

**Paper title: ‘Observing Women at Work’: Franki Raffles**

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Franki Raffles (1955 – 94) was a British feminist social documentary photographer who documented women’s working lives in Scotland and internationally. She began this work in the early 1980s when she photographed the women crofters who were her neighbours on the Hebridean island of Lewis. Over the following decade Raffles assembled a body of work showing how working life for women in Scotland, under the free-market policies of Thatcherism, compared and contrasted with women around the world, such as those living under communism in the Soviet Union at the time of perestroika. In this paper we will reflect on how Raffles’ archive reveals the solidarity, resilience and humour of women under two political systems.

Raffles’s career was suddenly cut short in December 1994 when she died aged thirty-nine. Her early death has meant that her work remained hidden until 2015 when, working with her partner, I gathered the entire collection of her negatives and prints, together with personal notebooks, to be deposited with St Andrews University Library. This has enabled research to begin to re-discover and assess Raffles’s contribution to feminist photography and resulted in the new exhibition, *Observing Women at Work – Franki Raffles*, earlier this year at the Reid Gallery, Glasgow.

In 1978, after studying philosophy at St Andrews University, Raffles moved to a remote

Scottish village on the Isle of Lewis to renovate a derelict farmhouse. Her earliest photographs recorded the everyday activities of women in this community. As a student she had been active in the Women's Liberation Movement, and in her notes she wrote, "I hope that, through my photographs, people will see and learn about the reality of life for women and question and press for change and improvement." This approach began with her photographs of women neighbours engaged in communal crofting work such as when the sheep of the village were brought together for shearing.

Jumping forward to the mid-1980s, after leaving Lewis and travelling in China and Tibet for more than 12 months, Raffles was living in Edinburgh. From September 1987 to April 1988 she worked on a project with the District Council's Women's Unit that brought together research into statistics on the local economy, interviews with women in the workplace, and a photographic record of working conditions. The aim was to document the reality of women's lives to gather evidence for policy initiatives to combat inequality and argue for improved childcare facilities.

Raffles reflected on her working methods,

"...most of my time is spent talking to women about the issues to be portrayed. Without the understanding that I gain from talking to women, I cannot produce good photographs. I want my photographs to show how women feel, and to do this I have to learn myself."

In order to capture the voices of the women Raffles used short quotes from the interviews as text captions alongside her images.

*"To Let You Understand..."* was launched in May 1988 as both an exhibition and publication and toured community venues such as libraries and sports centres touring

over the following year. Raffles was determined that it should be shown in places accessible to, and visited by, ordinary women.

In June 1989 Raffles travelled by car with her nine-year-old daughter across the USSR, transporting “*To Let You Understand...*” to exhibit in Rostov-on-Don, where she had established a link with a local photography club. Following a tradition of women’s documentary photography which links her back to photographers in the 1930s, Raffles had secured funding for an assignment to photograph Soviet women workers. She spent three months, June – September, in the Soviet republics of Russia, Ukraine and Georgia. As part of her preparations Raffles made contact with the magazine, *Soviet Woman*. The editor commissioned her to write an article about why she was interested in the lives of women in a communist society and in her notes she outlined her reasons:

“I was 15 years old when I first visited the Soviet Union..... I remember so clearly standing at the window of my hotel room in Leningrad and watching the workers on a building site below as they laid the foundations of a new building. The workers on that site were women. On that visit, I met women factory managers, a surgeon and women engineers. I saw for the first time that it was possible for women to work in any occupation at any level. The experience of that visit has led me down a path of interest and concern and has determined my life and work since that day.... It opened my eyes to the possibility of a future for women where our work could be valued as of equal worth to that of men.”

Over the summer Raffles captured the confident faces of Soviet women workers in the city and countryside, in factories, hospitals, and collective farms. She kept a notebook

recording her progress, her frustration with the bureaucratic Intourist officials, and her conversations with the women she photographed. The resulting exhibition was shown in May 1990 at the Pearce Institute, Glasgow, as part of events for the European City of Culture, and then in June in Rostov-on-Don. As with “*To Let You Understand...*” alongside the photographs there were captions with quotes from the women who were portrayed.

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*Franki Raffles: Observing Women at Work* (2017), Reid Gallery, The Glasgow School of Art, presented a selection from these two bodies of work *To Let You Understand...* (1988) and *Women Workers, Russia* (1989). Furthermore, this was exhibited alongside material from ‘*Prevalence*’, the first campaign of *Zero Tolerance*. *Zero Tolerance* was a charity established by Franki Raffles and Evelyn Gillan, together with a small group of women who came together through working on Edinburgh District Council Women’s Committee projects in the late 1980s. *Zero Tolerance* was developed to raise awareness of the issue of men’s violence against women and children. It was a ground-breaking campaign as it did not portray women as victims. The inclusion of *Zero Tolerance* in the exhibition purposefully disrupted a possible classical aesthetic hang of the other two bodies of photographs. This was completely in keeping with Raffles’ desire to use her photography across different forms to communicate a message.

In a second space in Reid Gallery, the final section offered the opportunity to begin contextualising Raffles’ work alongside that of other key women photographers,

including Margaret Fay Shaw (1903–2004), Helen Muspratt (1907–2001), Doris Ulmann (1882–1934) and The Hackney Flashers Collective.

The process I drew on for the exhibition was one of documentary analysis utilising the archive, with the primary objective being to find methods of presentation that could have relevance with the originator's aims and process. The archive of Raffles' work, housed within Photographic Collections at the University of St Andrews, predominantly comprises of the negatives and contact sheets from these series, rather than original prints. For the wall works in this exhibition, the decision was taken to digitally reprint the photographs from negative scans. Some of the original artefacts that remain, which begin to hint at Raffles' hand and process, were shown in vitrines. There is no existing exhibition documentation of the shows that Raffles had been involved in to indicate her preferred photograph size or schema. I therefore decided to explore the potential of her photographs at two scales for viewing- larger in the main part of the Reid Gallery and at a more intimate scale in the second space, echoing the size of the historical re-prints.

On entering the gallery to see *Observing Women at Work*, visitors encountered a similar view as the narrators do in Charlotte Gillman's *Herland* (1915) – a society entirely comprising women. Through the repetition of gender, each of Raffles' photographs reinforces her feminist agenda. The women are centre-stage. It is only on closer inspection that one can see men in the further recesses of the photographs – having a cigarette out of a lorry window or lingering at the end of a corridor with a co-worker. Intriguingly, Raffles resists the device of the close-up, preferring the mid- or long-shot. She predominantly uses the establishing shot, which clearly shows the environment

within which the worker operates, whether it is the regulated space of the open plan office, the natural dirt of the state farm or the systematic space of manufacture. Her photographs when seen en masse show her predilection for establishing bold graphic line and pattern through the framing of the scenes.

Did Raffles discount the close-up for its potential objectification of women and in opposition to the 'male gaze' (a concept introduced by Laura Mulvey in 1975 in the essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*)? Whilst Raffles observes, her photographs do not frame their subject as 'other' or categorise the protagonists as 'type'. Hers is not an ethnographical eye. Her frequent method of providing captions alongside photographs gives autonomy to the women, affording them their own voice. They provide information, they are humorous at times and they capture the 'on the ground' interaction between Raffles and the women she photographs. In '*Potato Lifting, State Farm, Caucasus*' of 1989, a woman in her overall, says to Raffles:

'... *'Why don't you come over and live here. I could get you a job no problem. I said 'I've got a job already'. She said 'Yeah, taking photographs of me'.*

The roles conferred by work create equality between the person behind and in front of the camera.

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The exhibition at the Reid Gallery meant that Raffles's work gathered notice from the press and public after twenty years of remaining hidden from sight. Surveying the work retrospectively critics made comparisons between how the Scottish and Soviet women

were represented. Catherine Spencer commented that Raffles's images were "resonant in raising poignant questions about work and ideology", challenging the conventional understanding relating to labour and gender. She believed that "*Women Workers* is in stark contrast to Raffles's "*To Let You Understand...*" where the Soviet women appear engaged and energized, the cleaners, shop assistants, factory workers and home-help carers documented in this series seem listless and alienated, their faces often occluded by shadow", however, "the comparisons and rhythms that she establishes across her images complicate any simplistic binaries between communist and capitalist modes of production".

Throughout her career Raffles used the camera as a tool directly connected with her political commitment. Her early death has meant she never had the opportunity to look back at her own work decades later. Photo archivist Marc Boulay observed one "advantage of this collection is, and how it differs from other museum collections is that we have the entire negative collection, we have the entire print documentation. So you get to see the process of the photographer". He argued that the photographs in "*To Let You Understand...*" focused on working women's difficulties, whereas the "*Soviet Women Workers*" images, reflecting the empowerment and the engagement by the women, could be seen as demonstrating Raffles's progress as a photographer interacting more with her subjects.

Early research into the archive of her work has identified the ways in which Raffles's approach addresses theoretical issues raised by writers in the USA who argued that by the

1980s the tradition of 'photo documentary' as a public genre had become an outdated, exploitative form of rhetoric. Martha Rosler accused the star photo-journalists and magazine editors of creating sensational and manipulative images imbued with a 'myth of objectivity'. In her own creative practice Rosler, like many feminist artist/photographers, moved away from documentary to work with performative, installation and constructed imagery. In her Notes and Photo-essay she asserted that the liberal aims of 'committed photography' could never result in political change. Also active in this debate Allan Sekula had observed that, "Documentary is thought to be art when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artist". Raffles certainly rejected this idea, in a newspaper interview she made her intention for her work clear, "I don't see my photos as art objects at all. They're a means to an end. The content of what I'm doing matters much more than the process. I want my pictures to say something, otherwise there's no point in producing them. I believe that by people opening their eyes and actually seeing, then that's the way things start to change."

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In a bid to explore whether Raffles' work on women and labour could begin to be aligned with a wider wave of UK feminist artists and filmmakers demanding equal rights for women, the exhibition *Franki Raffles: Observing Women at Work* included a reprinted work by The Hackney Flashers Collective from their *Women and Work* series, commissioned by Hackney Trades Council in 1975. This feminist and social collective was set up in 1974 and included members Sally Greenhill, Elizabeth Heron, Michael Ann Mullen, Maggie Murray, Christine Roche, Julia Vellacott, Jo Spence and Ann Dekker.



Their work focused on the social and economic issues faced by women at work and home in the '70s. A black-and-white reprint, shown alongside Raffles' photograph of women working in a shoe factory, is half of a montage panel from the Hackney Flashers Collective's exhibition *Women and Work*. The image of the factory worker is shown with text from an advertisement for Simpson – an upmarket London clothing manufacturer and retailer, who had a factory in Hackney at the time. The retail price of the clothes has been marked with a red circle, to show that it exceeds that of the labour taken to make it.

During this second wave of feminism, a number of collectives were also focusing on equal rights for women, including The London Women's Film Group with their work, *The Amazing Equal Pay Show* (1974), a film looking at the place of working-class women in capitalist society. The London Women's Film Group worked with the Women's Street Theatre Group, to lampoon issues of inequality through using the language of carnival, street theatre and pantomime.

Catherine Spencer in her *Map Magazine* review of '*Franki Raffles*': *Observing Women at Work* ' exhibition aligns Raffles' documentary process and social activism with Margaret Harrison (b.1940), Mary Kelly (b.1941) and Kay Hunt's (1933-2001) exhibition '*Women and Work: A Document on the division of Labour in Industry 1973-75*' (1975, *South London Gallery / Tate Britain 2013-14*). The artists made a sociological analysis of womens' work at a metal box factory in Bermondsey, London, contrasting the female low-skilled roles with those of their fellow male workers who held higher positions. The artists' investigation, which followed the passing of the Equal Pay Act (1970), concluded that there were still significant pay gaps. The exhibition showed black and white

photographic portraits of the women alongside the ephemera of their work, such as time punch cards and charts with statistical information of the workplace.

Against this feminist backdrop of a focus of practice on the working conditions of women, Raffles' work *To Let You Understand...* a decade later –begins to reveal how important a photographer Raffles is. The accompanying publication shows the photographs with statistical information relating to low pay, childcare issues, income support, inadequate health care and lack of equal opportunities.

Raffles continued recording the contribution of women to the workplace and to society, believing, according to Evelyn Gillan, in an interview with Alistair Scott, ‘...*in women's equality. What you required for women's equality was economic independence and that was critical to ... her interest and work. I remember her saying, economic independence, if you don't have that, you have nothing*’.

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As a result of the critique initiated by Rosler, Sekula had proposed a new approach to ‘photo documentary’ for which he gave the term ‘critical realism’. It is not clear whether Raffles was aware of these theoretical debates, however, in the way “*To Let You Understand...*” and “*Women Workers*” engaged with and documented women at work, it can be argued that this was indeed a form of feminist ‘critical realism’ - using photography as note taking - which did not aim to ‘precede, supplant, or transcend’ social activism. This is photography *as* a form of social activism, placing at its centre an

authentic representation of women's working lives and their genuine desire for radical political change – a real collaboration between the photographer and her subjects.

Perhaps Franki Raffles should be acknowledged as a feminist photographer who found a way to bring 'critical realism' into her documentary practice. With the partnership established between Edinburgh Napier, Glasgow School of Art and the University of St Andrews we hope to expand research into Raffles's contribution and welcome your questions, comments and suggestions.

### **Speaker Biographies**

#### **Edinburgh Napier University**

##### **Alistair Scott**

Alistair Scott is Associate Professor in Film and Television at Edinburgh Napier University and Director of Screen Academy Scotland. He leads the Franki Raffles Research Project and co-ordinated the deposit of her photographic prints, negatives and other materials with Special Collections at the University of St Andrews library. In the 1970s Alistair studied Modern History at the University of St Andrews where he first met Franki Raffles. They remained close friends for the rest of her life. After postgraduate training at the National Film and Television School he spent over twenty years working in broadcast television as a director of arts and documentary programmes. In 2005 Alistair began teaching in higher education. His research interests include documentary practice, community film and television. Publications include a chapter,

entitled 'Representing Scottish Communities on Screen', in Malik, S, Chapain, C, Comunian, R (Eds), *Community Filmmaking: Diversity, Practices and Places* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017). [www.frankirafflesarchive.org](http://www.frankirafflesarchive.org)

### **Jenny Brownrigg, Exhibitions Director**

#### **The Glasgow School of Art**

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Jenny Brownrigg is a curator and writer. She has been Exhibitions Director at The Glasgow School of Art since 2009. Her recent research is on early women photographers and film-makers who documented the Highlands and Islands of Scotland.