

Losing Ground? A Note on Feminism, Cultural Activism, and Urban Space

To effect the total insertion of women into capitalist society would involve the acknowledgment of the “blind spot” of traditional socio-political theorizing: that the reproduction of the species, sexual relations and domestic work are performed under *socially constructed* conditions, not natural ones, and that these tasks are socially and economically necessary.¹

Our intention was not to make art, but effective agitprop.²

Over an eighteenth-month period in the late 1970s, the feminist collective the Hackney Flashers produced a documentary account of a community nursery in North East London, concentrating on the structural difficulties of organising childcare in an exploitative urban environment where the necessary reproduction of life was coming into increasing conflict with the productivity demands of capitalism. The project combined research on childcare facilities, and interviews with parents and workers at the nursery, alongside visual material including photographs, cartoons, and appropriated advertising images. Hung on a series of twenty-nine laminated panels, *Who's Holding the Baby?* was available for hire and was exhibited at community centres, libraries and trade union events across the UK (fig.1).³

I have written elsewhere about *Who's Holding the Baby?* in relation to the contemporary art museum, considering whether the project can continue to fulfil its pedagogic ambitions under altered social and economic conditions of display.⁴ My intention here, however, is to comment in greater depth on how a historical consideration of the Hackney Flashers opens up pressing enquiries around activism and artistic practice in contexts of urban change or gentrification. Given that the collective's working life in the mid-1970s coincides with the beginning of a decades-long decline in welfare capitalism, and we are currently negotiating the ruined aftermath of that decline, it is instructive to explore the salient features of urban change and social reproduction activism captured by the project. Consequently, rather than relinquishing the project to the sepulchral or spectacular effects of the contemporary art museum, by examining the complex social structure

¹ Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality* (Polity Press, 1991), p.129.

² Collective member Liz Heron writing on her personal blog: <https://lizheron.wordpress.com/tag/agitprop/>. Accessed 15 August 2016.

³ The artists would not grant permission to reproduce sections of the project needed to illustrate this article; however, interested readers can find the images online.

⁴ Victoria Horne, 'The Art of Social Reproduction', *Journal of Visual Culture* 15.2 (Aug 2016): 179-202.

within which *Who's Holding the Baby?* was produced and now circulates, this article aims to separate the original cultural intervention from the art historical representation produced out of it. This would allow us to see how the project captures a moment of historical change in the organisation of social reproduction labour, and why its critique remains – or has become *increasingly* – relevant to contemporary debates about gentrification, gender and the possibility of labour withdrawal or collective resistance. What follows is a series of notes situating the social reproduction activism of the Hackney Flashers in relation to coexistent conditions of the period.

FEMINISM AT HOME

The critique of domestic space and its associated 'homemaking' tasks has long been a prominent feature of art informed by feminist politics. This tradition encompasses diverse examples, including the handcrafted environments of the LA 'Womanhouse' (1972), Martha Rosler's seething video-performance 'Semiotics of the Kitchen' (1975), the UK postal network 'Feministo: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Housewife' (1975-77), and Alexis Hunter's photographic 'The Marxist Housewife (Still Does the Housework)' (1978). For the second-wave feminist movement, emerging in the 1960s, this focus was a logical response to the phenomenon of suburbanisation, with its associated race, class and gender effects, that was taking place as a result of a post-war housing expansion.⁵ Betty Friedan's book of 1963, *The Feminine Mystique*, gave expression to that generation's gathering discontent; the paradigm of the isolated and frustrated middle-class housewife was inaugurated, and the suburban home became the locus of women's emancipatory organising. As Kirsten Lloyd points out, however, recent conditions (most notably a financial crisis spurred by risky mortgage debts) demand a shift of emphasis in feminist art history '*from housework to housing*'.⁶ Given the very visible absorption of reproductive work within the productive sphere and, consequently, the deepened imprecision of those already uncertain boundaries, such a shift is certainly required. However, we must be careful not to relinquish the great feminist gains that have been built upon the exaggerated (or at least in need of updating) division between the public and private, and remain cautious of hierarchising the public/urban and private/domestic figures once again.⁷ This shift might also allow us to revisit historical moments, to trace more clearly how women's cultural activism in the areas of life labelled personal, (including childcare and housework) was never secondary, but deeply connected to, public struggles around neoliberal economies and the right to the city.

Who's Holding the Baby? was intended as an intervention into the moral ideologies giving shape to practices of motherhood and childcare, rather than a straight documentary series. And although the collective called on men to share this care burden (by aiming critique at the interdependent structures of capitalism *and* patriarchy), the focus of the project remained on an

⁵ David Harvey traces the history of suburbanization in postwar America and argues that it served the ideological function of refocusing largely white, middle-class desires towards the private, individual and conservative; crucially absorbing surplus-capital and assuring social stability. 'The Right to the City', *New Left Review* 53 (Sept-Oct 2008), 27-28.

⁶ Kirsten Lloyd, 'If you lived here... A Case Study on Social Reproduction in Feminist Art History', in *Feminism and Art History Now* ed. Horne and Perry (London: IB Tauris, 2017). Emphasis added.

⁷ For more on this topic see Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonagh eds. *The invisible flaneuse? Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris* (Manchester University Press, 2006).

urban female subject, recognising her primary role in reproduction and its associated relations of care. Read together, the textured display panels draw critical connections between a series of issues, including poor housing provision, a lack of childcare facilities, surviving on a modest income, and women's mental health. The critique mounted by the Hackney Flashers was especially prescient in targeting pharmaceutical companies and their individualised, medical solutions to what were undeniably public, structural problems.⁸ This occurred within the context of a women's liberation movement that was loudly proclaiming maintenance labour, and reproductive health, to be falsely characterised as private, individual, even shameful problems, leaving women susceptible to those targeted corporate and promotional pressures.⁹

Who's Holding the Baby? asked how we might re-politicise the work of childrearing in face of such powerful ideological adversaries, and presented viewers with a tangible alternative based on solidarity, relationality and collectivism. Regrettably, over the ensuing years, as sociologist Glenda Wall has shown, media representations of socialised childcare and nursery provision have significantly worsened. Wall's detailed analysis describes the cultural construction of 'child-centred' mothering which leaves little room for a mother's own needs and desires, and investment in other activities, including paid work. This, coupled with the competitive language of neoliberal self-responsibility, has consolidated desires for individual solutions predicated on the private family unit.¹⁰

CARE IN THE CITY

The subject of how sexual difference shapes experience of the modern city has historically formed a significant thematic within the development of feminist discourse. Cultural theorists have constructed valuable frameworks — concerning gender, the power of the gaze, and controlled access to social and representational space — to describe how women's urban experience has necessarily been very different to that of men's.¹¹ How women see and are seen has formed the core of these investigations; thus the urban specialist Dolores Hayden has examined ways of making women's elided history visible in the metropolitan landscape.¹² Such investigations cut to the core of contemporary struggles over gentrification, homogenisation, and the displacement of 'surplus' subjects who are no longer considered economically useful.¹³ The position of culture

⁸ The commodification of maternity has reached exceptional levels today: see Victoria Browne, 'The money follows the mum', *Radical Philosophy* 199 (Sept/Oct 2016).

⁹ Arlie Hochschild later described this phenomenon strikingly in *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*, 'I don't believe these lively, inquiring eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old students haven't thought about the problem. I believe they are afraid of it. And since they think of it as a "private" problem, each also feels alone.' (London: Penguin Books, 2012 [1989]).

¹⁰ Glenda Wall, "'Putting family first": Shifting discourses of motherhood and childhood in representations of mothers' employment and child care', *Women's Studies International Forum* 40 (2013): 162-171. I was directed to this essay by Littler et al, 'Life After Work: A Discussion', *Soundings: A Journal of Art and Culture* 56 (Spring 2014): 67-80.

¹¹ Griselda Pollock and Janet Wolff have notably theorised gender, modernity and urban space. For more recent responses to these theories, see D'Souza and McDonagh referenced n.7.

¹² Dolores Hayden, 'Claiming Women's History in the Urban Landscape', in Joan Rothschild ed. *Design and Feminism: Re-visioning Spaces, Places and Everyday Things* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1999): 45-57.

¹³ See, for instance, the pressure group 'Focus E15: Social Housing Not Social Cleansing'. As the *Independent* reported on 29 April 2015, over 50,000 families had been 'shipped out of London Boroughs in the past three years due to welfare cuts and soaring rents', which they also described as a form of 'social cleansing'. Available at:

within these issues is complex (not least for art's well-known entanglement in processes of gentrification), but as Rob Shields argues, representational strategies are vital:

Without attention to gender there is a tendency to represent the city as a generally public space, that is to focus on its street life, leaving out home life within the tenements, flats, dwellings and backyards in which family life takes place. The domestic remains *invisible* in representations of the city as a public "space" which is thought of merely as the built analogue or architectural concretisation of the public "sphere".¹⁴

The geographer Liz Bondi has worked assiduously to draw attention to the numerous ways in which the family, as a key mechanism of social reproduction, exists and thrives in an urban environment – and notably how, alongside class relations, 'gender relations are built into the organisation of the city and ... continue to shape its development.'¹⁵ Bondi's research establishes links from childcare organisation to gentrification and displacement; demonstrating that if campaigners want to combat the social cleansing of cities, some of the solutions will have to start at home. The geographer determines that young men and women may achieve relative parity across their waged and unwaged work, but this commitment to gender equality tends to last only *until the introduction of children into the household*.¹⁶ At this stage, career-driven middle-class women may avoid the reassertion of a care disparity by displacing the burden onto paid professionals, usually other women. This implies that the historic focus on progressing women's working practices through improved access to childcare requires a more holistic re-conception of the ethics and practices of 'work' overall.

Most vitally, Bondi points to the lack of a collective feminist voice in this housing debate; this is the 'best of times for some and the worst of times for others'. Women are cast as simultaneously agents of gentrification (cities have provided emancipatory opportunities for waged employment, housing, and new levels of consumption) and, at the other end of the economic scale, as vulnerable casualties aggressively expelled from their homes as a result of those changes.¹⁷ The aspirational ideology of liberal feminism finds a direct correlation here with that of the creative economy – as both 'success-stories' are predicated on a fundamental clash between the domestic and the public, between productive and reproductive work. Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson have hinted that Britain could today be accurately described as 'a servant economy', as 'there are at least four million people "in service" and the proportion of the population employed by the well-off to

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/over-50000-families-shipped-out-of-london-in-the-past-three-years-due-to-welfare-cuts-and-soaring-10213854.html>. Accessed 15 August 2016.

¹⁴ Rob Shields quoted in Janet Wolff, 'Gender and the haunting of cities', in *The invisible flaneuse? Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris*, ed. Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonagh (Manchester University Press, 2006): 18-28, 23.

¹⁵ Liz Bondi, 'The best of times for some and the worst of times for others? Gender and class divisions in urban Britain today', *Geoforum* 31 (2000): 329-343, 331. See also: 'Gender Divisions and Gentrification: A Critique', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 16.2 (1991): 190-198; 'Gender, Class and Gentrification: Enriching the Debate', *Society and Space* 17 (1999): 261-282. Thanks to Angela Dimitrakaki and Kirsten Lloyd for alerting me to Bondi's research.

¹⁶ Bondi 2000: 335.

¹⁷ Bondi 1991.

do their cooking, cleaning, childcare and gardening *is as high as it was in the 1860s*.¹⁸ Throughout their book, the authors excoriate New Labour's focus on the employment and regeneration opportunities presented by the so-called creative industries, pointing out that:

A large number of people work in the creative industries, broadly defined, although not nearly as many as the hype would suggest. There are three times as many people working in domestic services as there are in advertising, television, video games, film, the music business and design combined; the creative industries represent around one in 20 of the people working in Britain today. Between them they account for 4 per cent of all UK exports of goods and services, but as the NESTA report made clear, it is hard to make serious money.¹⁹

These figures implode the myth of creative industrial regeneration, exposing at its core the replication of a characteristically bourgeois urban subject, one whose freedom is predicated on the unseen reproductive work of others. For Elliott and Atkinson's creative workers, and Bondi's middle-class mothers, achieving and sustaining a bourgeois social position is only possible by displacing what used to be called 'women's work' onto others. As feminists, we need to continue asking how this risk of being declassed is entwined with gender.

ART IN THE CITY

Coincidentally, the very name chosen by the collective indicates some of the more excessive transformations to have sculpted London's landscape over the past four decades. The *Hackney* Flashers: during the 1970s this geographic signifier would have evoked a working-class periphery in the North East of the city, strewn with tower blocks, and deserted warehouses left-over following the deindustrialisation of the area. Indeed, Sheila Rowbotham tellingly recalls relocating to Dalston in the mid-1960s, the train journey seeming 'that we were heading for the end of the known world'.²⁰ At the other end of the spectrum, the borough has now become a byword for hipster chic, more likely to conjure the romanticised post-industrial design aesthetic of artisan coffee shops and the consumer lifestyle of affluent young professionals.

Cities change; and anti-gentrification struggles are not fundamentally opposed to change, or development in the character of an area.²¹ However, urban development does not occur organically, but takes place within concrete historical conditions and uneven social relations. Timon Beyes reminds us that gentrification is not a benign process of urban revitalisation; instead, it involves 'the wholesale, and frequently shockingly brutal "cleansing" and "pacification" of inner-city areas to make them "safe" for middle-class residents.'²² Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel

¹⁸ Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson, *Fantasy Island: Waking up to the Incredible Economic, Political and Social Illusions of the Blair Legacy* (London: Constable, 2007), 76. Emphasis added. The term 'New Labour' refers to the Labour Party's redefinition under the leadership of Tony Blair, in the run-up to the 1997 UK election. Although no longer in government, the legacies of that rebranding have been carried forward.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 89.

²⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream* (London; New York: Verso, 2000) p.81.

²¹ In 1964, Ruth Glass coined the term 'gentrification' to describe the injustice of displacement that she was witnessing in post-war London. See *Aspects of Change* (London: MacGibbon and Gee).

²² Timon Beyes, quoting Latham (2009), in 'Summoning Art to Save the City: A Note', *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* 15.1 (2015): 207-220, 213.

Ryan, in their celebrated article 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', describe the victims of gentrification as the 'cast-offs of late capitalism', surplus subjects who are 'losing the right to survive in society at all.'²³

A closer look at the exhibition history of *Who's Holding the Baby?* illuminates these transformations with striking accuracy, standing as a salient example of changes to the fabric of the city. Following its display at Market Nursery, the project was exhibited in 1978 at Centerprise Bookshop, a cooperative cultural centre situated on Dalston's bustling Kingsland High Street. '[T]he venue was important,' Rosemary Betterton writes, as 'Hackney had a thousand children on its daycare waiting list and the exhibition was linked to campaigns for nurseries in the borough.'²⁴ After touring various venues across the UK, in 1979 the project was included in the landmark show *Three Perspectives on Photography* at the Hayward Gallery in London.²⁵ This exhibition was not without its tensions and, according to the collective, it 'attracted controversy and some criticism from the art establishment.'²⁶ The subsequent history of these two exhibition sites is valuable in that it points to forty years of mounting urban commodification, and the closure of non-institutional spaces for the dissemination of artistic activism.

From 1971, Centerprise provided an alternative cultural space for the local community, encompassing a bookshop, café, gallery and space for education classes. The bookshop and its associated publishing community has been especially noted for its dedication to recording and disseminating 'marginal' histories from the working-class and black British cultural spheres.²⁷ In 2012, however, Centerprise was forced to close after a lengthy legal battle with Hackney Council. The Council insisted upon bringing annual rent on the property into line with commercial rates in the area rather than continuing the token 'peppercorn' arrangement that had been in place for 42 years. It should be self-evident that non-profit community enterprises cannot compete at the levels established by the commercial sector, and are resultantly forced out of economically 'regenerated' areas. In 2015, however, *Who's Holding the Baby?* returned to the Hayward, included in a thorough survey exhibition intended to shed light on the cultural history of Britain since the post-war period. As Liz Heron writes, 'After much debate on the subject in the past, we have no objection to our work being seen in museum and gallery contexts, because we think it still raises questions about women's work and childcare within a wider political framework.'²⁸

Founded two years previous to Centerprise, and therefore sharing a historical ancestry, the Hayward nonetheless reveals a converse history of this period. The gallery was managed until 1987 by the Arts Council of Britain, after which it became part of the independent arts organisation the Southbank Centre. The Southbank has its origins in the Festival of Britain, and in 2011 celebrated the bicentennial of that event 'with Mastercard', the tagline epitomising the shift from state-funded to corporately-sponsored culture during half a decade. The Southbank has also been

²³ Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification', *October* vol. 31 (Winter 1984): 91-111, 96.

²⁴ Rosemary Betterton, 'Maternal Embarrassment: Feminist Art and Maternal Effects', *Studies in the Maternal* 2.1 (2010): 1-18, 3.

²⁵ *Three perspectives on photography: Recent British Photography*, Hayward Gallery, 1 June – 8 July 1979.

²⁶ <http://hackneyflashers.com/history/>. Accessed 15 August 2016.

²⁷ See for more details: Tom Woodlin, 'Working-class writing, alternative publishing and audience participation', *Media, Culture & Society* 31.1 (2009): 79-96.

²⁸ Liz Heron's personal blog: <https://lizheron.wordpress.com/tag/hackney-flashers-collective/>. Accessed 15 August 2016.

engaged in a legal dispute centred on property rights, since its announcement in 2011 of a £120 million pound development project that would see a historic community skate park transformed into corporate retail venues. The closure of non-institutional or non-commercial spaces (as I explore in the following section) raises concerns over where cultural activism and artwork can be shown, the ideological context of their display, and which visitors are likely to access them. Acknowledging significant changes within the London property market, this discussion is not intended as a unique criticism of the Hayward – the fate of Centreprise illustrates the outcome for cultural organisations that do not conform to competitive economic arrangements – but suggests that the altered landscape of contemporary, creative cityscapes must be a prime consideration when assessing the history and future of activist work. As Andrea Phillips reminds us, today ‘museums and galleries must understand that their survival depends on collaboration with the private sector.’²⁹

In a further twist, in 1984 Deutsche and Gendel Ryan alerted readers to the twinned ‘renewals’ of property (economic capital) and art (cultural capital) in New York City, suggesting that their probable interrelationship was an ethical concern for subjects working in the cultural sector. Since then, of course, a number of agents have sought to harness this correlation in order to ‘improve’ or regenerate specific urban landscapes. Timon Beyes distinguishes three modes in which ‘art is summoned to save the city: as spectacle, as grassroots development and as social work.’³⁰ Most relevant here the third; how art in its post-representational, socially-engaged form today (wherein artists want to do something ‘more social... and more real than art’³¹) instantiates a further phase of art’s incorporation into a contemporary regime of urban development. With the commodification of housing and childcare intensifying, in confrontation with the withdrawal of state funding, to what extent does the autonomous organising of artists’ complement or subvert processes of urban renewal. Does liberal voluntarism simply assuage the fissures in state supported social reproduction? And if that is indeed the case, as others have already discussed, how might it be possible to withdraw or refuse our reproductive and/or artistic labour in face of a care deficit, or to move beyond enforced complicity.³²

ALTERNATIVE SPACES, PUBLIC PROTESTS

The epigraph at the beginning of this article reminds us the Hackney Flashers conceived of their photography practice principally in terms of cultural activism or ‘agitprop’, rather than fine art. The acronym agitprop emerged in use shortly after the October Revolution of 1917, to describe art and design projects explicitly ‘applied to political and agitational ends’. But as John Milner puts it, ‘Agitprop was not a stylistic term; it applied to various forms and... [t]hese new art forms were,

²⁹ Andrea Phillips, ‘Art and Housing: The Private Connection’ in Phillips and Fulya Erdemci, eds. *Social Housing- Housing the Social: Art, Property and Spatial Justice* (Sternberg Press): 143-159, 154.

³⁰ Timon Beyes, ‘Summoning art to save the city: A note’, *ephemera: theory & politics in organization* 15.1 (2015): 207-220, 208.

³¹ Quoted in Harry Weeks, ‘Ethics in Public’, in K. Brown ed. *Interactive Contemporary Art: Participation in Practice* (London: IB Tauris), p.173.

³² Silvia Federici, ‘Wages Against Housework’ 1975.

crucially, defined as public, political and communal in purpose and execution.³³ The criterion of municipal production and consumption is useful here (not only as it is so often in tension with the apparently private concerns of the reproductive sphere), as it points to resonances with recent scholarship on the politics of ‘visual ephemera in public space’.³⁴ This facilitates an understanding of how the Hackney Flashers’ work precedes, and corresponds with, civic modes of cultural activism that became popular within feminist and queer organisations of the 1980s. Moreover, while *Who’s Holding the Baby?* has been limitedly historicised with reference to feminism and photoconceptualism, adopting a material culture framework enables us to trace more clearly the project’s relation to the urban environment in which it was sited.

In the 1960s, London was home to an agitprop revival, with leftist workers’ groups, anti-nuclear campaigners and student radicals experimenting with countercultural street actions and political performance. Rowbotham vividly recalls this artistic-activist milieu in her memoirs of the period; encapsulated in her account by an anti-corporate housing campaign modelled on Ken Loach’s realist drama about homelessness, where the banners and circulated flyers cried: ‘Cathy Come to Centerpoint: It’s Empty’.³⁵ These performative actions harked back to 1930s political theatre, and sculpted the activist environment within which the Hackney Flashers would later emerge. The anti-fascist montages of John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch shared a locus with agitprop and were also an influence on the collective’s cultural resistance, updated in the context of the women’s liberation movement and its demands for revolution in women’s labour conditions, both in and out of the home.

The liveliness of this oppositional culture was predicated, in part, on the availability of free time to organise politically and an abundance of space in which to do so. Kathi Weeks has noted the escalating constriction of such free time from the demands of waged employment during the late twentieth century, and proposes the need for a shorter working-hours movement to carve out ‘hours for what we will’.³⁶ However this temporal revolution would need to be matched by a spatial counterpart; at least in metropolitan centres where peripheral public sites have been likewise enclosed. The developmental history of post-war avant-garde art is greatly bound up with the availability of cheap or unoccupied urban space. And while the post-industrial caverns of New York City have been so well documented as to become familiar, the networks of alternative sites in other cities, including London, have been less well attended to.³⁷ It quickly becomes apparent from looking more closely at the history of feminist art and cultural activism that access to alternative spaces beyond the established gallery circuit was crucial to sustaining the movement. In 1972, the cohort of students at CalArt’s Feminist Art Program was able to arrange the use of a

³³ John Milner, Entry on Agitprop (1996) for *Grove Art Online*, unpaginated. <http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T001136#fullTextLinks>. Accessed 15 August 2016.

³⁴ See Kevin Murphy and Sally O’Driscoll’s edited issue of *Space and Culture* 18.4 (Nov 2015).

³⁵ ‘Cathy Come Home’ was Loach’s hugely successful TV play that screened on BBC 1 to 12 million viewers.

³⁶ Kathi Weeks, “Hours for What We Will”: Work, Family, and the Movement for Shorter Hours’, *Feminist Studies* 35.1 (Spring 2009): 101-127.

³⁷ For a summary of recent publications see: Fiona Anderson, [Review] Preserving and Politicising the Alternative Space’, *Oxford Art Journal* 38.1 (2015): 448-451. For more on NYC’s alternative art system in relation to feminism see Meredith A Browne’s award-winning essay “The Enemies of Women’s Liberation in the Arts Will be Crushed”: A.I.R. Gallery’s Role in the American Feminist Art Movement’, available at: <http://www.aaa.si.edu/essay/meredith-brown>. Accessed 15 August 2016.

condemned mansion at 533 Mariposa Avenue in Hollywood, the scale of the decrepit space enabling outsized experiments that swathed visitors within the student's crafted environments. A few years later Kate Walker spearheaded the collective installation 'A Woman's Place' at the South London Women's Centre at 14 Radnor Terrace. This centre was in fact housed within a squat, a not uncommon option at the time when Councils with unoccupied properties would turn a blind eye to squatters.³⁸ The exhibition generally presented a situation of 'sordid chaos', and in reviewing the show Rozsika Parker emphasised the necessity of such chaotic spaces beyond conventional art structures. As she describes it: 'They worked on the home as a group instead of in isolation, creating a public instead of a private environment.'³⁹ For the Hackney Flashers also, such spatial community-building was evident in not only the content of their project (the derelict building that the community-nursery workers and families were able to occupy and renovate) but also in its dissemination at alternative exhibition sites including Centerprise.⁴⁰

Histories of alternative networks have until recently tended to focus on spaces and processes of production at the expense of reproduction. Of particular relevance is an established account of post-war art's development that concentrates on the anxious relationship between art workers and blue-collar labourers in light of artists' occupations of post-industrial spaces and a number of artists (including Robert Morris and Chris Burden) collaborating with labourers or self-consciously performing manual activities themselves.⁴¹ A consideration of the Hackney Flashers – or the Waitresses, or Martha Rosler, or Feministo – interrupts and expands such an account by refocussing attention on the maintenance function of feminised labour, making it clear that such work was always already there, but at the same time signalling a transformation in the organisation of that sphere of work. The feminist (art) movement probed the divisions between gendered domestic and public spaces (nursery, museum, squat, kitchen), simultaneously reflecting and impelling transformations in the organisation of work more widely, as the public and private, waged and unwaged spheres became increasingly indistinct.

In recent years, the rapid expansion of digital technology has generated great interest in the history of print culture, ephemera and the modes of collective organising associated with those older forms of media. Kevin Murphy and Sally O'Driscoll point to the historical right to speak or make noise as a manifestation of power.⁴² They note that the popular introduction of cheap printing facilitated an expansion in 17th and 18th-century print culture, with revolutionary words and images displayed in homes, taverns and other public spaces. Print ephemera later became central to the public performance of political resistance: from women's suffrage organising and their famous displays of banners, to the abundant leaflets, buttons and flyers of 1960s

³⁸ Amy Tobin alerted me to this history of 'A Woman's Place' in a paper presented at 'Writing/Making/Curating Feminist Art Histories' Conference at Edinburgh College of Art in March 2014. In 2012, squatting was re-categorised as a criminal rather than civil offence, which seems to have put an end to such creative housing alternatives.

³⁹ Rozsika Parker (1975), reprinted in Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1975-1985* (London: Pandora Press, 1987), p.200.

⁴⁰ Alongside Centerprise, London had a rich network of alternative bookshops at the time, including Walter Rodney Bookshop, Gay's the Word, Compendium Books, and Silver Moon. From 1975-81, a Federation of Radical Booksellers even existed.

⁴¹ For more on this topic see: Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

⁴² Kevin D Murphy and Sally O'Driscoll, 'The Art/History of Resistance: Visual Ephemera in Public Space', *Space and Culture* 18.4 (2015): 328-357.

countercultural movements. Moreover, Kate Eichhorn has pointed out how the accelerated development of reprographic technology, particularly xerography, in the late twentieth century, facilitated numerous artistic and political experiments.⁴³ Thus the second-wave feminist movement was marked by a vibrant print culture of magazines, posters, and the circulation of information through photocopies and reading groups.⁴⁴ The affective dimension of these materials should not be overlooked; and it is revealing that, in this later period of economic unrest and disillusionment with the political elite, the Brooklyn Museum mounted an exhibition entitled ‘Agitprop!’, collecting together creative paraphernalia agitating for social change, and including the Hackney Flashers’ *Who’s Holding the Baby?*

The textured layers of images montaged across the display boards capture a range of ephemeral activist interventions including, political demonstrations, urban graffiti slogans, collective meetings, and exhibition flyers. The incorporated leaflets and photographs of nursery marches, with banners and placards, are often set against professional advertising imagery. This exacerbates the collective’s deliberately crude, de-skilled aesthetic, which was an important preference (if not entirely optional due to production constraints), enabling the evasion of the commodified ideals of marketing imagery and crafting a non-hierarchical public discourse. Unlike later feminist-activist artists of the 1980s, such as the Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger, who exploited the graphic aesthetics of consumer culture, the grassroots aesthetic of 1970s print resistance was not slick enough to be reproduced and circulated as spectacular posters (a method of mainstream dissemination that has both pros and cons). Instead as Siona Wilson has suggested, the bulletin board arrangement of *Who’s Holding the Baby?* draws on historical civic models, deriving ‘from the widely used practice of the wall newspaper. Common in factories and other contexts, the wall newspaper was a temporary makeshift collage of information and imagery that served as a leftist alternative to the mainstream press.’⁴⁵

One particular image summarises the Hackney Flashers’ visual montage technique and hints at the public display practices of punk subculture and AIDS activism that would swiftly follow.⁴⁶ ‘Who’s still holding the baby’ exemplifies the DIY aesthetic of the collective, featuring a striking cut-and-paste collage of a wall in Dalston, sprayed with angry graffiti declaring: ‘Where’s my (free) nursery? STAND UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS’. This public intervention was created in the dead of night, and could be seen by members of the public at any time. (That the image was also reproduced on exhibition flyers for Cockpit Gallery signifies its importance to the group.) The very presence of graffiti in a community can be ‘figured by the establishment as violent attack on the social fabric’, yet as Murphy and O’Driscoll point out, its signification tends to depend on the social positioning of the viewer.⁴⁷ A hole has been cut out the photographed building, and another photograph of a busy kitchen scene layered beneath it, revealing the hidden domestic

⁴³ Kate Eichhorn, *The Adjusted Margin* (MIT Press, 2016)

⁴⁴ Prior to the internet, as Eichhorn has convincingly argued, photocopied materials including flyers and leaflets circulating on bulletin boards and in bags, functioned as a form of proto-social media where this digital information is shared online.

⁴⁵ Siona Wilson, *Sex Politics Art Labour* (2015), 159.

⁴⁶ Tara Burk, writing about 1980s AIDS activism points out that, ‘[t]his art/history of resistance is part of a groundswell of collaborative art and activist practices in New York City that seized public display opportunities opened by the city’s derelict buildings from the early 1970s through the 1990s. “Radical Distribution: AIDS Cultural Activism in New York City, 1986-1992”, *Space and Culture* 18.4 (2015): 436-449, 439.

⁴⁷ Murphy and O’Driscoll, 332.

labour of a woman and children taking place within its walls. A banner pasted across the top redundantly asks: 'who's still holding the baby'.

As previously mentioned, the Hackney Flashers display at the 1979 Hayward exhibition was not universally well received. Art critic Brian Sewell reportedly suggested 'it belonged in a village hall' rather than a contemporary art institute.⁴⁸ This icy assessment did not unduly bother the Flashers; in part, I think, because it is not wholly inaccurate. Created for the alternative display spaces that existed, or were proactively seized, in 1970s London, the bulletin boards of *Who's Holding the Baby?* initially depended upon civic engagement, discussion and collective organising. The joke is really on the dated critic, for failing to recognise western contemporary art's imminent expansion into the realm of the social, an impulse that was primarily directed by feminist collectives and artists, including the sociological work of Hackney Flashers.

CONCLUSION

Sarah Schulman's passionate account of urban change in downtown New York introduced the concept of cultural and intellectual gentrification to a broad audience.⁴⁹ This 'gentrification of the mind' is characterised by banalisation, increased conservatism, intensive consumerism, and the replacement of diversity with a suffocating homogeneity. As these homogenising impulses began to creep into urban planning with greater alacrity, the Hackney Flashers countered by revealing how various forces (a paucity of childcare resources, poor housing provision, a lack of mental health services) were functioning to reinforce the marginality and isolation of working-class mothers and their families. The fact that this agitprop project has powerfully resurfaced into institutional contexts - into the collection of a national museum in Madrid, and exhibitions in New York and London - is promising.⁵⁰ At a time when leading accounts of art activism (such as those printed in the popular forum *e-flux*), say nothing on the topic of feminism, it is clear that a materialist analysis foregrounding social reproduction is required to counteract this tendency.⁵¹ Such an analysis demonstrates that the social relations between parents and their nannies, between mothers and fathers and families, between all those that cook, clean and care for us (whether paid or unpaid), are fundamental to sustaining not only urban life but capitalism itself.

As mentioned, the Hackney Flashers work marks a prescient engagement with the decline of welfare – both in practice and ideologically. Today, we are in a further period of reorganisation (even disintegration) of those apparatuses of support, as London undergoes a process of 'social cleansing' orchestrated through housing. However, these transformations have attracted wider attention due to the expanded manifestation of de-classing processes, which are clawing in greater numbers of the lower middle-classes (those historical gentrifiers and 'young urban professionals'

⁴⁸ 'Birdsong meets the Hackney Flashers', blog interview, 11 August 2015: <https://birdsong.london/birdsong-meets-the-hackney-flashers/>. Accessed 13 March 2017.

⁴⁹ Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

⁵⁰ Stills Centre for Photography (Edinburgh) recently pulled another of Jo Spence's collaborative projects out of storage. The Polysnappers' *Family, Fantasy and Photography* (1981) covers comparable terrain to that of the Hackney Flashers, although has much greater focus on the role of media representation in ideologically shaping family life and social relations. See: V. Horne, 'Exhibition Review', *This is Tomorrow*, <http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/jo-spence-1>. Accessed 10 October 2016.

⁵¹ Exemplarily see: Boris Groys, 'On art Activism', *e-flux journal* 56 (June 2009). An exception to this is the international feminist art journal *n.paradoxa's* special issue on 'Art Activism' vol. 23 (Jan 2009).

or yuppies) who are in turn struggling to remain in a city that has been flooded with domestic and overseas investment. It is hoped that the historical details of visual ephemera, activism, agitprop, collective organising and public space can inform us of strategies for inventing pockets of resistance within city space. If the 1970s negotiated the remains of deindustrialisation in cities and the introduction of neoliberal forms of social and economic organising, we are currently in the throes of a later developmental stage of hyper-flexibility gathered under the misnomer 'sharing economy'.⁵² How to insist on understanding housing, property and care not as a commodities but as basic needs and sources of pleasure is once again the key directive going forward.

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⁵² Alex Hern, 'Why the term "sharing economy" needs to die', *Guardian*, 5 October 2015. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/oct/05/why-the-term-sharing-economy-needs-to-die>. Accessed 7 September 2016.