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From the political to the personal: work and class in 1970s British feminist art

Abstract:

How did British feminist art of the 1970s represent work and class, and what light does this shed on the women's movement more generally? This article discusses the work of artists including Bobby Baker, the Feministo and Fenix collectives, the Hackney Flashers, and Mary Kelly. These artists were eager to connect feminist activism to other struggles on the Left, and were thus initially drawn to document working-class women's paid work. Their political commitment to represent 'ordinary' working lives often led to lengthy periods of research, as well as attempts to make both the creative process and the finished product accessible to new participants and audiences. However, across this period, two changes took place. Firstly, artists began to focus on women's unpaid work, drawing attention to the tension between domestic work and paid employment, and the lack of easy solutions to this problem. Secondly, most lost faith in art's power to represent the experience of work beyond the individual and the personal. Early political idealism gave way to sustained soul-searching about the intellectual, moral and aesthetic difficulties of representing the experience of others, particularly those of a different class background. This article, then, shows that the early British women's movement was keen to engage with working-class experience and that it did so in a way that was self-reflective. In the end, it was this self-reflection, and the questions that it generated about the morality, politics and aesthetics of representing others, that led to the personal and psychological turn of the later 1970s.

Keywords: feminism, women's liberation movement, feminist art, class, work

From the political to the personal: work and class in 1970s British feminist art

In 1978 the feminist photography collective The Hackney Flashers celebrated the opening of their second major exhibition, *Who's Holding the Baby?* In an Indian restaurant in Hackney, Jo Spence, a long-time member of the group, was overcome by a crisis of confidence.

I remember sitting there thinking, I feel really strange about this, because next door [the exhibition] and what's going on there is not part of my life really. I don't live in Hackney. I'm not working class. And my mother was at the table with me, kind of looking at us as a middle class group, and kind of, quizzically thinking, what are you doing? It's really strange that kind of internalized mother. And I thought, I don't ever want to do this again.¹

Spence was not a stereotypical middle-class feminist. She had been brought up in a working-class family, and worked for years in a photographic studio before doing a degree at Central London Polytechnic as a mature student.² Her work since the early 1970s, both with the Hackney Flashers and with other groups such as the Half Moon Gallery and the Photography Workshop, aimed to amplify working-class experiences, histories and voices. Yet by the end of the decade she was increasingly troubled by the possibility that the Flashers were appropriating working-class experience. Shortly afterwards, the Flashers disbanded and

¹ British Library (henceforth BL), C459/13. Jo Spence interviewed by Val Williams, March and April 1991. Transcript, 145.

² A classic trajectory for her generation of women, according to Eve Worth, 'Women, Education and Social Mobility in Britain during the Long 1970s', *Cultural and Social History* 16 (1) (2019), 67-83.

Spence spent the 1980s creating much more personal and psychologically-informed work, drawing on her own relationship with her childhood, her body and her health.

Spence was not alone with this ethical dilemma. The questions raised by the Hackney Flashers' work were core ones for the entire Women's Liberation Movement (WLM). What was the meaning of work in women's lives? How did gender and class intersect in paid and unpaid work, in the factory and the home? And was it really possible to understand and to represent other women's lives and work? This article examines British feminist art of the 1970s, and its representations of work and class. It identifies a trajectory from the movement's early years, when working-class women's paid work was a prominent theme, to the later 1970s, when artists turned increasingly to the subject of unpaid domestic labour and drew more extensively on their own personal experience. In conclusion, this article asks what drove this turn away from the public and the collective to the individual, domestic and personal, and what light it can shed on the history of the women's movement more generally.

This article draws on and contributes to a recent and impressive body of work on the British WLM, driven by dozens of pioneering PhDs as well as larger projects led by established scholars. This wave of activity has not only vastly enhanced our knowledge of the movement, it has also opened up invaluable new sources for future studies.³ This new history of women's liberation is shedding light on feminism beyond the capital, feminism and trade unionism, print

³ For example the Sisterhood and After project led by Margaretta Jolly, which has produced a collection of interviews of inestimable historical importance: <https://www.bl.uk/sisterhood>. Margaretta Jolly, Polly Russell & Rachel Cohen, 'Sisterhood and After: individualism, ethics and an oral history of the women's liberation movement', *Social Movement Studies*, 11 (2012), 211–226.

culture, and health, and on the lived experience of feminist activism.⁴ A significant strand of recent research focuses on feminists' engagement with race and class, and with working-class and black women within and outside the WLM. Recent scholarship shows us these issues were not invisible: in fact they were the subject of ongoing discussion and debate. Throughout the 1970s, the WLM grappled with the question how much women actually had in common, and how much difference the concept of 'sisterhood' could accommodate. George Stevenson identifies two strands in the historiography: the 'traditional' view which argues that the WLM essentialised white, middle-class experience, and was unable to accommodate difference; and the 'revisionist' view, which sees the WLM as far more flexible and reflective, and concludes that the movement worked hard to recognise difference.⁵ Stevenson himself, writing about class, concludes that neither approach sufficiently takes into account working-class women's

⁴ See for e.g. Sue Bruley, 'Women's Liberation at the Grass Roots: a view from some English towns, c.1968–1990', *Women's History Review*, (5) 25 (2016), 723-40; Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); George Stevenson, 'Women's Movement and 'Class Struggle': gender, class formation and political identity in women's strikes, 1968–78', *Women's History Review*, (5) 25 (2016), 741-55; Laurel Forster, 'Spreading the Word: feminist print cultures and the Women's Liberation Movement' *Women's History Review*, (5) 25 (2016), 812-831; Jesse Olszynko, 'The feminist appropriation of pregnancy testing in 1970s Britain', *Women's History Review* published online July 2017 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2017.1346869>; Margaretta Jolly, *In Love And Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁵ George Stevenson, *The Women's Liberation Movement and the Politics of Class in Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 129-30.

experience and agency and the importance of middle-class ‘class power’ within the movement.⁶

This article takes up these questions of difference in the WLM, with particular attention to the ways in which work and class were represented in British feminist art. The question of representation is a particularly pertinent one in this context. The early WLM developed a powerful critique of the ways in which mainstream culture ‘othered’ and objectified women and their bodies. Scholars such as Linda Nochlin and John Berger had launched a devastatingly effective critique of the ways in which women were represented in mainstream art and visual culture.⁷ As Berger explained, this othering of women had consequences far beyond the art gallery – indeed, it was a fundamental part of the female experience: ‘men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.’⁸ This attack on traditional art history was closely allied to the activism of the WLM, from the infamous protests against the Miss World contest in 1970 to the defacing of books with sexist

⁶ Ibid, 154-6.

⁷ See for example, Linda Nochlin’s photograph ‘Buy My Bananas’ from 1972 (a reproduction and the story of the photograph can be found here: <http://www.katewerblegallery.com/files/kwg-buy-my-bananas-pr-2012.pdf>) and John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), based on a BBC TV series in the same year.

⁸ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 47.

cover art.⁹ Building on this critique of the status quo, the British feminist art movement sought to develop an alternative visual perspective, one in which women were more than a ‘sight’. This was not a niche issue, but a one that was fundamental to developing a new ‘way of seeing’ the world.¹⁰

⁹ On the defacing of books, see Lucy Delap, ‘Feminist Bookshops, Reading Cultures and the Women’s Liberation Movement in Great Britain, c. 1974–2000’, *History Workshop Journal* 81 (1) (2016), 171–196.

¹⁰ For an accessible international overview of feminist art in the 1970s, see *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark (CA Mass: The MIT Press, 2007). Rozsika Parker and Grisela Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970-1985* (London: Pandora, 1987) is a foundational text and still an essential work of reference. Kathy Battista, *Renegotiating the Body. Feminist Art in 1970s London* (London and NY: IB Tauris, 2013). On the Hackney Flashers, Na’ama Klorman-Eraqi, ‘The Hackney Flashers: Photography as a Socialist Feminist Endeavour’, *Photography and Culture*, 10 (2017), 53-71. Any work in this particular area must build on Hazel Elizabeth Frizell’s groundbreaking 2009 PhD on British feminist art in the 1970s. Frizell’s account of the ways in which feminist artists engaged with the demands of the women’s liberation movement is particularly concerned with the ‘domestic orientation’ (31) of the movement, and how that was reflected in the work of groups such as Feministo. While I share Frizell’s interest in the depiction of domestic work, this article seeks to reinstate the importance of the earlier works of the feminist art movement, with their focus on factory work and equal pay, and to make sense of the shift from the political to the personal over the course of the decade. Hazel Elizabeth Frizell, ‘Representations of specific concerns of the Women’s Movement in British feminist art, 1970-1978’, DPhil, Kingston University, 2009.

As the feminist art movement sought to develop a new ethics of representation, questions of difference were quick to emerge. Following the wider WLM, the artists discussed here placed class and working-class experience at the centre of their artistic practice. This raised the question of how one might legitimately represent other people's lives without othering them in the ways that male visual culture had othered women. In order to overcome these problems of difference, middle-class feminist artists undertook lengthy programmes of research to familiarise themselves with working-class lives, and made sustained attempts to engage the subjects of their art with both process and product. To recognise this engagement is not to glorify it or endorse it as a success. Feminist artists themselves were self-critical and highly aware of the ways in which their work fell short of their aspirations. In fact, it was this process of self-reflection that led many to turn away from their attempts to represent other people's lives. As the 1970s came to an end, early political idealism gave way to sustained soul-searching about the intellectual, moral and aesthetic difficulties of representing the experience of others, particularly those of a different class background. This article, then, argues that feminist artists refocused on their own personal experiences and identities not out of self-involvement, but as a response to the ethical dilemmas of representing other people's lives, and the epistemological difficulties of understanding the roots of women's oppression.

Returning to Stevenson's typology, this research is certainly revisionist in that it demonstrates the ways in which the WLM was sensitive to (class) difference. But it finds little evidence that the WLM used 'sisterhood' as a balm to overcome these differences. Indeed the word 'sisterhood' and even the broader concept is conspicuous by its absence in the sources I have examined. Feminist artists were from the outset conscious of class differences, and attempted to document and understand rather than erase or overcome them. To be sure, these attempts to practice empathy across class lines did not always meet their ambitious aims. But artists did acknowledge their failures, and grappled with the discomfort they caused. Secondly,

this research suggests that it is unwise to assume a shared experience on the part of the white middle-class membership of the WLM. Middle-class artists were themselves divided by very real differences of geography, economics and access to institutions, networks and resources. Many identified as first-generation middle class. The salience of class difference in their own lives drove their initial interest in representing the working class experience, and also sensitised them to the pitfalls of appropriation and misrepresentation. This research, therefore, suggests that the importance of 'sisterhood' to feminist attitudes to class has been overstated, and that there is much to be gained by paying attention to the nuances and complexities of class identity in the movement.

Many of the artists discussed in this piece worked under precarious and marginal conditions, and produced work in short-lived collectives. As a result, much of their work is no longer extant, and is at best accessible only in reproduction. Other pieces only survive in the form of descriptions in the feminist and art press. Few feminist artists were in a position to amass a significant archive, and paper records from this period are also patchy. The holdings of the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths have been invaluable for this research, particularly its slide collection and its collections of artists' papers and ephemera. I have also made extensive use of oral history interviews in the British Sound Library, primarily carried out under the Artists' Lives and Sisterhood and After projects, as well as publications and exhibition catalogues from this period. Using these sources has allowed me to build up a social history of the creation of these art works and their contemporary reception that provides a salient case study of the complexities of the women's movement's relationship with difference.

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Work was a fundamental issue for the Women's Liberation Movement. Of the four original demands of the WLM passed in 1971, three related directly to work (equal pay, equal educational and job opportunities, and free 24-hour nurseries). Feminists saw the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work, and the undervaluing of women's work outside the home as key markers of gender inequality. What is more, work was a site not just of gender oppression but of class oppression too. The women's movement of course was born out of a critique of the left: its sexism, its division of political labour, its failure to incorporate a politics of the home and the body. But this critique did not mean that feminists had abandoned left-wing principles: most activists still believed strongly in the importance of supporting working-class struggle. From a feminist perspective, this meant engaging with the struggle of working-class women, supporting women worker's strikes such as Grunwick and Trico, developing campaigns that were designed to unionise and mobilise women workers, like the Nightcleaners campaign, and joint initiatives with the trade union movement such as the Working Women's Charter Campaign. As George Stevenson puts it, '[F]ar from discarding class, the WLM and its activists were almost as concerned by its meaning and political expression as they were by gender.'¹¹

The feminist art of the early to mid 1970s is notable for its engagement with paid work, and with the experience of working-class women in the workplace. This reflected the centrality of class to the early WLM, and also drew on a broader left-wing commitment to represent 'ordinary' lives and experiences, notably in the oral history movement. The Hackney Flashers, a collective of women photographers and artists based in North London, began their work with a commission to illustrate the Hackney People's Autobiographies project.¹² This oral history

¹¹ George Stephenson, book, 11.

¹² Jo Spence, *Putting Myself In The Picture* (London: Camden Press, 1986), 50, 58.

project had begun in 1972 at the Centreprise community arts centre, and was run as a Workers' Educational Association evening class.¹³ Inspired by the History Workshop movement, the project did oral history interviews with working-class Londoners who then used the interview transcript as the basis for their written autobiography. The published volumes that resulted from this project were called *Working Lives* and set out to provide 'accounts of work, what it was and what it meant, by men and women living in Hackney'.¹⁴ In most cases, authors were identified by their profession: 'Betty Ferry, Boot and shoe maker', 'Myrtle May Green, Hairdresser'. In the second volume (published in 1977), a study of younger residents who were still at work, each autobiography was accompanied by a series of photographs of the author at work: Mike Christou's essay on his work as a fish and chip shop owner was illustrated by six photographs by Michael Ann Mullen which showed him behind the counter, at the fish market, and preparing the fish.¹⁵

Working class factory and manual labour remained a core theme in the Flashers' first exhibition, *Women and Work in Hackney* (1975). This came about as a direct response to the Hackney Trades Council's tender for an exhibition to mark their 75th anniversary, under the rubric '75 Years of Brotherhood'.¹⁶ The Flashers countered this andocentric premise with a

¹³ Rosa Schling, *The Lime Green Mystery. An Oral History of the Centerprise co-operative* (London: On The Record, 2017), ch. 4. This excellent book can be downloaded here: https://www.ahackneyautobiography.org.uk/uploads/The_Lime_Green_Mystery.pdf

¹⁴ Centreprise, *Working Lives. Volume One 1905-45* (London: Centreprise, n.d.), front cover.

¹⁵ Centerprise, *Working Lives. Volume Two: Hackney 1945-77* (London, Centerprise Trust, 1977), 158-167.

¹⁶ Liz Heron, 'Hackney Flashers Collective. Who's still holding the camera?', *Photography/Politics: One* (1979), 125.

proposal for a photographic exhibition that would document women's work in the borough. *Women and Work in Hackney* opened in Hackney Town Hall in 1975 and later went on show at dozens of other venues, including the Half Moon Gallery and the Paris Socialist Feminist International Conference. The exhibition was made up of over 100 photographs, including workers in a packaging factory, homeworkers in the garment and footwear industries, teachers and childcarers, shop, market stall and clerical workers, and professional women including doctors and dentists. Although one panel with eight photographs documented housework, the bulk of the exhibition was concerned with paid work.¹⁷ Older women were prominent in the photographs, including on the poster for its run at the Half Moon. This featured a woman in her fifties or sixties, caught in the middle of sweeping the floor of a lecture theatre. On the blackboard is some sort of technical diagram and on her other side is a large piece of machinery. The woman is looking directly into the camera lens and laughing.¹⁸ This image was unusual in its subject's direct engagement with the photographer and in its sense of fun. Most of the photographs showed women absorbed in their jobs, preoccupied with their duties and seemingly unaware of the camera. The overall feel of the exhibition was of a serious documentation of working lives – underlined by the fact that in the original exhibition the photographs were directly mounted on display boards and supplemented with hand-written information about the gender pay gap, the availability of occupational pensions and nursery places. This was a deeply political exhibition. 'All workers are exploited, some are more exploited than others' proclaimed one board, complete with the results of a survey of 50 women

¹⁷ Hackney Archives, D/S/52/6/15/10. 'Women's photographs. Women at work exhibition 1976'.

¹⁸ Ibid.

which found that most were paid below the local rate, 11 were paid less than 6p an hour, while the highest paid earned 72p per hour.¹⁹

The Flashers were not alone in their emphasis on documentation and research. Many feminist artists drew their authority to speak about and represent working-class lives on lengthy processes of evidence-gathering. Kay Hunt, Mary Kelly and Margaret Harrison's exhibition *Women & Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry* (1975) drew on two years' research at a metal box factory in Bermondsey and at the TUC library.²⁰ Like the Flashers, Hunt, Kelly and Harrison were interested in the longer history of women's work, choosing Bermondsey 'because it has been a centre of workshop industries employing women for over a century'.²¹ They carried out extensive surveys within the factory and gathered information on levels of pay, time use, job turnover, and union membership. A good deal of the material related to the implementation of the Equal Pay Act of 1970. Whereas the look of the Flashers' exhibition was functional, with large numbers of smaller photographs placed on display boards with little apparent regard for aesthetic considerations, 'Women & Work' was more deliberately austere. Statistical material was presented in an expanse of white space, broad margins drawing the eye to the salient points. Visitors were directed to a 'reference system' of films, audio recordings and books for further information. Two films shown side-by-side depicted men's and women's work in the factory, accompanied by the sounds of the factory

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ BL, Mary Kelly Artists' Lives interview (13-14.9.2014); Women's Art Library, pamphlet collection, Kay Hunt, Mary Kelly, Margaret Harrison, *Women & Work. A Document on The Division of Labour in Industry* [exhibition catalogue].

²¹ Kay Hunt, Mary Kelly, Margaret Harrison, *Women & Work*, p. 3.

machinery. This was an exhibition that demanded that the viewer repeat the artists' immersion in the material and economic reality of factory life.²²

This documentary methodology carried over into future projects by members of the *Women & Work* team. Many of their subsequent pieces began from the premise that it was impossible to understand work – and women's experience of it – without an in-depth engagement with the fabric of working lives. Margaret Harrison's *Homeworkers* (1977) was the result of a two-year collaboration with the National Campaign for Homeworkers.²³ Mary Kelly also remained wedded to research: as part of the Berwick Street Film Collective, she collaborated on the film *Nightcleaners*, a documentation of a unionization campaign involving the London Women's Liberation Workshop. Her solo exhibition *Post Partum Document* (first shown at the ICA in 1976) was based on an auto-ethnographic documentation of her son's early years. Even one's own work as a parent would not yield up its secrets without forensic examination, and in order to examine it, it was first necessary to document it. This focus on quantitative and qualitative data gathering was to be found in the wider WLM as well. Sarah Stoller's work on the politics of care in the WLM shows that 'accounting for where and how women spent their time came to play a central role in consciousness raising, in feminist essays, and in early women's-studies courses.'²⁴ Others took an ethnographic and immersive approach: the sociologist Miriam Glucksmann spent nine months working in a car parts factory in London

²² Rosalind Delmar, 'Women and work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry', *Spare Rib*, (40) 1975, 32-3, reproduced in Parker and Pollock, *Framing Feminism*, 201-202.

²³ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/harrison-homeworkers-t13631>

²⁴ Sarah Stoller, 'Forging a Politics of Care: Theorizing Household Work in the British Women's Liberation Movement', *History Workshop Journal* 85, Spring 2018, 95–119.

in 1977-78 in an attempt to understand the apparent gulf between working-class women and the WLM.²⁵

Of course, as Natalie Thomlinson points out, there was a danger that such an approach made working-class women 'subjects of study' for middle-class women.²⁶ In an attempt to address this, some projects sought to include working-class women not just as the source of material and information, but also as actors in the creative process. In common with the oral history and community arts movements, feminist artists tried not just to make working-class women visible, but also to give them an opportunity to speak for themselves. Hunt, Kelly and Harrison wrote in the introduction to *Women & Work* that 'more than 150 working women have participated in this documentation' and these women were named on the first pages of the catalogue.²⁷ Jo Spence drew on her earlier activism around children, play and photography. She described the Hackney Flashers, with a hint of self-irony, as 'social workers with cameras'.

You go into a community that you are geographically part of, and maybe you are part of as mothers, say. And you say, 'How can we be useful to you?' And then 'Tell us your story and we'll help you to illustrate it. And we will take what you want to put with it as words.'²⁸

Like the Flashers, the Berwick Street Film Collective hoped that the night cleaners would not just be the subject of their film, but would help to shape it. As Mary Kelly remembered it: 'we showed every bit of *Nightcleaners* at every stage to both cleaners and

²⁵ Miriam Glucksmann, 'Reflecting on "Women on the Line:" Continuities and Change in Women's Work', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 81 (2012), 168-173.

²⁶ Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women's Movement*, 52.

²⁷ Hunt, Kelly and Harrison, *Women & Work*, 1-2.

²⁸ BL, Jo Spence interview.

people in the movement. And with the, the *Women & Work* project we had, you know, the women from the factory, actually came to the exhibition.²⁹ But as Rosalind Delmar pointed out in her review of this exhibition in *Spare Rib*: ‘In *Women and Work* material from one situation – the point of production – is transferred firmly into the gallery, in a gesture which runs directly counter to those who argue that the purpose of revolutionary artists is to liberate art from the galleries – a sort of “out of the galleries, on to the streets” position.’³⁰

Here was a key challenge: how best to bridge the gap between the worlds of experience (the factory) and representation (the gallery), and how to make art accessible and meaningful to working-class women and non-feminists. As Kelly put it: ‘when I started out I was really thinking about work that could reach other women and I was thinking to myself – I wanted a woman like my mother to be able to get something out of it, you know, not just professionals’.³¹ One way to bridge this gap was to exhibit art locally: *Women & Work* was originally shown at the South London Arts Centre, close to the factory where the research had taken place. Touring exhibitions were another strategy: *Women & Work* went on to tour to trades councils and schools, with the intention that it be archived by the National Museum of Labour.³² The Hackney Flashers were particular advocates of touring. By July 1976 they had received numerous requests to show *Women and Work in Hackney* and had secured Greater London Arts Council Funding to have the show professionally mounted. Their second major project *Who’s Holding The Baby?* was designed as a series of laminated panels that could be easily transported and exhibited. They also produced a slide pack with questions to prompt

²⁹ BL, Mary Kelly, Artists’ Lives interview.

³⁰ Delmar, ‘Women and work’, 201.

³¹ BL, Mary Kelly, Sisterhood and After interview.

³² Delmar, ‘Women and work’, 201.

discussions, and exercises for follow-on work. One prompt suggested: ‘Students could find other images of people “at work” and consider how much they say about work – the processes of production, earnings, hours, conditions, profits etc.’³³ Here, the exhibition is imagined as a starting point for further critical engagement with visual culture, doing pedagogical as well as political and aesthetic work.

This commitment to exhibiting in non-traditional and accessible spaces was put to the test when the Flashers were invited to take part in the ‘Three Perspectives on British Photography’ exhibition at the Hayward Gallery in 1979. A ‘hard and heavy’ internal dispute ensued.³⁴ As she explained in an interview, Sally Greenhill was vehemently opposed to the group’s participation, and left the Flashers when they decided to take part. ‘It hadn’t been designed for that, it had been designed for libraries and community centres, to become a mouthpiece for the people in the pictures, to help them and to present themselves, and I felt it was a negation for it to go the Hayward Gallery.’³⁵ The remaining Flashers made it a condition of their participation in the show that the organisers put on a series of events that both included children and drew attention to the difficulties of accessing art galleries with small children. One event encouraged people to bring their children to see the exhibition on a Monday – when entry was reduced to 50 pence – and then to join a ‘pushchair protest’ outside the Hayward to draw attention to the needs of under-5s. The second event was held in the early evening, with

³³ Women’s Art Library (henceforth WAL), Hackney Flashers box file, ‘Slide notes’ for ‘Who’s Holding the Baby?’

³⁴ BL, C459/28, interview with Maggie Murray, interviewed by Michael-Ann Mullen, 15.1.1993.

³⁵ BL, 1995-04-06, interview with Sally Greenhill, interviewed by Michael-Ann Mullen, 22.2.1994.

a crèche and panel discussion on childcare.³⁶ These events were intended to be provocative and anarchic, complete with a performance by the feminist band The Cunning Stunts and clowns to entertain the children. John Tagg remembered: ‘It sort of teased, it said for one night the Hayward is going to be a village hall for the Southbank, for social issues. I don’t think they [the Hayward management] liked that, they thought it was intrusive, vulgar, and disruptive.’³⁷

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The 1979 childcare events, and the *Who’s Holding The Baby* exhibition they accompanied, were the culmination of a growing interest in childcare and unpaid work. In part this was a reflection of the growing prominence of these themes in the wider WLM.³⁸ It also stemmed from artists’ fieldwork in factories and with other manual workers, which quickly demonstrated that childcare and domestic work were fundamental problems in working-class women’s lives. Many of the subjects of *Nightcleaners* worked at night because they had small children to look after during the day: as one put it, ‘it’s the only kind of job women with kids can do’.³⁹ In another scene a woman explains all the domestic work and childcare to be done during the day, saying ‘if I get round to it [sleep], its usually between 1 and 3’. Another section of the film focuses on the health effects of permanent sleep deprivation and exhaustion, with one woman commenting: ‘the doctor told me to pack it in.’ When Hunt, Harrison and Kelly

³⁶ <https://hackneyflasherscollectiveblog.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/hayward-leaflet.jpg>.

Hackney Flashers website, leaflet advertising two events for under-fives.

³⁷ BL, C459/173/04, John Tagg interviewed by S. Bright, June 2003.

³⁸ Stoller, ‘Forging a Politics of Care’.

³⁹ All quotes from Berwick Street Film Collective, *Nightcleaners* Part 1 (UK, 1975).

interviewed Bermondsey factory workers about their working days they found that ‘all the men described in detail what they did at work...The women didn’t describe anything about being at work, they described everything about before, how they’d gotten the children ready, and they made breakfast and they did this this and this and then went to work, and then they went home and did all this.’⁴⁰ This can also be seen in the Hackney Autobiographies essay by Annie Spike, who is described as ‘Housewife-Nightcleaner’. Spike had come to London from Ireland in 1964 and had three young children. Michael Ann Mullen’s photographs showed her making the bed, at the launderette and the supermarket, giving the children medicine, supervising homework, cooking, and asleep in a chair.⁴¹ As Spike put it: ‘A working woman’s job is a nerve-wracking thing.’⁴² It was clear that unpaid work needed to be understood as an integral part of working-class women’s lives. It presented an immediate political challenge: how could it be more fairly distributed and how could state childcare infrastructure be improved? In this way, feminist artists echoed the concerns of the WLM, with its demand for 24-hour childcare, debates around Wages For Housework and locally-based nursery campaigns.⁴³ As Sarah Stoller has shown, ‘the psychological costs for women of continually navigating between paid and unpaid realms of caring work’ were a key theme for 1970s feminist activism.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ BL, Mary Kelly Artists’ Lives interview

⁴¹ Centerprise, *Working Lives: Volume Two 1945-77*, 107-125.

⁴² Ibid, 110.

⁴³ Camille Barbagallo, ‘24-hour Nurseries: the Never-Ending Story of Care and Work’, in Robert Garrett, Tracey Jensen, Angie Voela (eds), *We Need to Talk About Family: Essays on Neoliberalism, the Family and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 2-21.

⁴⁴ Stoller, ‘Forging a Politics of Care’,

The intersection of paid and domestic work also resonated with artists' personal experiences. Jo Spence reflected on how the Hackney Flashers' work was linked to her memories of a working-class childhood. Spence had been evacuated during the Second World War. After the war, her mother continued to work 12-hour days out of the home. As the Flashers engaged with the theme of childcare provision, Spence felt 'what I was actually doing was going back and looking at how my mother had lived as a working mother. And we were photographing day nurseries, and all the things that had happened to our family that I'd blotted from my mind.'⁴⁵ Although the Flashers' work gave strong support to organized childcare, Spence's own memories were more melancholy and ambivalent, sparking feelings of abandonment that she would go on to explore in her 1980s phototherapy work. For other artists, the experience of becoming a parent was an important influence. Mary Kelly described how *Post Partum Document* was a result both of her encounters with working-class working mothers and her own pregnancy:

I was doing that film [*Nightcleaners*] and then there were these women trying to do their children and their job, and then I did the Women in [sic] Work project and there were the women talking about nothing but what they did at home and there I was pregnant. So I thought, okay, I'm going to see...what is actually overdetermining the sexual social division of labour at the psychological level. [laughs]⁴⁶

While *Post Partum Document* and *Who's Holding The Baby* both took the unequal division of labour as their starting point, they differed radically in their intellectual framework and their artistic approach. For Kelly, the roots of women's double burden were to be found

⁴⁵ BL, Jo Spence interview, 2.

⁴⁶ BL, C1420/55, Mary Kelly interviewed by Margaretta Jolly on 19.3.2010 for Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project.

through a Lacanian investigation of the psychological connection between mother and child. *Post Partum Document* was a highly conceptual piece, combining extracts from Kelly's documentation of bringing up a child in a communal household with quotes from Lacan and material artefacts such as nappy liners and woolen vests. The overall effect was sparse, austere and highly intellectual –a radical intervention in a traditional art space. Where Kelly focused on the internal dynamics of the family, the Flashers based their work on both a structural critique of society, and a critical analysis of the public depiction of women. This was a more directly political approach, demanding better provision of state-run childcare,

The home was becoming a key site for feminist artists, not just as a site of research and analysis, but as somewhere that work was produced and exhibited. A group of artists around Kate Walker carried out an important series of related projects, beginning with the *A Woman's Place* exhibition at 14 Radnor Terrace in South London in 1974. This was strongly influenced by the Womanhouse art project in San Francisco, which had been widely discussed in British feminist circles. *A Woman's Place* gave each artist a room of the house to create an installation: Walker's focused on the kitchen, where a figure in a wedding dress lay under a pile of rubbish, her wedding cake in the gas oven.⁴⁷ Building on this, Walker and her collaborators began the Feministo postal art project, which culminated in an exhibition at the Institute for Contemporary Art in 1977, *Portrait of the Artist As A Housewife*. The project had begun in 1975 as a way for Walker and Sally Gollop to keep in touch after Gollop moved to the Isle of Wight, exchanging small artworks through the post. More women were recruited and Feministo became a large postal art project, involving over a dozen artists and 200 pieces of work.⁴⁸ These

⁴⁷ Battista, *Renegotiating The Body*, 125.

⁴⁸ WAL, Kate Walker slide file, Flyer for 'A Portrait of the Artist As a Housewife, 10th June – 20th July 1977, The I.C.A'.

works had to be small and light enough to be sent through the post, and they had to be created in the chinks of time between housework, childcare and paid work. As Walker described it, ‘this was the only kind of art one can do during children’s TV’. Many artists used traditional women’s craft techniques, for example Walker’s needlework sampler which read “Heart not Art – Homemade I’m Afraid’ and Angela Amesbury’s crocheted plate of bacon and eggs. Materials were often those that were readily to hand: a baby bottle filled with sand, a saucepan sawn in half.⁴⁹ Like Mary Kelly, the Feministo collective brought the detritus – material and emotional – of childrearing and housework into the spaces of contemporary art. As Alexis Hunter remembered: ‘Some people considered the tatty pots, pans and beds of the Feministo installation embarrassing, but it was genuinely radical because it subverted the gallery space into a domestic one.’⁵⁰ Feministo provoked by confronting the viewer with objects that flagrantly declared their domesticity (‘homemade, I’m afraid’).

As well as drawing attention to invisible and unpaid work, the ‘homemade’ nature of feminist art highlighted the obstacles that lay in the way of women’s creative work. *Portrait of the Artist As a Housewife* deliberately declared its distance from the themes, techniques and materials of the conventional art world. Indeed much of this work questioned conventional ideas of artistic technique, suggesting that formal training was less important than the intention and process behind the artwork. According to Jo Spence, photographic skill was not an entry criteria for involvement in the Hackney Flashers. ‘If you were interested in the subject that we were all going to document, then the weak would be helped by the more able. [laughs]’⁵¹ Liz

⁴⁹ Rozsika Parker, ‘Feministo’, *Studio International* 193 (1977), 182.

⁵⁰ WAL, Box: Early Years Women’s Art Movement in Great Britain, Alexis Hunter, Curating as an aesthetic experience’ (m/s, 1997), n.p.

⁵¹ BL, Jo Spence interview, p. 130-131.

Heron joined in part because she wanted to learn how to take photographs. ‘My lack of technical knowledge presented no problems. “Professionalism” was never an issue.’⁵² The Flashers adopted collage techniques partly because they were accessible to anybody with a pair of scissors. Consciously or not, they were working in a longer tradition of female artists using materials that were readily to hand, so deftly captured in the title of Dadaist Hannah Höch’s collage *Cut With The Kitchen Knife* (1919).

An apparent lack of skill could also be a basis for a wider critique of art world norms. Bobby Baker had studied drawing at St. Martin’s college of art, but found her true artistic breakthrough elsewhere:

I started making these little armchairs out of cake, and icing them. They were quite rudimentary, very badly made, but I loved them... Then one night... I made this baseball boot out of cake and I just had... one of the most wonderful moments of my life, when I looked at this very badly made bake and I realized that it was a work of art... This was a sculpture and... it was of equivalent status to the pieces of work that were going on in the British school of sculpture that was represented by St. Martin’s School of Art. These large pieces that were by Anthony Caro. My work could be compared to that. And it was so liberating and so funny and so subversive.⁵³

Baker’s epiphany was not simply the production of the baseball boot, but the juxtaposition of her deliberately amateurish work with that expected from the graduates of elite art schools. What is ‘liberating and funny and subversive’ about her cake is its rejection of a formal hierarchy of skills. *Baseball Boot*, bodged together from sponge and buttercream and icing, punctures the grandiose pomposity of the sculptor in his studio, chipping stone and casting

⁵² Heron, ‘Hackney Flashers Collective’, 126.

⁵³ Quoted in Battista, *Renegotiating the Body*, 68.

bronze. This humour and irreverence had a significant class dimension: in refusing to take itself too seriously ('Heart not art', 'homemade I'm afraid') and in using wool and margarine rather than oil paint or granite, it drew attention to the self-regarding earnestness of the middle-class male art world. Baker went on to create a series of works that used baking and cooking to comment on domestic politics, including a life-size family made out of sponge cake and *Packed Lunch* (1979) a witty performance piece at the Hayward Gallery. Baker invited the audience to eat a packed lunch she had made and placed under each seat. While they did so, she delivered a one-hour illustrated lecture, which described the work involved in making the lunch in mock heroic tones.⁵⁴

Working together was another means to overcome the barriers in the path of women artists. Drawing on the collectivist ethos of the wider WLM, most of the work discussed in this piece was collaboratively produced. Mary Kelly stressed that all her 1970s projects were 'absolutely entrenched in discussion'.⁵⁵ *Nightcleaners* and *Women & Work* were the produce of formalized collaboration, both within an artists' collective and (to a lesser extent) with the subjects of the work. Although a solo piece, *Post Partum Document* was not only a record of the collective experience of childraising, but the piece itself was discussed intensively by a history discussion circle and a Lacan reading group. This iterative process of intellectual debate and artistic production was key to the development of Kelly's body of work. Others, less densely socially and intellectually networked, turned to collaboration as an antidote to isolation. This was most evident in the case of Feministo, whose members were often geographically isolated:

⁵⁴ Battista, *Renegotiating The Body*, 73.

⁵⁵ BL, Mary Kelly, Artists' Lives interview.

It's like talking to somebody else in a visual way. One day Sue sent a crocheted cactus to Kay, and received a crocheted plant the day after...with the postal event you feel your work is valued; you've got the right to take the time you need to work, specially when you have to reply to a work you've received. Sometimes it's very urgent, the images are very personal.'⁵⁶

Here, we can see the importance of an artistic community as a means of creating time – a scarce and precious commodity for most women artists. The Fenix collective (1978-1980) set up by Kate Walker, Monica Ross, Suzy Varty and Su Richardson after the *Portrait of The Artist as a Housewife* exhibition, drew on Feministo's themes of the abrasion of domestic and artistic life, and the difficulties of time and space facing the female artist. Fenix developed a way of working in which the exhibition was created in the gallery space, which remained open to the public throughout the entire process. This both created a protected period of time in which the artists could work together and made the creative process part of the work itself.⁵⁷ As Su Richardson put it: 'This is a way of forcing a situation which will give us space to do large work. It's only this way that the average working woman would get a chance. She can't afford extra space.'⁵⁸ Working collectively, then, was a way of overcoming the issues that specifically plagued women artists: isolation, lack of time, childcare. It also drew on feminist traditions of mutual support and consciousness-raising (in fact, the Fenix collective framed their work

⁵⁶ WAL, Box: Early Years Women's Art Movement in Great Britain, 'Feministo: A Postal Art Event', n.d.

⁵⁷ WAL, Kate Walker slide file, 'Pheonix. Women artists at work, 16-27 January'.

⁵⁸ WAL, Kate Walker slide file, 'Flying in the face of male artocracy'.

specifically in terms of the consciousness-raising tradition).⁵⁹ Jo Spence remembered ‘all those wonderful women’ and the spirit of ‘solidarity’ in the Flashers.⁶⁰ Another member, Helen Grace, recalled her engagement with the group (which lasted less than a year) as a period of ‘dynamic activity and activism...the most valuable period of my life in terms of learning and it shaped everything I’ve done since’.

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Significantly, by 1978 the focus of much feminist art had shifted away from the manual paid labour that had been an important theme in its early years. However, it would be wrong to assume that artists’ attention had simply drifted away from working-class women and their experience. In fact, this turn towards the domestic, and towards personal experience, was the result of doubts about their early attempts at straight-forwardly political representational art. This crisis of representation and legitimacy had political, intellectual, aesthetic and moral aspects, all of which undermined artists’ confidence in the project of capturing other people’s experiences.

Early feminist art, as we have seen, had hoped to bring to wider attention unseen or underrepresented aspects of women’s work, be they the manual labour of older Hackney women, or the ‘second shift’ of the Bermondsey metalbox workers. But in subsequent projects, artists began to feel the need to explain and understand as well as document – and for this a more complex epistemological framework was needed. Mary Kelly felt that her early

⁵⁹ See Sue Bruley, ‘Consciousness-Raising in Clapham: Women's Liberation as ‘Lived Experience’ in South London in the 1970s’, *Women’s History Review* 22 (5) (2013), 717-738.

⁶⁰ BL, Jo Spence interview, p. 137.

‘sociological’ work could draw attention to the dominance of unpaid childcare in women’s lives, but could not explain why this was the case. She became convinced that the importance of children in women’s lives could only be understood through an exploration of psychological, subjective factors, and via an exploration and re-reading of the work of Freud and Lacan. ‘Even though I started the Post Partum Document thinking along more sociological lines, like the father’s role in childcare, and the mother’s role in childcare, increasingly psychoanalysis was important for understanding the kind of subjectivity that we define as femininity.’⁶¹

The Hackney Flashers too came to feel that the documentary approach which had dominated their first *Women and Work in Hackney* exhibition had its limitations. For one, photography was only able to show the viewer what was there – it was unable to represent what was not (yet) there, but should be. This limited its usefulness as a political tool. Maggie Murray remembered a key moment in the development of *Who’s Holding The Baby* when the group hung an interim exhibition of the work that they had done so far. ‘[W]hat we were trying to say was that there was a real problem for women because there were no childcare facilities...and what we showed up on the wall were all these wonderful photographs of children having a good time, at all sorts of facilities...And it has never struck me so strongly before or since just what the drawbacks of photography are...you can’t show something that’s missing.’⁶² The Flashers also became critical of their earlier philosophy of photographic representation. It was, they argued in the catalogue for the ‘Three Perspectives on British Photography’ exhibition, misleading to assume or imply that a photograph was a ‘window on the world’. Naturalistic photographs were unable to ‘expose the complex social and economic relationships within

⁶¹ BL, Mary Kelly Artists’ Lives interview.

⁶² BL, Maggie Murray interview.

which women's subordination is maintained.'⁶³ In order to draw the viewer's attention to these social and economic relationships, the group began to juxtapose their documentary photographs with images from advertising, as well as to annotate media images with critical captions.⁶⁴ This technique drew on the work of Victor Burgin – at that time an influential tutor at the Polytechnic of Central London. Spence remembered: 'I took a set of [Burgin's] slides in. well it really did shift the way we work. Instead of the way we were working, which was in a straight documentary mode, suddenly we were taking adverts and taking the piss out of them.'⁶⁵ One panel from *Who's Holding The Baby* superimposed the following caption on top of an image of a glamorous model in a provocative pose:

You've tucked the kids into bed...
slipped into something simple...
taken your Valium...
and you're waiting for him to come home...
mustn't be late for the evening shift at the bread factory.⁶⁶

This was set alongside an advertisement for Cutex nail varnish, underlining the pressure on women to attain glamour and perfection. This panel recontextualised the concerns of the women's movement (paid and domestic labour, mental health, marital obligations) with the

⁶³ 'The Hackney Flashers Collective' in *Three Perspectives on Photography. Recent British Photography* (London: Arts Council of GB, 1979), 80.

⁶⁴ See also Spence's work on representations of women, 'What Do People Do All Day? Class and Gender in Images of Women', *Screen Education*, 29 (1978/9), 29-45.

⁶⁵ BL, Jo Spence interview.

⁶⁶ A reproduction is available on the Hackney Flashers' website:

<https://hackneyflasherscollectiveblog.files.wordpress.com/2013/05/cutex-photomont.jpg>

commercial dreamworlds of fashion and advertising. The viewer was encouraged to identify with the woman described in the caption ('you've tucked the kids into bed...you're waiting for him to come home...') and through a moment of humour (the bathetic punchline of the 'bread factory') asked to question the commercialized and sexualized images of women that surrounded her.

The move away from documentary representation did not mean that the issue of class slipped out of focus. Indeed, the Flashers' critique of popular representations of women was driven by the mainstream media's failure to represent class. 'Images of women consistently cut across class differences and disguise them. Shared roles of wife and mother create the illusion of shared experience.'⁶⁷ Another panel in *Who's Holding The Baby* was headed 'Childcare is a question of money and class', contrasting the different costs of nannies, au pairs and childminders, and the shortage of affordable state-run nurseries. This was a direct critique of 'the representation of women's experience as universal'.⁶⁸ Even artists who had begun with a belief in a shared experience of womanhood began to question this. In a later interview, Mary Kelly reflected at length on how she began to realize that the similarities of women's experience as mothers might be less significant than differences of politics and class:

Like when I did *Post-Partum Document*...we thought this was most women's condition, being with children, and that it seemed amazing ... the art world would just pretend this didn't exist. And then when I finished it I realized of course the work existed, because I wasn't the same. And we had this support thing that we'd kind of built into the commune that would enable me to do the work and have the child. And more and more we've kind of begun to acknowledge how our lives have changed. But

⁶⁷ Heron, 'Hackney Flashers Collective', 130.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

I felt it was also a kind of problem that we have to deal with, in the way that you think some women are just women, right [laughs], and why aren't they able to be something else. Do you sense that? Do you sense it? It's not such a conscious thing but it's the way you think of yourself in relation to other women. I'm just trying to explain that in the beginning of the movement we didn't feel it, didn't feel that separation, but we pretty quickly found out that there were those differences. And as we changed and as we were more empowered by our situation, then we became us and they became them [laughs].⁶⁹

In Kelly's account, the women's movement had actually widened divisions between women. Thanks to living in a political commune and having a partner who was committed to the equality of their careers, she had been able to create *Post Partum Document* and be changed by it ('I wasn't the same'). She and other women in the movement were empowered and united by their political awakening ('we became us'). But they also became more aware of the 'differences' and 'separation' between women. 'Some women are just women and why aren't they able to be something else', she asks the interviewer rhetorically. Kelly identifies a widening divide between the 'them' of 'just women' and the 'us' of the women's movement – and seems daunted by it.

The Flashers had made bridging this divide – between activists and 'other' women – central to their work. Yet they too experienced serious political and even moral dissonance in their attempts to bring the two together. Some of the women featured in the *Women and Work in Hackney* project were uncomfortable with how they had been represented. Jo Spence remembered: 'the women were saying, we're not just victims, you know. Why draw attention

⁶⁹ BL, Mary Kelly, Sisterhood and After interview.

to our low pay, we didn't ask you to, sort of thing. You're just causing problems at work.'⁷⁰ These sorts of critical voices can be found in the exhibition's visitors' book. Two women wrote: 'We thought the exhibition was working women in Hackney, some of it is untrue, some people enjoy their work and are not exploited, my photo appears here and the wording is incorrect.' The next comment concurred: 'A well put together exhibition but captions untrue in certain cases, no exploitation and I strongly object to the inference. We are all working women & I hope doing & enjoying our jobs.' Other visitors felt that the statistics had been 'exaggerated...like the 6p an hour bit'.⁷¹ In this dialogue of sorts between artists and subjects, different narratives of work were in play: work as exploitative and demeaning versus work as something to be thankful for, and and proud about, and possibly even enjoy. In the light of such conflict, Jo Spence became increasingly troubled by the possibility that the Flashers were appropriating working-class experience. For others in the group, like Sally Greenhill, this discomfort grew to unacceptable levels as the group's work moved into elite spaces like the Hayward. The Fenix collective, too, grappled with questions of appropriation, criticizing exhibitions where 'everyday reality was used in the vain hope that in itself reality will make art accessible.' Kate Walker went on: 'This approach used alone is of limited value, and when it uses other people's lives, verging on exploitative.'⁷² Walker raised the possibility that feminist artists, in the hope of engaging working-class women, were merely using them. In the context of the WLM's critique of male appropriation of women and their bodies, this was a question that needed to be taken seriously.

⁷⁰ BL, Jo Spence interview.

⁷¹ Hackney archives, D/S/52/6/15/10. Photocopy of visitors' comments.

⁷² WAL, Kate Walker slide file, 'Flying in the face of male artocracy'.

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Like the WLM it was a part of, the feminist art movement was founded on an understanding of the structural inequalities of class. Artists such as Kelly and the Hackney Flashers were initially drawn to document the specificities of working-class women's lives and their work. It was their understanding of the differences between women's working lives that led them to embed lengthy periods of research into their artistic processes, and to attempt to make both process and finished product accessible to new participants and audiences. This focus on class may well have crowded out other axes of difference and discrimination. What is missing from much of this work is any critical discussion of race and ethnicity. The Flashers, it is true, chose to root their work in an ethnically-diverse neighbourhood, and many of the panels in *Who's Holding The Baby* feature Afro-Caribbean parents and children. Yet any discussion of the ethnic dimension of inequality is implicit. Similarly Natalie Thomlinson points out that although over half of the night cleaners were black, race and racism was not brought to the fore in the film or the wider campaign. It is difficult to argue with her conclusion that '[a] focus on class in the early days of the WLM...had the effect of minimizing other points of difference between women, pushing Black women to the edge of the field of vision where their problems became blurred, distorted or simply not seen.'⁷³

As Kelly tells it, the WLM not only failed to overcome the class divide, it deepened it: 'we became us and they became them'. The story of middle-class 'feminists' versus working-class 'women' is a familiar one and like all familiar stories, it feels in some way comforting and true. But what emerges strongly from this research is that the middle-class feminist

⁷³ Thomlinson, *Race and Ethnicity*, 52.

experience was not a homogenous one.⁷⁴ The ‘us’ used by Kelly describes a very specific experience of feminism: London-based, university-educated, immersed in the 1970s political and intellectual counterculture, a supportive partner, the kin-like relationships of communal living. The experiences of other middle-class feminist artists were very different: the intellectual and artistic isolation of provincial living, a nuclear family in which the woman was both a wage-earner and the primary carer, unsupportive family and friends, little or no time to develop major projects. The view from a terrace in Birmingham was rather different from a political commune in Pimlico. Even within a single group like the Hackney Flashers, there were ‘tremendous differences’. As Jo Spence phrased it: ‘Liz comes from a working class background; Christine’s father a judge, Michael Ann’s father was a, an industrialist millionaire.’⁷⁵ The artists I have examined here had very different access to markets, education, institutions, connections, resources and time. Art could be a way of exploring these complex personal class histories, as for Jo Spence:

To glimpse working class women at their ‘daily toil’ was for me a way of reclaiming my own mother’s identity, and allying myself to it, for her was the world in which she had occupied a place. I began to be aware of my middle classness on this project, and to feel quite uncomfortable with it.⁷⁶

The Fenix collective too, grappled with identities that did not fall easily into established categories of class:

⁷⁴ See also Stevenson, *The Women’s Liberation Movement*, ch. 6 for a discussion of the complexities of class identities in the WLM.

⁷⁵ BL, Jo Spence interview, 145.

⁷⁶ Spence, *Putting Myself In The Picture*, 59.

The generation which this trio represents is the first in which working class women have had access to art education. ... Fenix arises from a paradoxical background: the education of women of working class origins in a pursuit which has been the prerogative of the leisured classes i.e. what is called 'FINEART', mainly white, European, male and middle class.⁷⁷

This lived understanding of the range of women's experience – both between and within classes – informed feminist artists' earnest attempts to understand working-class women's lives. These attempts tried to recognise difference while also seeking common ground on which the WLM might build a united force for change. Yet tuning into working-class lives – albeit with imperfect reception – was an uncomfortable experience. First, as artists paid increasing attention to women's unpaid work, they became increasingly aware of the tension between domestic work and paid employment. This raised questions that did not have easy answers: about the affective bond between mother and child, about men's readiness to become involved in childcare, and about the enormous political task of establishing universal childcare. Secondly, the importance of research in many of these art projects threw up epistemological dilemmas about how much could really be understood about other people's lives. The sociological data-gathering and oral history interviews of the early 1970s offered a more secure evidence base for 'how things really were' than the participative, Lacanian and performative frameworks used in the later period. Thirdly, the self-reflection inherent in most of these artists' practice led to sustained reflection of the intellectual, moral and aesthetic difficulties of representing the experience of others. As a result of this, by the end of the decade most artists had turned away from attempts to represent working-class working lives into a more personal,

⁷⁷ WAL, Kate Walker slide file, 'Flying in the face of male artocracy'.

psychological artistic mode. This trajectory from the political to the personal adds to our understanding of the complex ways in which the WLM navigated difference. Attempts to integrate working-class voices and experience into feminist art did not seek to paint a unified picture of 'sisterhood' – in fact much of the art discussed here underlined the differences between class experiences. Feminist artist-activists were alive to the nuances of class – not least because they were present in their own lives.

Word count: 9765