

Exploring Exhibition-making as research practice

Thank you for the invitation to this session that is '**Exploring exhibition-making as research practice**'. If I was to describe what I do in research terms, it would be to say, my research investigates women's photographic and filmmaking practice in Scotland, with a particular interest in 20th Century social documentary forms. I am a practice-based researcher, working in areas of curation, art history, feminist practices, photography and filmmaking.

Slide 2:

In thinking about the theme of this session, what are the ways in which curatorial practice is a form of critical enquiry and form of knowledge production, I think we can view this simply, what is it that a curator brings differently to the 'research table', for example, different than an art historian, in my case, looking at the same archive? Then following on from that, how can a curator articulate their research?

In this talk I will begin with looking at the efficacy of an enduring research question, that I can bring my different projects under. As we know, work as a curator, and research can be non-linear, and linked very much to working on numerous projects. The enduring research question allows for this at times non-linear way of working, allowing me to identify which of my projects link under this heading. I then have separate research questions as sub headings for each project I can bring under the enduring research question.

Slide 3:

Here is an example of how the enduring research question works for the 'sub questions' for Franki Raffles exhibition. The sub-questions also bring in the curatorial methodologies of 'exhibition-making', using a 'context sensitive' appraisal of the work, drawing out Raffles process, methods and aims, as well as placing her work in a wider historical context with other women social documentary photographers who had shared subjects or aims.

Slide 4:

This is the scope of the exhibition, which can be good to define each time for research purposes, as any external assessor may not have seen the exhibition. It is pragmatic but a useful part of establishing the research narrative.

Slide 5:

It is helpful to define in the narrative what is it that is important in the research. Here, Raffles' work in 2017 had been missing from feminist art history discourse. It should be noted her work has since gone on to be the focus of the major solo exhibition in Baltic, Newcastle, *Franki Raffles: Photography, Activism, Campaign Works*, 2024, Baltic; and '*Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970-1990*', 2024, Tate Britain/National Galleries of Scotland. However, at the point of the exhibition I curated in 2017, this was the

first solo exhibition of her practice in twenty-three years, following her death, at the age of 39.

Slide 6:

Whilst Raffles had nine bodies of work in her lifetime, the exhibition focused on three – To Let You Understand (1988) a project initiated by Edinburgh District Council Women's Committee; Women at Work, Russia (1989), from a road trip to Russia, just before perestroika and items from the Zero Tolerance campaign.

Slide 7&8

Examples from Women at Work, Russia, which I had hung in an organic mass, starting with images of women working in rural situations on the state farms, moving through to the city's factories and shops.

Slide 9:

I would define my curatorial methodology as aligned to Maria Lind who described the appraisal of an artist's work, in particular when they are not there, (as is the case of Raffles who died when she was thirty-nine) requiring a 'context-sensitive' reading of the work itself in order to establish the logic of the subsequent exhibition (P.63, *The Curatorial, Maria Lind Selected Writing*, Sternberg Press, 2010).

The methods employed for a 'context-sensitive' reading of Raffles' work were as follows:

- assessment of existing archival material.
- Selecting two bodies of work referencing women at work; one in Soviet Union and one in Scotland, in order to draw out her interest in political systems, using the exhibition layout to contrast those systems to imply what the photographer perceived to be the difference in condition for women workers.
- Select the third body of work, '*Zero Tolerance*', a graphic advertising campaign, to demonstrate that Raffles' saw her work as having to function by communicating a message. This work showed how Raffles' used her photography in a campaign format.
- Use the formal aspects of Raffles' processes, such as her inclusion through captioning of dialogue with those she is photographing, to become formal exhibition devices. Where possible those captions appear as vinyl lettering under framed works in the Reid Gallery exhibition.
- Experiment with the scale of Raffles work in the exhibition, as there was no guidance in archival material, regarding her preference for scale.

- Using exhibition as a tool to place Raffles' work in a wider context by showing examples of her work alongside four other historical and contemporary women photographers and collectives who also engaged with the theme of women and work

So I'm going to illustrate a couple of these points with images from the show in the next slides.

Slide 10:

In the assessment of existing archival material, I could see Raffles, who had travelled with a translator in the Soviet Union, had taken excerpts from her conversations with the women she had photographed, and had used Letraset (on the right) to place fragments of her conversations under the photographs which had been pasted onto board and were found in plastic sleeves in a portfolio. I found Raffles' choice of giving women their voice in this way, a really important factor in giving the women she photographed their agency. In the history of ethnographic photography, subjects are objectified, they are unnamed and shown as type. Raffles' clearly in her own process wanted to do the opposite. Therefore, in the exhibition I included those phrases in vinyl, directly under photographs where I could see she had included text. The curatorial method amplifies the photographer's method.

Slide 11:

How does your exhibition layout align with the artist's message you are researching? I had to consider the fact that the Reid Gallery, the location for the show was a white cube. Raffles in her lifetime had purposefully shown the majority of her work in non-gallery venues. The primary motivator for her was her work to communicate a feminist message. It was not for her photographs to be aesthetically pleasing. Therefore the exhibition itself as an exhibition-making method had to reflect her aims. If it has just been an exhibition solely of her photographs, framed, there would have been a continuous sense of comfort for an audience used to seeing photography exhibitions in a linear way. Therefore, it was important to include her 1993 campaign work, 'Zero Tolerance', again a collaboration with the Edinburgh District Council committee, a campaign against violence against women. The distinctive Z of the campaign was printed like the size of a billboard and pasted up in the Reid Gallery – an important interjection in the photographic hang.

Slide 12:

There are very few original objects in Raffles' photographic archive at St Andrews, so these were shown in cases. Contact sheets are such important ways to understand how the photographer chooses which images they will enlarge – having Raffles' own choices shown through these artefacts was again important.

Slide 13:

This was another curatorial method I used in the exhibition. In the second room of the gallery, I changed to a smaller scale and placed her work in the context of four other women photographers. This allowed her work to begin to be placed in a wider canon. Here we have Raffles work next to that of Helen Muspratt, who went to Russia in 1936, to photograph women taking predominantly men's roles in the communist system. So the curatorial research method here is 'Comparative'. Here we have *Women in the Fields*, Helen Muspratt, (1936), *Work 3 Women Workers, Russia*, Franki Raffles (1989). *Observing Women At Work: Franki Raffles*, Reid Gallery, GSA (2017)

Slide 14:

I think that method of placing overlooked women photographers in the context of other women photographers in art history, really fed into my approach for the next exhibition I curated that we will look at: 'Glean: early 20th Century Women Filmmakers and Photographers in Scotland'. at City Art Centre, Edinburgh. Rather than presenting a homogeneous narrative, or the women's biographies over-shadowing their work, the exhibition sought to retain complexities and diverse motivations at play. I'll look at curatorial research methods used to develop such an approach. I should say 'Glean' as a choice of word, for the exhibition title, was to reflect an action shared three-fold: by those photographed eg gleaning in farm labour; to the photographers and filmmakers using the camera to glean disappearing ways of life; and my subsequent actions as a researcher in multiple archives. Seen in the whole, the work of these women provided a different insight into documentary practice from this period.

Slide 15:

What is learnt when these 14 women are grouped together in this survey show? Whilst the majority of the women in this exhibition made their work independently, a small number worked in the film industry. Two set up commercial photography studios. When assessing the aims of these women, their films and photographs were used for a variety of purposes – to record events, to share with communities as well as wider audiences, to educate, for research, to sell, or to illustrate the other activities that they were involved in. Whilst some described themselves solely as photographer or filmmaker, many described themselves in multiple ways – author, historian, folklorist, photographer, filmmaker.

Slide 16:

This **scope** for *Glean* condenses into: 17 archives, 125 framed photographs, 8 films, 35 related artefacts and 7 events.

Slide 17:

Began as 3 of the women but as research continued others came to light.

Slide 18:

In terms of deciding the model of the exhibition, it was helpful to think of what it focused on but didn't. I came to realise that a survey exhibition would represent new knowledge, by beginning to map out the wider picture, of early 20th century women filmmakers and photographers in Scotland.

Slide 19:

So I'll aim to outline in this paper my research methodology, which I've defined as curatorial, exhibition-making and comparative. In particular, here is also a further research question, looking to see how a curatorial 'context sensitive' appraisal of women's photography and film-making from this period draws out their process, methods and aims.

'Context sensitive' is a phrase used by Maria Lind: where the appraisal of an artist's work, in particular when they are not there, requires a 'context-sensitive' reading of the work itself in order to establish the logic of the subsequent exhibition (P.63, *The Curatorial, Maria Lind Selected Writing*, Sternberg Press, 2010). This includes an assessment of material (in this case archival), visible decisions the women made about their own work (this can be any documents that show how they selected particular works for example in exhibitions, but where this was not possible, the way they laid out photographs, for example a number had photograph albums), then findings establishing key decisions in layout.

Slide 20:

Rather than present each woman's work individually, '*Glean*' had four cross-cutting themes, in order to allow for comparison of work and differing motivations. The themes were '*Capturing Scotland*', '*Nature, Landscape and Travel*', '*Recording Community*' and '*Women and Society*'.

Slide 21:**'Capturing Scotland'**

'*Capturing Scotland*' looked at the ways in which the women recorded rural and urban Scotland, often capturing historically significant moments for communities, ways of life, work and industry. In my research, a clear definer in the type of narrative about Scotland that the women were telling, as opposed to their male contemporaries, was that this was not a Romantic picture of a Scotland caught in aspic. Rather it was one where both modernity and traditional ways of life were simultaneous. This 1930 photograph by Violet Banks, *The road by the western shore of Barra*, clearly shows a modern building next to a traditional dwelling.

Slide 22:

Here's a grid of Isobel Frances Grant's working photographs, held by Edinburgh Central Library, were displayed to show how she mapped different traditional Scottish building types. Her photographs showed them often in ruinous state, or with mends, such as in this roof, clearly seen. They are not aesthetically composed, more an aide memoire for her to note different construction methods. She was to subsequently commission reconstructions of such cottages at her Highland Folk Museum.

Slide 23:

The flapper girl strolling down the main street in Lerwick, Shetland – Jenny Gilbertson 1931
A crofter's life in Shetland.

Slide 24

In researching multiple archives, I had identified ‘overlaps’ of subject, place, and sometimes the same person, recorded by different people. I was able to make such groupings apparent in the exhibition allowing for a means for making a critical analysis of style through comparison of framing and focus. Here, for example, drawn from separate sources, I was able to illustrate that three of the women traveling independently to photograph the same unlikely subject, the post office in Eriskay. Here are clockwise: Violet Bank’s circa 1920 photograph *Telegraph and Post Office, Eriskay*; Margaret Fay Shaw’s *Slightly scattered houses, Eriskay*, date unknown; and the earliest, Isabell Burton MacKenzie’s 1912 photograph *Post Office – Isle of Eriskay*. I suspect that the post office was of interest as a further anachronism of modernity and tradition – technology existing within a remote island cottage.

Slide 25: Eggs: I chose the grouping of four examples of bird’s nests by Garvie, Donaldson, Shaw and Gilbertson, as a metaphor to present key tensions embedded in the contemporary presentation of this archival work. These women were not grouped together in this exhibition, like eggs in a nest, purely because of their biological gender. All fourteen of the women’s backgrounds were different to those that they recorded. All were white. None of the women were native to the communities they photographed or filmed. All had some form of independent means, key in terms of privilege, in making their endeavours possible.

Slide 26

The timeline – another important element of the exhibition has been the timeline, which is a simple device but again, like the map, plots key activity or work across the 14 women. For example, 1935 is a productive year: Violet Banks establishes her commercial photography studio in Edinburgh; Hutchison is in Greenland and makes the film ‘Flowers & Coffee party at Umanak; Biggar joins the Kino Film Group and IF Grant sets up first iteration of Am Fasgadh in Iona.

Slide 27:

A further exhibition theme, Women in Society.

Slide 28: Housing Problems:

A number of the women were motivated politically in their work, so were a key part of this exhibition section. Ruby Grierson was an uncredited assistant in ‘*Housing Problems*’ (1935, directed by Arthur Elton, Edgar Anstey) – latterly credited with getting those living in poor conditions to talk straight to the camera, rather than the norm of the received pronunciation narrator. This was an innovation for documentary film making.

Slide 29

The inclusion of two films by Helen Biggar, *Challenge to Fascism: Glasgow’s May Day* (1938) and ‘*Hell UnLimited*’ (1936), a collaboration with Norman McLaren (1914-1987) were key in making this historical work relevant to the issues of today. *Hell Unlimited* (1936) was made as a protest against profits in armaments during a period when fascism was growing throughout Europe, its mixture of stop animation and archival footage making evident the relationship between capitalism, armaments and war.

Slide 30

A key curatorial decision was creating a layout where the women's work would not be overshadowed by biography. Here is the first layout – more traditional, with all information at start,

Slide 31

And here is the layout I went with, that the women's biographies were in the second room 'Women and Society', as they were just as affected by societal norms for their gender at the time. Also meant the work was met first by the gallery visitors. This then achieved the research question: **How can a curatorial methodology broaden a response to feminist practice beyond a biographical approach?**

Slide 32: Outputs along the way

Slide 33: Eigg, working out sites in photographs and re-photographing

Slide 34

A way I found helpful during my research, has been to write 'research notes' after key archival visits or visiting the site where the women made work. These are on my Wordpress. It is a really good way of writing up, and gathering outlines and reflections.

Slide 35

Context : It's important to give the context for this research by outlining the field in which you are making the research in. This slide sets out the research field, which is a current one and growing.

Slide 36

The exhibition also acknowledged, in particular through the events programme, the researchers, gallerists and archivists, who have championed these individuals in their work. The feminist ethics of '*Glean*' were to show the 'live' hive mind in this field of study.

Slide 37:

The last project I will focus on is the exhibition I recently curated for Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art, on the work of Sandra George. Sandra was born in Nottingham in 1957, living the first seven years of her life in Jamaica with her mother, before moving to Birmingham, and then Edinburgh, to live with her father. Sandra George was a community worker in Craigmillar, Edinburgh. She died in 2013. Her archive is cared for by Craigmillar Now, an arts and heritage organisation in Edinburgh.

Slide 38:

Sandra was a prolific social-documentary photographer, taking thousands of images of community projects across Scotland between the late 1980s through to the late 2000s. Her period of photographing in Edinburgh, completely overlaps with Franki Raffles who documented women's working lives in Scotland and internationally in the 1980s to 1990s. There is no evidence however that they were aware of each other. Her perspective and insight as a Black female social documentary photographer and artist add further importance to this collection – women photographers of colour capturing community life in

Scotland over this period are significantly underrepresented. Her black and white photography includes subjects ranging from Braille classes at Royal Blind School Edinburgh, to capturing sessions with disabled musicians. Here we have the receptionist, Robert, at Blindcraft – a business who made beds and mattresses -over 60% of its employees were disabled.

Slide 39:

The message of her work – community, care, accessibility and equality in the arts and workplaces, ethics in working with others in under-reached communities, and exploration of identity – remain important issues today. Her observations are always sensitive and surprising, here is a young couple at Victoria Hostel in Edinburgh. Her work represents an important and previously missing part of Edinburgh’s social histories, of those communities whether by class, ethnicity or disability have been overlooked.

Slide 40:

Her sensitive portrayals give people their agency every time, to learn, to play, to take collective action. George, writing on photography in her journal noted: ‘Stop making assumptions about people’ ‘Start from the level people are based’.

Here we have her documentation of international women’s day with Shakti, a women’s group.

Slide 41:

The exhibition was at an old school building, 5 Florence St, which meant I could select two classrooms to show the work in, thus being able to present a room on her community work and wider portraiture, and a second room on Sandra’s biography, which also included the other artforms Sandra had worked in when a mature student at Edinburgh College of Art.

From an assessment of the archive, George made numerous images in sequence of the groups she photographed.

Slide 42:

Rather than show singular images from each group, I chose to select strong sequences for each ‘story’ to begin to show her process as a photographer. So here is the wider Blindcraft series...

Slide 43:

And here is the wider Shakti series, showing the international women’s day event and also the women in their office, protesting and at a lunch break. By showing this work in sequence, it begins to illustrate that Sandra spent real time with the groups she photographed, going back repeatedly, as distinct from just treating it like an assignment.

Slide 44:

When working on a number of curatorial projects, a ‘context sensitive’ method will change approach in key areas. Where as an earlier research question had been **How can a**

curatorial methodology broaden a response to feminist practice beyond a biographical approach, in Sandra George's practice, there was an equally strong strand of self-portrait and works on family, in particular charting her son Tyler from baby through the first childhood years.

Slide 45:

Biography is of key importance in terms of representation and equality, when archives have been a predominantly white pursuit, both for audiences and for a current generation of Black and POC practitioners. I was also very much aware of my position as a white curator, so rather than 'extract' from Sandra's work, the exhibition was very much developed with her family and also Craigmillar Now. Therefore, the second room of the exhibition, which operated as a biography type of room for Sandra, and was of equal importance. There was also as part of the project an archive commission call-out, to commission a Black or Person of Colour contemporary photographer /artist/ community worker or curator to engage with the archive and develop an event for Gi. Christian Noelle Charles developed 'An Evening for Sandra George' and created a panel discussion with Zoe Lorimer and Titilayo Farukuoye. Christian, Zoe and Titilayo held a reflective dialogue, on the experience of living as Black women in Scotland and the role of community in navigating challenges and fostering resilience. The event offered a space for meaningful conversation and connection, honoring Sandra's contributions while highlighting the ongoing importance of amplifying Black voices in the arts.

All participants continue to explore Sandra's archive beyond this exhibition and will bring their own readings to her work.

Jenny Brownrigg