



FRANKI RAFFLES



FRANKI RAFFLES



PHOTOGRAPHY, ACTIVISM, CAMPAIGN WORKS



PHOTOGRAPHY
ACTIVISM
CAMPAIGN WORKS



BALTIC



1 1A 2 2A 3 3A



7 7A 8 8A 9 9A



13 13A 14 14A 15 15A



19 19A 20 20A 21 21A



27 27A 28 28A 29 29A

FRANKI RAFFLES

PHOTOGRAPHY ACTIVISM CAMPAIGN WORKS





- 4 Introduction
Sarah Munro
- 6 Franki Raffles: Photography,
Activism, Campaign Works
Alistair Scott
- 12 To Let You Understand: Franki Raffles,
Feminist Networks and Solidarity
Catherine Spencer

27 **LEWIS**

35 **COMMUNITY, HOUSING,
CHILDCARE**

51 **WOMEN WORKERS**

67 **TO LET YOU UNDERSTAND...**

87 **SOVIET WOMEN**

127 **SOLIDARITY AND
SISTERHOOD**

141 **LOT'S WIFE**

163 **DISABILITY, PHOTOGRAPHY
AND SOCIAL PRACTICE**

169 **ACTIVISM AND PROTEST**

177 **ZERO TOLERANCE**

- 190 Exhibition
- 194 Timeline
- 196 Image Captions
- 199 Selected Publications

FRANKI RAFFLES: PHOTOGRAPHY, ACTIVISM, CAMPAIGN WORKS

Alistair Scott

Franki Raffles' photographs embody the energy of feminist social documentary practice in the 1980s and early 1990s, a time when women artists were challenging the purpose of photography by engaging with activist projects and political campaigns as well as gallery exhibitions. Raffles' prolific creative output over a period of 12 years documented women's lives and work. She used photography to combat inequality and to support solidarity and sisterhood, and observe how women faced challenges with resilience and humour. Her work focused attention on gendered violence, disability and the displacement caused by migration. She brought an innovative, activist approach to the tradition of social documentary photography, using her camera as 'a tool for change'.¹ This retrospective exhibition at Baltic has been selected from her entire output, more than 40,000 images. For the first time it is possible to trace how her practice developed and to reveal connections between her work at home in Scotland and internationally in the Soviet Union, China and Israel.

Raffles died aged 39 in 1994. Because of her untimely death, for many years her contribution to photography was in danger of remaining forgotten. During her lifetime, the work that was best known was Edinburgh's *Zero Tolerance* campaign, which raised awareness of male violence against women (fig.1). Raffles' large-scale black and white images of women and girls in staged tableaux were displayed on billboards and buses across Edinburgh and other British cities. These positive images, which avoided presenting women as victims, were juxtaposed with short captions in bold text that summarised shocking research about the prevalence of male violence against women. It was acknowledged and celebrated as an innovative campaign that delivered a feminist message to a mass audience.² It was the premature culmination of a career tragically cut short.



Fig. 1. *Zero Tolerance Prevalence* campaign poster, bus shelter, Edinburgh, 1992

After her death, Raffles' photographs and negatives were carefully stored in a cupboard by her partner. In 2015 these were rediscovered and brought together for preservation in the Special Collections of the University of St Andrews Library. Gradually since then, curators and researchers have begun to reassess Raffles' contribution to feminist photography.³ A small selection of her work was included in the St Andrews Photography Festival in 2016; in 2017 there was an exhibition at the Glasgow School of Art titled *Franki Raffles: Observing Women at Work*; she was also included in the Tate Britain exhibition *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK 1970–90* in 2023.

Raffles was born in Salford in October 1955. Her grandparents had come to the UK in the early twentieth century, fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe. Raffles spent her childhood in London, and as a teenager she visited the Soviet Union and Israel. In 1973 she started to study philosophy at the University of St Andrews; although she travelled widely, Scotland would remain her home until her death. As a student she was active in the Women's Liberation Movement in St Andrews and nationally.⁴

After graduating in 1978 she moved to Callanish, on the Isle of Lewis, to renovate a derelict farmhouse. It was here that she began to view photography as more than a hobby. As she got to know women in the local community, she was able to take photographs unobtrusively, capturing them engaged in traditional communal work. Developing and printing these images in her home darkroom, she began to see a way that photography could connect with her commitment to feminism and Marxism. One of Raffles' Lewis women images was selected for the *Herstories* 1982 calendar, a celebration

of women's history published by Stramullion, a feminist publishing collective based in Edinburgh. She also exhibited photographs in May 1982 as part of the Edinburgh Women Live arts festival at the New Solen Gallery, showing the reality ofcrofting working life (fig. 2). A few years later she wrote, 'I hope that, through my photographs, people will see and learn about the reality of life for women and question and press for change and improvement.'⁵



Fig. 2. *The Fank*, Lewis, 1981

By 1983 Raffles had moved to live in Edinburgh with her daughter. She established herself as a professional photographer with freelance work on a range of social documentary projects, and was teaching photography to evening classes and community groups. Commissions included work for charities such as Women's Aid, and were often produced for low-budget publications and travelling exhibitions, but from the outset she also made work for gallery exhibition. A selection of early photographs from her time in the Hebrides was shown in the exhibition *Lewis Women* (First of May, 1983). She was also interested in creating photography projects for children and young

people with special needs. She was awarded a Kodak Bursary and funding from the Scottish Committee for the Arts and Disability to develop a project titled *We Can Take Pictures* at Pinewood School. Children were taught to use Polaroid instant cameras and 35 mm SLR cameras. The aim was to demonstrate how their quality of life could be enhanced through the expression of their individual creativity by learning to use the camera. An exhibition of this work was shown in the Houses of Parliament in 1985.

International projects were also important to Raffles, and in September 1983 she travelled to Zimbabwe, where she documented women's health projects. The following year, in June 1984, together with her partner and daughter, she set out overland for China, crossing the Soviet Union by rail and bus. They spent over twelve months travelling in Russia, China, Tibet, Nepal, India, Hong Kong and the Philippines. Throughout the trip Raffles continued to take photographs of women at work, using both 35 mm colour and black and white film (fig. 3). After returning home she organised an exhibition of photographs from her travels titled *Women in China* at Corridor Gallery, Dunfermline.



Fig. 3. *Woman in street*, China, 1984

1. Catherine Lockerbie, 'Franki's Focus on Women at Work', *The Glasgow Herald*, 12 July 1988, p. 4.
2. Fiona Mackay, 'The Case of Zero Tolerance: Women's Politics in Action?', in Esther Breitenbach and Fiona Mackay (eds.), *Women and Contemporary Scottish Politics: An Anthology* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2001), pp. 105–30.
3. Jenny Brownrigg, Sarah Munro and Alistair Scott, *Franki Raffles: Observing Women at Work* (Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art, 2017).
4. Sarah Browne, 'A Veritable Hotbed of Feminism: Women's Liberation Movement in St Andrews, Scotland, c. 1968–c. 1979', *Twentieth Century British History* 23, no. 1, 2012, pp. 100–23.
5. Franki Raffles in Eddie Dick and Susan Moffat (eds.), *Picturing Women: Scottish Women in Photography* (Edinburgh: Scottish Film Council, Stills Gallery and the Scottish Community Education Council, 1989), p. 71.
6. Franki Raffles in Dick and Moffat (eds.), *Picturing Women*, p. 65.

The next stage of Raffles' career involved taking on campaign work through which she developed her approach of using photography as a tool 'to question and press for change'.⁶ In the mid-1980s Edinburgh District Council, under Labour Party control, had set up a Women's Unit, and Raffles took on the role of the professional photographer working alongside the unit. Although she was not an employee, Raffles developed a close working relationship with the team led by Campaigns Officer Evelyn Gillan. Together they devised a project to document the reality of ordinary women's lives and to gather evidence to make the case for new policy initiatives to combat



Fig. 4. *To Let You Understand...*, laundry worker, National Health Service, Edinburgh, 1987–88

gender inequality. The project ran from September 1987 to April 1988 and generated over 5,500 images. Raffles visited workplaces across the city of Edinburgh to interview and photograph women of all ages in shops, factories, offices, hotels and hospitals (fig. 4). The women spoke about low pay, working conditions and childcare provision. The research gathered statistics on the stereotyping of school leavers, teenage pregnancies, and the low status of women's work in retail, catering work and domestic cleaning jobs. To capture the voices of the women Raffles used short quotes as text alongside her images.

To Let You Understand... was launched in May 1988 as both an exhibition and a publication, and toured community venues such as libraries and sports centres over the following year. Raffles was determined that it should be shown in places visited by ordinary women. Although it was planned as a campaign initiative, the exhibition was reviewed by visual art critics, such as in *The Scotsman* newspaper:

*If the overall impression is one of often cheerless drudgery, the women depicted face that drudgery with both humour and tolerance. Their brief, bald comments make that clear... The exhibition title was used because, again and again, this was the phrase used by the women before they talked about their lives. The voice and the character of ordinary women is here to be understood, and, one hopes, appreciated.*⁷

The powerful combination of image and text ensured that this work had the impact of direct testimony from the women whose lives were portrayed. In this way Raffles had progressed to a type of reinvention of social documentary, authentically representing the women she photographed, and building on previous feminist practice. She addressed theoretical issues that had been raised by practitioners who argued that, by the 1980s, the tradition of 'photo documentary' as a public genre had become an outdated, exploitative form of rhetoric. In the USA Martha Rosler accused star photojournalists and glossy magazine editors of creating sensational and manipulative images imbued with a 'myth of objectivity'. Her photo-essay took a critical look at the American documentary tradition.⁸ Like many feminist artists/photographers, Rosler moved to work with installation, performative and constructed imagery. The photographer

7. Anon, 'Women at Work: A Portrait of the Humour Behind the Drudgery', *The Scotsman*, 11 May 1988.

8. Martha Rosler, 'In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)', in *Decoys and Disruptions, Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), pp.152–206.

9. Gail Day, 'Allan Sekula 1951–2013', *Journal of Visual Culture* 12, no. 3, 2013, pp.515–18.

10. Lockerbie, 'Franki's Focus on Women at Work', p.4.

11. Franki Raffles in Dick and Moffat (eds.), *Picturing Women*, p. 70.

and critic Allan Sekula also proposed the need for a new approach to 'photo documentary' for which he coined the term 'critical realism'.⁹

In a newspaper interview Raffles made her intentions for her work clear:

*I don't see my photos as art objects at all. They're a means to an end. The content of what I'm doing matters much more than the process. I want my pictures to say something, otherwise there's no point in producing them. I believe that by people opening their eyes and actually seeing, then that's the way things start to change.*¹⁰

It is not clear whether Raffles was aware of the theoretical debates; however, in the way she engaged with women at work for *To Let You Understand...* this was precisely a form of 'critical realism'. This was photography as a form of social activism, an authentic representation of women's working lives, a collaboration between the photographer and her subjects.

In 1988 Raffles was selected as one of four women photographers for *Picturing Women*, a group exhibition at Stills Gallery, Edinburgh, with a residency commission to portray the women who worked at Drummond Community

High School, Edinburgh. Her approach was to include dinner ladies and cleaners, as well as the teachers. These images challenged gender stereotypes and, through her way of placing pictures together, she introduced complex ideas about hierarchies in society. The catalogue notes provide insights into how she reflected on her own work: 'It is not possible, often to show what I want to show through single images. Power relations are subtle, the way that people relate differently to different people can only be shown through juxtaposing photographs.'¹¹

A further stage of development for Raffles came with a new international project in which she aimed to investigate whether women's working lives were different under the communist system. In June 1989 she travelled by car with her daughter across Eastern Europe, transporting *To Let You Understand...* to exhibit in Rostov-on-Don, where she had established links with a local photography club. Raffles was following a tradition of women's documentary photography that connects her with photographers of the 1930s, such as British photographer Helen Muspratt and American photographer Margaret Bourke-White. Raffles had some funding for an assignment to photograph the women workers of the Soviet Union (fig. 5). She spent three months, from June to September, in Russia, Ukraine and Georgia.



Fig. 5. *No I don't want to own the land, it belongs to everyone. We work hard but the money is ok and we have the surplus of the crops to ourselves.* State farm workers, USSR, 1989

The editor of the English-language magazine *Soviet Woman* commissioned Raffles to write an article about why she was interested in the lives of women in a communist society. In her notes she wrote:

*I was 15 years old when I first visited the Soviet Union... On that visit, I met women factory managers, a surgeon and women engineers. I saw for the first time that it was possible for women to work in any occupation at any level. The experience of that visit has led me down a path of interest and concern and has determined my life and work since that day... It opened my eyes to the possibility of a future for women where our work could be valued as of equal worth to that of men.*¹²

Over that summer, just months before the collapse of the Soviet system, Raffles captured the confident faces of Soviet women workers in the city and countryside, in factories, hospitals, and on collective farms. She kept a notebook recording her progress, her frustration with the bureaucratic Intourist officials, and conversations with the women she photographed, including builders, road workers and farm field brigades. The resulting exhibition was shown in Glasgow in May 1990 as part of the programme for the European City of Culture, and then in June in Rostov-on-Don. As with *To Let You Understand...*, alongside the images were captions with quotes from the women who were portrayed.

Throughout her career Raffles' photography connected directly with her political commitment. Her early death meant that she never had the opportunity to look back and reflect on her work. Photo archivist Marc Boulay observed that one 'advantage of this collection is, and how it differs from other museum collections is that we have the entire negative collection, we have the entire print documentation. So you get to see the process of the photographer.'¹³ He argued that the photographs in *To Let You Understand...* focused on working women's difficulties, whereas the *Soviet Women Workers* images reflected on the empowerment of women and could be seen as demonstrating Raffles' progress as a photographer interacting and engaging more directly with her subjects.

In 1992 Raffles began work on her final international project, titled *Lot's Wife*. This project, although almost fully completed, has never been seen until this retrospective

exhibition. Over the following two years she made several trips to Israel to document the lives of Soviet Jewish women who had been encouraged to emigrate there after the collapse of the USSR. Raffles photographed the women and their children in their domestic surroundings in the settlements, and the resulting images of women and children are intimate portraits (fig. 6). The title for this project comes from the biblical story of the woman turned to a pillar of salt for the crime of looking back. It was retold in a poem by Soviet modernist poet Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966), written in 1924 while she suffered under oppression from Stalin's regime:

*It's not too late you can still gaze
At the red towers of your native Sodom...
... Who will weep for this woman?
Isn't her death the least significant?
But my heart will never forget the one
Who gave her life for a single glance.*¹⁴

There are approximately forty images which Raffles had selected from several hundred photographs. She had begun to design layouts for a book, with each double-page spread dedicated to the story of one woman. The mock-ups also included other images which reveal the complexities of the political situation and how the resettlement of the women reflected their powerlessness. For many of the women the notion of Israel had been a dream, and a recurring theme of the interviews was the idea that in the Soviet Union these women had been labelled 'Jews', and now here in Israel they felt dislocated, seen as Russian incomers, their stories revealing the complex layers of ethnic and national identity.

The project was carried out when the situation in Israel was very different from present circumstances, during the period when Yitzhak Rabin was Prime Minister and was engaged in a peace process with Palestinian leaders that led to the Oslo Accords in 1994. Nevertheless, Raffles' photographs of graffiti in Arabic and Hebrew – 'Stop the Occupation' – reveal her awareness of ongoing tensions. She wrote in her notes: 'Omnipresent the mistaken belief that normal life can continue in the shadow of a gun.'¹⁵

With *Lot's Wife* Raffles brought together her innovative approaches to documentary by juxtaposing images, selecting texts from interviews and other sources, designing bold layouts to present portraits that would capture the layers of complexity involved in



Fig. 6. *Lot's Wife*, 1992

understanding the lives of these women. Her activism and commitment to using photography to promote social action continued in final projects such as the campaign with the charity Artlink to use portraits with the text *Your Frame of Mind is Our Disability* as posters to draw attention to the prejudice and bias faced by people with disability. In the months before she died Raffles was also working on a commission titled *The NHS, a healthy place to work*, photographing women in hospitals, clinics and GP surgeries across Scotland. The photographs were later presented in an exhibition in an Edinburgh hospital. The text accompanying the exhibition read: 'Franki was a campaigning photographer. She wanted her work to make people think, not just about the picture in front of them, but about the wider world beyond the edges of the photograph...'¹⁶

As a result of her tragic early death, it is not possible to know how Raffles' work would have developed over the past thirty years, or to speculate on the campaigns and projects that she would be working on today. What is clear is that the themes of her work in the 1980s and 1990s, campaigning against violence against women and inequality, and supporting international sisterhood, are still relevant today.

12. Franki Raffles, 'I Am a Photographer', *Soviet Woman* 3, 1990, p.45.
13. Marc Boulay and Marine Benoit-Blain, 'Women Workers: A Discussion about the Work of Franki Raffles', *Stereoscope Magazine No. 6 – Intimacy*, University of St Andrews, 2015, p.67.
14. Anna Akhmatova, extract from *Lot's Wife*, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer in Roberta Reeder (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1992), p.273.
15. Natassa (Anastasia) Philimonos, 'Franki Raffles' *Lot's Wife: A "Reinvented Documentary"* for a Feminist Art of Knowledge Production', MSc thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2015, p.27.
16. Anon, *The NHS – a healthy place to work*, NHS Lothian Health Board, Deaconess Hospital exhibition, Edinburgh, 1995.