

Rediscovering feminist photographer

Franki Raffles

Franki Raffles was a Scottish photographer whose work reflects the energy and variety of feminist and social documentary practice in the 1980s and early 1990s. This was a period during which political campaign work, community projects, and gallery exhibitions challenging established attitudes about the purpose of photography, overlapped and came together¹. Raffles' creative output reflects this mixed-genre approach in a Scottish context.

Raffles died just as she was establishing a reputation with her work for Edinburgh's *Zero Tolerance* campaign which was adopted by local authorities across the UK and abroad². Her large-scale black-and-white images of women and girls in staged interior 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, which summarised stark evidence-based research about the prevalence of male violence against women. It was acknowledged as an innovative campaign delivering a feminist message to a mass audience, that women of all ages and from every background were at risk. It was the premature culmination of a career tragically cut short by her death aged thirty-nine in December 1994.

Since her death Raffles' reputation as a photographer has been almost forgotten. The significance of the political impact of her work on the *Zero Tolerance* campaign has been analysed by feminist commentators³ but her contribution as a photographer has not yet been properly



1992 - *Zero Tolerance* poster, Prevalence campaign. © Franki Raffles Estate. Image courtesy Edinburgh Napier/University of St Andrews Library.

1988 - *School Cleaner*, Drummond High School, Edinburgh: *Picturing Women* exhibition. © Franki Raffles Estate. Image courtesy Edinburgh Napier/University of St Andrews Library.



evaluated. This may be a result of the fact that her photographs for *Zero Tolerance* have been categorised as a political campaign rather than as authored images⁴, nevertheless, as well as this public campaign, Raffles left a substantial body of work including a number of international projects.

Raffles was born in Salford in October 1955 into a well-respected Jewish family, her grandparents having fled persecution in Russia and Poland at the start of the 20th century. Settling in the UK, they had established successful manufacturing businesses. Raffles spent her childhood in London and as a teenager visited the Soviet Union and Israel, where she spent summer holidays working as a lifeguard. In 1973 she took up a place to study philosophy at the University of St Andrews. Although she travelled widely, Scotland would remain her home until her death. Throughout her time as a student she was active in the women's liberation movement in St Andrews and nationally⁵. In 1978 she moved from Fife to Callanish, on the west coast of Lewis, to renovate a derelict farmhouse. It was at this time she began to view photography as more than a hobby, producing landscapes, portraits of neighbours, and pictures documenting women working on traditional crofting community activities such as the 'fank', when the sheep of the village are brought together for shearing.

By 1983 Raffles had moved to live in Edinburgh and began to establish herself as a professional photographer. She gained freelance work with a range of social documentary projects, as well as teaching photography to evening classes and community groups. Commissions included work for public bodies and charities such as Women's Aid. The work was 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* (1983). She was also interested in creating projects to help children and young people with special needs to use photography to express their individual creativity. She was awarded a Kodak Bursary to develop this project for special schools in Edinburgh.

Raffles always pursued international projects. In 1984, with her four-year-old daughter Anna, and partner, Sandy, she set out to travel by rail and bus across the Soviet Union. They spent over twelve months in China, Tibet, Nepal, India, Hong Kong and the Philippines. Throughout this trip Raffles developed her craft as a documentary photographer, using both 35mm colour transparency and black and white film. Her early international project work brought street photography together with a focused editorial assignment – images of women at work. Documenting women's working lives would be at the centre of her photographic practice for the rest of her career. Back in Scotland the pictures from her travels contributed to her freelance practice and she continued to work with children with severe learning problems. For a project at Pinewood School, West Lothian, she raised funding from the Scottish Committee for Arts and Disability, and the Mental Health Foundation. In a handbook entitled

We can take Pictures, Raffles revealed her intention of using photography to look beyond the frame.

Children and staff were introduced to working with Polaroid instant cameras and 35mm SLR cameras. Her aim was to demonstrate how the quality of life for these children could be enhanced through the expression of individual creativity, as they learned to use the camera. An exhibition of this work was shown in the Houses of Parliament in 1985.

In 1986 she began to document the work of the City of Edinburgh District Council's Women's Committee. Two notable exhibitions which toured locally came from this collaboration. *Simply Women*, photographs of the women athletes competing in the XIII Commonwealth Games, toured libraries and sports centres across Lothian Region in 1987. This led to a longer-term editorial commission from the Women's Committee to document local women's working lives. Raffles interviewed and photographed women at workplaces across the city of Edinburgh capturing the diverse reality of Scottish women's working lives at the height of Thatcherism. The result was *To Let You Understand*, an exhibition and book project. Raffles' images were accompanied by short quotes, capturing the common concerns and humour of the women whose lives were depicted.

In 1988 Raffles was selected as one of four women photographers for *Picturing Women*, an exhibition at Stills Gallery, Edinburgh. In a development of her existing practice Raffles' produced images of women at Drummond Community High School, Edinburgh, including teachers, cleaners and dinner ladies. With this exhibition Raffles brought her committed photographic practice into the sphere of the gallery. These images challenged gender stereotypes and, through a variety of strategies, including visual puns and her ways of placing pictures together, she introduced complex political ideas about hierarchies in society. The catalogue and educational 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.'⁽⁷⁾

In the summer of 1989, with funding from the Scottish Arts Council to undertake a project photographing *Working Women* in the Soviet Union, Raffles spent three months in Russia, the Ukraine and Georgia, documenting women's lives, in the city and country. In a tradition of women's documentary photography which links her back to photographers in the 1920s and 1930s, Raffles captured the confident faces of Soviet women in the final months of the communist system. The resulting exhibition was shown in Glasgow as part of European City of Culture 1990 and in Rostov-on-Don. Another international project, which she undertook at the same time as work on the *Zero Tolerance* campaigns in the early 1990s, was entitled *Lot's Wife*. The title comes from the poem by the Soviet modernist poet, Anna Akhmatova, in which the writer reflects on the implications of the Biblical story and the role of women.

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.....it provided the children with a channel of communication, a way of looking at the world and a way of challenging aspects of it.”⁶



1987 - Poll tax protest. *To Let You Understand* exhibition. © Franki Raffles Estate. Image courtesy Edinburgh Napier/University of St Andrews Library.

The image from *To Let You Understand* was accompanied by text in the exhibition and book as below:

'To let you understand, in those days you could make something out of nothing - a pot of soup and a dumpling. Mind you in the 1926 strike there was nothing. Everybody was looking for things on the cheap to get fed. It was hard then. The women didnae work - of course, there was no jobs for the men either. Mind you there's still a lot of unemployment about now - who'd have thought we'd be going back to that? Just the other day I got a hundred pensioners to sign against the Poll Tax. I said to them, 'it's no use moaning, you have to do something about it. Aye, you're never done fighting.'



Lot's Wife, or the story of Nadya. Israel 1993. © Franki Raffles Estate. Image courtesy Edinburgh Napier/University of St Andrews Library.

Raffles travelled to Israel to document the lives of Russian Jewish women who had emigrated after the collapse of the Soviet Union and had been settled in transit camps. As she did with *To Let You Understand*, Raffles experimented by using quotations from her interviews with the women to investigate ideas of nationality and identity. This project although almost fully completed was never exhibited.

After her death her photographic archive remained untouched, carefully stored by her partner. In 2015, this collection of around 90,000 negatives, together with journals and personal notebooks, was deposited with the Photographic Archive Special Collections, St Andrews University Library. It is now possible to rediscover the range of Raffles' work, and the themes on which she focused - the role of women, inequality, identity, migration - which all continue to be relevant to documentary photography today. The archive will enable future researchers to investigate how her practice was shaped and make a considered assessment of her legacy.

In the months before she died NHS Lothian commissioned a project entitled: *The NHS, a healthy place to work* and Franki photographed in hospitals, clinics, and GP's surgeries across Scotland. After she died these photographs were

presented in an exhibition in Edinburgh. 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..."

Observing Women at Work, Franki Raffles, exhibition curated by Jenny Brownrigg; Reid Gallery, Glasgow School of Art, 4 March - 27 April 2017.

www.frankirafflesarchive.org

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