

On curating the work of Sandra George (1957-2013) and Franki Raffles (1955-94), Jenny Brownrigg, St Andrews 21.2.25

The exhibition '*Between Women*', allows me to focus on two of the women shown together for the first time - Franki Raffles and Sandra George. There are 2 years between them, born 1955 and 1957 respectively. Both were born in England, going on to live and work in Edinburgh, although there is no evidence to date that they knew each other. Both were feminist social documentary photographers. Franki Raffles was born in Salford, and studied an MA (Hons) in Philosophy at St Andrews University 1973-77. As a student, Raffles was active in Womens' Liberation groups in St Andrews and nationally. 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. Sandra was a community worker in Edinburgh from the 1980s onwards in Wester Hailes, Craigmillar and Niddire. Sandra studied throughout, gaining her BA Photography in Napier University in 1982; her BA Hons in Drawing and Painting at Edinburgh College of Art in 2004; and Community Education at the University of Edinburgh in 2004.

As a researcher at GSA, one of my focuses is on 20th century women filmmakers and photographers in Scotland. What new knowledge can a curator bring to this subject, through exhibition making? This talk will explore the ways in which as a curator I engage with archival histories, drawing on two examples of solo exhibitions I curated of Raffles and George's work- '*Franki Raffles: Observing Women at Work*' (2017) in partnership with Edinburgh Napier University and Professor Alistair Scott; and as part of 2024's Glasgow International, Sandra George, in partnership with Craigmillar Now, the arts and heritage organisation in Edinburgh that holds Sandra's work.

This talk will consider what Raffles and George's archives- held in St Andrews Special Collections and Craigmillar Now respectively- can tell us about their aims and methods as social documentary feminist photographers and how curatorially these can be presented. In assessing who they chose to photograph, and the particular time the work was made in, I will look at the ongoing relevance and significance of their archival histories in contemporary art and society today.

In the 1980s and early 1990s in Scotland, The Conservative party, under Margaret Thatcher were in government for 18 years from 1979-1997. Scotland was yet to have its own parliament, which was founded in 1999. Thatcher aimed to cut spending on the welfare state, to aid the British economy, believing that a collective provision for unemployment and sickness benefits demotivated working-class people's drive to work. Thatcher was to say '*there is no such thing as society*', in her belief in the values of self-reliance and independence. Her social security policies therefore led to '*death by a thousand cuts*', a quote by political scientist Paul Pierson, where the aim was for social security to be the '*last resort for the poorest minority*'. [2]

It is against this backdrop that both Raffles and George purposefully worked with those minorities that Thatcher sought to in essence demonise. 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 an example focusing on youth, we have an image from Sandra George's series from 'Victoria Hostel, Edinburgh' (1981), which exemplifies her sensitive chronicling of disenfranchised communities in Wester Hailes, Niddrie and Craigmillar, in Edinburgh.

Curating is a very particular form of research and generation of new knowledge. Therefore, what can curating and exhibition-making achieve when working with archives? Both Raffles' at the point of the initial exhibition of her work in 2017, and Sandra George's work had been missing from feminist art history discourse. Therefore, pragmatically, exhibitions are a way of making their particular contributions visible to a wider audience. As a curator, you are looking to understand someone's work, and the context it was made in, and find ways or devices in the exhibition to draw out these connections. In terms of exhibition-making, I would define my own 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 39 and George who was 56) 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).

As a further curatorial co-ordinate, it is necessary to understand the wishes that the families and archives have for the work. Through conversations with Prof Alistair Scott, who in essence represented Raffles' family's wishes for her work, their main aim for Raffles' work and the archives was that it be engaged with by curators and scholars in a multitude of readings, interpretations and exhibitions over the next years to come. Therefore, it was the ethos of the Reid Gallery exhibition not to be the definitive exhibition by any means, referencing all the bodies of her work, in a quasi-retrospective, for example. At so early a stage following the conclusion of the digital archive, that would have meant no-one else could approach her work for a while. Rather, the exhibition ethos was to focus on three bodies of work- *To Let You Understand...* (1988), *Women at Work, Russia* (1989) and *Prevalence* (1993) from the *Zero Tolerance campaign*. *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. 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 her contemporary context. It was also important to draw together a small publication that would, through Alistair Scott's work, bringing together key information including a timeline for the first time, acting as a reference for others in the near future, wishing to engage with her work.

For Sandra George, the wish of her son Tyler and Craigmillar Now, was to build on the recent 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 would be the right platform to introduce further people to her work. The context of the venue, 5 Florence Street, one of the remaining thirty Glasgow Public School Board buildings, 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 gathering, ranging from rural to urban workplace when reading left to right. *To Let You Understand...* was hung uniformly in a modest single line.

There is a palpable difference in the women workers, with the strength of the women working in the Soviet Union; versus the more resigned air of the women workers in Edinburgh. 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*', 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. This prompted the exhibition-making decision to print the *Zero Tolerance* logo to the scale of a billboard and paste it directly onto the gallery wall. The presence of this large paste-up, 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. The inclusion of the graphic campaign and billboard sized *Zero Tolerance* image in the gallery, aimed to subvert the gallery white cube as principal holder of this exhibition when Raffles' made her work predominantly for a public domain.

From the visit to St Andrews Archives, I utilised aspects of Raffles' processes, such as her inclusion through captioning the dialogue with those she is photographing, to become formal exhibition devices. As you see on the right, in a photograph from the archives, Raffles' used Letraset onto the board the photograph is on.

Where possible those captions appear 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, through inclusion of her captioning of the subjects. 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 wished 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. The Reid Gallery is architecturally formed of two spaces which allowed for this formal shift.

This comparative methodology through exhibition-making allowed for a revisionist process of placing Raffles' work in a wider set of histories. These photographers and collectives were: Helen Muspratt (1907-2001), Margaret Fay Shaw (1903-2004), Doris Ulmann (1882-1934) and Hackney Flashers Collective.

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 in 2024, there are examples that Sandra was also drawn to workers, in this case, the visually impaired workers of the Edinburgh company Blindcraft, in Craigmillar, where 60% of the company were blind. From my assessment of the archive, 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 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 takes 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 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 meant we could have three freestanding walls down the central space. The photograph groupings were: 'Victoria Hostel', 'Blindcraft', 'Shakti Womens Group', 'Royal Blind School', 'Disabled Musicians at North British Hotel, Edinburgh' and a sequence from a shop which had been targeted with racist graffiti. Christian Noelle Charles found a Filofax in Craigmillar'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.

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 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. Sandra was adept in photographing children, again getting down to their level and capturing how they played. One of the screens was dedicated to this subject, moving from the more formal play of school to wild play.

The second screen was dedicated to place, as Sandra's observations of different areas in Edinburgh, including Wester Hailes, Niddrie, Oxfords, Craigmillar, Granton and Greendykes, were keen portraits of the different areas. Whilst some would record the ruinous architecture of some areas, equally Sandra showed the power of the community self-organising different events such as gala days and free concerts – again her approach was the antithesis of showing only the multiple devaluation.

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. 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 my talk today has focused on my own curatorial approach, I really wish to acknowledge those who have taken care of Raffles' and George's work and continue to do so – the families of both women, Professor Alistair Scott, University of St Andrews Special Collections, the volunteers and team at Craigmillar Now- and the increasing academic scholarship and curatorship around Raffles in particular- with exhibitions such as *'Home Economics: Franki Raffles and Margaret Salmon'* (curator Kirsteen Macdonald, 2021); the inclusion of Franki Raffles work, curated by Rachel Boyd and Weitian Liu in the larger show *'Life Support'*, curated by Caroline Gausden, Kirsten Lloyd, Nat Raha and Catherine Spencer at Glasgow Women's Library (2021); the current UK retrospective *'Franki Raffles: Photography, Activism, Campaign Works'* at Baltic Newcastle and of course *'Between Women'*, curated by Catherine Spencer and Kuang Vivian Sheng - the reason we are here today. The work around Sandra George will be in the Hayward touring show *'After the end*

of History: British Working Class Photography 1989-2024', touring to Stills in Edinburgh 21 March-28 June 2025.

Furthermore, it is testament to Raffles and George's work, that fellow artists, photographers and writers are engaging and find much resonance with these women's work – from Alicia Bruce to Christian Noelle Charles, Zoe Lorimer and Titilayo Farukuoye. I believe a collective rather than Thatcherite individualistic approach to Raffles' and George's work, in terms of many people working with it, bringing their own experiences and readings to it, and caring for it, will fittingly raise the profile of their work. 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.

Footnotes

[1] History and Policy website

[2] Ibid