Many Maids Make Much Noise

Plender, Olivia

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OLIVIA PLENDER, 2024

APPENDIX

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Dear reader

I would like to tell you about a conference that I attended in London in 2017. The word 'conference' might evoke for you an educational format developed for the purpose of sharing knowledge, between a relatively privileged sector of society who work as professional academics. The architecture of the room where such an event traditionally takes place, dictates a certain hierarchy between the audience and the speaker: the latter usually stands behind a lectern, while the people gathered to hear their thoughts sit side by side in rows facing forward towards the stage. In this 'theatre' scholars perform, as they read papers and parry questions about their research. In contrast, the Group Relations Conference at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust in London follows a very different dramaturgy. It is described in the literature advertising the event, as a "three-day experiential learning institution"[1] and reflects a different model of knowledge production to that outlined above.

The Tavistock is one of the primary places in the UK providing clinical services, research and training in the disciplines of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. It has an illustrious history having been home to many of the famous names to have developed pioneering therapeutic approaches, including Wilfred Bion who advanced methods for group therapy, John Bowlby who is credited with 'attachment theory'[2] and R.D. Laing who notoriously is associated with the anti-psychiatry movement.

When I walked into a room at the Tavistock on the 24 July 2017, to take part in the Group Relations Conference, as far as I remember, it conformed to my expectations of a conventional academic setting. There were four soberly dressed people sitting on a low platform, facing rows of chairs – a spatial arrangement which indicated that they were the ones in charge. Once the assembly of around sixty people had settled into their seats, we were welcomed by Maxine Dennis, the conference director – a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Psychoanalyst – who then introduced the other facilitators by name and gave a sketch of the timetable for the day.

At this point in my letter, dear reader, I am going to ask you two questions. Can you describe, for yourself, what you think Maxine Dennis looks like? To recap, this person works as a Consultant

[1] The advertisement for the 2017 Group Relations Conference stated the following: "Join us in creating a three-day experiential learning institution, designed to explore ways in which groups, inter-groups and organisations authorise and mobilise individuals to take up roles within the institutions of which they are members in the context of diversity. The primary task is to explore how our different backgrounds, ethnicity, cultures, and social classes play a part in what we learn and accomplish together in this living system. This conference is designed as a temporary organisational system for experiential learning. Experiential learning means learning from immediate experience; that is, through participation in and reflection on the events of the conference itself." See: https://tavistockandportman.ac.uk/events/identity-culture-and-class-in-group-and-organisational-life-a-group-relations-conference/ (accessed 15 October 2024).

[2] See: https://thebowlbycentre.org.uk/about-the-bowlby-centre/ (accessed 15 October 2024).

Clinical Psychologist and Psychoanalyst and was director of a conference, taking place at one of the most prestigious institutions in their field in Britain. Take a pause for a moment to reflect on how you have imagined them. When I say that Maxine Dennis is a Black woman, do you find yourself momentarily feeling embarrassed, as I did, that you were surprised by this information? Or are my assumptions about who I imagine you to be, dear reader, entirely wrong and based on my own prejudices and background? You may or may not have noticed that the list of psychoanalytic luminaries that I listed above were all white males. This reflects the norms that we are used to, which have taught us to associate a certain kind of person – a white middle- or upper-class man – with authority, as if finding such a person in a position of power were the 'natural' order of things.

"How would you like to begin?", Maxine Dennis asked us and sat down. We shuffled uncomfortably for a few minutes in our seats, until a tall African American man broke the silence. He stood and said, "I am really not sure what you are expecting from us." A white woman seated to my right, who spoke with an Eastern European accent, responded with something along the lines of how this uncertainty was making her feel rather uncomfortable. After about ten minutes of stilted conversation, silently watched from the front of the room by the four psychoanalysts facilitating the event, one of our number suggested rearranging the space into a less hierarchical configuration. Feeling a sense of relief at someone taking the initiative, I began to pick up my chair.

Maxine Dennis surprised us with the observation that perhaps we were a little quick to act. She suggested that it might be interesting to spend some time reflecting on the reasons for our discomfort. Taking the emotional temperature in the room, I would have said that most of us were feeling harried by the unfamiliar situation. As the discussion continued, we began to learn who among us was comfortable speaking in front of such a large group and who was not. After an hour or so – peppered with occasional observations from the facilitators, which each time would send the conversation spinning off in a whole new direction – the first session of the day ended, and we were informed that it was time for a break.

When I returned to the room, the arrangement of furniture had changed. Faced with concentric circles of chairs, a decision had to be made as to whether to place myself closer to the centre, or further out on the periphery. Having chosen our seats, most of us now had some sense of the direction of travel and so we quickly picked up the thread of the previous conversation. It was after lunch that things took a different turn, when we found that the space had been emptied. We were asked to arrange ourselves into groups of around fifteen. Panic ensued and everyone rushed about the room in haste, afraid of being chosen last or ending up with the 'wrong' people, to collect those that they had established some connection with.

Once my group had been led into a separate room, accompanied by one of the psychoanalysts, a white man in his late thirties, the first question that he asked us was: why had we chosen these particular people? As we were encouraged to reflect on our behaviour, it became clear that forming the groups was a situation that had been staged, to provoke exactly the stress that most of us had felt. In fact, the whole conference was structured in such a way as to enable us to learn from these experiences, about our own behaviour in groups. Through occasional observations on our responses, our facilitator subtly nudged us into an uncomfortable discussion on our feelings about the people that we found ourselves with right at this moment. Why, for example, had I chosen to sit next to this middle-aged African American man who had been the first participant to speak that day, but not that older white English woman? We began to unpack some of our initial emotional reactions, based, at this early juncture, largely on unthought through prejudices and gut assumptions about each other.

The stated theme of this Group Relations Conference was: "Identity, culture, and class in group and organisational life", with the primary task being to "explore how our different backgrounds, ethnicity, cultures, and social classes play a part in what we learn and accomplish together in this living system." What that meant in practice, during the three days of the conference, was some very difficult conversations about race, in particular, as well as gender, class and sexuality. We spent time discussing our backgrounds and life experiences and were directed to consider the ways in which they affect how we relate to others – to people who are different to us – and the stereotypes, preconceptions, and projections that we take into our encounters. Conflicts arose with each new group scenario, as well as attachments and alliances, which the psychoanalysts facilitating the event skilfully steered us to notice, unpack and learn from.

I first heard about the Group Relations Conference from a friend who is a professional psychotherapist. I was looking for ways of improving my skills at working with groups, seeking methods that address the emotional aspects of being with others. My reading had led me to Wilfred Bion's book *Experiences in Groups* (1961)[3]; and Carl R. Rogers *Encounter Groups* (1969)[4]. I was also curious to learn more about consciousness-raising, the format for mutual education used by many western feminists in the 1970s during the Women's Liberation Movement, which values lived experience as the basis for political knowledge. When I entered the PhD programme at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm in 2012, I was an internationally exhibiting artist working with themes related to education, history and historiography, whose artworks were primarily distributed through museum exhibitions and biennials. Museums are one of the sites through which official national histories are constructed and, as such, I want to be able to intervene in them, which is a large part of why I continue to distribute my projects through such institutions. But I was moving towards developing a more socially engaged practice – which to follow Pablo Helguera's definition, makes "the artist into an individual whose speciality includes working with society in a professional capacity"[5] – and I was curious as to how I might also potentially work with grassroots and community organisations.

A solo show titled *Rise Early, Be Industrious*, which toured the UK in 2012-23[6], traced the connections between several of my projects focussed on historical and contemporary forms of education. Drawing on social history, the series of five museum style 'period rooms' that made up the exhibition explored different educational models to emerge in the industrial and post-industrial eras – starting with the religious pulpit and ranging from world fairs to television and Google. The installations looked at opposing ideas about the purpose of education, training for the workplace versus education as an emancipatory practice. With a strong architectural dimension – involving the fabrication of platforms and models and a deliberate emphasis on play and game-like structures – the exhibition invited visitors to participate and 'perform', while considering how social roles and models of society have been constructed in the modern period. As part of the research behind this exhibition I had spent hours of my life in archives reflecting on how group identities form and are maintained – including the collections related to social movements held at London School of

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[3] Bion, W.R., *Experiences in Groups and other papers* (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1961).
[4] Rogers, Carl R., *Encounter Groups* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1969).
[5]Helguera was formerly director of adult and academic programs at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He provides a definition of socially engaged art in his handbook: "What do we mean when we say "socially engaged art"? … While there is no complete agreement as to what constitutes a meaningful interaction or social engagement, what characterizes socially engaged art is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence." Helguera, Pablo, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc., 2011), pp.1–3.
[6] The exhibition toured the UK during 2012–13, to MK Gallery, Milton Keynes; Arnolfini, Bristol; CCA, Glasgow. See exhibition catalogue: Plender, Olivia & van Noord, Gerrie, eds., *Rise Early, Be Industrious*, (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016).

Economics and Political Science (LSE). However, my aim in entering the PhD programme was to take the time to learn some of the practices, skills and methods necessary to be able to work more directly with group dynamics in a responsible way.

After some years of developing collaborative projects, facilitating workshops and teaching in community spaces, universities and art schools, as well as living in various housing collectives, I had begun to notice a pattern. In the early days, I considered group situations a failure if there was any conflict or emotional difficulty. With practice, it became clear that social dynamics will always be complex and when people engage in any kind of group work, emotions are one of the 'materials' that we work with. Feelings, as we all know, are open to misinterpretation, especially when there is an unequal distribution of power – regardless of whether that is manifest within a small group or on the macro level of society.

Even among a collection of people that may initially seem fairly homogenous, power dynamics will emerge over time and provoke complex feelings – an example from my own experience being the housing collective that I lived in for several years in Stockholm during my doctoral studies. We comprised five then child free cis gendered women and men, who were at that time in our late thirties and early forties, from white middle-class backgrounds. In this particular group, despite all of us identifying as politically left-wing, the differences that we struggled to negotiate included: uneven levels of privilege in relation to our various economic situations; our health and levels of disability; divergence in political opinions; gender; sexuality; nationality; and even something as seemingly simple as dietary preference (the fault line being whether we were vegan or lacto-ovo vegetarian). Some of these differences may have affected the contrasting ways in which we reacted as individuals to our own and each other's emotions, which presumably underpinned the miscommunications, tensions and conflicts that inevitably arose in the house.

When disagreements happen, it can feel disillusioning if there has been an assumption that everyone in the group is thinking and feeling the same thing, and it is easy for relations to break down at this stage. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Sara Ahmed relates how she has "experienced numerous social occasions where I assumed other people were feeling what I was feeling, and that the feeling was, as it were 'in the room', only to find out that others had felt quite differently. I would describe such 'spaces' as 'intense'. Shared feelings are at stake, and seem to surround us, like a thickness in the air, or an atmosphere. But these feelings not only *heighten tension*, they are also *in tension*. Emotions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don't necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling."[7] I attended the Group Relations Conference because I wanted to learn methods that would make it possible to work through this potential sticking point which occurs when we encounter difference, as I felt strongly that sameness cannot be the prerequisite for a successful collaboration. I was also looking to develop skills as a community organiser, something that I felt was necessary as an aspiring socially engaged artist.

When I curated the display of Sylvia Pankhurst's artworks in 2013-14, at Tate Britain, London, in collaboration with fellow artist Hester Reeve (as well as Tate curator Emma Chambers), Hester and I resurrected the name of the Emily Davison Lodge as an umbrella under which to work. In the words of art historian Catherine Grant, 'In a simple performative act, the artists take on the mantle of a long-defunct organisation... As in many contemporary artworks that delve into the archives, The Emily Davison Lodge has an air of ambiguity, and fictionality. Did this organisation actually exist? Is it a convenient device for the artists to re-ignite a relationship to a history of protest and sisterhood? ... Visiting the Women's Library archive in London, a search for 'The Emily Davison Lodge' raised no

[7] Ahmed, Sara, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.10.

distinct entries... A listing in Elizabeth Crawford's *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide*, gave the following information: EMILY WILDING DAVISON CLUB, 144 High Holborn, London WC, was founded as the Emily Wilding Davison Lodge by Mary Leigh in memory of her friend... From such meagre information a world can be imagined. Somewhere between an organisation and a place, The Emily Davison Lodge is a memorial to friendship and a place to continue political agitation or eat a meal.'[8] As Grant implies in her essay for the book *Feminism and Art History: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice* (2017), our use of the name of this early twentieth-century feminist organisation, was largely a conceptual gesture. The collectivity that we were pointing to, by borrowing the Lodge's moniker, was more of an aspiration than a reality. Any plans that we had for others to organise under its banner never really came to be, in part because community organising is a complex skill which I lacked at that time.

The Sylvia Pankhurst display at Tate Britain is the first of the projects that I am submitting as part of my PhD thesis; because it was through my 'reading' of Pankhurst's work, as both an artist and activist, and also the activities of the East London Federation of the Suffragettes (ELFS), that I became interested in the role that my own fields of art and education can play in social movements. In the projects that make up my PhD I have used the early twentieth-century British campaign for votes for women and the militant suffragette movement[9] as a case study, of sorts, in order to mine that history for artistic and educational strategies and question whether they might still be useful to feminist struggles today.

Education for their members was clearly an important part of the ELFS' modus operandi, as historian Barbara Winslow describes: "Classes were set up to train women to become public speakers. A member named Rose Leo took charge of these popular and successful classes. They were held at several different locations and male speakers, often George Lansbury or John Scurr[10], would be invited so that the women could practice heckling and learn how to deal with hecklers. In December 1913, the ELFS/WSPU[11] organized a week long suffrage school. The lectures and discussions covered a wide range of social problems facing women as workers and as housewives. They included: the legal position of women, wages, housing, infant mortality, sex education, trade unionism, radical and socialist history, female psychology and the effects of hunger striking and forced feeding. Lectures on such topics as sex education and female psychology were unusual at the time. They give an idea of the breadth of the ELFS/WSPU's feminist radicalism as well as the women's issues that concerned it. The schools and the meetings, the planning and organizing of demonstrations, marches and rallies, all trained a number of the East End women who remained politically active as leaders even after the suffragette activity ended. Annie Barnes wrote, "Being in the suffragettes did a lot for me. I couldn't say 'Boo' to a goose before that. It really brought me out.""[12]

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[8] Grant, Catherine, 'Learning and Playing: Re-enacting Feminist Histories', in *Feminism and Art History: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice*, edited by Victoria Horne and Lara Perry (London: IB Tauris, 2017), pp.260–1.

[9] It was the militant members of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) who were known as the 'suffragettes', a name given to them by hostile newspapers as a patronizing diminutive, derived from 'suffragist' – which is how women involved with the campaign for women's suffrage originally referred to themselves. The militant women then adopted this appellation and turned the description 'suffragette' into something to be feared, whilst also using this new name as a way of making a distinction between themselves and non-militant campaigners. In these letters, when I refer to the 'suffragettes' I mean the militant members of the WSPU, whereas 'suffragists' refers to the non-militant members of other organisations, such as the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS).

[10] Social reformer George Lansbury and trade union official John Scurr were both labour politicians, involved with the East London Federation of the Suffragettes. Both had female family members that were prominent in the group, including Minnie Lansbury and Julia Scurr.

[11] Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU).

[12] Winslow, Barbara, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.127.

Through the meetings that I staged with the groups of contemporary women engaged in community organising, self-help and activism – that I have represented in the book *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us* (2020) included in my PhD submission – I learnt how female-led activist groups both past and present can be places of mutual education. The political education that they provide for their members not only comprises sophisticated methods for consciousness-raising, but importantly also tools for managing group dynamics, community building and emotional care, all of which are being enacted within the group and passed on. This led me to question categories themselves, as many of their practices – woven throughout the conversations recorded in my book – fall outside of traditional definitions and ways of imagining education and art. I am curious as to whether these techniques can be considered as forms of feminist pedagogy? What might a feminist pedagogy comprise? By making visible some of the subtle forms of teaching and learning taking place in the groups that I encountered (both in archives and in real life), I hope that it becomes possible for you, dear reader, to 'read' their practices as such. This approach is underpinned by the idea that personal experience can be a legitimate source from which to build knowledge, that, as I have mentioned above, has historically been strong within both feminist practice and theory.

Another key question that I have asked myself is: how to narrate a feminist history – in this case the British suffragette movement – in ways that reflect the politics of the subject matter? To understand this (her)story, dear reader, surely, we need to refocus our gaze away from 'heroic' individuals and their political performances in the public realm, and instead reflect the practices of the communities and private networks of care and friendship that surrounded them? Throughout the course of my PhD research, I wanted to try out collective, polyvocal, and subjective modes of storytelling that would have space for diverse women's voices. I have allowed for a subjective reading of history, which tells us as much about the experiences of the contemporary women who participated in my research – their lived reality and memory practices – as it does about the historical events themselves. I witnessed how these groups utilise history, memory, and other cultural forms, such as theatre, to create a shared understanding of the past, analysis of power and the causes of inequality, as well as new political imaginaries.

Though the events that took place during the campaign for women's suffrage – that I narrate through the projects included in my book *Many Maids Make Much Noise* (2020) – happened within the British Isles, the British Empire is what forms the main backdrop to my nation's history during that period. In the years when the suffragettes were most active, from 1903 to 1914, the British Empire dominated almost a quarter of the earth's surface. London was the metropole at the centre of this system of domination and economic exploitation, exercising power over the colonies and the millions of people around the world who lived in them. In the meetings that I staged in women's centres and community spaces, as part of the project *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us*, those of the participating women who came from racialised or minoritised backgrounds were highly aware of the history of European colonialism. They named it as one of the causes behind their own contemporary encounters with racial prejudice, which inform their experiences of precarity. This is a stark example of how long past events will still affect contemporary social relations and create conflict.

Through this series of letters, I would like to talk to you in a personal tone not only about methodological concerns but also my own experiences – including some of the emotional and political tensions that emerged within the projects that make up my PhD submission – and to engage in self-reflection on what I have learnt. Many of these conflicts only became clear to me retrospectively and so I want to address them here, including the institutional racism, homophobia and ableism that can exist within the fields of both art and history, which inevitably underpin some of the assumptions with which I came into these projects. I will speak about some of the dynamics of racism that can exist within white feminism, and the colonial attitudes that can be directed against

women of colour in its name. I would also like to reflect on the role of whiteness in shaping historical narratives and consider the danger of representing the suffragette movement as if it were a universal history – instead of positioning it within the history of white feminism where it perhaps belongs – and thereby ignoring the specificity of different women's struggles. These are topics that I feel that I have not adequately addressed elsewhere but which need to be named.

The Group Relations Conference was an experience that I sought out as part of a process of educating myself, about some of my own assumptions when it comes to collective work. Most of the people attending the conference represented the different branches of the mental health care system and, those that I spoke to relayed how they, like me, were there to shift some of their own internalised biases and increase their "ability to recognise and manage hidden agendas, stereotypes and unspoken assumptions about differences", which can distort our sense of which bodies are entitled to speech and authority. The opportunity here, as described by the course literature, was to learn how to manage yourself "when ethnocentricity and racialised bias stands at the boundary between you".[13]

The room was full of people working or training in the fields of psychoanalysis, psychology, psychotherapy, psychiatry, and counselling. Perhaps unusually for the Tavistock, more than a third of the group were people of colour, some of whom had travelled to London from New York, where they were studying counselling at a community college. At the conference I also met a nurse, a social worker, a priest and another artist. Waiting outside the conference room on the first morning, I had been pleasantly surprised to find a colleague and friend there – the British artist Rehana Zaman. It was useful to have someone from my own field to compare experiences with at the end of each day, because in such a heightened emotional atmosphere, perceptions can be deceiving. For example, something strange happened to my sense of time during the conference, which I have discovered only now that I am sitting down to fact check this letter. What was in reality *only* three days spent "in tension", as Sara Ahmed might put it, felt so long that the duration of the conference expanded for me. In my memory it lasted for a whole week, as it is hard to imagine so many experiences being contained in such a short amount of time.

Rehana Zaman and I got to know each other the year before these events took place, when I invited her to lead a workshop in collaboration with community video maker Ed Webb-Ingall as part of my research, for the PhD cohort at the Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm,[14] where I was employed as a PhD candidate. It was on the methods that they both use when facilitating socially engaged art projects. In certain scenes from her video *Some Women Other Women and all the Bittermen* (2014)[15], we see Zaman holding a workshop with Justice for Domestic Workers (now Voice of Domestic Workers) Leeds; an activist group who "organise around restrictions to their employment rights within UK immigration laws"[16]. Because the employment visas – granting them the right to live and work in the UK – are tied to a particular employer, the law leaves these foreign domestic

[13] The purpose of the Group Relations Conference, as described in the course literature is to: "Learn more about how group and organisational dynamics are influenced by different perspectives of ethnicity, culture & social class. Explore how different perspectives impact authority and authorisation of roles in groups and organisations. Increase your ability to recognise and manage hidden agendas, stereotypes and unspoken assumptions about differences. Become more aware of the inherent dilemmas in collaboration and competition within and among groups. Enhance your skills in managing yourself and others in work roles when ethnocentricity and racialised bias stands at the boundary between you." See: https://tavistockandportman.ac.uk/events/identity-culture-and-class-in-group-and-organisational-life-a-group-relations-conference/ (accessed 15 October 2024).

[14] Named Kungl. Konsthögskolan in Swedish.

[15] The video can be viewed on Rehana Zaman's own website: https://rehanazaman.com/Some-Women-Other-Women-and-all-the-Bittermen (accessed 19 September 2024).

[16] Quoted from the website: lux.org.uk (accessed 24 February 2023).

workers vulnerable to abuse by employers. It is difficult for them to leave a job where they are experiencing, for example, sexual harassment or assault.

Parallels can be drawn with the experiences of the asylum-seekers and refugee women that I met during my project *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us*. They explained to me how their choices are limited to destitution or working illegally as domestic workers, during the process of seeking asylum, because they have no legal right to work in the UK while their claim is being processed. From them, I heard many distressing accounts, some of which I have included in my book on the project. Other stories I have not reproduced, particularly those related to sensitive topics such as sexual violence and rape, because of the desire for privacy on the part of those people who described such experiences to me and the traumatic nature of what occurred. Whether they are in the country legally or not foreign female (and male) domestic workers are vulnerable, as they are largely hidden from public view in the private sphere of the home. They have no recourse to a human relations department or a trade union. Despite all this, in Rehana Zaman's video we see some of the ways in which Justice for Domestic Workers Leeds have asserted their agency and overcome their invisibility and political isolation, through organising collectively. Zaman has taken care not to represent the women as victims, and instead focusses on what we can learn from them.

In their essay *Challenging Imperial Feminism* (1983), Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar speak of how white feminists have often portrayed women from the global south "as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of Western feminism."[17] Meanwhile, Chandra Talpade Mohanty speaks of the stereotype of "Third World woman", in her book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), who "leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being "Third World" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.)." Mohanty suggests that this "is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions."[18]

As a "Westerner" myself, I did not want to reproduce racist stereotypes about "Third World woman", when making editorial choices about what to include in the book and artworks that resulted from my conversations with the many different women who took part in my own project, particularly those originating from the Global South. I have attempted to strike a balance between showing the extreme difficulty of these women's situations, such as the institutional violence of the immigration system in the UK, as well as their political maturity: the complex ways in which they go about their activism and political organising, from which I have learnt so much. Together the groups create a mutually supportive space, where some truly difficult feelings and emotions, often resulting from trauma, can be safely held and turned to action.

Sara Ahmed describes how white racist hate groups usually "claim the position of the victim" as the ones who are somehow losing something ('their' nation, history, future) through the presence of people of colour in 'their' country. According to Ahmed, in this self-serving narrative, "the ordinary or normative subject is reproduced as the injured party; the one that is 'hurt' or even damaged by the 'invasion' of others. The bodies of others are hence transformed into 'the hated' through a discourse of pain. They are assumed to 'cause' injury to the ordinary white subject such that their proximity is read as the origin of bad feeling."[19]

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[17] Amos, Valerie, and Parmar, Pratibha, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism' (1983), republished in Morgan, Sue (ed.), *The Feminist History Reader*, (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2006), p.287.
[18] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2003), p.22.
[19] Ahmed, Sara, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp.43–4.

Reading these words, I imagine myself to have nothing in common with these other white people who falsely claim the status of victim. But as Maxine Dennis pointed out, the "sprinkling of liberalism" present in the room was exactly what made it hard for some at the Group Relations Conference to address those parts of our behaviour in groups, that we didn't want to acknowledge. At the conference I noticed that whenever any of the people of colour so much as mentioned an experience of racism, this would be read as an accusation by many of the white participants. I was struck by the inability of many white people to simply listen, without getting wrapped up in (illusory) feelings of victimhood; uncomfortable sensations of guilt and shame at being implicated in racism that often the person of colour is then expected to take responsibility for, as they are "read as the origin of bad feeling".

Similarly, when the women attending the conference spoke of experiences of sexist discrimination, some of the men present would talk over them, try to undermine their perspective, or change the subject. Sitting "in tension" and being guided to name and discuss the dynamics going on within the group, was where the experiential learning happened. It is one thing to enjoy Sara Ahmed's writing and intellectually understand the need to unlearn certain behaviours – inscribed in us, according to Ahmed, by living in a racist and sexist system that values the perspectives and well-being of white people over those of people of colour, and men over women – but it is another to learn through experience. Listening with empathy, when a person tells you what it's like moving through the world in their body and with their subjectivity, takes practice. Subsequently, when experiences of racism came up in the meetings that I had staged as part of my project *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us*, I was mindful of any reflex to indulge in my own feelings of discomfort, in order to simply listen openly to what the women were telling me about their lives.

At the Group Relations Conference, I also found myself reflecting on ageism, as I noticed my own negative response to an older white woman who I perceived to be middle-class and approximately the same age as my mother. I can guess that unconsciously, this probably has something to do with my troubled relationship with my own parent (which I shall spare you the details of here), as well as a desire to distance myself in this context from my own white, middle-class background. Dear reader, to be honest with you, I am probably doing something similar here with you now and imagining you as a white middle-class liberal, very much like my mother and the other women that I grew up with, which says more about my own biases than it does about you. But the more that I was able to actually listen to this woman and practice hearing what she said about her life, it became clear that she was, in reality, very unlike the image that I had initially built up of her in my mind.

In the 1970s and 80s this woman had been involved in both left-wing and feminist activist groups, she told me, and through those experiences became interested in studying psychoanalysis as she saw a need to develop more emotional self-awareness. She observed that when group members were unable to see how their own behaviour was impacting others, the ability of the group to function well and achieve its political aims was impaired[20]. After the Women's Liberation Movement and experiences in consciousness raising groups, many feminists of her generation, she said, had turned to psychoanalysis.

At the conference, I also had the privilege to meet Gail Lewis, a fellow participant who introduced herself as a psychotherapist and a sociologist. As I found out in retrospect, she is in addition a well-known activist within both feminist and anti-racist circles in the UK. I read that Gail Lewis was one of the founding members of the influential Brixton Black Women's Group, in the book *Sisterhood and After – An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-Present* (2019), edited by

[20] See Jo Freeman's critique of consciousness raising groups within the Women's Liberation Movement *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, first published in 1972.

Margaretta Jolly[21] which is based on an oral history project funded by the British Library. The group was established in 1973 and formed by women from the Race Today collective and the radical bookshop Sabarr, which was located in the South London neighbourhood of Brixton.

Paul Gilroy describes this historical moment as follows, in his book *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987): "An informal and locally-based network of anti-fascist/anti-racist committees grew in the period between 1973 and 1976. It is during this period that the emergent anti-fascist movement began to express itself as a self-conscious political formation and to create its own organs for communication and debate. Though its primary audience lay in the black communities rather than among anti-racists, the journal *Race Today* (hijacked from the Institute of Race Relations and re-oriented by its activist editorial collective) had an important role in these discussions. The magazine's central place in the struggles between blacks and the police, around education and housing in the East End of London and in its attempt to build links between black political organizations in different parts of Britain as well as between British blacks and radical struggles elsewhere in the world, all made considerable input into what anti-racism was to mean."[22]

In the 1970s and 80s Brixton was predominantly populated by people from the Caribbean diaspora, something that I remember well, having spent my childhood on the edge of Brixton in an adjoining district called Herne Hill. Back then, many of my neighbours had West Indian origins, but when I visit my mother today – who still lives in the same house that she moved to after becoming a single parent in the 1980s – her street is largely home to wealthy white middle-class couples who work in financial services.

Nowadays, even in Brixton, struggles against gentrification are among the most urgent political causes, as working-class people – many of whom are from the West Indian community – are being priced out of the now desirable area and pushed into low quality and insecure housing. However, for most of my lifetime Brixton was demonised in the press and represented in popular culture as criminal and dangerous. In 1979, famously, the punk band The Clash released the song *The Guns of Brixton*, with lyrics that describe a character who "You see, he feels like Ivan; Born under the Brixton sun". The song refers to the Jamaican film *The Harder They Come*, released in 1972[23], the plot of which centres on Kingston, Jamaica, and the travails of a working-class young man, Ivan (played by Reggae star Jimmy Cliff), who finds fame and notoriety as a gangster. At the climax of the film, following a violent crime spree, he is gunned down by the police.

In March 1979, the same year the song was released, the inaugural conference of the Organisation for Women of Asian and African Descent (OWAAD) – of which Gail Lewis was also a founding member – took place in Brixton. White feminists often trace the beginning of the so-called feminist 'second wave' in Britain, to the first National Women's Liberation Conference, held at Ruskin College, Oxford, in 1970. Around four hundred women attended the event, along with sixty children and forty men. There was a nursery staffed by men supportive of the cause including the academic luminary Stuart Hall, whose wife and fellow academic Catherine Hall was a speaker. In a photo taken of the conference's nursery at the time, Stuart Hall – who was then acting director (later director) of

[21] Jolly, Margaretta, *Sisterhood and After – An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-Present* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp.29–30.
[22] Gilroy, Paul, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The cultural politics of race and nation* (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1987), p.154.
[23] *The Harder They Come* was an influential film produced entirely in Jamaica and directed by Perry Henzell (1972).

the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham – sits on the floor, pinned in place by the weight of a small child sleeping on his shoulder.[24]

The first four demands of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain were defined at the conference, having been agreed by majority vote. These were: equal pay; equal education and opportunity; twenty-four-hour nurseries; and free contraception and abortion on demand. For socialist feminist historians such as Sheila Rowbotham, who was one of the organisers of the event along with fellow historian Sally Alexander,[25] the Ruskin conference plays a key role in the origin story of the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain – which influenced my approach to British feminist history when I commenced my PhD research – alongside important protests organised by working-class women around that time. These included strikes in Hull's fishing industry in 1968, and the struggle for equal pay at the Ford Motor Company factory in Dagenham, East London – immortalised in the film *Made in Dagenham* (2010)[26] – that led to the Equal Pay Act of 1970. As I learnt from Gail Lewis's testimony in the book *Sisterhood and After*, Black British feminists are critical of this way of narrating the history of women's struggle in the UK.

"Ruskin, which though connected to Oxford University, was an independent adult education college for those who had left secondary school early without qualifications . . . Yet it is not surprising that, despite Ruskin's extensive Labour networks and links to mothers' and wives' groups that reached beyond the ordinary university boundaries, there were few of the militant black intellectuals or activists then centred on the Race Today collective and other race rights groups. Their social and educational circles were still scarcely connected. Scholar-activist Gail Lewis speaking at a forty-year commemoration of the Ruskin conference, argued that fetishizing Ruskin repeats a structural exclusion of black women who were not able to be there to define a different agenda. Questioning the narrative that locates the conference as the beginning of the WLM [Women's Liberation Movement], the Hull and Dagenham strikes meant more to her as a young mixed-race working-class woman working in a factory. The black women's movement in the United Kingdom was influenced by black radicalism in the United Kingdom as it developed during the 1960s. This ran parallel rather than subsequent to white middle-class activism, just as did white-working class women's activism."[27]

Black activists Gerlin Bean and Pat Smith who were present in 1970 at Ruskin College, recall in their testimony for *Sisterhood and After* that they couldn't really see the relevance of Ruskin to Black women, as the agenda did not address the issues that felt urgent to them. At the time this included racist policing, the forced administration of the contraceptive Depo-Provera, and related demands around reproductive control more pertinent to low income Black and Asian women, such as the right to actually have children. They saw the one exception as being, "the American Selma James, who, having come from US Trotskyism and civil rights, and married to the Pan-African leader C.L.R. James, was able to "put it all in context . . . how it would affect black women and our involvement because our struggle wasn't just about women, it was anti-imperialist struggle about black people."" It is interesting to note that Selma James is one of the founders of Crossroads Women's Centre, where I

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[24] Jolly, Margaretta, *Sisterhood and After – An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-Present* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.164.

[25] Sally Alexander was present at the Second Meeting of the Emily Davison Lodge, held at Tate Britain in 2013, documented in chapter one of my book *Many Maids Make Much Noise*. She is played by Kiera Knightly in the comedy film *Misbehaviour*, about the British Women's Liberation Movement, which dramatizes events surrounding the protests at the Miss World competition in London in 1970. It was directed by Philippa Lowthorpe and was released in 2020.

[26] *Made in Dagenham*, a comedy film directed by Nigel Cole (released in 2010).

[27] Jolly, Margaretta, *Sisterhood and After – An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-Present* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.28.

undertook part of my project *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us*. Crossroads' mission statement foregrounds their anti-racist stance, along with their disability-accessibility.[28]

The 1979 OWAAD conference was held at the Abeng Centre in Brixton – a community space more accessible to Black women than Ruskin College in Oxford – and was attended by around two hundred people. Initially the acronym OWAAD had stood for Organisation for Women of *Africa* and African Descent but owing to the unanticipated presence of many women of South Asian origin at the conference, it was quickly amended to Organisation for Women of *Asian* and African Descent, so that an alliance could be built between these different communities based on shared experiences of racism and migration. At that time the term 'Black' was often strategically used as a collective political identity by racialised and minoritised people in the UK, as it enabled groups of different ethnicities and backgrounds to mobilise around such shared experiences. We see an example of this with the name of the legendary group Southall Black Sisters, who are still a highly effective women's organisation active today, founded by women of South Asian origin in 1979[29]. In the four years that OWAAD was active as an organisation it achieved much, according to Margaretta Jolly, but it is noteworthy that when they split, differences were apparently cited as one of the reasons, between women of African, Asian and African-Caribbean decent, but also between straight and lesbian women[30].

At the conference there was a nursery, which like the Women's Liberation Movement conference at Ruskin College was staffed by men, largely the partners and brothers of women active in OWAAD[31]. The males present also took on the job of cooking for the female conference participants. From the testimonies of Black feminists such as Lewis, I take the lesson that choice of location is very important to the work of community organising, as buildings and institutions are often subtly coded in terms of race and class (as well as other categories including gender, sexuality and disability), affecting who exactly feels welcome and able to step through the door. This is a lesson I learnt the hard way when making my video *Hold Hold Fire* (2019) – as I have described in chapter five of the book *Many Maids Make Much Noise* – when circumstances meant that I moved the location for filming from a community centre in East London to the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in central London. Despite having budgeted for childcare and travel expenses for those who needed it, I had still unwittingly created an obstacle to their attendance. Careful choice of location is clearly not only important when engaging in the work of community organising, but, dear reader, should also be considered as part of the methodology when creating the conditions for diversity among participants of socially engaged art and research.

In 1981, three years after the OWAAD conference, the first Brixton uprising happened, provoked by racist policing tactics. The notorious 'sus' law[32] gave police the power to stop and search anyone they suspected of loitering, "with intent to commit an arrestable offence". The predominantly white police force frequently used these wide ranging and vague powers to harass Britain's Black minorities. In 1995, when I was studying at Central St Martins School of Art and Design in London, and living in a flat on one of the streets just behind Brixton Police station, I was witness to one of the many Brixton uprisings to have taken place in my lifetime. Coming home from art school one evening, I stepped out of the train station to find uniformed employees from London Underground hurriedly closing up the entrance behind me. I had arrived in time to see what looked like an army of

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[28] See: http://crossroadswomen.net/ (accessed 15 October 2024).
[29] See: Petra Bauer's film *Sisters!* documenting one week in the life of the organisation (2011).
[30] Jolly, Margaretta, *Sisterhood and After – An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement, 1968-Present* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), p.34.
[31] Ibid, p.164.
[32] From the phrase 'suspected person' in the Vagrancy Act 1824. The law was repealed by the British government in August 1981 following the uprising.

police officers, wearing helmets and holding large plastic shields, storm down Brixton's Acre Lane into an angry crowd.

The spark had been the death of a 26-year-old, previously healthy, young Black man called Wayne Douglas in police custody. Dear reader, do you feel like you have heard this story before? That police station was notorious locally, and for many years there was a makeshift memorial outside the building that I frequently walked past: a tree which, as far as I remember, had been covered in flowers, candles and a photo of yet another young Black man. It was a symbol of both protest and trauma. I don't remember there being any accompanying explanation for passers-by as to what was meant by this shrine. Everyone in the neighbourhood already knew. As the streets around the police station were at the epicentre of events that night, I didn't make it home until the early hours of the morning.

Still today British people from ethic minorities, particularly those of Afro-Caribbean and Asian origin, are stopped and searched in far higher numbers than those with white skin. The institutional racism of the British police force was officially recognised in 1999, in the document written by retired judge Sir William Macpherson for the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry Report, which addressed the relationship between the British police and Britain's Black communities. The report followed the racially motivated murder of an 18-year-old named Stephen Lawrence, and the seemingly deliberate failure of the police to investigate properly.

According to Brian Richardson in his introduction to a recently republished edition of Darcus Howe's book *From Bobby to Babylon: Blacks and the British Police* (2020), originally published in 1988, "In Macpherson's own words, disproportionality in stops and search had been the single biggest bone of contention expressed by black communities during the inquiry. When he reached that conclusion, black people were four times more likely to be stopped and searched than their white counterparts. In 2019, those identifying as "Black or Black British" are 9.7 times more likely to be stopped than white people."[33]

Richardson states that, "Macpherson reached the landmark conclusion that the investigation, the police more generally, and indeed public bodies across society as a whole are blighted by institutional racism, which he characterised as: …the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It is seen in: …processes, attitudes and behaviour which amounts to discrimination through *unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping* [my italics] which disadvantages minority ethnic people." In his commentary on Macpherson's report, Brian Richardson notes that there "is much that is wrong with this definition but it was nonetheless a huge step forward from another judge, Lord Leslie Scarman's report into the 1981 Brixton riots."[34]

"[O]ver 1700 people have died following contact with the police since 1990", Richardson says, and to back up this claim he quotes yet another government report written this time by Dame Elish Angiolini QC, who "examined this and noted with alarm the "disproportionately high number of deaths of black men in restraint related incidents"." These grim statistics include a 29-year-old named Mark Duggan in 2011, whose death led to uprisings all over Britain. But this is not just a British problem, as we saw in 2020, when the murder of an African American man named George Floyd at the hands of a police man in the USA, led to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter[35]

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[33] Richardson, Brian, introduction to: Howe, Darcus *From Bobby to Babylon: Blacks and the British Police* (originally published by Race Today Publications, 1988, republished by Bookmarks, 2020), p.11.
[34] Ibid, p.10.
[35] See: Garza, Alicia, *The Purpose of Power: How to Build Movements for the 21st Century* (London: Double Day, 2020).

movement in countries around the world. This incident clearly resonated with minority communities in many countries, including Sweden, where I was aware of many Black Lives Matter protests during that period.

The pattern of racism and discrimination against people from ethnic minority backgrounds by the police, has a history as long as that of the police force itself. In an essay titled 'The Early Years: Whisper in the Ear of Authority', included in his book *From Bobby to Babylon* (1988), Darcus Howe, who was the editor of Race Today and nephew to Selma James' husband C.L.R. James, characterises police mistreatment of Black communities as "the crusade they were conducting in the domestic colonies."[36] In Britain, the police force is a relatively new institution. Modern professionally organised police were a nineteenth century innovation, created during the era when Britain had an empire spanning the globe.

The treatment that suffragettes in East London received at the hands of the police, could fit Howe's description of such a 'crusade', against people originally from Britain's colonies living within the British Isles. To understand their story, dear reader, we must consider that many of the members of the East London Federation of the Suffragettes were racialised and minoritised people, subject to police brutality and racism. They endured circumstances with parallels to those of working-class British people living in poverty today, often from immigrant backgrounds, which include housing precarity and poor working conditions. By the early twentieth-century, when the suffragette movement was active, Ireland had been under brutal British colonial rule for over four centuries and there was a militant Irish independence movement[37]. London's East End would have been home to many women of Irish origin, who made up a significant proportion of London's working-class population, along with numerous others from Britain's colonies, owing to the proximity to one of the country's largest docks. This included communities of lascars – sailors, usually from the Indian subcontinent, who served on British ships for lower wages than their white colleagues – and their descendants. Lascars were also expected to work longer hours with poor working conditions. Many ended up stranded in British port towns, unable to return to their country of origin due to poverty and were forced to settle.

The ELFS were subject to some of the most aggressive policing tactics endured by women within the suffragette movement – including both physical and frequently sexual assault. Dear reader, let's pause for a moment at this nasty misogynistic detail as it is important not to overlook it. There is a version of this letter that I started writing in 2021. At that time, I urgently wanted to tell you about a photo that had been published in most of the British newspapers that morning, but I could not find the words[38]. In the picture a young woman is pinned to the ground by two police men in uniform. Her whole body has been pressed into the floor as the officers hold her down. It is taken after dark, and so the light of the camera has picked up the shine on a police issue boot in the bottom lefthand corner of the image, close to her head. Her neck cranes upwards straining to look behind her, presumably attempting to grasp what the policemen are doing. These are events that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and so we cannot see her full facial expression because all the figures in the image are wearing face masks, but we can see that she is a white woman probably in her

[36] Howe, Darcus *From Bobby to Babylon: Blacks and the British Police* (originally published by Race Today Publications, 1988, republished by Bookmarks, 2020), p.25.

[37] The Irish War of Independence officially came to an end in 1922, following the Anglo-Irish Treaty, when Ireland became a self-governing Dominion within the British Empire, except for Northern Ireland which was partitioned and still today remains part of the UK. Ireland was officially declared a republic in 1949. For more details on the Irish struggle for independence see: Ferriter, Diarmaid, *A Nation and Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution 1913-1923* (London: Profile Books Ltd: 2015).

[38] See: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/mar/14/woman-pinned-ground-clapham-vigil-policing-disgraceful-sarah-everard (accessed 15 October 2024).

twenties, with loose red hair. Aside from a few details, such as the masks and the picture being in colour, this could easily have been a photograph from around 1913 at the height of the suffragette protests.

The young woman had been attending a candle lit vigil on Clapham Common – another South London neighbourhood adjacent to Brixton. It was in memory of Sarah Everard who was kidnapped, raped and murdered nearby in March 2021 by a serving police officer, who had used the authority of his position to handcuff this young white female and get her into his car. Patsy Stevenson, the woman in the photo, was arrested because at that time Covid restrictions were in place limiting public gatherings. Along with Dania Al-Obeid and four others, she later won substantial damages and an apology from London's Metropolitan police force, known as the Met, who acknowledged that they had been inappropriate in their policing of the protest.

After the murder of Everard in 2021, many middle-class white women began for the first time to feel that they could not trust the police, an attitude that has been recorded among women from the Black community and other ethnic minorities for decades, as well as other groups including sex workers. A spotlight was shone by the press on police forces around the UK, bringing to light a catalogue of violence against women by serving police officers that seemed to fill the newspapers with a new example each week[39]. This ranged from domestic violence to sexual harassment, and further instances of rape. I feel almost physically weary to tell you about one more report into police misconduct that was subsequently ignored. It was commissioned by the Met itself from Louise Casey, a peer and former British government official, who, when asked to look into the failings surrounding the Everard case, found a toxic culture within the Metropolitan police. Without mincing her words, she described the Met as being guilty of institutional racism, misogyny, and homophobia[40].

In the case of the East London Federation of the Suffragettes, it would not be unreasonable to surmise that a combination of ethnicity, gender and class had something to do with their excessively aggressive treatment at the hands of the police force. According to historian Barbara Winslow, in that period the police were '[s]een as hated outsiders in most of East London, the police enforced their rule with brutality; it seemed to the population that they were trying to conquer the area, rather than police it.'[41] These women were 'disciplined' by police officers through violence and sometimes sexual assault for being 'unfeminine', and stepping out of their 'proper place' into the public arena. The ELFS were for the most part made up of poor working-class women, many from immigrant backgrounds, including Irish people and Eastern European Jewish refugees, who would at the time have regularly suffered from discrimination. For many of the Irish women memories of colonial domination would have informed their mistrust of the police, as well as other state institutions.

As I have discussed in my book *Many Maids Make Much Noise*, in the chapter on my project *Hold Hold Fire* (2019), it was the aggression meted out by the police force that led the ELFS to undertake self-defence training. They practiced jiu-jitsu and established The People's Army, who drilled publicly in Victoria Park in Bethnal Green, during 1914, in a symbolic show of violence. According to Sylvia Pankhurst, in her book *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals*

[39] Another notorious case that provoked widespread discussion of police misconduct and systemic racism relates to the police response to the murder of Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, in a London park in 2020. See: https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-61721721 (accessed 5 November 2024).
[40] See: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/21/metropolitan-police-institutionally-racist-misogynistic-homophobic-louise-casey-report (accessed 21 March 2023).
[41] Winslow, Barbara, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.61.

(1931)[42], the message that this sent to the police was effective, "I saw that the police now shrank from attacking us in the East End; I wanted that shrinking accentuated...I had urged the people to take sticks to parry police truncheons, I was now prepared to rise to the circumstances and phraseology of the time by calling for the formation of a "People's Army; an organization men and women may join in order to fight for freedom. And in order that they may fit themselves to cope with the brutality of Government servants." The term "Army" was in our case rhetorical rather than militarist."

Sylvia Pankhurst herself would have been well aware of how colonial dynamics played out in East London in the early twentieth-century, when she lived there. There are strong parallels to the relations between the community and the police force in Brixton decades later and other predominantly Black neighbourhoods within the UK. Pankhurst wrote extensively on the situation in Ireland in the newspapers that she edited – The Women's Dreadnought, published by the East London Federation of the Suffragettes from 1914-1917, which continued as The Worker's Dreadnought from 1918-24. Pankhurst was in close touch with Irish rebel leaders such as James Connolly, until his execution in 1916 following the Easter Rising[43]. In 1920 she was the first newspaper editor in Britain to employ a Black journalist, the Jamaican revolutionary and communist Claude McKay. He was initially commissioned to write a series of articles for The Worker's Dreadnought from an anti-racist perspective, comparing the experiences of Black and white sailors in the London docks.[44]

As an anti-Imperialist, Sylvia Pankhurst was by the 1930s comrade to many of the key figures within the Pan-African movement. Activist Amy Ashwood Garvey was a close friend, who along with her former husband Marcus Garvey had founded the Negro World newspaper in 1914. Visitors to Pankhurst's house in the Essex suburb of Woodford, where she moved after her time in Bow, East London, comprised a long list of Black luminaries, activists and intellectuals including: the African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois; activist T. Ras Makonnen[45]; Dr Harold Moody, founder of the League of Coloured Peoples; writer and journalist George Padmore; Peter Abrahams, the first Black South African novelist to be published in Europe and the USA; Kwame Nkrumah, later first Prime Minister of newly independent Ghana; and Jomo Kenyatta, who was then studying at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and went on to be the first President of an independent Kenya, among many others.[46] Notably after 1935, the majority of Sylvia Pankhurst's activism was focussed on Ethiopian independence from European colonialism. She continued her activities as a journalist and newspaper editor throughout her life, publishing The New Times and Ethiopian News from 1936-56, to make public the atrocities perpetrated by the Italian Fascists occupying Ethiopia. She died there in Addis Ababa in 1960. Unusually for her time, Sylvia Pankhurst saw the connections between racism, class struggle and issues of gender inequality. It is an approach that we might nowadays refer to as intersectional.[47]

In his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Edward W. Said attempts to describe, "a general pattern of relationships between the modern metropolitan West and its overseas territories". He does this

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[42] Pankhurst, E. Sylvia, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London: Longmans, 1931), pp.504–5.
[43] Holmes, Rachel, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), pp.271-2, 310, 370, 410, 492-4, 496–7.
[44] Ibid, p.570–3, 576–8.
[45] T. Ras Makonnen's original name was George Thomas Griffith.
[46] Ibid, pp.749–755. Several of these figures played a leading role in organising the Fifth Pan-Africanist Congress on October 1945 in Manchester, UK.
[47] Intersectionality was a term coined in 1989 by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender and other individual characteristics 'intersect' in experiences of discrimination.

through the study of European literature and other writing from the past on colonised countries, including places as disparate as India, the Caribbean Islands, Ireland, and the 'Far East'. Said says, "What are striking in these discourses are the rhetorical figures one keeps encountering in their descriptions of 'the mysterious East', as well as the stereotypes about 'the African [or Indian or Irish or Jamaican or Chinese] mind', the notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric peoples, the disturbingly familiar ideas about flogging or death or extended punishment being required when 'they' misbehaved or became rebellious, because 'they' mainly understood force or violence best; 'they' were not like 'us', and for that reason deserved to be ruled."[48]

Though today we may think of the Irish as being comfortably included in the privileged racial category of 'white', they were at the time represented by the British as a primitive people, barbaric and in need of civilizing. In common with colonised people around the world, their colonisers saw them as a rabble: a less than human collection of unruly bodies, in need of a paternalistic whip hand to keep them in line. I can well recall the language that was used to describe the Irish in the British media when I was a young adult, prior to the peace process in Northern Ireland[49] when that region was in the news daily. The causes of The Troubles[50] in Northern Ireland were frequently put down to 'tribalism' by the British government in the press, rather than being acknowledged for what it was: an anti-Imperialist struggle sparked by the inequalities resulting from British settler colonialism. What we can learn from this example is that racial hierarchies and categories are neither stable nor 'natural', but instead shift and change for historical reasons.

As I experienced at the Tavistock in London, groups can either fall apart or thrive depending on our self-awareness as to how we address the assumptions that we each bring with us about others, tolerate difference and incorporate conflict. Subsequently, I have attempted to bring some of the methodology described in my anecdote about the Group Relations Conference, into my own socially engaged art practice. In my next letter, dear reader, I would like to talk to you about how historical attitudes to race, as well as class and gender can continue to shape the institutions of both art and history. I would also like to consider what kind of epistemic regime underpins the institution (namely the Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm) which has funded and hosted my PhD research?

In sisterhood and solidarity

Olivia Plender

[48] Said, Edward W., *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994) p.xi-xii.
[49] The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 officially ended The Troubles.
[50] The Troubles is the name given to the conflict. See: Feeney, Brian, *A Short History of The Troubles* (Dublin: The O'Brian Press Ltd., 2004).

18 July 2023
Stockholm

Dear reader,

I would like to take a moment to tell you about an event that took place in September 2015 at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, during the time that I was based there as a PhD candidate. The Marxist feminist activist and academic Angela Y. Davis had been invited from the USA to give a lecture. On the day that this was to occur, I arrived just prior to the scheduled time for the talk on the island of Skeppsholmen in the centre of Stockholm, where the school is based. I was surprised to see an extraordinarily long queue made up largely by young people of colour and in particular young Black women, many of whom were wearing head scarfs. They were patiently waiting to see Angela Y. Davis, legendary activist and author of canonical feminist books including *Women, Race and Class* (1981)[51], who at the time of writing this letter is a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I walked past the queue and into the building – "one of Sweden's whitest institutions" [52] according to Valerie Kyeyune Backström, in the critical article that she wrote following the event in the Swedish newspaper Expressen – feeling very self-conscious in that moment of the privilege of my own whiteness.

My colleagues informed me that some of these people had been waiting for six hours and it seemed that tension was mounting, as there was anxiety amongst the crowd as to whether they were going to get in at all. The Royal Institute of Art had chosen to host the lecture itself, rather than seek out a larger venue, and had seating capacity for only 150 people. The largely white students and staff had all been given priority with regards to the allocation of tickets. It was very clear that many of the people in line were unlikely to make it through the door, or at most would have access to the hastily improvised additional streaming room next door to the lecture theatre, where a further 400 people would be able to view the event on a screen.

When those at the front of the queue started to make their way into the building, the atmosphere soured when they were not treated with the politeness and respect that they were due. The school had hired bouncers to police the event, a gesture which Kyeyune Backström points to in her article as inappropriate, as it only added to the feeling of exclusivity. The school staff who were posted at the entrance, I am sad to say, also reacted to those waiting to hear Davis as a problem that needed to be disciplined. At one point I witnessed a group of young Black people who attempted to enter the lecture theatre – many of whom according to Kyeyune Backström were activists – have the door slammed in their faces by white staff members. Unsurprisingly, the crowd, who were by this point aggrieved and angry, began to force their way into the room. I and many others gave up our seats, so that other people could sit – those for whom attendance at Davis' lecture clearly felt so urgent, that they were prepared to stand in line for a whole day.

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[51] Davis, Angela Y., *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983).

[52] https://www.expressen.se/kultur/det-ar-latt-att-alska-svarta-pa-en-scen/ (accessed 12 Sept 2024). My own translation from Swedish (with assistance from Google Translate).

The lecture that Davis had planned was focused on her philosophical research and in particular her intellectual engagement with Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse. As a seasoned activist she clearly understood, as soon as she assumed her place behind the lectern, that something was amiss. Rather than deliver the talk as planned, she started an impromptu conversation with the audience to ascertain the situation and who they were. I remember her asking how many of them were studying art here at the school (very few), and I heard someone shout out, "Angela, do you know what has been going on here?". Having quickly read the room, Davis abandoned her paper and improvised a moving political oratory about racism today, which was more in tune with the interests of those assembled. Her long experience as a community organiser was visible in the way that she could read the crowd's mood and respond. Davis used a large part of her time for discussion with the audience, which quickly turned to a heated conversation about racism in contemporary Sweden.

This was, in my view, a shameful incident in the history of the Royal Institute of Art. Valerie Kyeyune Backström and others rightly called out the school in the press in the following days, and describes witnessing similar incidents of aggression and physically rough treatment towards the visitors as those that I saw myself: "It becomes apparent that so much has been done to make it difficult for people to access this event. The black queues are reprimanded in strong Swedish by one of the school's employees, and they have seriously hired bouncers, who work as hard as they would in a pub. Elisabete Cátia Suzana is pushed and held tight by a guard when she is taking up her place, her little daughter gets caught in a pinch and screams in fear… In what way does KKH[53] [the Royal Institute of Art] work with the issues Davis has fought for, at risk to her life? I talk to students, they say: they do nothing at all. They say: at best, KKH is indifferent. So, what's the point of this? … it became clear how all this is just part of the school's attempt to build a positive brand, without in any way making a real change."[54]

In the years in which I was an employee at this bastion of the Swedish cultural establishment, this was the only time that I have seen a majority of people of colour in the building. It is testament to Angela Y. Davis' legendary status, and it was a unique moment as the usually sleepy corridors of the art school for once filled me with an electric energy. I looked around and saw people who historically have been excluded from institutions such as this, urgently demanding change. They were challenging the structures of privilege that underpinned the way in which the institution had treated them that evening, an experience that they named as racist when describing to Davis what had taken place over the preceding hours.

Though this incident may sound exceptional, my aim in writing to you about it is not to single out any of my individual colleagues, or even the Royal Institute of Art itself. I suspect that the school is probably no worse than any of the other institutions that act as the gate keepers for Swedish art and culture. What is unusual here is that this was a rare occasion when some of the liberal assumptions that underpin many cultural institutions in Sweden and the West – particularly the idea that they are democratic and inclusive – were exposed as untrue. Through its reaction to the people of colour who literally had the door slammed in their faces, the school inadvertently revealed the (perhaps) unconscious ideas that exist in many of the institutions of art and academia about who really belongs inside. Racist structures of thinking and behaving were exposed as the staff reacted to these Black youth as if the school was the "the injured party; the one that is 'hurt' or even damaged by the 'invasion' of others" to quote Sarah Ahmed[55]. With twisted irony, these young people were treated as if they were the aggressive party for simply wishing to enter the building – to see an icon of anti-

[53] KKH is an abbreviation of the Swedish name for the school: Kungl. Konsthögskolan.
[54] https://www.expressen.se/kultur/det-ar-latt-att-alska-svarta-pa-en-scen/ (accessed 12 Sept 2024). My own translation from Swedish (with assistance from Google Translate).
[55] Ahmed, Sara, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 43–44.

racist struggle! Dear reader, is it because I am writing this letter to you from within the Royal Institute of Art, that I have perhaps mistakenly imagined you as a white liberal?

In the heated discussions that took place at the Royal Institute of Art that evening, Angela Y.Davis – who presumably has relatively little knowledge of conditions within Sweden – made reference at one point to the country as a nation which has a reputation for moral authority on the international stage, uniquely positioned to set ethical standards for the rest of the world. This utopian image is presumably based on a combination of Sweden's progressive foreign policy in the 1970s and its famous but fast disappearing welfare state[56]. She was swiftly disabused of this picture by the activists present. Davis had apparently inadvertently fallen for what scholar Ylva Habel has called Sweden's "narcissistic self-image of our country as a haven of neutrality and innocence in the world." Habel says, "This allows many White Swedes to mobilize what I have called naivety management as a protection against reflection and problematization. Despite the belated rise of postcolonial critique here, we reproduce conceptions about Sweden as a country beyond comparison, where common sense, and equality serve to inoculate us against real racism."[57]

In her essay 'Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism: Teaching While Black', from 2012, Habel describes some of the particularities of how discussions of race and racism play out in Sweden and its academies. She argues that Swedish everyday discourse negates the significance of race, resisting discussion of racial difference thereby "denying Sweden's share in the colonial past" by adopting a supposed "colour blindness", in order to maintain the "country's lingering attachment to collectively held conceptions of political, historic and cultural innocence vis-à-vis racial issues." One of the effects of this widely held stance – which she and other scholars have named as "Nordic exceptionalism"[58] – is that it blocks the white subject from any self-awareness about their own privileged position within society and makes it difficult to raise questions about racially based social inequalities in the present.

In the article Habel quotes other Swedish scholars, such as Katarina Mattson, Mekonnen Tesfahuney, Lena Sawyer, and Tobias Hübinette, who "have argued that Sweden imagines itself as a race-less, tolerant country, purportedly less affected by postcolonial relations than other nations, by virtue of its welfare politics, and its democratic, egalitarian principles. Indeed, antiracist attitudes constitute important parts of our official national self-image. To some extent, unacknowledged forms of individuated entitlement connected to Whiteness (Cherniavsky, 2005; Yancy, 2004) have intersected with welfare state discourse to construct an automatic, principally inclusive collectivity – based on an understanding that equality stands in a metonymic relation to *sameness* [my italics] … It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture."[59]

Reading these words, I am reminded of the comment that the psychologist and psychoanalyst Maxine Dennis made during the Group Relations Conference that I attended at the Tavistock, about the troublesome effects of the "sprinkling of liberalism" in the room. In parallel, Habel describes the liberal white Swedish subject as someone who supposes that they have "nothing to learn from engaging in questions of racism… The "normative colorblind," in turn, may acknowledge that stereotypes can be disturbing and hurtful, but will be reluctant to historicize and contextualize their meaning. According to this mentality, stereotypes might be regarded as unpleasant, or inelegant

[56] See: https://www.socialistalternative.org/2013/05/28/reality-swedish-neo-liberalism/

[57] Habel, Ylva, 'Challenging Swedish Exceptionalism: Teaching While Black', in *Education in the Black Diaspora Perspectives, Challenges, and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2012), p.118.

[58] Ibid, p.100. According to Habel it was the research network The Nordic Colonial Mind that defined this positioning of Nordic exceptionalism.

[59] Ibid.

cultural representations indeed, but since the word "race" should be deleted out of our vocabulary as obsolete, the subject must not be delved into. Otherwise, we will only play into the hands of the racist. We are all alike, and if we start talking about difference, it will only divide us against each other."[60] What is clear from Habel's words is that refusing to see and acknowledge difference, is far from the generous act that the white liberal might suppose. Instead, it denies the lived reality of others, to toxic effect. If we do not acknowledge the variations in our experience, we cannot learn from encounters with difference.

Dear reader, in light of what I have told you about these events you may well ask what kind of epistemic regime underpins the institution which has funded and hosted my PhD research? When I look at the 'History' section of the Royal Institute of Art's own website,[61] I see that its origins are in the eighteenth-century, having been founded in 1735 as part of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, which grew out of the drawing school established during the construction of the Stockholm Castle. The academy secured its mandate in 1766 and its statutes were drafted in 1773 "using the French arts institution, Académie des Beaux-Arts, as a model." The webpage also tells me that there was a special emphasis on classical Greek and Roman art and culture. What strikes me about these dates is that the latter half of the eighteenth-century also saw the birth of another closely related educational form: the museum. The Louvre in Paris is usually credited as being the first public museum, having opened its doors to the *hoi polloi*[62] in 1793, during the French Revolution[63]. In the spirit of 'Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité'[64], the masses were now free to survey the royal collections of art in what had formerly been a palace.

Today it might seem like a normal state of affairs to find a diverse collection of objects – ranging from asteroids to taxidermy animals, ancient Egyptian artefacts, fossilised dinosaurs, ingenious inventions, coins, and priceless works of art – arranged in a public institution such as a museum for our edification and entertainment. This was not always the case. In Europe, it was only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – during the Renaissance and early modern period – that we saw the emergence of an encyclopaedic mania for collection and classification. Stirred by new modes of thought based on Enlightenment ideas of rationality, the compulsion to collect sat alongside a renewed interest in the cultures of ancient Rome and Greece, which were taken to be the source of all culture and learning. This is an approach to history which has led us to forget key elements of our shared past. Knowledge has always travelled in multiple directions at once, and, like the meanings of words, hierarchies change as power ebbs and flows across time. Dear reader, are you aware, for example, of how many of our scientific ideas originated in the East? Were you ever taught that our decimal number system and the concept of zero were conceived in India and introduced to Europe via the Middle East in the Middle Ages, as was algebra, a largely Persian innovation whose name derives from the Arabic word *al-jabr*?[65] Did you know that weaving – which we may think of as a lowly domestic craft – was known in medieval Europe to be a highly-valued art form and was understood as a practical branch of mathematics?[66]

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[60] Ibid, pp.104–5.
[61] https://kkh.se/en/about/history/ (accessed: 20 July 2023).
[62] From Ancient Greek – meaning 'the many' or 'the people'. In English it has a negative connotation and signifies the 'ignorant' masses.
[63] Bennett, Tony, *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.36–8.
[64] From French – meaning *liberty, equality, fraternity*.
[65] Crombie, A.C., *Augustine to Galileo, The History of Science A.D. 400-1650* (London: Falcon, 1952), p.32.
[66] "It has often been pointed out that science develops best when the speculative reasoning of the philosopher and mathematician is in closest touch with the manual skill of the craftsman. It has been said also that the absence of this association in the Greco-Roman world and in medieval Christendom was one reason for the supposed backwardness of science in those societies. The practical arts were certainly despised by the majority of the most highly educated people in Classical Antiquity, and were held to be the work of slaves… [However,] it may be doubted whether even in Classical Antiquity the separation of technics and science was as complete

European colonial expansion also brought an influx of unfamiliar plants and animals from 'the new world', which in turn led to the development of areas of study such as the natural sciences. Curated parks and gardens became a central means of cataloguing and knowing the wider world, along with well-stocked libraries and carefully organised museums – which were initially set up by wealthy European princes and merchants for their own pleasure, in the form of the cabinet of curiosities (also known as the *Wunderkammer*, or *theatrum mundi*). A particularly celebrated example can be found in Sweden: Gustavus Adolphus' *Kunstschrank* (also known as the Augsburg Art Cabinet) which was originally assembled between 1625 and 1631 by the merchant, banker, and art collector Philip Hainhofer of Augsburg, Germany. Later presented to the Swedish crown, the *Kunstschrank* eventually entered the collection of Uppsala University, where it is still housed in the Museum Gustavianum.

Historians such as Tony Bennett and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill have argued that by "Appropriating royal, aristocratic and church collections in the name of the people… the [French] Revolution transformed the museum from a symbol of arbitrary power into an instrument which, through the education of its citizens was to serve the collective good of the state…" However, from the very beginning, the public museum was balancing "two deeply contradictory functions: 'that of the elite temple of the arts, and that of a utilitarian instrument for democratic education'", to which was added "a third function as the museum was shaped into an instrument of the disciplinary society. Through the institution of a division between the producers and consumers of knowledge – a division which assumed an architectural form in the relations between the hidden spaces of the museum, where knowledge was produced and organized in camera, and its public spaces, where knowledge was offered for passive consumption – the museum became a site where bodies, constantly under surveillance, were to be rendered docile."[67] This was effected through prohibitions on those behaviours associated with places of popular assembly, such as eating and drinking, touching the exhibits, and even advice on what to wear and what not, in an attempt at reform of public manners.

Still today, dear reader, you might recognise the feeling of entering an art museum and being induced to subdue your behaviour, limit the expressiveness of your body's movements, or control the loudness of your voice, in line with the norms of this particular environment.[68] In the nineteenth century, as this new educational and institutional form: the public museum, proliferated around Europe and beyond, Tony Bennett argues, they "were envisaged as a means of exposing the working classes to the improving mental influence of middle-class culture."[69] The masses were not to

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as has been sometimes supposed. In the Middle Ages there is much evidence to show that these two activities were at no period totally divorced… This active, practical interest of educated people may be one reason why the Middle Ages was a period of technical innovation, though most of the advances were probably made by unlettered craftsmen… to the different branches of theoretical mathematics there corresponded such practical arts as business concerned with money, carpentry, smithing and stone-masonry, weaving, shoemaking." Ibid, p.143–8.

[67] Bennett, Tony, *The Birth of the Museum: history, theory, politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.89.

[68] In a scene from the film *Bande à part* (1964), by French New Wave director Jean Luc Godard, the three youthful protagonists choose to express their freedom from society's mores, by playfully running as fast as they can through the Louvre in Paris, evading the museum guard who attempts to stop them.

[69] In Emile Zola's novel *L'Assommoir* written in 1877, a wedding-party made up of the story's working-class protagonists visit the Louvre and find themselves out of place: "They were awe struck by the stark severity of the staircase. They were even more intimidated by a magnificent usher in a red waistcoat and gold-braided livery who seemed to be waiting for them on the landing. Most respectfully, walking as quietly as possible, they entered the French Gallery…In the Gallery of Apollo, what amazed the group most was the floor, which was clear and shiny like a mirror, and reflected the legs of the benches…Little by little, however, the word must have spread that a wedding-party was visiting the Louvre; painters rushed over, their mouths twitching with

encounter their own preferred popular cultural forms in an art museum, but rather a version of culture produced by an elite, trained in specialist institutions such as art academies. As feminist art historians such as Griselda Pollock have taught us[70], the very category of 'art' formulated in the modern period has historically excluded those cultural forms usually practised by everyone besides white men of bourgeois or upper-class origins. The forms of cultural production associated with working-class people, women and people of non-western cultures have instead been categorised as craft or objects of ethnographic interest, for example, which carry little social status.

In her essay 'Art, Art School, Culture' (1987) Pollock provides a criticism of art school education: "Consider the organizing principles of many schools. The basic pedagogical plan is that the privileged independent spirits selected for the course at interview are given the opportunity to sink or swim. Space is provided, materials, a few technical resources. The student is expected to develop a programme of work, 'my work', that precious phrase, a project about which, from time to time, a conversation is held in unequal, ill-defined and educationally lamentable conditions. Assessments, when recorded, tend towards personal comment and register from the staff point of view the kind of contact (was the student aggressive, resistant to advice, willing to take up suggestions, etc.?). Undoubtedly many students thrive in this hostile and unsupportive environment, especially where their own sense of identity is implicitly reinforced by the hidden agenda of macho self-reliance and aggression… The hidden agenda is institutional sexism. Let there be no flippant underestimation of what this intimidating and bizarre parody of an education means to women. Some have literally died of the experience."[71]

Though the essay was written in the 1980s and is presumably based on Pollock's time teaching at the School of Fine Art at Leeds University (among other art schools in the UK), I must admit, dear reader, that I recognised in it some of my own experiences of art education which took place about a decade later. A lack of structure, an individualistic and competitive atmosphere and a macho environment were all things that I remember enduring during my years studying for a bachelor's degree in fine art (specialising in painting), between 1995 and 1998, at Central St Martins School of Art and Design, London. When I started teaching at the Royal Institute of Art in 2012, many of the (particularly female) students I encountered complained of much the same.

Pollock argues that the model of the artist that underpins art school education, was formed by the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie and "articulated contradictions within the norms constructed around masculinity, satisfying fantasies of freedom from social constraints within a world of strict regulation of sexualities, behaviours, gestures and common senses".[72] The question arises as to who exactly can risk exercising these masculine "fantasies of freedom". Pollock's critique is excoriating, as she says that "in practice art schools deliver very little education. Indeed art students are put at a scandalous disadvantage (and ironically glory in it) vis-à-vis other students in higher and further education." For those students who do not come from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, the lack of proper structure in art education may be another of the ways in which entry to the artworld is

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laughter; curious bystanders sat down on benches ahead of the group, the better to enjoy the sight, while the attendants watched tight-lipped, restraining their witticisms. And the wedding-party, weary but now no longer intimidated, dragged their hob-nailed boots and clumped their heels on the noisy floors, sounding, in the bare and tranquil orderliness of the galleries, like the trampling of a stampeding herd." Zola, Emile & Mauldon, Margaret (translator), *L'Assommoir* (Oxford & New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), pp.75–9.

[70] Pollock, Griselda, *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[71] Pollock, Griselda, 'Art, Art School, Culture' (1987), reproduced in abridged version in the reader: Allen, Felicity (ed.) *Education: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London/ Cambridge, MA, Whitechapel Gallery, The MIT Press, 2011), pp.149–152.

[72] Ibid, p.150.

rendered opaque. One is so much more likely to be able to "swim" if one has a secure economic position and university educated parents, who have already familiarised one with the august institutions of art and culture.

Various attempts have been made to create a separatist art education for women, especially during the high point of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s – so that female artists might find the space to grow in confidence outside of an educational system constructed around what Pollock calls "macho self-reliance and aggression". A well-documented example is the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), founded by Miriam Shapiro, and Judy Chicago which lasted from 1971-74. Famous alumni include Suzanne Lacy, often credited as being one of the founders of the field of "social practice"[73]. As part of the programme Shapiro and Chicago created the immersive exhibition Womanhouse in 1972 with students and artists, such as Faith Wilding.

Miriam Shapiro describes the education as follows: "Twenty-one young women artists elected to join this exclusively female class. We do not teach by fixed authoritarian rules. Traditionally, the flow of power has moved from teacher to student unilaterally. Our ways are more circular, more womb-like; our primary concern lies with providing a nourishing environment for growth. Classes begin by sitting in a circle; a topic for discussion is selected. We move around the room, each person assuming responsibility for addressing herself to the topic on her highest level of perception. In the classical Women's Liberation technique, the personal becomes the political. Privately held feelings imagined to be personally held 'hang ups' turn out to be everyone's feelings, and it becomes possible to act together in their solution, if there is a solution…"[74]

Though I struggle with some of the essentialist vocabulary from the 1970s, such as the suggestion that an educational situation can be "womb-like", I am interested that the form described here shifts away from the "sacred individualism" of Pollock's art school. However, with the assumption that "personally held 'hang ups' turn out to be everyone's feelings", there is an apparent failure to acknowledge possible differences in experience, as if all of the women were feeling exactly the same thing. Without going into the particularities of whether the Feminist Art Program at CalArts was successful in its aims, I want to draw your attention, dear reader, to the attempt that was made, as part of their feminist pedagogy, to build a group dynamic between students and teachers in which learning became a shared responsibility – a form of mutual education. There is also a shift here in the boundaries of what topics can be considered worthy of an artwork, without being kicked out of the sphere of 'fine art' or 'high art' and relegated to the traditionally lowly categories of craft, or ethnographic object. In Shapiro's words: "There are some interesting unwritten laws about what is considered appropriate subject matter for art-making. The content of our first class project Womanhouse reversed these laws. What formerly was considered trivial was heightened to the level of serious art-making: dolls, pillows, cosmetics, sanitary napkins, silk stockings, underwear, children's toys, washbasins, toasters, frying pans, refrigerator door handles, shower caps, quilts, satin bedspreads."

Not all historians commenting on the history of art school education are quite as damning as Griselda Pollock. In the essay 'Cries, Consensus and Criticality: Making Artists in the Contemporary

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[73] "In the United States, socially engaged art is rooted in the late 1960s, in the seminal influence of Alan Kaprow, the incorporation of feminist education theory in art practice, the exploration of performance and pedagogy by Charles Garoian, and the work of Suzanne Lacy on the West Coast and elsewhere, among many other examples." Helguera, Pablo, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc., 2011), p.ix.

[74] Shapiro, Miriam, 'The Education of Women as Artists: Project Womanhouse' (1972), reproduced in abridged version in the reader: Allen, Felicity (ed.) *Education: Documents of Contemporary Art* (London/ Cambridge, MA, Whitechapel Gallery, The MIT Press, 2011), pp.135–6.

Art School' (2019)[75], Michael Newall writes on the history of the 'art school crit', or group critique, which is a pedagogical form central to the education in every art school where I have ever taught, including the Royal Institute of Art[76]. In the group critique conversation is mediated by a teacher, but it is the students who take it in turns to give feedback to each other and present their artworks. According to Newall "the reliance on a group of peers for feedback rather than a teacher has strong parallels with Freire's dictum that "[t]o teach is not *to transfer knowledge* but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge"[77]". In the same paragraph, alongside Brazilian pedagogue Freire, he also mentions other progressive educational theorists of the twentieth-century, Lev Vygotsky and Ivan Illich.

According to Newall, the "art school crit" appears to have emerged as an educational form in the 1960s and is meant to encourage peer to peer interactions, breaking with the model of the masterclass where knowledge flows solely from the master to the student. We can surmise that it's ubiquity within contemporary art schools was a response to the democratic educational ideas that arrived in the 1960s and early 1970s, with the popularity of Paulo Freire's books such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) and *Cultural Action to Freedom* (1970)[78] and the emergence of the field of critical pedagogy. At the Royal Institute of Art (as with many other art schools) what we appear to have then, is an apparently democratic twentieth-century model of education grafted onto an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century root.

The field of socially engaged art (or 'social practice' as it is often known in the USA) in which I find myself today, presents something of a paradox in that it seeks to move away from the "sacred individualism" that Griselda Pollock refers to and simultaneously challenge the boundaries of the category of art, while still maintaining something of the social status of continuing to be categorised as art. In his book *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, Pablo Helguera describes how the term 'socially engaged art' emerged in the 1970s, later to drop any reference to art (particularly in the context of the US art scene) and become 'social practice':

"Socially engaged art, as a category of practice, is still a working construct. In many descriptions, however, it encompasses a genealogy that goes back to the avant-garde and expands significantly during the emergence of Post-Minimalism. The social movements of the 1960s led to greater social engagement in art and the emergence of performance art and site-specificity, which all influence socially engaged art practice today. In previous decades, art based on social interaction has been identified as "relational aesthetics" and "community", "collaborative", "participatory", "dialogic", and "public" art, among many other titles. (It's redefinitions, like that of other kinds of art, have stemmed from the urge to draw lines between generations and unload historical baggage.) "Social practice" has emerged most prominently in recent publications, symposia, and exhibitions and is the most generally favored term for socially engaged art."

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[75] Newall, Michael, 'Cries, Consensus and Criticality: Making Artists in the Contemporary Art School', in Brisbin, Chris and Thiessen, Myra, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Criticality in Art, Architecture and Design* (London/New York: Routledge, 2019), pp.14–31.

[76] For a full list of art schools that I have taught in see my website: https://oliviaplender.org/what-is-school/i-have-given-workshops-and-lectures-at-art-schools (accessed: 1 August 2023)

[77] Freire, Paulo, Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage, trans. Patrick Clarke (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), p.30. Quoted in Newall, Michael, 'Cries, Consensus and Criticality: Making Artists in the Contemporary Art School', in Brisbin, Chris and Thiessen, Myra, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Criticality in Art, Architecture and Design* (London/New York: Routledge, 2019), pp.14–31.

[78] Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Penguin 1970, first published in Portuguese 1968) and *Cultural Action to Freedom* (London: Penguin 1972, first published in Portuguese 1970).

Pablo Helguera continues, by saying that "The new term excludes, for the first time, an explicit reference to art-making. It's immediate predecessor, "relational aesthetics," preserves the term in its parent principle, aesthetics (which, ironically, refers more to traditional values–i.e., beauty– than does "art"). The exclusion of "art" coincides with a growing general discomfort with the connotations of the term. "Social practice" avoids evocations of both the modern role of the artist (as an illuminated visionary) and the postmodern version (as a self-conscious critical being). Instead the term democratizes the construct," and to repeat a quotation from my previous letter makes, "the artist into an individual whose speciality includes working with society in a professional capacity."[79]

In 2012 I interviewed educators Chris Crickmay, David Harding and Susan C. Triesman, who in the 1970s and 80s were among the first to bring socially engaged art practices into art education in the UK. According to Crickmay, "There are several narratives about creativity that have gone on simultaneously through history. One being Friedrich Fröbel's, or other people like Herbert Read, or D.W. Winnicott's, who talked about play as almost a human right, or certainly a human faculty, something that people naturally have, which informs every second of their lives in fact. Then there's another narrative, which is the idea of genius in art and the idea that creativity is very unusual, just a property of rather a few significant people. In the 1960s the art world was very dominated by Clement Greenberg and his writings, so there was an 'art for art's sake' idea. At that time a rift arose between the staff at art colleges, who were informed by Greenberg's idea, and the students who were beginning to reject it. It all boiled up into the Hornsey sit-in[80] – which paralleled the 1968 French uprising – where the students were saying, 'No! We don't want this idea of "art for art's sake" nor do we want this idea of "genius". We want a much more egalitarian view of culture.'"[81]

In May 1968 students and a few staff occupied Hornsey College of Art, London. The sit-in lasted for six weeks, during which time the protestors lived on site and created a vigorous debate about the nature of arts education, producing over seventy documents; they also took responsibility for running the school, organising everything from the canteen to seminars (visiting speakers included architect and designer Buckminster Fuller, theatre director Joan Littlewood and psychiatrist R.D. Laing). The Hornsey protest inspired revolt in arts schools all over the UK and resulted in confrontation with the local authorities and questions being raised in the British Parliament.

The interview took place in my installation *Open Forum* (2012-13), at Arnolfini, Bristol, as a public event during my solo show *Rise Early, Be Industrious*, which toured the UK in 2012-23. In the middle of the exhibition at Arnolfini, the viewer encountered the installation which resembles a television studio. This seductive social space was situated on a raised platform and filled with soft carpeting, colourful screens, cubes used as seating and a conversation pit. Dispensing with the traditional architecture of the lecture theatre, the space was arranged so that the speakers and audience sat together 'in the round'. The usual hierarchy, in which a lecturer stands at a lectern in front of a room full of silent listeners, was replaced by a situation in which everyone was equally on display. Speakers and visitors found themselves cast as performers in the space, as a television presenter or

[79] Helguera, Pablo, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc., 2011), pp.1–3.

[80] At the time the events also inspired an exhibition at the ICA, London, a book titled *The Hornsey Affair* published by Penguin in 1969, and a Granada television film, *Our Live Experiment Is Worth More than 3,000 Textbooks*, directed by John Goldschmidt and broadcast in 1969. More recently Lisa Tickner, art historian (and former student of Hornsey College of Art), wrote a book titled *Hornsey 1968: The Art School Revolution* (London: Francis Lincoln, 2008).

[81] The interview is published in Plender, Olivia & van Noord, Gerrie (eds.), *Rise Early, Be Industrious*, (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016), pp.75–94.

a member of the studio audience. A workstation behind the scenes was also on show, suggesting the presence of support staff and technicians, who would usually be invisible to the television viewer.

The space contained archive material related to experimental art education in the UK, focusing on The Open University's interdisciplinary Art and Environment course. Running from 1976 until 1985, the influential course's chief agenda was to rethink the relation between art and society. Courses were offered for home study without entry requirements, and lectures were broadcast on BBC television and radio. Chris Crickmay and Susan C. Triesman had both been part of creating the Art and Environment course, following the founding of The Open University in 1969 in the New Town of Milton Keynes.

In the decades after World War II, many New Towns and cities were planned and built in Britain as a means of relocating urban populations away from poor quality or bombed housing and to relieve London's urban overcrowding. The largest of these was Milton Keynes and when The Open University was founded – despite today being one of the largest universities in the UK – according to Crickmay, it "consisted of a little bunch of Portakabins in what was going to be Milton Keynes, street names in the fields. What was interesting about this stage was that it was completely unknown what this entity was going to be like, or indeed whether it was going to work at all. That gave us an extraordinary large room for manoeuvre, because you could elect to start a course if you could form a team around it." Crickmay described how "It was seen as a second-chance university, so it was specifically for adults; students who, for one reason or another, had not managed to take a degree when they were 18+. I often thought of the typical student as being a woman in her late thirties, who might have had a family, looking to re-launch her career, who didn't have many qualifications and wanted to get going again. Often a very courageous, energetic sort of person".

As is implied by the name, Art and Environment placed emphasis on taking art out of the studio and into everyday life. The faculty was interdisciplinary, combining methods from varied fields including sociology, architecture, and the Community Arts movement among others. A course description reproduced in my book *Rise Early, Be Industrious* (2016)[82], describes how "Each unit in Art and Environment draws the students' attention to a particular aspect of their own experience. This is partly in terms of modes of experiencing, e.g. listening, seeing, visualising, judging, fantasising, remembering etc., and partly in terms of things experienced, e.g. the natural environment, language, social roles, materials, places, etc. Students are expected to carry out expressive work in a variety of art forms using these aspects of experience as the starting point."

As Triesman said, "For me, one of the key influences was the development of community theatre, which was young and fresh. There was a lot of political theatre at that time, some of it very agit-prop. This was pre-Thatcher. The minute you talk about community theatre you're automatically talking about social and political context. But there was also a personal interest in philosophical and aesthetic theories, about how you get creative in society as a subject, which of course fed into the feminist strand of what I was doing." Triesman was responsible for a feminist course unit called 'The Great Divide', that addressed the home as the context in which the students were working. In one project focussed on the social roles people play, students had to act as if they were a guest in their own home for a day, which, according to Crickmay, was an unpopular task but very informative, "particularly when it came to questions like who did the washing up."

In 1978, Chris Crickmay and David Harding established the Art and Social Context course at Dartington College in rural Devonshire in the UK, which ran from 1978 to 1991. Harding later went on to set up the Environmental Art course at the Glasgow School of Art, in 1985, and it is possible to

[82] Ibid, p.96.

trace a line between the three courses in terms of their founding ethos. Harding had developed his own ideas about context in the New Town of Glenrothes, Scotland, where he was employed in the unusual position of 'town artist'. In his words "The role of town artist was defined in the advert as to 'contribute to the external environment of the town'. I was there for ten years, which was unique at the time. However, the brief didn't have anything about involving local people. Very quickly I began to feel that I couldn't be the only privileged person in that town to contribute to its environment and looked for ways in which other people could do so too. I lived in a council house, and I had my studio where all the workshops were, with the bricklayers, plumbers, carpenters. I joined the building workers' union UCATT, so that on the building site I'd be part of that team, doing the same job. I was almost the artist as artisan. I was being drawn into context. Barbara Steveni made a visit around 1973. Working as part of the Artist Placement Group[83] she had convened a meeting of all the general managers of the new towns in Scotland in Glenrothes. The chief architect and planning officer gave a talk about what was happening in Glenrothes and she stood up and said 'but that's what APG are all about'. From that moment on, John Latham, Barbara Steveni and I were very close – it was then that I learnt of John's great aphorism; that 'the context is half the work'."

Reflecting upon the conditions that made this way of working possible, Harding said, "New Towns offered new ways of thinking, not all of them obviously successful. They didn't have a town council, so there was very minimal politics. There was a development corporation, and after about two or three years I could literally do anything I wanted, working with the architects, engineers and landscapers… Also, being what we called a green-field-site town, it had no history. By involving people you were allowing, encouraging them to make their mark on the town... Without an extended family or a long history it becomes very important."

Influenced by Harding's experiences in Glenrothes, Crickmay described how at Dartington College the Art and Social Context course built up to students working in environments, "outside college that on the face of it had nothing to do with art. It could be anything; a fishmonger or a scientific group working with the water board… they would start with an open brief. They weren't going in to do a task, they were just going in and seeing what they could do, and they would have to find a role for art in that setting. That was the task." Harding told us how he would say to the students, "think of a setting, go and visit different places that you feel comfortable with, or challenged by, or excited by and work out when they meet. Do they meet in the evenings? Would it only happen on Saturdays? Well then that's the time that you should go."

However, both Chris Crickmay and David Harding were reflective in our interview about the emotional cost to the art students of working in this way. "We got it wrong once or twice", said Crickmay, whereas Harding went so far as to admit that, "We sometimes felt students were actually damaged by it. They had the idea that they could transform settings. When they didn't it was painful, or if they were in very difficult environments, say a hospital, they sometimes got so wrapped up in it that we did call them – jokingly – 'walking wounded'. It began to dawn on me that even mature artists working with APG find context and setting very challenging and difficult to make art out of … I used to say to students, 'whenever you go into a setting, a social setting, forget the idea that you're the bearer of great gifts. The gifts are there, you'll receive the gifts.' It was a complete reversal. It's not that you have the goods to deliver: you have to be responsive to settings." In line

[83] According to the website of Tate Museums, "The Artist Placement Group (APG) emerged in London in the 1960s. The organisation actively sought to reposition the role of the artist within a wider social context, including government and commerce, while at the same time playing an important part in the history of conceptual art during the 1960s and 1970s." https://www.tate.org.uk/artistplacementgroup/ (accessed 12 November 2024). See also the chapter: 'Incidental People: APG and Community Arts', in Bishop, Claire, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London, New York: Verso, 2012), p.163.

with Harding's comments, in the community spaces where I have spent time, such as Crossroads Women's Centre and Sylvia's Corner, in London, I encountered knowledge and creativity, often leading me to feel that I was the one learning the most from the encounters that I set up.

From his description, it seems that the emotional cost to the art students was in Harding's view, in part, due to the emotional complexity of the environments in which they were working. But he also implies that their distress perhaps derives from the gap between their expectations of what they could personally achieve, in terms of social change, and the reality. Such unrealistic presumptions are perhaps still informed by fantasies of the artist as a uniquely gifted genius. Dear reader, I have on occasion also overestimated my own ability as an individual to transform a setting, which I will admit can be an emotionally painful experience.

Helguera outlines the dilemma of the art student attracted to this form of art making, who, he says, often find themselves wondering whether it would be more useful to abandon art altogether and instead become professional community organisers, activists, politicians, ethnographers, or sociologists. I have certainly asked myself this question at times and in my projects have borrowed heavily from fields outside of my own, including community organising, critical pedagogy, psychology, political theatre, and the social sciences. The latter was largely courtesy of my sister Celia Plender, a social anthropologist whose research circles around issues related to social justice. She conducted her PhD field work with food co-operatives based in community spaces in London, in the same years that I was undertaking my own PhD. Through my relationship with my sister, I have had first hand exposure to the anthropologist's toolkit of qualitative research methods, some of which I have adapted to my own ends, such as participant observation[84], interviews, and ethnography, which is a method of study that places emphasis on the first-hand experiences of both research participants and researchers as a source of knowledge. We have also spent years discussing the complicated power dynamics inherent in these kinds of practices and the ethical dilemmas that emerge when one attempts to represent the knowledge and experience that has been gathered through these means.

When seeking groups to participate in the process that led to the project *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers*, *They Will Not Define Us* and the video work *Hold Hold Fire* (2019), my production assistant Hannah Renton and I contacted many women's centres and female-led activist groups all over London. We were initially disheartened when a couple of those that we had approached did not respond to our enquiries, while others explained that they simply did not have the time or the capacity to be part of a cultural project such as this. When I got in touch with Crossroads Women's Centre and was invited there for a meeting by their Peer Support & Volunteer Co-ordinator to discuss the possibility of working together, I recall being pleased to find a framed photograph of Sylvia Pankhurst hanging on the wall in their reception area, alongside photos of many other feminist 'foremothers' and heroines. I remember thinking, when I saw the photo, that this meeting might just work out okay, because the women at Crossroads clearly had an existing interest in socialist feminist history and already made use of it in their own way. Similarly, Focus E15 had named their community space Sylvia's Corner, after Sylvia Pankhurst, which gave me the sense that it would be possible to create an exchange of knowledge.

My aim was to build reciprocity into the situations that I staged with these groups, so that I would not be the only person in the room benefitting. By inviting their participation in a project about Sylvia Pankhurst, I later realised, I was asking these particular groups to engage with something that

[84] Participant observation is where the anthropologist observes human behaviour through immersion and active participation in a social setting, fully acknowledging and analysing their own effect on the social environment in a self-reflexive manner, as well as the behaviour of the group of which they are a part.

they could already see the value of. Part of the artistic methodology that I have adopted through these projects, is to establish collaborations with communities and groups based on mutual interests. It is important that the people I work with have chosen to be there. To do otherwise, I have learnt (through doing), renders it hard to find participants as your activity has no real meaning for the people you are trying to engage.

In her book *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), Chandra Talpade Mohanty states that: "Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history, a process that is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity. Writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. It becomes a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself. If the everyday world is not transparent and its relations of rule – its organizations and institutional frameworks – work to obscure and make invisible inherent hierarchies of power (Smith 1987), it becomes imperative that we rethink, remember, and utilize our lived relations as a basis of knowledge."[85]

Sylvia Pankhurst and the East London Federation of the Suffragettes looked back to the French Revolution of 1789 and the later Paris Commune of 1871. At their first major demonstration, after coming into being as an organisation in 1913, historian Barbara Winslow reports that, "According to the *Daily Herald,* "thousands and thousands of women were drawn into the streets" carrying almond branches, waving purple, green and white banners – the colours of the WSPU – and wearing a new, special symbol for the ELFS/WSPU added by Pankhurst: red caps, like those worn by the revolutionary women of the French revolution."[86]

Mohanty goes on to describe how "history and memory are woven through numerous genres: fictional texts, oral history, and poetry, as well as testimonial narratives – not just what counts as scholarly or academic ("real"?) historiography"[87]. The artworks that make up my PhD project are examples of how art is also one of the means through which history can be woven. For the groups, the process of 'reading' and 'rewriting' the history of the British suffragette movement was potentially a useful part of a process that Mohanty describes as, "the creation of a communal (feminist) political consciousness through the practice of storytelling."[88]

Focus E15 and the activist group of female asylum-seekers and refugees that I later met, also had an interest in learning about political theatre, both groups having previously written plays of their own as a means of getting their message out to a public. The latter group recounted how they had been performing scenes based on their experiences of the brutal asylum system, at the public protests that they stage. The locations for these demonstrations include Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre, a notoriously abusive detention centre, whose running is outsourced by the British government to the private company Serco, where many of the women had themselves been held under threat of removal from the UK. Therefore, another common interest, I discovered, was in learning how cultural forms can be used as political and educational tools. This was a reason that many of the women gave, as to why they were prepared to give up some of their limited time to read a play written circa 1913.

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[85] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2003), p.78.
[86] Winslow, Barbara, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.45.
[87] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2003), pp.79–80.
[88] Ibid, p.79.

When I first encountered *Liberty or Death or A Popular Uprising for the Vote* (to give the play its full title) in the archives at The Women's Library, London, among a collection of plays and poems by Sylvia Pankhurst, there was no indication that it had ever been performed. I later found a reference to it having been staged at the headquarters of the ELFS, at the Women's Hall on Old Ford Road in Bow, in London[89]. There were many plays written by campaigners for votes for women in support of their cause, but the majority of them seem to have been satirical or humorous in tone.[90] According to theatre historian Susan Croft, who attended several of the readings of *Liberty or Death* that I staged at Crossroads Women's Centre, Pankhurst's play was unusual in that it contains naturalistic representations of life in the East End of London. Working-class women, apparently, did not usually feature as characters in mainstream theatre of that era. Therefore – unlike what was going on in fashionable theatres in the West End of London – the play would have provided the opportunity for the activists and other women who spent time at the Women's Hall to see their own struggles mirrored back at them, in a community setting that was familiar and accessible, thereby creating the possibility for reflecting as a group on their own circumstances.

This means of political 'consciousness-raising', to use the vocabulary of the 1960s and 70s, was also central to much of the political and community theatre of that later era. Influenced by the workers' theatre movement of the 1930s, UK based groups such as Banner Theatre[91] formed close links with trade unions, such as the National Union of Mineworkers, performing plays in non-traditional settings such as miner's clubs and galas. In his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* (published first in Portuguese in 1974 and in the UK in 1979) Augusto Boal, the influential Brazilian theatre director, writes of his experiments with the People's Theatre of Peru, in 1973, as part of an educational programme to raise adult literacy rates, using a method derived in part from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968). He traces a history of Western theatre, from Ancient Greece to the present, in which he contrasts Aristotle's "poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the dramatic character so that the latter may act and think for him", with the methods of Bertolt Brecht in the 1930s. In Boal's view Brecht "proposes a poetics in which the spectator delegates power to the character who thus acts in his place but the spectator reserves the right to think for himself, often in opposition to the character." According to Boal, "[I]n the first case a 'catharsis' occurs; in the second, an awakening of critical consciousness." Boal goes on to say that "all the truly revolutionary theatrical groups should transfer to the people the means of production in the theatre so that the people themselves may utilise them. The theatre is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it."

My main collaborator in the meetings staged in order to read Sylvia Pankhurst's play was Yael Shavit, a director experienced with community theatre. She invited a series of actors and theatre-makers to work with us, including Angela Clerkin, who makes politicised performance work, and Cherrelle Skeete, who runs a Black women's organisation called Black-tress UK, among others. We divided our responsibilities so that Yael facilitated the readings of the play, while I mediated the discussions. With each of the groups we looked at the same two sections of the drama. This was in part because of a lack of time, as each session lasted a mere two and a half hours, due to the understandable limits to the women's availability. Before working with the groups in the community spaces, Yael Shavit and I had initially run a two-day workshop with professional actors, in which we rehearsed and discussed scenes. It had become clear there that it was scenes one and three of *Liberty or*

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[89] Romero, Patricia W., *E. Sylvia Pankhurst: Portrait of a Radical* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990), p.76.

[90] See: Croft, Susan (ed.), *Votes for Women and Other Plays* (Twickenham: Aurora Metro Press, 2009); Paxton, Naomi (ed.), *The Methuen Drama Book of Suffrage Plays* (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[91] Filewood, Alan, & Watt, David, *Workers' Playtime: Theatre and the Labour Movement Since 1970* (Strawberry Hills: Currency Press, 2001), pp.83–127.

Death, that seemed to work best dramatically and had the potential to provoke the most discussion about contemporary conditions.

The ethos of putting the creative tools into people's hands, outlined by Boal in revolutionary language, affected our approach to how we might create reciprocity in the meetings with the women's groups. Influenced by Boal's *Forum Theatre* method, which is detailed in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974), we saw that Pankhurst's play could be a useful tool to open up conversation with the groups about their own situations in the present. By inviting the women to read, perform and rewrite the play, we aimed to break down the "division between the producers and consumers of knowledge" and culture, as described by historian Tony Bennett. In our first meeting at Crossroads Women's Centre, the group felt that there was too much emphasis on the character of Mary Pennell, who presumably is based on Sylvia Pankhurst herself. Their criticism was that she was represented as something of a messianic leader, which diminished the agency of the working-class women in the narrative. Therefore, the group chose to edit the text and remove that character altogether from scene three. It was this revised version that we continued to use in further meetings with the other groups.

We had imagined that our participants might be unwilling or shy to act out scenes from the play, which is why we assumed that the presence of professional actors would be necessary, in case they needed to fulfil the role of 'players' and leave others free to act as discussants. This proved not to be the case, as everyone wanted to have a go at performing as well as reflecting. Later, when I asked all three groups what they enjoyed about our sessions together, the women seemed to primarily take pleasure in this form of 'playing' together. For some it was a way of meeting and sharing experiences with other women and a relief from care responsibilities. For those who already knew each other, it created the potential to reinforce their bonds as a group and I was interested to see how much value the activists placed on having fun – as a way of avoiding the burn out that can come from the daily grind of organising a political campaign.

Liberty or Death is based on actual women who participated in the struggles of the East London Federation of the Suffragettes. It depicts circumstances which include precarity and poverty, as well as police brutality. The play remains interesting today because it contains testimonies from characters that clearly speak to the present and read almost like oral history. Many of them, I would guess, are drawn directly from stories that Sylvia Pankhurst heard from the people that she knew in East London. The brush-maker who appears in *Liberty or Death* to tell us about her working conditions, is most likely based on a real woman named Jane Savoy and the testimony that she gave to members of parliament about her working conditions, as part of the ELFS' deputation to the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith in 1914[92]. She used the pseudonym Mrs Hughes for the occasion because her husband did not want his surname to appear in the newspapers. The woman who had her skull fractured by a detective in the Roman Road was, in reality, Zelie Emerson whose health was permanently damaged by this injury. She lived with Sylvia Pankhurst in East London for several years, along with Norah Smyth, as her close friend, comrade and possibly lover (according to both Pankhurst's biographer Rachel Holmes and historian Barbara Winslow),[93] and has clearly inspired the character of Mrs Rice in *Liberty or Death*.

In 2018, Britain celebrated the centenary of full suffrage for (some) women[94]. However, as I asked in my introduction to the book *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us* (2020), to what

[92] Jackson, Sarah, Taylor, Rosemary, *East London Suffragettes* (Stroud: The History Press, 2014), pp.74–78.
[93] See: Holmes, Rachel, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), pp.416–7; and Winslow, Barbara, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.34.
[94] "In 1918 the Representation of the People Act was passed which allowed women over the age of 30 who met a property qualification to vote…It was not until the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 that women over 21 were

extent has the situation of women improved as a result of access to parliamentary representation? What we can learn from the play is that the vote was far from being an end goal; but was instead intended as a step on the road to a much larger transformation of society. Many of the issues that are reflected in the story – from unequal pay to poor working conditions, domestic violence, a housing crisis, and the punitive benefits system, continue to disproportionately affect women today; particularly those experiencing intersecting forms of oppression, such as women with disabilities, working-class women, trans women, and women of colour.

My goal in this project was to meet groups of female activists who campaign on issues similar to those that were important to the ELFS. I wanted to 'read' this history together with women who had an embodied knowledge of how these events – which took place over one hundred years ago in East London – might have felt to those present at the time. Therefore, I sought out groups who could speak from experience about the conditions of trying to organise politically, in similar living and working conditions to those found in Pankhurst's play; and might therefore understand past events in a way that was potentially different to the approach of an academic historian. I was mindful, however, of Mohanty's warning that although our shared identity as women means that we may have some experiences in common, it is important not to ignore differences. To indulge in "vague assumptions of sisterhood or images of complete identification with the other" inevitably ends up privileging the needs of white middle-class women. It is important to acknowledge difference in our experiences, argues Mohanty, as a potential source of knowledge and strength, and to practice solidarity: "Diversity and difference are central values here – to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances."[95]

The approach that Chandra Talpade Mohanty advocates, stands in sharp contrast to the supposed "colourblindness" that Ylva Habel criticises. However, acknowledging and respecting diversity and difference is often easier said than done. I noticed that when there was any divergence of opinion with the potential to create emotional disruption in the meetings, both the participating women and I would often lean on the idea that we share something essential in common as women, as a means of bridging differences. There were also imbalances of power that were sometimes hard to reconcile, especially when it came to the sensitive topic of money. To make it possible for the activist group of asylum-seekers and refugees to attend our meetings, I provided travel expenses, as well as tea and snacks, while the community space where we met offered a cooked lunch after each session. On the first occasion we met, I was embarrassed to find that I hadn't brought enough cash with me to give the women their travel expenses. I asked the group if they minded waiting for ten minutes while I went to a bank around the corner. Most responded with alacrity, but I noticed that for one woman this was clearly beyond the pale and her facial expression and body language towards me changed entirely. When I returned, she had gone, while the others had waited. Feeling very guilty, I left an envelope with the groups co-ordinator containing her travel expenses. I asked the co-ordinator to please make sure she gave the woman the money next time that the group met.

I can only speculate as to what made her leave. Perhaps she had to rush off to work or to pick up children and I had accidentally ruined her day, by forcing her to choose between delay or missing out on being reimbursed. It may also be a question of dignity, because by making her wait I had inadvertently acted with a lack of empathy and asserted my power to give or withhold money, as if this was charity. The lesson was that what may seem like a small thing to me as a middle-class

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able to vote and women finally achieved the same voting rights as men." Quote from the website of the UK parliament: https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/thevote/ (accessed 18 October 2024).

[95] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2003), p.7.

woman, is a big thing for those on the edge of destitution. It was a mistake that I did not repeat, and I was very careful in future sessions to prepare all the envelopes of cash in advance.

With my collaborator Yael Shavit and the coordinator at the community space where we met, I consequently raised the possibility of finding money in the budget to pay the women an actual fee for their participation in the sessions. To my surprise at the time, they both reacted with horror and said that this would only entrench the power imbalance. They argued that this would put the women from the group in a position where they would be under an obligation to share their often traumatic experiences with me, as if I was their employer, and compromise their agency to volunteer as much or as little of their stories as they felt willing. Discouraged, I did not then attempt to discuss this with the women themselves as I feared that such a sensitive conversation might ruin the relationship, which, dear reader, I will admit was probably a failure on my part. I would certainly aim to approach this more directly in future projects. However, the conversation made it clear to me that there is no one way of resolving all the ethical dilemmas inherent within a scenario such as this. There will always be an imbalance of power between myself and the participants that must be acknowledged, which inevitably is accompanied by complex emotions on all sides. It is naïve to imagine that this is a problem that can be solved, though I have striven to mitigate its effects by building reciprocity in other ways.

According to Mohanty, being a woman does have "political consequences in the world we live in… sexism, racism, misogyny, and heterosexism underlie and fuel social and political institutions of rule and thus often lead to hatred of women and (supposedly justified) violence against women…wherever in the world we happen to be."[96] Although, who exactly fits within the category of "woman" is a complex question, as it has often been used to exclude woman who are seen as 'unfeminine', including working class women, women of colour, women with disabilities, trans women, gender non-conforming women, non-binary people and lesbians.

Mohanty makes a useful distinction between ""Woman" (a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses – scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.) and "women" (real, material subjects of their collective histories)".[97] Nineteenth century ideas of femininity, the legacies of which we still live with today, were based on an ideology of separate spheres for women and men, in which a female's proper place is the private realm of the domestic space. In the bourgeois ideal, women were meant to be the 'The Angel in the House', equated with ideas such as chastity, purity and passivity. They should be devoted to the comfort of their men, so that after a weary day of heroic masculine exertions in the public sphere, the Victorian husband could return to a sanctuary over which he reigned as master, tended by his ever-loyal wife.

The Angel in the House is the title of a turgid poem published in parts between 1854 and 1862 by Coventry Patmore – bearer of an antique sounding name which could surely only belong to a Victorian patriarch. Commenting upon it in 1931, the great modernist writer and feminist Virginia Woolf says: "You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her—you may not know what I mean by *The Angel in the House*... She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught, she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was

[96] Ibid, p.3.
[97] Ibid, p.19.

pure... I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense."[98]

In her witty commentary on *The Angel in the House*, Woolf invokes her own 'unwomanly' capacity for violence, imagined or otherwise, in the interests of self-defense. In the era that she describes, women who strayed from this self-effacing role were suspect for not being 'womanly' enough. As we see from the example of the suffragettes, if they transgressed by stepping into the public sphere, they may be 'disciplined' by men through physical and sexual violence[99]. In reality, this Victorian 'ideal' was only attainable for a minority of women, those able to afford not to work who were members of the economically privileged middle- and upper-classes. For working-class women and women of colour, who historically have always been subject to state interference in their private lives, as we see both in Pankhurst's play and in the contemporary women's commentaries on it, the distinction between the public and private sphere looks somewhat different to how it may be perceived by white middle- and upper-class women. This has implications for the feminist idea that the 'personal is political', popularised in the 1970s by the Women's Liberation Movement in the USA.

Aida Hurtado, who is quoted by Mohanty, says "Women of Color have not had the benefit of the economic conditions that underlie the public/private distinction. Instead the political consciousness of women of Color stems from an awareness that the public is personally political. Welfare programs and policies have discouraged family life, sterilization programs have restricted reproduction rights, government has drafted and armed disproportionate numbers of people of Color to fight its wars overseas, and locally, police forces and the criminal justice system arrest and incarcerate disproportionate numbers of people of Color. There is no such thing as a private sphere for people of Color except that which they manage to create and protect in an otherwise hostile environment."[100] Despite having been written in the context of the USA in 1989, these words echo the experience of many of the women from the groups that I met, as well as the voices of working-class women that we hear in the play *Liberty or Death* from 1913.

In their essay 'Challenging Imperial Feminism'[101], written in 1983, Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar offer a stinging critique of racism within the Women's Liberation Movement; which, it is worth noting, has not always been welcoming to women of colour, nor working-class women, lesbians or

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[98] Woolf, Virginia, 'Professions for Women', republished in *Killing the Angel in the House: seven essays* (London: Penguin, 1995).

[99] See Rachel Holmes' description of the most notorious incidence of police violence against suffragettes on 18 November 1910, on the occasion subsequently known as Black Friday: "In response to the demise of the Conciliation Bill into the long grass, the Women's Parliament marched in a deputation of 300 to Westminster on Friday 18 November, Sylvia and her aunt Mary among them. The demonstration was met with a six-hour complete onslaught by the police, which Sylvia described as exhibiting unprecedented levels of state-sanctioned brutality. A policeman struck her in the chest with his truncheon, seized her by the arms and threw her onto the pavement. Women were dragged down side streets, beaten up, sexually assaulted and raped… The Home Secretary Winston Churchill rejected calls for a public inquiry into police conduct…Police shoved Rosa May Billinghurst, a disabled suffragette who campaigned from a wheelchair, into a side road, assaulted her and stole the valves from her wheels, leaving her stranded." Holmes, Rachel, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), pp.259–60.

[100] Hurtado, Aida, 'Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Colour', Signs 14, no.4 (summer, 833-55. Quoted in Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2003), p.51.

[101] Amos, Valerie, and Parmar, Pratibha, 'Challenging Imperial Feminism' (1983), republished in Morgan, Sue (ed.), *The Feminist History Reader*, (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.284–94.

gender non-conforming people.[102] It is for these reasons that some women of colour involved in the struggle for gender equality have historically avoided the use of the word 'feminism' altogether – which can be a contested term – opting for alternative expressions such as 'womanism', a term first coined by African American author Alice Walker[103]. The working-class women who led the strikes in Hull and Dagenham that I mentioned to you in my last letter, dear reader, did not describe themselves as feminists, although their struggles are written into feminist history by socialist feminist historians. Neither did many of the women that I met in the community organisations that I worked with (who seemed to find the term overly academic), although I read their practices through a feminist lens.

Amos and Parmar also point out that the majority of nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminists were pro-imperialist, stating that, "The 'herstory' which white woman use to trace the roots of women's oppression or to justify some form of political practice is an imperial history rooted in the prejudices of colonial and neo-colonial periods." Christabel Pankhurst (older sister to Sylvia), one of the founders of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) which was the main militant suffragette organisation, expressed an interest in upholding white supremacy, as she "echoed her agreement with the growing eugenic lobby when she said, 'sex powers are given … as a trust to be used not for … immorality and debauchery, but … reverently and in a union based on love for the purpose of carrying on the *race*'." The italics are Amos' and Parmar's.

As I mentioned in my last letter, in contrast with her sister, the socialist feminist Sylvia Pankhurst saw the connections between anti-imperialism, issues of gender inequality, and class struggle, and was expelled from the WSPU because of that. It speaks volumes that the activists that I met from the East London based group Focus E15 (who largely come from working-class backgrounds), told me that they don't vote as they don't believe that this system represents working-class people, as I recorded in my book *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Divide Us* (2020). From this I infer that the struggle for votes for women is not the aspect of Sylvia Pankhurst's activism that they had in mind, when they named their community space Sylvia's Corner. In our conversations the contemporary activist groups that I met through my research, all seemed to find a wealth of interesting tactics and approaches to community organising, activism, education, and culture within this history, that still feel relevant today. My guess is that this is precisely because the ELFS campaigned on a wide range of issues and, unlike the Women's Social and Political Union from whom they split, were not narrowly focussed on winning votes for women.

Sylvia Pankhurst herself later turned away from suffrage politics. According to Barbara Winslow, in an article in The Worker's Dreadnought titled 'The Datum Line', Pankhurst "reiterated her belief that Parliament was "part of the oppressive machinery of the bourgeois state." She further argued that it was the duty of revolutionaries to destroy Parliament and, as William Morris had suggested in *News from Nowhere* (1890), to turn the buildings into storehouses for manure."[104]

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[102] The 'Lavender Menace' was a phrase coined in 1969 by American feminist Betty Friedan, who claimed that outspoken lesbians were a threat to Women's Liberation and that stereotypes of 'mannish' and 'man-hating' lesbians would provide an easy way to dismiss the movement. Friedan was famous in the USA as the author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and a leader of the National Organization for Women (NOW). In response to their homophobic exclusion from the American feminist movement, lesbian members of NOW, who were also involved in the Gay Liberation Front, resigned and started a group called the Lavender Menace in 1970.

[103] In her work: Walker, Alice, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

[104] Winslow, Barbara, *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.127.

But, you may ask, why write to you about the suffragettes at all? In her book *Feminist Afterlives: Assemblage Memory in Activist Times* (2018)[105], memory studies scholar Red Chidgey gives many examples of how the memories and mythologies of the suffragette movement continually reappear in the present; for example, at political protests, in memes, popular films such as *Suffragette* (2015)[106], state sponsored heritage events, the opening ceremony of the Olympics held in Britain in 2012 which was created by film director Danny Boyle, and even art projects. This includes my own artworks about the suffragette attacks on art works made in collaboration with Hester Reeve at The Women's Library, London, in 2010 – which was the first project that I made reflecting on suffragette history and led to me starting this PhD research project in 2012.

According to Chidgey, "The first day in office of the Trump administration in January 2017 was met with Women's marches in 82 countries globally…Traces of feminist memory appeared playfully throughout the protests. UK protestors dressed as suffragettes carrying signs stating, 'I didn't time travel for this shit' and 'Different century, same shit'."[107] Chidgey points out that in many ways the Edwardian campaign for votes for women is a highly anachronistic legacy for today's political struggles. Yet, the suffragette movement was one of the first movements to skilfully make use of the mass media – whose ecology at the time included newsreel and photography – by staging highly dramatic images of protest that still circulate today. She argues that "The resultant memory images and stories are contestable; providing less of a truth-index to what historically was, and more a fault-line to understanding what these pasts might means for constituencies in the present."[108]

Chidgey reminds us that "memory processes are driven primarily through the imagination and affect rather than through a sharp sense of historical fidelity".[109] Although she adds, "What appears to have failed to transmit in popular, mediated and historical memory more broadly, were mediations of the (anti-) imperial trajectories of this time, and of women of colour's own historical agency within the making of modern Britain, and of transnational histories for campaigning for women's suffrage across the British Empire."[110] This important point is another reason why I prioritised including a diverse group of women in my attempt to 'rewrite' British suffragette history through my project *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us*, including working-class women, many of whom are racialised and have origins in the Global South.

Though contested, the legacy of the suffragettes does not go away. Activist groups ranging from Greenham Common in the 1980s to Extinction Rebellion today, refer to the militant suffragette movement as a means of justifying their 'right to revolt', whereas in governmental realms, according to Chidgey, "legacies of the right to vote, rather than revolt, are articulated"[111]. The suffragette movement looms large in the British national and political imagination, which is why, dear reader, I have spent so much time with this particular historical moment, critiquing the ways in which it is being remembered and pointing out what and who has been left out of the (her)story.

Today when suffragette history is being celebrated, there are aspects of it that are ignored as inconvenient – as Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar point out – such as the imperialist attitudes and racist ideologies that were present in much of the movement. Red Chidgey, in the chapter of her

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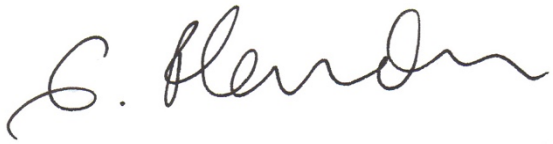
[105] Chidgey, Red, *Feminist Afterlives: Assemblage Memory in Activist Times* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
[106] *Suffragette*, directed by Sarah Gavron, released 2015.
[107] Chidgey, Red, *Feminist Afterlives: Assemblage Memory in Activist Times* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.27.
[108] Ibid, p.47.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid, p.104.
[111] Ibid, p.8.

book titled 'Embodiment as a Technique of Protest Memory', rightly mentions that in a recorded interview that she made with Hester Reeve and myself in 2011 – about our collaborative work on suffragette attacks on artworks, shown at The Women's Library, London, in 2010 – we failed to mention Mary Richardson's later involvement with the British fascist party[112]. Instead, we focus on her celebrated attack, in 1914, on the Velázquez painting of Venus in London's National Gallery when Richardson was still a part of the suffragette movement. This is a critique that I took on in the subsequent projects that make up this PhD, along with Chidgey's questions: "What would a feminist memory of tactics, networks and solidarities look like? How can these memory practices be materialised, imaginatively and commemoratively, beyond the realm of an individual-based commemorative statue? The key question would be how to de-territorialise political memories from actors to acts, thus encouraging a new set of political imaginaries to unfold."[113]

I have set out to revisit what Chidgey calls the "multitude of artefacts, traces, expressions and potentials"[114] left behind by the suffragette movement with diverse groups of activist women, and in particular those that reveal something of the suffragette's approach to my own fields of art and education. My intention has been, in part, to understand which of their "acts" or *practices* might still be put to use by artists and educators such as myself, in the work of imagining a different and more socially just future together. In my next letter, dear reader, I would like to go further into some historiographic questions and ask how we can narrate a feminist history in ways that reflect the politics of the subject matter?

In sisterhood and solidarity



Olivia Plender

[112] Ibid, pp.105–110.
[113] Ibid, p.112.
[114] Ibid, p.49.

1 August 2023
Stockholm

Dear reader,

I would like to ask you to imagine what feminist history might look like if we drop the image of the waves? In Britain and the USA, as well as Sweden, feminist history is often described using the figurative description of a first wave, which was focussed on the struggle for votes for women in the early twentieth-century, and a second wave that began with the Women's Liberation Movement in the late 1960s and 70s. As I have described in my previous letters, I learnt that this narrative structure emphasises those aspects of feminist struggle that are most important to white middle-class western women, such as the fight for the vote, and it leaves out important connections between different political struggles, such as prejudice against women on the grounds of race or other forms of discrimination, for example, sexuality and disability. It also obscures the relation between women's campaigns for equal rights and labour struggles – something which socialist feminist historians such as Sheila Rowbotham in the UK have worked hard to amend.

Within feminist approaches to history writing, what strategies can we find to represent the complexity of intersecting experiences of discrimination? How can we avoid falling into a traditional linear narrative structure when telling this story, and hint at the subjective ways in which people live actual events? In recorded speech, such as oral histories, subjects can contradict themselves and misremember things. A story recounted out load can sound less like a monolithic historical truth and makes us, the listener, far more attentive to the perspective from which the narrator speaks. In her introduction to the book *Sisterhood and After* (2021) Margaretta Jolly says she builds "on poststructuralist theorists such as Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli, and feminist oral history as a branch of memory studies that attempts to put the politics of speaking and listening at its centre."[115] Jolly invokes "oral history's strength as a creative method", because in conversation people express thoughts and feelings that are hard to articulate, in the tone of their voice or a meaningful pause, which we cannot hear when words are transposed onto a page, as mine are now.

We learn about the potential difficulties of intergenerational relations between women, from the sound of the weary sigh Gail Lewis expels when she starts to talk about her own mother in her interview for the oral history project initiated by the British Library, on which the book *Sisterhood and After* is based. We get a sense of the emotional cost of political struggle, or the intimacies that go on behind the scenes, if we listen out for the nuances in recorded testimony. An accent can reveal something of a person's background. Relationships, whether friendship, familial or romantic in nature, and the complex feelings that they entail are often at the heart of social movements, but this valuable knowledge is often overlooked as irrelevant to the historical record.

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[115] Jolly, Margaretta*, Sisterhood and After: An Oral History of the UK Women's Liberation Movement*, 1968-present (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p.5.

In the introduction to *Striking A Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and their place in History* (2011), by historian Louise Raw, Sheila Rowbotham talks about how feminist historians "have been particularly aware of the relevance of personal networks in enabling women to take public action"[116]. In contexts where females do not have equal access to power and resources, solidarity between women can create such possibilities. In my work I have attempted to move away from a story comprised of heroic individuals and situate the suffragettes such as Sylvia Pankhurst in their social contexts; to expose, through my aesthetic strategies, some of the fabric of how personal networks function in female-led activist groups, both in the past and present.

Louise Raw describes a tendency to regard women, and particularly working-class women, as passive and in need of rescuing from their circumstances – resulting in narratives which are "locked in an old-fashioned story of the great Individuals helping The Poor."[117] In the case of the female workforce at the Bryant and May match factory in Bow, East London, who were the subject of her study, this has resulted in much repetition of the story that it was the middle-class journalist and social reformer Annie Besant, who led them out on strike in 1888. Approximately twenty-five years later, when the streets of Bow were once more filled with protests, the East London Federation of the Suffragettes were, however, carrying on a long existing tradition within that neighbourhood of female-led community organising and activism.

The famous events of the Bryant and May match women's strike are usually one of the few examples of female industrial action to appear in British labour histories. Based on her own knowledge of the kind of communities that would have been involved, as someone from a working-class background with personal experience as a trade unionist, Louise Raw found the version of events in which Besant led the match women's strike un-credible: "Without my own experiences, both in and outside the workplace, my research would never have begun… Without personal experience of strikes from the workers perspective, I would probably never have questioned the orthodox history of the matchwomen… Throughout the years I found more and more conclusive proof that Besant did not lead, and actually couldn't have led, the strike… I wanted to go further than this, however: to somehow get closer to the matchwomen's own perspective on events. There were no known autobiographical accounts, and the participants are long dead, which presented me with what academics call a 'methodological problem'."[118]

Louise Raw solved this 'methodological problem' by adopting an approach which would seem suspicious to many historians, because of academic claims of objectivity. She filled in gaps in the archives by conducting oral history interviews with the descendants of the former matchwomen, to hear what they had learnt from grandmothers and great aunts about these events. However, relying on the descendants of historical figures to tell their stories accurately is not without its problems. I have been informed anecdotally by fellow researchers that sometimes it is the family members of suffragettes – who today may potentially withhold the rights to reproduce photos, letters and documents – who resist any mention of the same sex relationships that many suffragette women were involved in. We are therefore left with hints and stories of gender non-conforming elderly aunts who were radical in their youth in the Edwardian period, but 'sadly' never married.

For the artist, filmmaker, or writer of literature there is no such 'methodological problem' as outlined by Louise Raw, as we do not labour under the same obligation to verity as the historian. Where there is an absence in the recorded historical narrative, we can either fill in the holes with our

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[116] Rowbotham, Sheila, in foreword to: Raw, Louise, *Striking A Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and their place in History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).
[117] Raw, Louise, *Striking A Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and their place in History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), p.5.
[118] Ibid, p.1.

imaginations, engaging in what scholar Saidiya V. Hartman might call "critical fabulation"[119], or point to the gaps in the story, trace their outline and question why they might be there. When Nobel Prize winning Nigerian author Chinua Achebe wrote the history of the colonization of his own country from an African perspective, as opposed to the European colonizer's view, he chose to do it in fictional form in novels such as *Things Fall Apart* (1958) set in nineteenth-century Nigeria. He has described how he turned to fiction, because the very rules of what counts as legitimate history were written by the colonizers and the insistence on 'objective' truth telling excludes non-western oral traditions[120].

In his sculpture series *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007–ongoing), the American Iraqi artist Michael Rakowitz meticulously recreates many of the 8000 artefacts, statues and objects looted from the National Museum of Iraq following the 2003 American invasion. He reconstructs the lost cultural heritage of the Middle East – which he says has disappeared largely as the result of America's disastrous foreign policy – out of everyday commodities, important to (now displaced) Iraqi communities, such as the brightly coloured cans in which dates are sold. By doing so, he says, he does not attempt to fill in the hole left in history by the destruction of these artefacts, but rather to draw attention to their 'ghosts' and to the loss itself[121].

History it seems is full of such ghosts, who whisper to us of trauma and loss, of people and their artefacts, which at worst have been deliberately destroyed to serve the interests of the powerful; or at best, were considered unimportant by those in power and their stories therefore unworthy of preservation in archives or museums. Though the metaphor of the ghost has been brilliantly used in relation to history by Rakowitz when describing his project, as well as others such as sociologist Avery F. Gordon in her book *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008)[122], it does not entirely serve my purpose here. A phantom perhaps has too faint an outline for the historical women that I wish to speak of, as I am trying to describe to you how lively they were. I want to tell you about their vitality and sense of agency, by getting closer to the desires, affective ties, the friendships, and relationships that underpin their actions.

With the emotional and sometimes financial support of their female comrades, many suffragettes were able to eschew traditional family structures and the time-consuming responsibilities of marriage and children, to fully participate in the movement. I want you to know of the passion that must have existed between women such as the social reformers and suffragists Esther Roper and Eva Gore-Booth who founded the journal Urania, the love whose romantic nature is sometimes hinted at in the historical record and rich friendships, whether platonic or otherwise, that must have existed between women within the suffragette movement. As Rowbotham indicates, when she talks about "the relevance of personal networks in enabling women to take public action"[123], friendship is an important part of what makes political change possible.

Arguably some of the misrepresentation of the struggle for the vote, began with those veterans of the movement who originally controlled how these histories were being narrated. According to Red

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[119] The concept of 'critical fabulation' is elaborated by Saidiya V. Hartman in her essay 'Venus in Two Acts' (Durham: Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism/ Duke University Press, 2008).
[120] Said, Edward W., *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp.91, 200, 284, 331, 335, 372–3.
[121] In his lecture at Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design, Stockholm on 19 September 2019, which can be found here: https://www.konstfack.se/sv/Aktuellt/Department-of-Art-Public-Lecture--Artist-Talk-Series/
[122] Gordon, Avery F., *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[123] Rowbotham, Sheila, in foreword to: Raw, Louise, *Striking A Light: The Bryant and May Matchwomen and their place in History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

Chidgey in her book *Feminist Afterlives: Assemblage Memory in Activist Times* (2018), "the memorial group of the Suffragette Fellowship, made up of WSPU and Women's Freedom League (WFL) members, and in operation from 1926 to the 1970s, has had an incredible influence on cultural productions of women's suffrage movement memory in the aftermath of the campaign. To name but one example of the Fellowship's influence, this group acted as consultants to the BBC – one of the largest purveyors of cultural heritage in the UK – on suffrage content, even managing to block programmes from being made when they felt that the militant suffragettes were not adequately represented."[124]

In later life the Women's Social and Political Union leader Christabel Pankhurst went on to earn her living as a Baptist evangelical preacher, which historian Martin Pugh speculates might be why she may have wanted to downplay her once close 'friendship' with Esther Roper and Eva Gore-Booth, the founders of the Urania journal. In his book on the Pankhurst family, Pugh states that, "Christabel's private life has always been rather obscure. In her own autobiography she passes over this formative phase in a surprisingly perfunctory fashion, referring to 'Miss Roper' and 'Miss Gore-Booth' in a way that seems almost calculated to misrepresent the depth of feeling that had once existed between them… Christabel may well have felt a little embarrassed by the possibility that Eva and Esther were themselves not simply close colleagues but were in love with one another, and that in befriending the 21-year-old Christabel they were drawing her into the relationship. However, one should resist the temptation to project the late twentieth-century's perceptions back to the late Victorian era. It would be wrong to assume that such relationships were necessarily lesbian ones… In the case of Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper, their biographer concludes that there was nothing physical in their friendship."[125]

When reading his words, I am led to wonder whether Martin Pugh has actually done any primary research in archives, or has instead relied solely on secondary sources, such as the biography by Gifford Lewis published in 1988[126] that he refers to here. Playing into nineteenth-century fantasies of 'ladies' as innately chaste – pure angels who merely tolerate sex to satisfy men's brute nature – Pugh, it seems, would rather deny females any sexual feelings at all than acknowledge that they may be involved with each other. He adds that, "In many cases sex was not a particularly important element in lives that were filled with a full range of interests, political causes and friendships."[127] I would question how he could possibly know something so intimate, with the confident certainty that is implied here. For anyone that has visited either The Women's Library, in London, or the Glasgow Women's Library, and read Urania, edited by Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper between 1915–1940 (along with Thomas Baty, also known as Irene Clyde), it seems absurd to suggest that their life-long partnership did not involve sex[128]. They were, after all, eventually buried together in a single grave, laid to rest at the end of their lives under a stone engraved with a quote from Sappho[129]. One glance through the pages of Urania, makes it impossible to suppose that they could have misunderstood

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[124] Chidgey, Red, *Feminist Afterlives: Assemblage Memory in Activist Times* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p.72.

[125] Pugh, Martin, *The Pankhursts: The History of One Radical Family* (London: Vintage, 2008), pp.92–94.

[126] Gifford Lewis, *Eva Gore-Booth and Esther Roper: A Biography* (Lewes: Rivers Oram Press, 1988), quoted in Pugh, Martin, *The Pankhursts: The History of One Radical Family* (London: Vintage, 2008).

[127] Pugh, Martin, *The Pankhursts: The History of One Radical Family* (London: Vintage, 2008), p.94.

[128] Although they are unlikely to have referred to themselves as lesbians, it not being a term that was in wide use at the time. They were far more likely to have described themselves as Uranians, which was widely known as a synonym for homosexual in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, having been coined by the sexual reformer, socialist and feminist Edward Carpenter. He referred to himself and his partner George Merril as Uranian Comrades. See: Rowbotham, Sheila, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love* (London & Brooklyn, NY: Verso 2008).

[129] Sappho was an Ancient Greek poet from the island of Lesbos. See: Hamer, Emily, *Britannia's Glory, A History of Twentieth-Century Lesbians* (London & New York, Cassell, 1996), pp.73–4.

the full symbolic and sexual significance of that. Nevertheless, historians such as Pugh continue to insist that there was nothing 'queer' about the campaign for women's suffrage in Britain.

To quote Martha Vicinus's essay, *Lesbian History: All theory and no facts or all facts and no theory?* (1994): "Every lesbian has an anecdote about someone – often a family member or teacher – who failed to recognize what was going on between her and a best friend. But perhaps this was not a failure to know, but a refusal to know. Knowing – recognizing a woman's sexual autonomy – may be simply too threatening. I want to suggest that lesbianism can be everywhere without being mentioned; the sustained withholding of the name can actually be the very mechanism that reinforces its existence as a defined sexual practice. In effect, we have what was unnamed in the past and our own reluctance to name that past; this determined ignorance reinforces homophobia and impoverishes both lesbian history and the writing of history itself."[130]

In 2016 when I noticed that the British Library in London were advertising a two-day course titled Introduction to Oral History (run jointly by a department called National Life Stories together with the Oral History Society) I decided to enrol. My first recorded interview using the basic Oral History techniques that I learnt, was with a woman named Carry Gorney who had been a part of the Community Arts movement in the 1960s and 70s in the UK. My aim in speaking to Gorney was to ask her about the methods that she had employed during that movement when collaborating with community groups. I particularly wanted to talk to her about the projects that she made together with women in the city of Milton Keynes, UK, in the 1970s. We met in a quiet café in Kentish Town, London, in the early evening, and, dear reader, I immediately found her to be a warm and friendly presence; characteristics which are not insignificant when it comes to working in communities. As I have argued previously, knowing how to put people at ease is an undervalued and complex skill – to build trust with groups, create a sense of hospitality and a creative atmosphere where people are open to collaboration. When I asked Gorney about this she replied, *"*I like people's stories… I listen much more than I talk. I like listening. I like making connections between people, and I was probably always good at that. Sounds like you are too…being open and making people know that you are very present…you've got to be absolutely there with people."

During our conversation she explained how she had gotten involved with the Community Arts movement having graduated from a drama degree at Manchester University in 1966 and become disillusioned with the world of theatre. She came to London in 1968 and initially participated in happenings at the Drury Lane Arts Lab[131]. Moving backwards and forwards between Leeds and London, because of what she described as "relationships of my heart", Carry Gorney set up an organisation called Interplay in 1972 and later joined Inter-Action, which started as "half a dozen people in a shop front on Chalk Farm Road [in London] ... We had to clean the dog shit away when we did the game sessions with the local kids. The office was upstairs, and we slept there. There was a smaller office, and we took it in turns to sleep in it if we wanted privacy with someone we were sleeping with."

In the 1970s Inter-Action was one of the highest profile Community Arts organisations in the UK, bringing together community workers and people with a variety of skills within the arts – from theatre to education, architecture and video. It started in various squats and venues in London, having been founded in 1968 by Ed Berman, interweaving theatre and community work in order to bring about social change. In practice it was run as a cooperative within a charitable framework and the community arts workers also lived collectively. By 1977 Inter-Action moved into a purpose-built

[130] Vicinus, Martha, 'Lesbian History: All theory and no facts or all facts and no theory?', *republished in Morgan, Sue (ed.), The Feminist History Reader (Oxford & New York: Routledge, 2006).*

[131] The Drury Lane Arts Lab existed from 1967–9, in London, as an alternative centre for arts and culture. Despite being short lived it influenced a whole movement of independent Arts Labs in cities around the UK.

building in London's Kentish Town, designed by architect Cedric Price to be flexible and expandable. Activities there included street theatre; community festivals; making video, print, and radio media locally accessible; designing and building playgrounds with kids; self-help gardening clubs; summer sports clubs; a community architecture service; as well as establishing the first City Farm in Europe, among numerous other projects. Servicing all this was a community resource centre, which exemplified their ethos of putting the creative tools into the hands of local communities. In 1985 Inter-Action divided into Interchange and Inter-Action Social Enterprise Trust.

Art historian Claire Bishop provides a definition of the Community Arts movement in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012): "[T]he recurrent characteristics of the movement can be summarised as follows: it was positioned against the hierarchies of the international art world and its criteria of success founded upon quality, skill, virtuosity, etc., since these conceal class interests; it advocated participation and co-authorship of works of art; it aimed to give shape to the creativity of all sectors of society, but especially to people living in areas of social, cultural and financial deprivation; for some, it was also a powerful medium for social and political change, providing the blueprint for a participatory democracy… In the UK, the first community arts groups were formed in the late 1960s: professional artists took equal roles alongside members of the community in the collaborative production of a politicised artistic project: murals, street theatre, festivals, film and video collectives, etc. For many organisations, the collectivist ethos extended into squatting, communes and a self-sufficient lifestyle."[132]

Having retrained in later life as a psychotherapist, today Gorney wonders what the emotional motivation was for this way of living and working. This is a question that I have also asked myself, because through experiences such as the Group Relations Conference at the Tavistock (described in my earlier letter), I have come to realise that this kind of self-awareness is necessary when working in group settings. It's lack will affect one's ability to work successfully with other people. Carry Gorney told me that, "There are psychological reasons: I come from a refugee family and people who felt they were outsiders and the way they found their own expression was by…doing things together, my father did music. That helped them hold onto a part of themselves that had been wrecked… It goes back to what my personal reasons were for engaging in communities of people who were always on the outside and didn't fit in easily, didn't know how to fit in… [For example] why are these kids not coming to this [art] centre? There is a main road. Why has nobody thought of that? You don't ask them to come to the centre across the road, you push a cart with art materials to their street… asking what is preventing these people from engaging with [art and culture] … and most of all with each other and their sense of themselves… I became a group worker and interested in group processes of different age groups, including adults."

Gorney worked part time as a teacher during much of that period. In the 1970s, she said, "You could supply-teach two days a week and earn enough money to live on and hang out in some squat somewhere and that was all you needed to do." It was clear from our conversation that it was, in part, the economic conditions of the time that made it possible for community artists to work in such an ideologically uncompromising way, in particular the abundance of cheap housing, unlike contemporary Britain (as well as many other countries today including Sweden). The low cost of living made it possible for members of Inter-Action to live on very minimal incomes and use their time how they chose. In my conversation with Carry Gorney, like the interview with artist David Harding described in my last letter, I was inspired by the Community Arts ethos of spending years working within the same communities, rather than packing up and moving on with the completion of each project. But such long timescales are rarely supported by mainstream art institutions, and only became financially possible for me once I had access to research funding through my role as a

[132] Bishop, Claire, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London, New York: Verso, 2012), pp.177–191.

PhD candidate. My position working within the Royal Institute of Art and an academic system provided me with five years of paid employment, which included the right to sick pay, a yearly allowance for health-related activities such as gym membership,[133] a computer, a phone and holiday pay. These are exceptionally privileged conditions in which to produce art and far from the norm.

When I asked Gorney about the living and working conditions within Inter-Action, she said: "We moved very fast. We had three parts to the day in Inter-Action. You were supposed to do admin in the evening and have the day doing stuff in the community. We did that for years, and in the end I collapsed…no reflection time. Nothing. You were in action all the time… What was making people run at that speed? And not take time for themselves and reflect… I wanted to be left alone sometimes. I couldn't do the whole communal stuff… [But] I did some experiments in collective living, and collective property and possessions."

In response to the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement in the early 1970s, according to Gorney, at Inter-Action there was "a lot of interesting legislation around childcare and supporting people and women. A friend of mine set up a women's group and we met weekly at lunch time." However, she said, "The leaders of the movements are charismatic males. Then the women are the handmaidens and don't take ownership over their own skills and experience… I think I was the only woman in Inter-Action for a number of years who led a procession on the streets with a loudspeaker. It was the men who were in front, and the women were still looking pretty."

Experiences such as this led Carry Gorney to move to the new town of Milton Keynes, from 1976 until 1979 – at the invitation of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation – and set up her own project working with working-class women on projects that addressed their day-to-day issues. Like the town of Glenrothes in Scotland which Harding described, in this newly built city, according to Gorney, "There were isolated housing estates in the middle of nowhere and no city centre. They wanted us to create an identity, create a community."[134] Milton Keynes is characterised by modernist architecture and roadways constructed on a grid pattern. When people arrived in their new homes, it was still under construction, lacking urban infrastructure such as a bus service or even a hospital. The city had been centrally planned, apparently without considering the needs of women. As they described in the television programme *Things That Mother Never Told Us*, broadcast on a community cable TV channel, titled Channel 40, circa 1978[135], the women that Gorney met often lacked access to a vehicle. Many of them were married and experiencing isolation and loneliness, as they were stuck at home during the daytimes taking care of small children while their husbands went out to work.

On the front cover of their book *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment* – an influential feminist intervention in the field of architecture first published in 1984 – Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative introduce their ideas with a black and white photograph of a woman struggling to carry a baby in a pushchair up a set of stairs. Though the infant looks comfortable enough, signs of physical strain are visible in the woman's posture and on her face, from bearing the weight of both the child and their pram. She is seen from above, as she passes a graffiti sprayed wall and attempts

[133] Friskvård in Swedish.

[134] For more information on the Community Arts movement in Milton Keynes see my interview, 'Olivia Plender in Conversation with Chris Crickmay, David Harding and Susan C. Triesman' in: Plender, Olivia & van Noord, Gerrie (eds.), *Rise Early, Be Industrious*, (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016), pp.75–94.

[135] See: Gorney, Carry, *Things That Mother Never Told Us*, circa 1978, London Community Video Archive, which can be viewed at: https://the-lcva.co.uk/videos/594bb0ac0609e223a0d38a64

to climb the hard concrete stairs. Grime collects in its corners, which suggests the presence of pollution and the smell of car exhaust characteristic of modern urban environments.[136]

Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative was an architectural collective made up of women from multi-racial backgrounds, active in Britain in the 1980s and 90s. Influenced by the feminist movement and the growing critique at that time of modern architecture and town planning, such as that found in Milton Keynes, Matrix asks the question: who is the public space designed for? In the words of Matrix member Jos Boys, "our man-made surroundings lack consideration for the less mobile – people in wheelchairs or using sticks, women carrying heavy loads of shopping or pushing prams or pushchairs over kerbs, old people negotiating a high step onto a bus – and for small children…That this is [designed for] a male, white, middle-class 'norm' (look at almost any cross-section of car drivers during rush hour) is ignored by the makers of our physical surroundings."[137]

Founded in 1980 by a group of women who had been active in the New Architecture Movement (NAM), through their architectural practice and projects Matrix attempted to lay bare the assumptions built into the 'man-made' environments that we inhabit. Critical of the usual way of doing things within the male dominated field – 95% of architects in Britain at that time were men – they argued that women played almost no role in decision making about the environments in which they lived, leading to cities that did not accommodate women's needs and were often unsafe for them. Subsequently, Matrix attempted to break down the discriminatory barriers that limited women from entering the professions of architecture and the building trade.

They asked critical questions about the restrictive social roles defined for women, arguing that the layout of cities and housing interiors are based on an idea of a gendered division of labour, tying women to unpaid caring roles in the domestic sphere and isolating them from the public world, which from my conversation with Gorney appears to be what had happened in Milton Keynes. Centring the needs of the users of buildings and urban spaces in their designs, Matrix collaborated with women's community groups on architecture projects that prioritised more childcare facilities, disabled access, as well as the specific cultural needs of women from ethnic minorities. For example, the Jagonari Asian Women's Education Centre, in the ethnically diverse neighbourhood of Whitechapel in East London, which was commissioned by a group of women of mixed Asian origin and completed in 1987.

The photograph that I have described above – from a series documenting what Matrix called 'urban obstacle courses' reproduced in *Making Space* – is evidence that the architect's vision for this modern public space did not include women and children. In more ways than one it is a hostile environment for anyone who does not conform to the male, white, middle-class and, we could add, able-bodied 'norm' underpinning the architects design choices. In their book Matrix argued that the street plans characteristic of much modern development – which often incorporated a dark subway underneath a busy road – also ignore the reality that many women feel unsafe in such places. The design of cities limits access for many, in ways that can be isolating and have the potential to damage both physical health and mental well-being, affecting the most intimate areas of people's private lives.

It is a well-documented fact that a larger proportion of women suffer from chronic health conditions than men, despite living longer on average. This is for a complex set of reasons – according to Caroline Criado Perez in her book *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (2019) – that include: unequal funding for medical research into the health problems suffered by

[136] Matrix, *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment* (first published London: Pluto Press, 1984, reissued London: Verso, 2022).
[137] Ibid, p.41.

women as opposed to those men live with; the difficulty that many women have in getting a diagnosis, including negative experiences such as doctors dismissing the severity of pain or suggesting that symptoms are 'all in your head'; as well as the physical and mental burden that unpaid care work places on women.[138] Statistically, according to Criado Perez, the risk of chronic health problems is increased for working-class women and women of colour.

In Milton Keynes, Gorney set up projects with women to build social cohesion and enable them to articulate their needs. She started by doing activities oriented towards children and focussed on play, but influenced by the ideas of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich's book *De-schooling Society* (1971), she wanted to find ways to put creative tools into the hands of the women, "breaking down and disseminating the skills into the communities as quickly as you could" and removing the necessity for a facilitator such as herself, so that, in her words, "they could do it for themselves." In 1977 she made a project called *Sweet Sixteen* to bring people of different age groups together, as a form of oral history, where children under sixteen would interview people who were over sixteen. She said, "We did it street by street. The kids interviewed, they used video, they filmed in people's houses, they made newspapers. We had those Gestetner duplicators on the street corner." Subsequently she worked with women from Milton Keynes to create television programmes for the community cable TV channel, Channel 40, which was broadcast locally. The experience built the women's confidence in their own abilities and, Gorney said, "They made a series of programmes about maternity facilities, or home-school link, or infant education. But the interesting programmes were when they talked. For them that was most interesting as they had never thought they could talk as articulately as that neighbour. Playing that back to them, they'd say, "Hey I sound great.""[139]

In my conversation with Carry Gorney, I noticed that when I restricted myself to the role of the interviewer, revealing little of myself, it seemed to make her uncomfortable. It was only when I started sharing my own stories and telling her about myself and my own projects – in a way that enabled her to position me, understand what kind of person I might be, read my political commitments, and find experiences in common – that she was able to open up. Consequently, when I facilitated the meetings that were part of my project *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us* I brought my own experience with me and openly shared with the women my personal motivations for being interested in these topics, and some of my own vulnerabilities such as experiences of housing precarity and chronic illness. In 2013 I became ill with a virus that left me with a variety of post-viral problems, that included losing my voice for a year – which I have talked about publicly through my sound installation *Learning to Speak Sense* (2015) – but also chronic fatigue, and more embarrassingly irritable bowel syndrome, which I have not.

In her essay 'Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities' (2001), disability studies scholar Susan Wendell describes an experience that is all too familiar to me: "Fatigue is one of the most common and misunderstood impairments of chronic illness. The fatigue of illness is different in three critical respects from the ordinary fatigue experienced by healthy people: it is more debilitating, it lasts longer, and it is less predictable. Every activity, including thinking, watching, listening, speaking, and eating, requires energy. It is possible to be too fatigued to do any of these. Anyone who has had severe influenza may recall being too fatigued to have a conversation, to follow a simple story, or to make a decision. That experience of fatigue is closer to the fatigue of MS, rheumatoid arthritis, fibromyalgia, depression, or ME/CFIDS than the fatigue of a healthy person at the end of a hard day. A good night's sleep rarely cures the profound fatigue of illness; it may last for days or weeks with no apparent improvement, or it may fluctuate, allowing some activity punctuated by periods of total exhaustion. And unlike the fatigue of influenza, which will gradually

[138] Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (London: Vintage, 2019), p.X1–X11.
[139] See: Gorney, Carry, *Things That Mother Never Told Us*, circa 1978.

improve as one's body recovers from infection, the fatigue of chronic illness is unpredictable. It may appear first thing in the morning on the tenth day of a restful vacation or in the middle of an energetic day's work. Reasonable precautions may help to prevent it, but it resists control."[140]

Having health problems is one of the main material conditions to have shaped my life and work in the last decade, and it has dictated the way in which I have worked on the artistic and research projects documented here. The furious pace of work at Inter-Action would not be possible for me, or many others – such as older people, those with health problems, disabilities, or care responsibilities – and as Gorney describes, it clearly took a toll on her and those involved. Many of the women that I have met in community spaces live with chronic health conditions, both mental and physical, often brought on by the stress of their circumstances. As I know myself from experience, disability and illness bring with them a great deal of shame, feelings of guilt, as if it is somehow your own fault, as well as economic and social pressure to 'pass' as able bodied.

To quote Susan Wendell again*:* "It is not easy to pin down chronic illness with a definition. Usually, they are understood to be illnesses that do not go away by themselves within six months, that cannot reliably be cured, and that will not kill the patient any time soon."[141] In her text Wendell relays the experiences of a woman who suffers for "more than a year with a painful debilitating condition initially diagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis and then re-diagnosed as viral arthritis. She says that during the time she was ill, she identified with people with disabilities, was constructed as a person with a disability, and inhabited the world of people with disabilities. However, she also experienced a strong pressure to "pass for normal". People minimized her illness, ignored it, denied it, and urged her to get over it… young and middle-aged people with chronic illnesses inhabit a category not easily understood or accepted. We are considered too young to be ill for the rest of our lives, yet we are not expecting cure or recovery. We cannot be granted the time-out that is normally granted to the acutely ill (or we were given it at first and have now used it up, over-used it), yet we seem to refuse to return to pre-illness life… Many of us with chronic illnesses are not obviously disabled, we have to remind people frequently of our needs and limitations... So much depends on that recognition – accommodation of our impairments, inclusion in disability politics, and, of course, our moral reputations… people wonder whether someone whose disability is not obvious is faking or exaggerating it; the trustworthiness of people who claim to be disabled but do not look disabled is always in question."[142]

In the social model of disability, which was developed by disability rights activists in the early 1980s,[143] a distinction is made between 'impairment' (a physical or cognitive limitation for example) and 'disability', which refers to the social and environmental obstacles that exclude and oppress disabled people. Barriers to access can include transportation systems or housing unsuitable for a wheelchair user, but social attitudes to impairment can also create disabling obstacles. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modernity in urban planning went hand in hand with eugenic ideas of 'social hygiene'. The garden city movement founded by British urban planner Ebenezer Howard, which was an influence on the development of New Towns such as Milton Keynes, advocated on one hand for the introduction of trees into the urban environment and on the other for the segregation of impaired people. In the USA cities such as Chicago and San Francisco brought in rules which have retrospectively been termed 'ugly laws' that facilitated the

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[140] Wendell, Susan, 'Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities' in *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis (2013), pp.166–7.
[141] Ibid, p.163.
[142] Ibid, p.164.
[143] A term first used in print by Mike Oliver in 1983, although the idea was developed among disability rights activists prior to that date. See: Shakespeare, Tom, 'The Social Model of Disability', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, Edited by Lennard J. Davis (Routledge, 2013), p.215.

'beautification' of urban public spaces through the removal of beggars and other 'undesirable' bodies from the streets, whose 'deviance' was largely defined in terms of race, class, and disability.[144] Prior to the advent of modern medicine, according to disability studies scholar David Gissen, illness was often seen as being a punishment for individual moral failure. Today those labelled 'defective', 'deviant' or 'sick' can still face discrimination.

'Access intimacy' is a useful term named by disability justice activist and community organiser Mia Mingus, which she uses to describe the feeling of intimacy a person experiences when another person takes the time and care to understand and attempt to accommodate access needs – in contrast to a usually uncaring, or sometimes downright discriminatory world. In her essay, which was published on her blog in 2011 and can be found online[145], Mingus offers 'access intimacy' as a concept that emerged from her own particular lived experience of disability, which she suggests can be useful not only to those with impairment but also to others in order to describe all different kinds of access. It moves beyond a more narrowly defined definition of access, based solely on architectural modifications.

The way in which time is organised in our society – around the demands of work, and the rigid routines and deadlines required by employers – can also be a barrier to access. For disabled people, the chronically ill, and people with care responsibilities for children or the elderly – who are most likely to be women – being on time can be a challenge. You might have noticed that I started this PhD in 2012, over ten years ago, dear reader. This duration has come about partly because of my own residence for many years in 'crip time', due to my chronic illness. In the words of Alison Kafer in her book *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), "As one slang dictionary puts it, "crip time" means both a "flexible standard for punctuality" and "the extra time needed to arrive or to accomplish something." This need for "extra" time might result from a slower gait, a dependency on attendants (who might themselves be running late), malfunctioning equipment (from wheelchairs to hearing aids), a bus driver who refuses to stop for a disabled passenger, or an ableist encounter with a stranger that throws one off schedule. Operating on crip time, then, might be not only about a slower speed of movement but also about ableist barriers over which one has little or no control; in either case, crip time involves an awareness that disabled people might need more time to accomplish something or to arrive somewhere."[146]

Kafer, a scholar from the field of 'crip theory', suggests that experiences of illness and disability challenge normative societal structures. Therefore, they have the potential to teach all of us, including the able bodied, about cultural ideas of independence and self-sufficiency, and topics such as care, interdependence, and our orientation to time, among other things. 'Crip time' is a term that was first used wryly within disability communities and has been taken up by the academic field of 'crip theory', which emerged out of disability studies through the work of scholars such as Robert McRuer. The term 'crip' is a reclamation of the derogatory word 'cripple'. 'Crip' perspectives intersect with 'queer' approaches, to celebrate non-normative bodies.

Bodies and minds that deviate from the so called 'norm', which is usually defined by the members of our society with the most power and privilege, necessitate inventiveness in finding ways to thrive in environments that are indifferent and sometimes hostile to their wellbeing. Ideas such as 'crip time' have the potential to benefit all of us, because the concept demands a temporality that acknowledges human needs. It is a standard of time that is less damaging to health than the

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[144] Gissen, David, *The Architecture of Disability: Buildings, Cities, and Landscapes beyond Access* (University of Minnesota Press, 2022), p.36.
[145] See: https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/ (accessed: 19 September 2024).
[146] Kafer, Alison, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), p.26.

relentlessly productive work regimes characteristic of the factory or office, which appeared with industrial capitalism. 'Crip time' also challenges our value system, in which individual autonomy is prized and a person's worth is measured according to their earning potential. As Kafer argues, experiences of vulnerability and dependence create perspectives that can be valued, leading us to question norms and to develop creative new models for mutual care and community.

Within Crossroads Women's Centre, Sylvia's Corner and many other women's centres and female-led community spaces that I have visited, time unfolds in a manner akin to 'crip time'. People drift in and out, depending on their circumstances, which, as I have mentioned to you dear reader, is something that these spaces accommodate. Many of the women that I met have disabilities and chronic health problems. These include stress induced high blood pressure or mental illness, physical disabilities and health conditions brought on by poor working conditions or low-quality housing. Children may be present when adults are having an important meeting, because of the difficulties involved in accessing affordable childcare. When I was arranging the meetings for my project *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us,* I discovered that it was rare for all the women to be present for a whole session. Their work and care responsibilities, or poor health, often obliged them to arrive late or leave early. This forced me to change my expectation of how time would be organised and question my own sense of frustration, when it is not used 'productively'. For the activist groups that I met, there are outcomes that need to be achieved, campaigns to organise and win, very serious crises such as homelessness, destitution, deportation or imprisonment, loss of income, to be averted; but they also place value on passing time in company, listening, and caring for one another, or eating together. I experienced a great deal of 'access intimacy' first hand in these spaces and have learnt much about inclusiveness from the institutional forms developed by these groups.

Since developing a chronic illness, these community spaces are among the few environments that I have spent time in, in which disability and illness are not treated as shameful or inconvenient. There is an understanding that people have different physical and mental limitations and capacities and may need to take a rest during a meeting, sit in a different chair or make frequent trips to the toilet. In the community spaces, sharing my own experiences helped to build trust and a sense of reciprocity with the women, as it signalled that I was not there to collect stories in a proprietorial way. As I have mentioned in my previous letter to you, dear reader, the aim was not only to put tools into people's hands – as community artists such as Carry Gorney and her colleagues at Inter-Action might have put it – but to engage in mutual education, learn from each other's experience and have an exchange of knowledge. The children present also contributed to the atmosphere of the workshops, noisily playing in the background. At one meeting held at Sylvia's Corner a child, whom I am calling S, even decided to perform one of the characters during a reading of Sylvia Pankhurst's play *Liberty or Death*.

Did you notice, dear reader, that I have used false names for certain people and avoided naming one of the groups that I worked with? This is something that I have considered at length for reasons that I would like to tell you about. Owing to the precarity of many of the women – related to insecure immigration status, for example, or fear of having their children taken away by the authorities – it would not be appropriate to show their faces in an identifiable way in any of the public outcomes of my project. The necessity to avoid creating a situation which might potentially cause the women any harm through my work, was another of the material conditions that dictated many of my artistic and aesthetic choices. For this reason, I decided to record our meetings with sound but not video and make simple line drawings that retained the anonymity of everyone involved. The advantage of working with this medium is that I am still able to show the texture of the situations – the atmospheric details such as the shape that the group assumes (sitting in a circle with a cup of tea in hand), the numbers present and the diversity of the women.

In the book *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us* (2020) that was one of the artistic outcomes of my PhD research, I have changed people's names except where I have received explicit consent to use them, for example, Susan Croft and Nora Connolly who represent their organisation Unfinished Histories. I have also taken out the names of children and anyone who is referred to that was not actually present in a meeting (and who I have therefore not met in person). The difficulty that arises with this approach to representation, is that there is an unevenness to who is named and who is not. By referring to the child who was present in the meetings with Focus E15 simply as S, I risk her being regarded by you, dear reader as if she is lacking in full personhood. You may recall the story told by Jasmin from Focus E15, about the police asking for her child's name at a protest, which tells us why the presence of children at a meeting might be sensitive. However, not naming the child is also an aesthetic decision, as it draws your attention to this sensitivity – the gap that the absence of her name leaves in the story – and I hope that in my drawings I restore the feeling of her being a person.

Though I would not describe the sound installation that I made during this project as oral history, it is loosely inspired by this method. When I embarked on the processes described in these letters, my intention was to return to the three groups with my edit of the sound and any material that I would publish, to get their feedback on how they were being represented. In March 2020, I planned to spend the month in London and start meeting the groups. Instead, the global Covid-19 pandemic happened and so I stayed in Sweden where I am based, unable to travel to the UK for one and a half years. In the intervening time I lost contact with some of the people involved, in particular, the activist group made up of refugees and asylum-seekers. They were presumably engaged with the far more urgent business of staying alive during that terrible time.

Once the worst phase of the pandemic was over and the community spaces where I had been staging meetings opened once more, the coordinator for the activist group of asylum-seekers and refugees had changed. I found myself emailing someone that I did not know, trying to persuade her to grant me access to the women whom I had met previously. For safety reasons, I had never been given their individual email addresses or contact details. The previous coordinator and I had a good relationship. Having participated in my workshops, she had a sense of what my project was about and seemed to find the process meaningful. This is a lesson in how personal relationships are what underpins a successful socially engaged process. When friendships are not maintained, projects can easily fall apart.

However, one thing that I have learnt is that even under 'normal' conditions it can be hard to stay in touch, because many of the women that I have worked with live in precarity. They change addresses frequently and have very uneven access to resources, including the Internet. I have found that the best way to build relationships is to be physically present at the places where they already spend time, which, as I described in my last letter, is the same advice that David Harding gave to his students from the Art and Social Context course at Dartington College in the 1970s and 80s. With the closure of the women's centres and community spaces during 2020 and 2021, when we were advised to 'socially distance' because of the pandemic, this was not possible. Therefore, the project remains to some extent unfinished. With regards to Focus E15 and Crossroads Women's Centre, I had collected participants email addresses and could solicit feedback over email, which was an imperfect method, to say the least, as I reached some but by no means all of them.

Perhaps, dear reader, you would urge me not to use this material under such circumstances and so I would like to explain my reasoning to you. I decided to proceed with the project because I felt that I would be letting the women down, if the sound files from our meetings stayed unused on my hard drive. The groups involved had devoted time and effort to engage with the history of the East London Federation of the Suffragettes. The structures of funding for the project also meant that I

was under obligation to make finished artworks. The workshop process that underpins *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us*, as well as the artistic outcomes of the project including the video work *Hold Hold Fire* (2019), were funded through my PhD at the Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm, and also partly by the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), in London. In my meetings with the groups, I had described how I was planning to use the recorded material from our conversations, where I might exhibit it and what kind of audience this would reach; so I felt relatively confident that the women had a clear idea of what they were giving consent to, when they allowed me to record. However, given the sensitivity of the information that many of the women reveal, I have removed all identifying details unless I have been given explicit permission to include them. I have also taken the decision not to name the activist group of asylum-seekers and refugees, until such time as they have confirmed that they are happy for me to do so.

The initial session with each of the three groups went unrecorded, and I was fearful each time of ruining the atmosphere of trust that we were working hard to build. However, to my surprise, when Lucy Pickering – the professional sound recordist whom I worked with throughout – set up her equipment and began recording, it added a new feeling of purpose to our sessions. The presence of microphones apparently gave the participating women the sense that they were being listened to, that the testimonies they had to share were important and would be heard by people beyond the room where we were sitting. A salient political motivation behind their participation, they told me, was an interest in the injustices that they were experiencing being made known to a wider public. Therefore, despite the paucity of feedback, I felt a responsibility to those who had given up their precious time to be involved, to finish the project as best I could. But in contrast with Carry Gorney in her work with the women in Milton Keynes in the 1970s, I was unable to play back the recordings of our conversations to these women and create that powerful moment of recognition, where the group actually hear themselves articulating their situation.

In autumn 2021 I renewed my attempts to contact all the women that had been involved in my project, prior to a solo exhibition titled *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us*[147] which was held at a feminist project space called The Bower, located in a public park in South London. The show comprised a four-channel sound installation, based on the recordings of our conversations, which filled the small exhibition space. In the piece we hear a montage of female voices describing their daily lives. They detail the return of what seem like nineteenth-century living conditions: the violent effects of the British government's policies of austerity – which have pushed a disproportionate number of women into poverty since the financial crisis of 2008 – and the 'hostile environment', which has fuelled anti-immigrant feelings in the UK. Forced into unpaid care work, or struggling with a punitive benefits system, precarious housing conditions, racism and detention, the women turn to protest. As we hear, the experiences of police intimidation that follow, underlines the violence with which those in power continue to respond to struggles for equal rights. The networks of care and solidarity that they create, enable them to change their situations and challenge the status quo.

Accompanying the women's voices was a series of posters on the walls of the gallery space, showing bold black-and-white slogans based on their words, like newspaper headlines. These include statements such as: "The Benefits System is Like an Abusive Relationship", "Cleaner is a Job Not a Name" and "Shame on You". Shame was a constant theme throughout my conversations with the women participating in my project. Many of them expressed difficult emotions around being made to feel ashamed because of their circumstances; for example: being on welfare or living in poverty and feeling unable to provide their children with a proper home. "Shame on You!" is a phrase that is often shouted at the police at public protests in the UK. I have heard it many times at

[147] See: https://thebower.org.uk/archive/olivia-plender-neither-strivers-nor-skivers/ (accessed 17 October 2024).

demonstrations that I have attended against government austerity measures, as well as for other left-wing political causes. The slogan, used in that context, powerfully reverses the usual order of who has the authority to make someone feel shame.

The Bower published the book *Neither Strivers Nor Skivers, They Will Not Define Us* (2020), with a limited print run, and I was therefore able to send copies to all the groups that had been involved in the project. I invited those participants whose contact details I had, to visit the show and met a few of them there. To a limited extent, I was able to solicit feedback on what I had done with the material and reflect with some of these women, on their experiences of participating in the project. When it came to the activist group of asylum-seekers and refugees, it was their coordinator that I emailed to invite them to come and view the exhibition. However, they did not take me up on my invitation, for reasons that were not explained; despite some correspondence about how I could make it possible for them to attend and my offer to cover travel expenses and provide lunch.

My assumption is that too much time had elapsed for the project to still feel relevant, as they most likely had more urgent things to do with their time. It is also understandable that participants have differing levels of interest in the field of art, although it is important to me as a professional context in which I distribute my artwork and earn my living. To some it is irrelevant to their decision to take part in a socially engaged art project, as there are different things that they may be seeking from the experience. Others might be curious about the context of art, such as those who attended the screening of my video work *Hold Hold Fire* (2019), at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 2022[148], who had participated in its making. At the time of writing to you, dear reader, parts of the project have also been exhibited at the 34th Bienal de São Paulo in 2021, titled *Though it's dark, still I sing*[149], at Amant Foundation, New York (2022)[150], and at Maureen Paley, London (2022)[151].

Pablo Helguera outlines some of the ethical dilemmas that people like me, situated within the field of socially engaged art, can encounter: “downplaying the role of the individual artist, socially engaged art is specifically at odds with the capitalist market infrastructure of the art world: it does not fit well into the traditional collecting practices of contemporary art, and the prevailing cult of the individual artist is problematic for those whose goal is to work with others, generally in collaborative projects with democratic ideals… Yet the uncomfortable position of socially engaged art, identified as art yet located between more conventional art forms and the related disciplines of sociology, politics, and the like, is exactly the position it should inhabit. The practice’s direct links to and conflicts with both art and sociology must be overtly declared and the tension addressed, but not resolved. Socially engaged artists can and should challenge the art market in attempts to redefine the notion of authorship, but to do so they must accept and affirm their existence in the realm of art, as artists… Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines.”[152]

The subjects and problems outside of the field of art that I have attached myself to, in the manner Helguera describes, relate primarily to the disciplines of history and historiography. This is a large part of why I distribute my projects through museums, as well as community spaces and grass roots

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[148] See: https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/issue/october-2022 (accessed 17 October 2024).
[149] See: http://34.bienal.org.br/en/artistas/8732 (accessed 17 October 2024).
[150] See: https://jacobin.com/2022/06/working-class-suffragettes-sylvia-pankhurst-socialist-feminism (accessed 17 October 2024).
[151] See: https://www.frieze.com/article/olivia-plender-feminist-past-review-2022 (accessed 17 October 2024).
[152] Helguera, Pablo, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc., 2011), pp.4–5.

organisations, unlike the Community Arts movement who for ideological reasons worked exclusively with the latter. As I mentioned in my first letter to you, dear reader, museums are one of the sites through which official national history is constructed and as such, I want to be able to intervene in them. Another point of divergence from the Community Arts movement is when it comes to questions of authorship. I retain my name as the individual author of projects, while being careful to credit all collaborators where possible, as that gives me access to the social status of being a 'fine artist' and therefore the funding structures and institutions of the contemporary art world such as museums and art schools.

I have 'read' the history of the East London Federation of the Suffragettes together with the women that I have met in community spaces, largely through their lived experience. Where possible, I have also attempted to speak to you from my own experience and position myself, in these letters, so that you can understand the standpoint from which I am speaking and get some sense of what my blind spots or affective attachments to the topic might be. The reason that I mention some of my friends and family to you is because these ideas and practises are not my personal property, having instead emerged from a social context, and though I have quoted some theoretical sources in my letters to you, I have done so as a kind of genealogy of ideas.

However, this is also part of a normative practice of legitimating what I am saying, by relating it to the existing canon of that which is already considered to be knowledge. Historically, this has rarely included knowledge produced by groups not proximate to power, for example: women, colonised people and the working-classes. Citation can provide a roadmap, naming where certain ideas have come from so that others might follow and make use of them in their own work, but it can also reproduce existing hierarchies and power structures. Those engaged in the urgent fight for social justice rarely have the time to write about what they are doing and, unlike myself, may lack access to an expensive higher education. Their politics are often articulated through their ways of doing things rather than the written word. For example, at the beginning of our interview Carry Gorney commented on how the histories of the Community Arts movement that were published at the time, were not written by those who were involved at grassroots level, saying, "I have reservations about those books, what they say and what they don't say."[153]

Theoretical knowledge is valued far more highly in our society than knowledge based on lived experience, such as that which we find reflected in the subtle practice of making people feel welcome. The story that I told you in my last letter about Angela Y. Davis' visit to the Royal Institute of Art is something like a parable instructing us on the dangers of hubris. Art institutions have a lot to learn from community spaces – about how to create environments that are inclusive and welcoming, a practice which is not easy and takes skill. Equally, it can be hard for people from different backgrounds to successfully work together for a common cause or goal, which again is something that community spaces and female-led activist groups, such as Crossroads Women's Centre and Focus E15, are usually far better at than us artists and academics. The complex methods that make it possible to successfully facilitate and host people, who are inevitably different from oneself in some way, can only be learnt through experience and practice. By weaving a series of anecdotes together in these letters, I am attempting to illuminate some of the things that I myself have learnt in this way – which led me to the viewpoint that, as Mohanty says, "it is important to acknowledge difference in our experiences, as a potential source of knowledge and strength, and to practice solidarity."[154]

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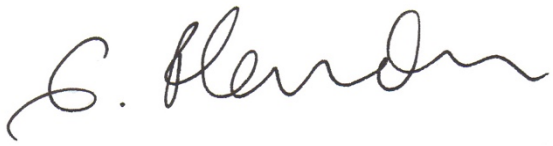
[153] For example: *Braden, Su, Artists and People (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); & Kelly, Owen, Community, Art, and the State: Storming the Citadels (London: Comedia, 1984).*

[154] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2003), p.7.

In the 1990s feminist scholar Jane Gallop began to experiment with what she calls 'Anecdotal Theory' culminating in her book of the same name (2002), which in her own words was "writing in which I would recount an anecdote and then attempt to "read" that account for the theoretical insights it afforded"[155]. As she outlines in the text, the anecdote is usually diametrically opposed to theory, seen as trivial, unacademic, subjective, and definitely not a reliable basis for knowledge. She did this to honour "the uncanny detail of lived experience" and insist, from a feminist perspective, on "the personal" as a source for theoretical insights. Long before the advent of Women's Liberation in the 1970s, the East London Federation of the Suffragettes foregrounded women's day-to-day experiences as an important source of knowledge with which to underpin their politics; an idea that was demonstrated largely through their acts and occasionally articulated in writing in The Women's Dreadnought – the newspaper published by the ELFS – which later became The Worker's Dreadnought.

When describing her intentions as the newspaper's editor, in an account of the suffragette movement published in 1931, Sylvia Pankhurst stated: "I wanted the paper to be as far as possible written from life; no dry arguments, but a vivid presentation of things as they are, arguing always from the particular, with all its human features, to the general principle."[156] In the projects that I am submitting as my PhD thesis, I have endeavoured to learn from feminist history in order to do the same.

In sisterhood and solidarity



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[155] Gallop, Jane, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2002), p.2.
[156] Pankhurst, E. Sylvia, *The Suffragette Movement: An Intimate Account of Persons and Ideals* (London: Longmans,1931), p.526.

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