone finally led him to the creative path of making his own work.

His work is mostly in public and private collections, but he also shows regularly in Dublin and has installed several public works around the country. He held a solo show at the F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio in 2010 and another at the Oliver Sears Gallery in 2013; in 2014 he was invited into the National Self-Portrait Collection of Ireland.

2016 sees him showing a new body of work with Oliver Sears and participating in both Sculpture in Context in Dublin and the RUA Annual Show in Belfast as an invited artist.
He lives and works in Dublin.

Exhibitions

Solo

2013	Corpus	Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin
2012	Plaster of Paris: Maquettes, 2006-2011	Pearse Museum, Rathfarnham, Dublin
2011	New Stone Carvings	Prospect Gallery, Dublin
2010	Jason Ellis: Sculptures	F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio, Banbridge

Group

2016	Royal Ulster Academy Annual Exhibition	Belfast
2016	Form 2016	Ballymaloe House, Co. Cork
2016	Sculpture in Context	Botanical Gardens, Dublin
2016	RHA 186th Annual Exhibition	Ely Place, Dublin
2015	In Residence	Oliver Sears Gallery in London 6, Fitzroy Square, London W1
2015	Form at Ballymaloe	Artistic Alliance
2015	RHA 185th Annual Exhibition	Ely Place, Dublin
2014	RHA 184th Annual Exhibition	Ely Place, Dublin
2014	Vase, vessel, void	Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin
2014	Sculpture in Context	Botanical Gardens, Dublin
2014	Unfold	Rua Red Gallery, Tallaght
2014	Form	Artistic Alliance, Ballymaloe House, Co. Cork
2013	Boyle Arts Festival	Boyle, Co. Roscommon
2012	Uddenskulptur 2012	Hunnebostrand, Sweden
2012	Hibernation	Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin
2012	Boyle Arts Festival	Boyle, Co. Roscommon
2012	Mór Chuid Cloch Sculpture symposium	Clones, Co. Monaghan
2011	RHA 181st Annual Exhibition	Ely Place, Dublin
2011	Black & White	Oliver Sears Gallery, Dublin
2010	La Biennale de Venezia 12th International Architecture Exhibition	Venice
2010	Séoda - Contemporary Irish Sculpture	Kenny Gallery, Galway & AVA Gallery, Bangor
2008	The Secret Garden	Solomon Gallery, Iveagh Gardens, Dublin
2004	Éigse	Carlow Arts Festival

Commissions

2012	Fergus Ahern Memorial	Boyle, Co. Roscommon
2010	12th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia	Venice
2010	Garda Memorial Garden	Dublin Castle
2009	Druid Theatre	Galway
2008	The Jim McNaughton Perpetual Award, Allianz/Business to Arts Awards	Dublin
2007	University College Dublin	Roebuck House, Belfield Campus
1997	The Bantry House Archive Gift	Bantry House, Co. Cork

Collections

Irish State Art Collection
National Self Portrait Collection of Ireland
F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio
Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin
Office of Public Works
KBC Bank
Bank of Ireland
University College Dublin
University College Cork
Trinity College Dublin
AWAS
Irish Presidential Collection
National Union of Journalists, UK