

Exhibiting Feminist Photography: the work of Sandra George (1957-2013) and Franki Raffles (1955-94), Jenny Brownrigg, AAH Conference 10.4.25

How can a curatorial '*context sensitive*' (Lind, M, 2010) appraisal of Sandra George and Franki Raffles' photography draw out their process, methods, aims and message through exhibition-making? This paper explores the curatorial methodologies of two separate solo exhibitions I have curated of their work: (*Sandra George*, Glasgow International, 5 Florence Street, 2024, in partnership with Craigmillar Now, the heritage organisation in Edinburgh that holds Sandra's work) and Franki Raffles (*Franki Raffles: Observing Women at Work*, Reid Gallery, The Glasgow School of Art, 2017, in partnership with Edinburgh Napier University, Professor Alistair Scott and the University of St Andrews). Both photographers contribute to the histories of social documentary photography in Scotland and the UK. Both George's and Raffles' work had been missing from feminist art history discourse at the point of the exhibitions I will speak about.

There are 2 years between these two feminist social documentary photographers, born 1955 and 1957 respectively. Both were born in England, going on to live and work in Edinburgh.

Raffles was born in Salford, and studied an MA (Hons) in Philosophy at St Andrews University 1973-77, where her collection is now held. As a student, Raffles was active in Women's' Liberation groups in University of St Andrews and nationally. Raffles would go onto document women's working lives in Scotland and internationally in the 1980s to 1990s.

Born in Nottingham, Sandra George lived the first seven years of her life in Jamaica with her mother, before moving to Birmingham, and then Edinburgh, to live with her father. She became a community worker in Edinburgh from the 1980s onwards. She studied throughout, gaining her BA Photography in Napier University in 1982; then 22 years later in 2004, her BA Hons in Drawing and Painting at Edinburgh College of Art; and Community Education at the University of Edinburgh. She was prolific, taking thousands of images of community projects across Scotland between the late 1980s through to the late 2000s.

Maria Lind defined '*curating as a way of thinking in terms of interconnections*' and an '*approach that owes much to site-specific practices*.'¹ For a curatorial '*context sensitive approach*', it has been essential to assess who Raffles and George chose to photograph, and

¹ (Maria Lind, P.63, 'The Curatorial', 'Selected Maria Lind Writing', Sternberg Press, 2010)

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the particular time the work was made in. The Conservative party, under Margaret Thatcher were in UK government from 1979-1997. Thatcher cut spending on the welfare state, to aid the British economy, believing that a collective provision for unemployment and sickness benefits was demotivating working-class people's drive to work. She coined '*there is no such thing as society*'.²

It is against this backdrop that both Raffles and George purposefully worked with those that Thatcher sought to demonise. Whilst Raffles photographed the working classes, looking at the inequalities for women under political systems, George showed the agency of the working class, of communities of colour and disabled people. Here on the left, we have an image from Raffles' '*To Let You Understand*', a collaboration with Edinburgh District Council's Women's Committee, which focussed on low paid work and women's labour. On the right, again focusing on youth, is Sandra's Sandra George's sensitive chronicling of life in '*Victoria Hostel, Edinburgh*' (1981). Glasgow based artist Christian Noelle Charles found a Filofax in Craigmillar Now's holdings on Sandra where Sandra had written on photography: '*Stop Making assumptions about people. Start from the level people are based*'. Her work is always about showing someone's agency.

As a further curatorial co-ordinate, it was necessary to understand the families and archives' wishes for the work. Through conversations with Prof Alistair Scott, who established the Franki Raffles digital archive and represented her family's wishes, their main aim was that it be engaged with by curators and scholars in a multitude of interpretations and exhibitions over the years to come. Therefore, it was the ethos of the Reid Gallery exhibition as the first one since Raffles death, 25 years earlier, not to be definitive. Rather, the ethos was to focus on three of her nine bodies of work- *To Let You Understand...* (1988), *Women at Work, Russia* (1989) and *Prevalence* (1993) from the *Zero Tolerance campaign*. This selection gave the parameters to look at the theme of women and labour in her work; consider how Raffles used her photography to communicate a message; and to begin to place her work in a historical and contemporary context.

² History and Policy website

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For Sandra George, the wish of her son Tyler and Craigmillar Now, was to build on the showings of her work that Craigmillar Now had undertaken in the communities she had made it in, by opening up opportunities for it to be encountered by wider audiences and arts professionals. Therefore, I suggested Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art would be the right platform. The context of the venue, 5 Florence Street, a vacant school, provided the perfect setting for Sandra's work, which drew on schools, nursery settings and children at play.

From a first assessment of existing archival material in St Andrews, I selected Raffles' 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. I used the exhibition layout to contrast those systems to imply what the photographer perceived to be the difference in condition for women workers. In terms of exhibition schema, to represent the Soviet emphasis on the collective, *Soviet Women* was shown across two walls as a non-linear collective, ranging from rural to urban workplace. *To Let You Understand...* was hung uniformly in a modest line.

There is a palpable difference in the women workers, with the strength of the women working in the Soviet Union; versus the resigned air of the Edinburgh women workers. As a contrasting example, here we have the women road builders in Russia, as opposed to the supermarket stacker in Edinburgh- the majority of the Edinburgh workers had their back to the camera.

I selected the third body of work, '*Zero Tolerance*'. *Zero Tolerance* was a charity established by Franki Raffles and Edinburgh District Council Women's Committee in the late 1980s, to raise awareness of the issue of men's violence against women and children. The presence of this large paste-up, the Z of Zero Tolerance, at billboard size, undermined the sovereignty of framed photographic work in the gallery space, thus aligning with the photographer's aim for her work to communicate a message beyond being an art object. This graphic campaign in the exhibition aimed to also subvert the gallery white cube as Raffles' made her work predominantly for a public domain.

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I also utilised aspects of Raffles' processes, gleaned from archival visits, such as her inclusion through captioning the dialogue with those she is photographing. This became a formal exhibition device. As you see on the right, in a photograph from the archives, Raffles' used Letraset onto the board the photographs were pasted on.

Where possible those captions appeared as vinyl lettering under framed works in the Reid Gallery exhibition. This also showed Raffles' aim to clearly give the women a voice, and draw out the ethnographic methodology in Raffles' work. The quotations are important as they include the voice of the women.

Here we a woman working in one of the state farms: *"No, I don't want to own the land, it belongs to everyone. We work hard but the money is ok and we have the surplus of the crops to ourselves"*.

I also placed Raffles' work in a wider context, 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. These photographers and collectives were: Helen Muspratt (1907-2001), Margaret Fay Shaw (1903-2004), Doris Ulmann (1882-1934) and Hackney Flashers Collective.

This comparative methodology through exhibition-making allowed for a revisionist process of placing Raffles' work in a wider set of histories. In one of the pairings, original photographs by Helen Muspratt from 1936 of Russian women workers in a field were shown alongside a Raffles 1989 photograph of Soviet women workers in the field of a state farm. By placing her work next to Helen Muspratt's there was an alignment of political ideologies – here was a representative from an earlier generation of women photographers who had been drawn through political ideology to also photograph Soviet women at work.

In the exhibition of Sandra George, there are examples that Sandra was also drawn to workers, in this case, the visually impaired workers of the Edinburgh company Blindcraft. From my archive assessment, Sandra made numerous images in sequence of the groups she photographed. Each of the images from the sequence would tell a different part of the story. Rather than select and show singular images from each group, I chose to select strong

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sequences for each 'story' to begin to show her process as a photographer. So here is the wider Blindcraft series where we see the receptionist, Robert, at work. Sandra take's shots of him from different angles, showing how he works the particular tools of his trade – the tannoy speaker system as well as the braille. As well as being inside his little office, she then goes out into the showroom, to look back in.

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 a one-off assignment.

The sequential reading of Sandra's work, in particular for the community photographs, became the focus of the first classroom. The architecture of the classroom mean we could have three freestanding walls down the central space. The photograph groupings were: *'Victoria Hostel', 'Blindcraft', 'Shakti Women's Group', 'Royal Blind School', 'Disabled Musicians at North British Hotel, Edinburgh'* and a sequence from a shop which had been targeted with racist graffiti.

On the original classroom walls, I grouped photographs from Sandra's documentation of protests undertaken over an almost twenty-year period, which included an Elderly People's Demo (1981), an 'Unemployment Demo', a demonstration on the Mound, Princes Street, organised by Access Ability (1998), an Anti Sex Shop Demo (1981) and 'A Night for the ANC'.

On the opposing wall, after this focus on sequences that built a bigger nuanced picture, I wished to show the breadth of Sandra's wider work, so selected another curatorial method that would hint at a different route in her work – that of the singular portrait. Here we have Marmion, Edinburgh, (1995), commissioned by Margaret Blackwood. Marmion, founded in 1972 by Dr Blackwood, was a national Housing and Care provider specialising in homes and case service for people with disabilities.

Conversations with the Craigmillar Now team, and with Tyler, Sandra's son, provided insight and turning points in the selection of works and shape of the exhibition. In talking with him about the number of the original selection of works, he was disappointed it was a smaller

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number due to the available wall space. He suggested bringing in screens to add to the available hanging space. In the archives, I saw this snapshot of an exhibition Sandra had, I think help organised, with these vivid blue screens. We therefore made two sets of screens for 5 Florence St. One was dedicated to children at play...

The second was dedicated to place, as Sandra's observations of different areas in Edinburgh. Whilst some did record ruinous architecture, Sandra equally showed the power of the community self-organising such as gala days and free concerts –her approach was the antithesis of only showing multiple depravation.

In Sandra'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. Sandra was very much exploring her own identity as a Black woman through her self-portraits. Her work is so important as 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.

Therefore, the second room of the exhibition, which operated as a biography type of room for Sandra, and was of equal importance, offering the opportunity to show a whole series of Sandra's self-portraits and work on her family. Sandra also made jewellery, stained glass and drew, so examples from these different media were also in room 2 to give a glimpse of the breadth of her practice.

Whilst I have focused on my own curatorial approach, I will conclude with an acknowledgement to those who have taken care of Raffles' and George's work and continue to do so. Furthermore, it is testament to George and Raffles' photography, that artists, photographers and writers are engaging with it – including Alicia Bruce and Christian Noelle Charles. I believe a collective rather than Thatcherite individualistic approach is required to raise the profile of Raffles' and George's work, with people bringing their own experiences and care to it. This seems to me to be more in keeping with the ethos of both women and how they would wish their message to reach others.