

Curatorial dilemmas: How to shape the differing narratives of 20th century women social documentary photographers in Scotland through exhibition making as a research tool

Introduction

This paper outlines key dilemmas in curating 20th century women's photography in Scotland from the position that there should be multiple narratives rather than one overarching narrative of photographic history in this subject area. It will argue that this approach can build on Scotland's distinct regionalism, with the women responding to rural, urban and island contexts and communities rather than one idea of 'Scotland'.

With numerous women's work dispersed across a multitude of different types of archives and collections from Dumfries & Galloway in the south to Shetland in the north, the curatorial has been a means to re-connect bodies of work between geographically distinct repositories. The dispersal of material across archives and collections mirrors the women's own routes and crossovers in Scotland. Those who documented urban situations recorded the fabric of place, communities, protest, society, industries and work. Work engaged with rural Scotland depicted land, nature, communities, travel, traditions, change, industries and work. Both subjects captured the place of women in urban and rural society.

The two time periods I have looked at over ten years of research to date have been from 1900 to 1940s, then 1980s to 2000s. This paper draws from three curated exhibition outputs. These are the survey show '*Glean: Early 20th century women filmmakers and photographers in Scotland*', City Art Centre, Edinburgh (2022/23); and two solo exhibitions of Edinburgh photographers Sandra George (Glasgow International, 5 Florence Street, Glasgow, 2024) and Franki Raffles ('*Observing Women at Work*', Reid Gallery, The Glasgow School of Art, 2017). The field for this work is feminist art history, carried out through practice-based curatorial research. At the point of all three exhibitions, I was the only researcher assessing the work of these particular social documentary women photographers in Scotland through a curatorial methodology.

I define my methodology as 'curatorial', 'exhibition-making' and 'comparative', with the research question: 'How can a curatorial context sensitive appraisal of women's photography and film-making draw out their process, methods and aims?'

Maria Lind defined '*curating as a way of thinking in terms of interconnections*' and an '*approach that owes much to site-specific practices*'.¹ These curatorial interconnections allow for creating a nexus in terms of exhibition making. In the case of '*Glean*', there were other researchers, gallerists and archivists with existing research on individual women photographers and filmmakers.² However, a curatorial approach of '*interconnections*', gives the ability to read across. This created the vehicle of a survey exhibition. '*Glean: early 20th century women filmmakers and photographers in Scotland*' was the first large-scale survey of its kind. It could establish comparative themes to analyse shared subject matter, approaches and styles of the 14 women³, through 125 photographs, 8 films and 35 related artefacts. The

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

² Their work and contribution was acknowledged in the accompanying events programme.

³ The women were Violet Banks (1886-1985), Helen Biggar (1909-1953), Christina Broom (1862-1939), M.E.M. Donaldson (1876-1958), Dr Beatrice Garvie (1872-1959), Jenny Gilbertson (1902-1990), Isobel F Grant (1887-1983), Ruby Grierson (1904-1940), Marion Grierson (1907-1998), Isobel Wylie Hutchison (1889-1982), Johanna

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exhibition aimed to show how they responded with their cameras to life in Scotland's rural communities, cities and beyond. Their work was drawn from 17 archives across Scotland.

Furthermore, as a methodology I have employed a '*context sensitive*' (Lind, M) curatorial approach, to draw out process, methods, aims and message of each woman through exhibition-making as well as the context they were making the work in, be that societal or political. This close reading includes an assessment of material (in this case archival) and looking for visible decisions the women made about their own work to establish the logic of the subsequent exhibition.

The context for the women's work

In terms of the context for the women photographers in *Glean*, whilst the majority of the women in this exhibition made their work independently, a small number were able to place their work commercially, in print for example, such as media and publications. Two set up commercial photography studios. Two had gone to art school⁴, with the rest self-taught or learning as part of a job. 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 use, for work, to sell or to illustrate the other activities they were involved in. As a backdrop to the period they made work in, it should be noted that whilst women in the UK over 30 were given the vote in 1918, the age limit was only lowered to that of men in 1928. This period of 1900 to 1940s also encapsulated two world wars.

From the later period, the two Edinburgh photographers I separately presented exhibitions on - Sandra George (1957-2013) and Franki Raffles (1955-1994)- were making their social documentary work during a period where the Conservative party, under Margaret Thatcher, were in UK Government from 1979-1997 and the idea of community was under further threat. Both photographers purposefully worked with those that Thatcher sought to demonise with her cuts to the welfare state– the working classes. Whilst Raffles responded to the inequalities of women's lives under political systems, George, a Black community worker, artist and photographer⁵ in Craigmillar, Edinburgh, showed the agency of the working class, of communities of colour and disabled people.

Raffles, who studied philosophy at University of St Andrews⁶, was an activist in Women's Liberation groups from student days onwards, drawn to address how societal issues impact gender inequality. She photographed women at work under different political systems in Edinburgh, Scotland and the Soviet Union, in the late 1980s. 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

Kissling (1875-1961), Isabell Burton MacKenzie (1872-1958), Margaret Fay Shaw (1903-2004) and Margaret Watkins (1884-1969).

⁴ Violet Banks went to Edinburgh College of Art, 1913-16, then 1917-1918, predominantly studying Drawing and Painting. Helen Biggar attended Glasgow School of Art, 1925-1929, studying textile design.

⁵ Sandra George as a photographer took on commissioned work and her photographs were used in local newspapers.

⁶ Raffles studied at University of St Andrews, 1973-1977, graduating with an MA (Hons) in Philosophy. P45, 'Franki Raffles: Observing Women at Work' exhibition pamphlet, published by The Glasgow School of Art, 2017.

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the right, again focusing on youth, is Sandra George's sensitive chronicling of life in '*Victoria Hostel, Edinburgh*' (1981). There is no evidence to date that whilst Raffles and George were in the same city, that they were aware of each other.

Curatorial Dilemma 1: Making a coherent exhibition whilst acknowledging multiple narratives

There is a distinct picture of Scotland as 'romantic' and 'remote' peddled by male photographers from the early 20th century period, such as Werner Kissling (1895–1988) and Alasdair Alpin MacGregor (1899–1979). How did women bring a different narrative? Early research for '*Glean*' uncovered that the women social documentary photographers and filmmakers had a different aim from male counterparts in this era on two counts. Firstly, those women in particular working in rural areas, all acknowledged in their work that a traditional way of life in Scotland, particularly the highlands and islands, was fast disappearing. If Grant's 'working' photographs of often ruinous traditional cottages across Scotland, tracked distinct regionalisms of build. Grant's photographic approach is similar to the amateur photographic survey movement over the early part of the 20th century⁷ who systematically recorded representations of old buildings for posterity. However, Grant was independent. Her photographs were intended as aide memoirs, to capture detail for reconstructions she would have built at her outdoor Highland Folk museum '*Am Fasgadh*'.

Secondly, women like Dr Beatrice Garvie in North Ronaldsay, Orkney, Margaret Fay Shaw in South Uist, Jenny Gilbertson in Shetland, and MEM Donaldson in Ardnamurchan, were choosing to live for long periods of time in the communities they were recording. This again, was different from many male photographers who 'parachuted' in, for short periods to record 'island types' and place. Here we have on the left and right, the same islanders from North Glendale, recorded by Werner Kissling and Margaret Fay Shaw. Kissling is interested primarily in the type of dwelling, posing Mary Smith and Angus John Campbell in the same frame. However, Margaret Fay Shaw had lived for five years (1930–35) in North Glendale, with the sisters Màiri and Peigi MacRae. When Shaw photographed the MacRae's neighbours, Màiri Smith and Angus John Campbell, she knew them, and saw the subject as an individual – Smith with her cat, and Campbell, a bard, crofter and fisherman, in charge of his own destiny.

In shaping the exhibition approach for '*Glean*' – as a container that could hold nuance and difference, whilst establishing a coherent narrative- I went through and discounted several approaches that engaged more with curatorial detail than an overview. These included a comparison of men and women social documentary photographers; or an exhibition of photographs comparing an overlap of subject, or even evidence where some of the women photographers' paths crossed; or a comparison with UK and international women social documentary photographers.

However, I came to realise that a survey exhibition could in terms of research represent new knowledge, by mapping out the wider picture, of early 20th century women social documentary filmmakers and photographers in Scotland. I drew out four themes, drawn from the women's' processes, aims and methods, to hold work from both rural and urban

⁷ P. xii, Preface, Elizabeth Edwards, '*The Camera as Historian: Amateur photographers and historical imagination, 1885–1918*', Duke University Press, Durham & London 2012'.

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situations across Scotland. These themes were: '*Nature, Landscape and Travel*', '*Capturing Scotland*', '*Recording Communities*' and '*Women and Society*'.

Curatorial Dilemma 2: The woman photographer as amateur

The presumption that a woman photographer was an amateur, and therefore less worthy of study in terms of quality of work, was particularly prevalent in the early 20th century. This therefore became a curatorial dilemma for the exhibition '*Glean*'. Thanks to Kodak, the boom of 'simple-to-operate' cameras⁸ allowed the pastime of photography to become popular with wider swathes of the general public, including women, as a hobby. Indeed, there is evidence that one of the Glean photographers, Isabell Burton MacKenzie, used a Kodak Vest Pocket camera to record the crafts women she was meeting in her role as travelling organiser of Highland Home Industries in 1912.

How could the exhibition respond to, counter or dispel the idea of the woman photographer as 'amateur', when the women would describe themselves in numerous ways – authors, filmmakers, folklorists, ethnographers, activists, community workers, teachers? A number would not have thought of themselves primarily as photographers. If to be a professional is to undertake every aspect of the photography process, there was only evidence that MEM Donaldson taught herself chemistry, in order to prepare her glass plates and take care of all steps. It became important in the exhibition to consider how to counter what was 40 years later termed the 'glass ceiling'⁹, that kept the women often considered as amateurs.

The interpretation panels for each photographer, shown in the '*Women and Society*' room, became a systematic index covering category, subject, location, motivation, methods, camera type, dissemination and archives where their work was held. As well as providing a context sensitive approach to recording these aspects, it also gave a methodological approach to formalise each contribution to the genre of social documentary photography and dispute through evidence that photography was not a hobby.

Curatorial Dilemma 3: The dangers of the curator speaking for the photographer

Furthermore, how should the curator represent individual women photographers when they are no longer there to speak for themselves? In Raffles case, there was very little primary source evidence available on her approach to photography. I was very aware I needed to be systematic in how I looked for her 'hand', such as the green or red felt tip pen marking her choice of image to print from her contact sheet or how she made up her paste-ups that juxtaposed image and text. These were clear examples of her editing and selection process in the archive. I therefore let this evidence set exhibition logics in '*Franki Raffles: Observing women at work*'.

I utilised the formal aspects of Raffles' processes, such as her inclusion through captioning in Letraset, the 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. This also showed Raffles' aim to clearly give the women a voice, and

⁸ P.15, More than a snapshot: a visual history of photo wallets', Annebella Pollen, Four Corners Irregulars No 10, (2023).

⁹ Marilyn Loden, 1978.

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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 subjects.

Curatorial Dilemma 4: Curating a historical exhibition from a contemporary timeframe: work versus biography

What methods can be employed when curating a historical exhibition from a contemporary timeframe in order to acknowledge issues arising from class, privilege, sex and race? There requires to be a recognition of, in the case of '*Glean*', a century of political, cultural and societal change between the works and present day. To find a metaphor for this, I chose the grouping of four examples of bird's nests by Garvie, Donaldson, Shaw and Gilbertson. The captioning indicated that 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. However, how can a curatorial methodology broaden a response to feminist practice beyond a biographical approach? I have chosen to consider exhibition layout as a way to consider the weighting of biography versus the work itself. In '*Glean*', the layout of the exhibition was such that the visitor encountered the work by the women first, in the first exhibition hall and only arrived at biography in the second room, in the '*Women and Society*' section. A curatorial simplification may have been to present each woman in her own section, to give a recognisable and finite overview for the viewer. However, taking a comparative curatorial methodology, the women's work was instead combined under the themes, offering the opportunity to compare styles and approaches.

However, for the exhibition of Sandra George's work, self-portraiture was a key part of her practice. She used it as a tool to explore her own identity as a Black woman and her identity as a mother, with further portraits of her relationship with her son Tyler as a baby and in childhood. Furthermore, the biographical nature of George's work is so important 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 in this exhibition, whilst there were groupings of sequences of Georges' wider work, on community groups and protest in the first classroom, the second class room allowed for a biographical approach through the practitioner's work.

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. There was also as part of the project an archive commission call-out, to commission a Black or Person of Colour contemporary practitioner, to engage with the archive and develop an event for Glasgow International. Christian Noelle Charles developed 'An Evening for Sandra George', a panel discussion with Zoe Lorimer and Titilayo Farukuoye. All practitioners still work with George's archive.

Whilst I have focused on my own curatorial approach, I will conclude with an acknowledgement to those who have taken care of all of these women's work and continue

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to do so. I believe a collective rather than Thatcherite individualistic approach is required to raise the profile of these women's work, with people bringing their own experiences and care to it. This is key in a feminist curatorial approach that wishes to acknowledge multiple narratives present in exploring work that has been missing from feminist art history discourse.

Jenny Brownrigg (2025)