

The Alice Walls at the Barbican (1982)

Angbeen Abbas

Out of the cinema I stagger up
take a breather from the stairs,
while strangers pass by lightly
I lean forward by the railing,
just about subterranean, cars
rolling behind me as I look up
into the trail of mirrors down
reflecting the sharp edges along
each wall, reflecting my face
back into my hands, the lines
intersecting and bleeding into
each mirror, a mural remembered
by name and not its history, artist
immortalised in display but never
invited to the centre's opening,
no mention of how in twenty years
management would mail gillian wise
to say, after twenty years of silence,
they were taking it down and
would she like to collect the pieces,
but what could be new about this,
about a woman's art scrubbed clean
until its official story shone,
what could be new about this,
the shapes of women we don't see

[From Gillian Wise's obituary in The Guardian](#): *"By the time The Alice Walls was unveiled, it seemed glaringly out of fashion. Although she was the only British artist to have installed work at the new centre, Wise received no acknowledgment for it and was not invited to the Barbican's opening. It was, she said, "a dark episode in the annals of support for national artists and, of course, women"."*