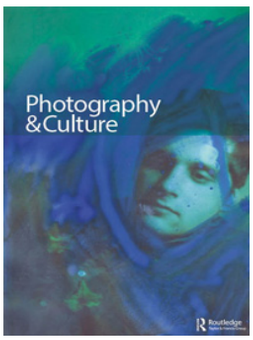

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The Hackney Flashers: Photography as a Socialist Feminist Endeavour

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This article discusses the photographic and cultural activities of the *Hackney Flashers*, an all-women socialist feminist photography collective that operated in the London Hackney borough during the 1970s. The paper explores this group's ' photography projects, the feminist and political arguments they posed, and the various debates informing their practice. This study examines the platforms in which the *Hackney Flashers* exhibited their projects and their distinct political and visual strategies. The study also considers the *Hackney Flashers*' disputed entrance into the Fine Arts institution through their participation in *Three Perspectives on British Photography: Recent British Photography* at the Hayward Gallery (1979) and the subsequent breakup of the group. It reviews the context of the *Hackney Flashers*' participation in this exhibition, considers their contribution to the show, and analyzes the context of their negative reception.

Keywords: Hackney Flashers, socialist feminism, collectives, photography, 1970s Britain

In 1979, a demonstration took place outside the Hayward Gallery, one of the main contemporary art galleries in London at that time.[1] Men and women holding banners demanded free childcare and state recognition of the needs of children under the age of five.[2] The demonstration was followed by a party inside the gallery that featured clowns and a rock music performance by the feminist group Cunning Stunts (Tagg 2003).[3] These events, unusual for a gallery, were organised by the *Hackney Flashers* (1974–1979), a socialist feminist photography collective, participating in the Hayward Gallery's exhibition *Three Perspectives on Photography: Recent British Photography*. This article explores the *Hackney Flashers*' activities and the politics informing their practice. It also considers this group's participation in the Hayward exhibition and reflects on its significance. The *Hackney Flashers* were an all-women photography collective that lived and worked in Hackney – a traditional working class London borough. Their name 'flashers' humorously translates from slang as 'photographers' and alludes to pleasure in publicly exposing private body parts, a metaphor for their photographic exposure of unjust social conditions. The group members were

Jo Spence, An Dekker, Sally Greenhill, Liz Heron, Gerda Jager, Michael Ann Mullen, Maggie Murray, Christine Roche, Sue Treweek, and Julia Vellacott (Heron 1979, 125–126). Other collaborators were Helen Grace, Maggie Millman, Jini Rawlings, Ruth Barrenbaum, Annette Soloman, Arlene Strasberg, and Sue Treweek (The Hackney Flashers 2014). The *Hackney Flashers* consisted of a mix of professional and amateur photographers (Heron 1979, 125). Murray and Greenhill, for instance, were photojournalists and documentary photographers.[4] Spence was a High Street photographer who with photographer Terry Dennet cofounded *Photography Workshop* (1974–1992), a photography collective that advocated using photography as a tool for advancing social change. This position was shared by the *Hackney Flashers* (Murray 2011; Spence 1991; 1986, 26–47, Halfmoon Photography Workshop, Spence and Dennett 2005, 136–213).[5]

Other members had little experience with photography. Heron was a writer for feminist and leftist publications (1979, 126). Decker, originally a sculptress, was a graphic designer, and Roche was an illustrator and cartoonist (Murray 2011).[6] The members came from several different European and North American countries.[7] They had a middle class background with the exception of Spence and Heron, who were working class. Similarly, the members had disparate political backgrounds, such as membership in leftist groups, trade unions, community politics, and the women's movement. Nonetheless, the group defined itself as socialist feminist, viewing capitalism and patriarchy as the sources of social oppression. Furthermore, the group used photography to advocate for local working class women's rights (Heron 1979, 125, Rowbotham 1999, 80 83 and Caine 1997, 257).[8]

The period of the *Hackney Flashers* activity was characterized by financial duress resulting from the global oil crisis, massive unemployment, race riots, and labor strikes. Also, this was the time when the British left redefined itself beyond traditional marxism and trade unionism and made room for new theoretical discourses and political forces. Among these was the women's movement and its diverse and conflicting factions of socialist and radical feminism and, towards the end of the decade, revolutionary and black feminism. Key feminist demands for equal pay, equal education, state funded nurseries, and free contraception, were echoed in the *Hackney Flashers* projects (Rowbotham 1996, 6–10).

The *Hackney Flashers*' activity was also related to the increased use of photography by emerging forms of political activism.[9] This photographic activity was supported by The Arts Council of Great Britain, and its photography subcommittee formed in 1973 by Barry Lane.[10] While not attempting to compete with the art market, the Art Council offered grants to encourage the production and dispersal of photography (Picton, Lane, and Gaskin 1977, 1–2). Photography galleries and photography publications also received support from the Arts Council. Among these was the *Half Moon Photography Gallery*, where the *Hackney Flashers* group was first formed during a planning meeting for the photography project *Women* (1972–74). Spence attended that meeting and interested Murray and Greenhill in the idea for the *Hackney Flashers* (Murray 2011). *Camerawork* (1976–1986), the gallery's journal initiated by *Photography Workshop,* became a platform for socially conscious works by photographers like the *Hackney Flashers* (Dennett 2011).

In the 1970s Britain became a major center for photography theory, which like other politicized photography practices, was driven by activism not confined to academia (Tagg 2012, 17–24). The development of photography theory corresponded with an increasing availability of English translations of texts by non-Anglo-Saxon intellectuals such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Walter Benjamin as well as of contemporary French writing that drew on Lacanian psychoanalysis (MacCabe 1985, 7 and Walker 2002, 5). The Polytechnic of Central

London's photography program became a major center for photography theory. This program's politicized view of photography resembled developments in cultural studies at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies and with "the New Art history" whose links to marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics challenged art history (Tagg 2012, 7–8). Victor Burgin, John Tagg, as well as Murray were among the program's teachers. Spence enrolled as a student in 1980 and was tutored by Burgin (Bezencenet 1986b, 6, Spence 1986, 98, 1991, Murray 2011).

Collective Feminist Activity

The *Hackney Flashers* was a photography collective that, among several groups made feminist contributions to publications, film, and visual art. The *Hackney Flashers* in many ways challenged the marginalization of women and professionalism in the field of photography. Murray recalled that when she started out as a photojournalist, she was rarely sent on interesting assignments as her employers thought that she was not capable of carrying heavy equipment. She mentioned being patronised by male photographers who assumed that she did not know how to use a camera; this sexist attitude led her to deliberately carry a large camera with impressive gadgets (Chappell 1989; Wilmer and Murray 1982, 48). Thus, forming an all-women photography group made a feminist statement. Additionally, the *Hackney Flashers*' promoted an egalitarian climate for women interested in photography (Williams 1986, 176). This goal was addressed by opening the group to inexperienced photographers and by having members share their skills. Spence recalled that one person would start working on a project and have a more skilled member take over (Murray 2011 and Spence 1991). The group held workshops on darkroom techniques, design, and layout methods for both its members and other women. Furthermore, the group credited their works to the 'Hackney Flashers Collective' rather than to individual photographers (Heron 1979, 125).[11]

Other all-women photography collectives similarly challenged the marginalisation of women in the field of photography. Women photographers often engaged in several feminist projects. Among them was the earlier mentioned *Women*, which exhibited at the Half Moon Gallery in 1974 and showed representations of women. Although not overtly feminist, *Women* was among the first photography shows in Britain to exhibit exclusively photographs by women (Williams 1986, 172). This show was planned collectively by Julia Meadows, a volunteer at the gallery (Ewald 2006-2007)[12] and a group of professional and nonprofessional women photographers (Meadows 2011)[13]. Soon after, this group organised *Men* (1976), which portrayed photographs of men (Williams 1986, 172).

Another all-women photography group was *Format Photography Agency* (1983–1993), founded by Murray and Val Wilmer, a photographer participating in *Women* and *Men*.[14] *Format* was the first all-women photography agency in Britain designed to offer employment to professional women photographers. One of *Format's* primary sources of funding was The Greater London Council's (GLC), which like the Art Council supported photography initiatives (Gray et al. 1984, 103). The GLC, however, was abolished in 1986 by Margaret Thatcher's government (Heron 2014). 'The South London Photo Co-Op' in Wandsworth borough, initiated in the late 1970s, was another photo collective funded by the GLC. Similar to *the Hackney Flashers,* it was a community photography project comprising a mix of amateur and professional photographers who campaigned for local borough issues (Boot and Glover 1986, 157). *Format,* nevertheless, was a commercial photography agency that employed collective forms of organisation and decision-making reminiscent of women's movement strategies (O'Brien 2011). Furthermore, *Format*

also covered various women related and social issues (Bezencenet 1986a, 74).

Although organised similarly to other photography collectives, the *Hackney Flashers* were distinguished by their political focus on socialist feminist concerns, their sharing of skills, and their view of photography as an educational political tool.

The Hackney Flashers' Photography Projects

The *Hackney Flashers* produced two major photography projects: *Women and Work* (1975) and *Who's Holding the Baby* (1978). Works from both projects were shown at the *Three Perspectives* exhibition. *Women and Work*, a documentary photography show, was first exhibited in Hackney Town Hall as part of the celebrations for the Hackney Trade Union's 75th Anniversary (Heron 1979, 125). It consisted of around 100 photographs portraying women from Hackney working in offices as well as doing manual jobs and other forms of low paid and unskilled work (Heron 1986, 67). These photographs were captioned with government statistics regarding women's labor and emphasizing their exploitation.[15] One panel incorporated nine black and white photographic portraits of women of varying ages and races during their shifts at a clothing factory (Figure 1).

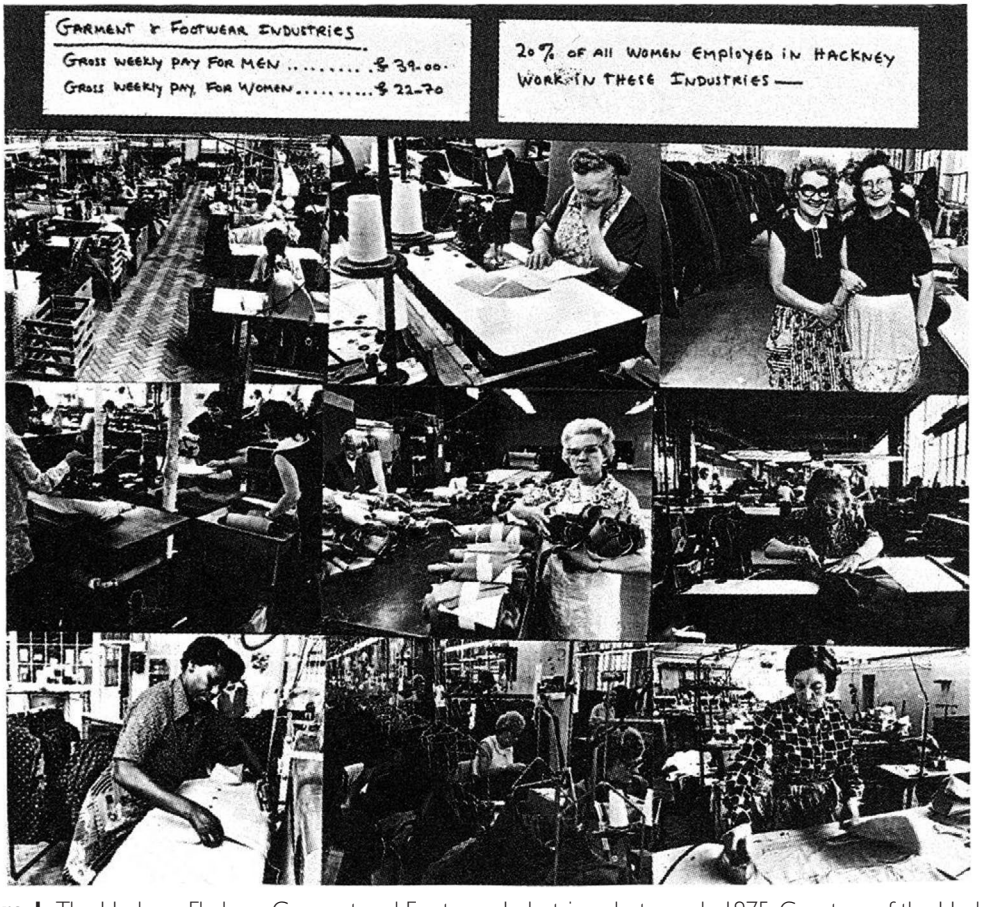

Figure 1. The Hackney Flashers, Garment and Footwear Industries, photograph, 1975, Courtesy of the Hackney Flashers.

Some smile for the camera while others are at work and appear not to notice the camera's presence. Alongside the photographs were captions indicating that in the footwear and garment industries men earned 39.00 lb per week while women made 22.70 £, and that 20% of the women employed in Hackney worked in these industries. The images arguably offer a realistic and perhaps glorified portrayal of these women's everyday life. This mode of representation likely resembles British workers' photography, which centered on working class life and the 'culture of everyday' (Roberts 1998, 59–67) as well as with Ken Loach's documentaries that focused on the experiences of the working class and glorified their work (English 2006, 259). A similar approach can be found in works by the *Amber Collective* formed in the 1970s in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, which employed social documentary photography and film to depict local working class culture (Capet 2009, 162–163).

The *Hackney Flashers* arguably aimed to articulate a shared working class women's 'experience', a notion like that of the initially American feminist position that the 'personal is political' and that personal experience defined a political sense of feminist collectivity (Rowbotham 1996, 6–7). Correspondingly, the *Hackney Flashers* viewed their photographs as a 'window to the world' that captured the underrepresented 'truth' of the lives of working class women in Hackney and conveyed to the local Trade Council that working women were being exploited (1979, 83 and Spence 1991). They also believed that their photographs would offer Hackney women an image of themselves that was underrepresented in the mainstream media (1979, 80).

Who's Holding the Baby, the *Hackney Flashers*' second project, first exhibited at the Centreprise Community Centre was organised in collaboration with the under-fives campaign for state funded nurseries (Heron 1979, 125–129). While *Women and Work* consisted primarily of photographs, *Who's Holding the Baby* included photographs as well as cartoons, advertising images, graphics, texts, and montages.[16] This project advocated a return to the Second World War state policy that made nurseries available so women could work in the factories (The Hackney Flashers 1979a, 83). It also reflected 'The Wages for Housework Campaign' led in 1972 by feminists Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, who argued that housework was a productive activity and should, therefore, include compensation (Kaluzynska 1980, 37–38).

Who's Holding the Baby also challenged media portrayals of women and their social roles. One panel headlined 'Don't Take Drugs Take Action', incorporated a psychiatric drug advertisement that depicted a white working-class woman next to a baby carriage, angrily grabbing her child's shoulder. An enlarged image of the women's agitated face superimposed on the advertisement emphasizes her distressed and anxious expression. The image is captioned: 'Adverse circumstances such as too many children and too little money are recognised as causes for neurotic depression or anxiety neurosis (Figure 2)'.

Below the advertisement was a photograph by the *Hackney Flashers* of a group of Hackney women and children marching with placards captioned: 'Parents must unite and fight' and 'Nursery is my right'. Thus, by juxtaposing these two images, the *Hackney Flashers* aimed to undermine the advert's portrayal of women as passive victims and to argue that women became distressed by adverse social conditions. Among these conditions were the absence of adequate childcare and the necessity to work both outside and inside the home. Moreover, they implied that by taking collective action rather than using psychiatric drugs women were adept at finding their own solutions (1979, 83).

The *Hackney Flashers* focus on mothers resembled other feminist art projects such as

Figure 2. The Hackney Flashers, Don't Take Drugs Take Action, photomontage, 1978, slide 23 from Slide Packet prepared by the Hackney Flashers, 1980, courtesy of the Hackney Flashers.

'Portrait of the Artist as Housewife' (1974), organised by the Bristol-based women's artist group 'Feministo'. This project was a long-distance consciousness raising activity in the form of mail exchanges among women artists living in regions outside London. The participants exchanged works made from domestic objects that addressed their experiences of motherhood, the domestic sphere, and their sense of isolation (Parker and Pollock 1987, 23). Like the *Hackney Flashers*, Feministo operated collectively and politicized the personal. Nonetheless, while the *Hackney Flashers* conveyed the implications of class differences, Feministo universalised women's domestic experience. *Hackney Flashers,* however, despite representing black working class women, overlooked racial differences by universalising them within a broader context of working class women' s experience.[17]

Media Images Advertisement

The *Hackney Flashers*' contestation of media representations of women was related to broader

developments and debates. After the Second World War, as a result of a buoyant economy Britain developed as a consumer society, a process that reached its height in the 1960s. Media images played a significant driving force and often seductively portrayed women and commodities (Brooks 1988, 47). Nonetheless, by the 1970s, advertising and media images of women became a central feminist concern. The analysis and contestation of these images were significant in opposing women's social oppression.[18] The *Hackney Flashers* and some of its members participated in this argument. Spence, for example, published a photograph of herself on the cover of the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* in which she appeared groggy-eyed and without make-up (Figure 3). She provokingly

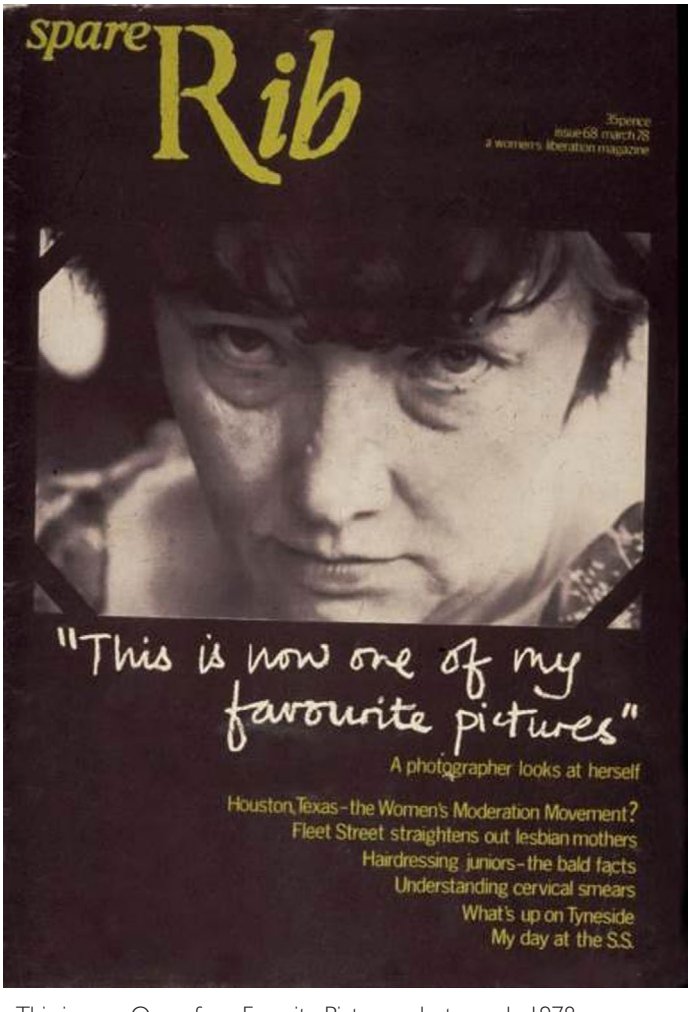

Figure 3. Jo Spence, This is now One of my Favorite Pictures, photograph, 1978, cover page of Spare Rib March 1978, Jo Spence Memorial Archive, Courtesy of Terry Dennett.

captioned this photograph: 'This is Now One of My Favorite Pictures'.[19] Similarly, in her lectures, Murray challenged the portrayals of women in the media by distributing a newspaper to her audience and asking them to count how many images of women it included, in which sections the images appeared, and how many of them depicted half-dressed women (Murray 2011).

Media and advertising representations were also a political focus for British leftist debates around the concept of representation. Some of these exchanges were informed by Louis Althusser, who broke away from expressive and economic deterministic readings of Marxism. Althusser argued that 'ideology' had to be understood as a material practice that was part of, not only the conditions of production, but also 'Ideological State Apparatuses' such as religious, educational and cultural institutions. Althusser suggested that these were the areas in which ideological representations were produced and that they constituted social subjects and organised social relations (1971).

Various politically engaged writers in 1970s Britain similarly viewed media and advertising representations as ideological apparatuses. Judith Williamson's *Decoding Advertisements* (1978) analysed the ideological function of advertisements by drawing on semiotics and psychoanalysis to expose the underlying message of advertisements. She suggested that advertising create a symbolic exchange between people and the connoted meaning of objects and, in so doing, produce a desire for the commodity (1978, 12, 50).

Althusser's ideas are also reflected in Spence's essay 'The Politics of Photography' (1976) written approximately a year into the *Hackney Flashers*' activity. This article suggested that television, cinema, and magazines convey ideological messages that construct social roles and shape our perception of sexual and racial stereotypes (1976). An analysis of the ideological functions of advertisements and their relation to photographic counterpractice was offered by Burgin, whose 1975 essay 'Photography Practice and Art Theory' used Marxist, semiotic, and psychoanalytic tools to unravel the rhetorical structures of advertisements and to construct counterideological messages (1975, 82–83). Burgin applied this approach to his photographic practice. For instance, one of his posters was captioned 'What does possession mean to you? 7% of our population owns 84% of our wealth' (1976) and depicted a slick image of an embracing white upper class couple. Thus, in this work Burgin employed rhetorical tools of advertising to challenge property relationships and to depict heterosexual relationships as property relationships (1986, 17).

The *Hackney Flashers* similarly used the rhetorical language of advertisement to intervene in its structures, attack its messages, and 'reveal' how ads produced ideological messages. This approach can be viewed in the *Who's Holding the Baby* panel and in other works. For instance, one of the *Hackney Flashers'* photographs juxtaposed two images. The first image depicted an advertising displaying a woman wearing an evening dress sprawled seductively on a couch. This part of the photograph was humorously captioned (Figure 4): 'You've tucked the kids into bed, slipped into something simple, taken your valium and you are waiting for him to come home, mustn't be late for the evening shift at the bread factory'. The second consisted of an advertisement for Cutex nail polish depicting a woman's fingernails painted with pink nail polish and captioned: 'Hands seen almost as soon as your face. Touching. Holding. Loving.' Thus, this work highlights the contradiction between advertising's representations of women as either glamorous sex objects or caring mothers. This conflict was implicit in the Cutex ad's focus on the hands and on the life experience of working class women and shift workers (Heron 1980, 18–19).

Despite the similarities between Burgin's and the *Hackney Flashers*' strategy, they differed in their political emphasis. The *Hackney Flashers* work aimed towards a 'genuine' representation of Hackney working class women experience (Spence 1986, 72–74).[20]

Figure 4. The Hackney Flashers, Panel from Who's Holding the Baby – with Cutex Ad, 1978, photomontage, slide 20, from Slide Packet prepared by the Hackney Flashers, 1980, courtesy of the Hackney Flashers.

In contrast, Burgin was not concerned with revealing a prephotographic reality but in decoding the way in which cultural signifying systems such as advertising images created meaning (Price 2009, 106–107).

The Hackney Flashers and Debates around Photographic Representation

The difference between the *Hackney Flashers*' and Burgin's approach towards the political use of photography paralleled conflicting positions within the then developing field of photography. One of the key positions taken by photography theory was to challenge photography's alleged transparency as well as the relationship between photography, political action, and 'truth'. Such positions were manifested in Burgin's writing [21] and practice and also in the writing of Tagg, one of the curators of *Three Perspectives on Photography*. Tagg's essay 'Power and Photography,' published in the "politics of representation" issue of the *Screen Education* (1980),[22] drew on Foucault's writings to suggest that 'truth' captured with a camera was sustained and produced by the institutional practices of power that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century (1988, 92–93).[23] Tagg proposed, for instance, that the camera's use by the police, prisons, and asylums endowed the photograph the function of 'proof'. Thus, Tagg argued that the role of photographs as evidence was not obvious but rather resulted from, a broader history of practices of power (1980, 17–24).

While in *Women and Work* the *Hackney Flashers* considered their photographs as documents conveying an underrepresented 'truth', in *Who's Holding the Baby,* they questioned photography's capacity to depict reality and the subordination of women (1979, 80). Mullen, for example, recalled that as the *Hackney Flashers* became familiar with photography theory they were prompted to challenge media representations of women (2011). She added that they also became concerned with the camera's limitations in visually representing 'lack' of childcare. Thus, they

decided to 'compensate' for what they perceived to be the visual restrictions of photography by incorporating text, illustrations, and advertising images alongside their photographs (2011).

The use of montage resembles Sergei Eisenstein's film and Bertold Brecht's theatre practices that set out to shock the viewer into new understandings of the social field (Mitchell 1998, xiii). The use of montage also evokes John Heartfield's photomontage practices, which criticised capitalism and the work of art as an aesthetic object (Burger 1984, 75 and Spence 1981, 7). Heartfield's works as well as Brechtian ideas were increasingly resurrected in the 1970s in photomontage works by other politicised British photographers, such as Peter Kennard, Peter Dunn, and Loraine Leeson. Heartfield's work was also referenced in Spence's essay 'The Sign as a Site of Class Struggle: Reflections on Works by John Heartfield,' which acclaimed his photomontage for its agitational use of photography. (1981, 2–13).

While the *Hackney Flashers*' were informed by the conflicting photography debates of the times, they also incorporated some of their adversaries' positions. For instance, the *Hackney Flashers* appropriated documentary strategies to convey the experience of working class Hackney women. They used documentary to prompt women's identification with these images and to mobilize them into political action. Nonetheless, informed by photography theory and montage practice, the *Hackney Flashers* questioned photography's transparency and sought to sustain it. For instance they incorporated their own documentary images into their work.

Entering the Fine Arts Gallery

Prior to *Three Perspectives of Photography,* the Hayward predominantly exhibited modern and contemporary shows like *Matisse: a retrospective exhibition at the Hayward Gallery* (1968) and *French symbolist painters: Moreau, Puvis de Chavannes, Redon and their followers* (1972).

While early photographers like Cecil Beaton and Julia Margaret Cameron were exhibited in the National Portrait Gallery, contemporary photography was not yet regarded as art (Charles and Richardson 1988, 75–76). Although photography prevailed in 1970s' conceptual art, it was often used for implying a distance from art values (Roberts 1997, 286).[24] *Three Perspectives of Photography* nonetheless exhibited the diversity of 1970s British photography, which like the *Hackney Flashers*' practice, developed outside art museums and was removed from aesthetic commitments associated with fine art practice (Bate 2009, 5). Burgin, then a member of the Arts Council's Photography Advisory Committee, proposed the show's concept and recommended that three selectors be responsible for different sections. Each of these sections would reflect a particular perspective on photography: Paul Hill's section 'Photographic Truth, Metaphor and Individual Expression' dealt with formulism and photography as fine art; Angela Kelly's section 'Feminism and Photography' dealt with the diversity of feminist photography's contributions; and Tagg's section 'A Socialist Perspective on Photographic Practice' presented photography engaged in socialist and feminist issues. Kelly's section included Ailleen Ferriday's portraits of her working class friends posing in a manner reminiscent of fifties Hollywood glamour images, Christine Leah Hobbeheydar's social documentary photo series "Chriswick Women's Aid" (1978), a refuge center for abused women, and a feminist conceptual work by Yves Lomax that deconstructed the category 'woman' (Hill, Kelly, and Tagg 1979). Tagg's section displayed Alexis Hunter's slide show "Domestic Warfare/ the Wedding Anniversary," which criticized marriage and the *Hackney Flashers* works (Kelly 2010 and Bate 2009, 4–5). Most of the works in Kelly's and Tagg's sections had previously circulated in the alternative press, community centres, libraries, and conferences (Tagg 2003; 1979, 71). Conversely, Hill wished to exhibit photography embodying fine arts qualities and to counter advertising and commercial magazine photography (Kelly 2009).

Although not realised, *Three Perspectives* was intended to be the first exhibition of the British

Art Council's 'British Biennial of Photography'. It was also planned that *Three Perspectives* would be exhibited in photography galleries and museums abroad (Lane 1979b).[25] In retrospect, *Three Perspectives* is often addressed as an influential moment in establishing the status of British photography.[26] However, at the time, it posed a challenge to the fine arts institution and its selections (Kelly 2009).

This exhibition was also a significant accomplishment for feminist photography. Earlier, in 1975 the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union[27] protested outside the Hayward Gallery against its exclusion of women artists. Following this event a group of women artists were invited to select works for the second Hayward Annual exhibition in 1978. Among the works was Mary Kelly's 'Post Partum Document' and photographs by Alexis Hunter, developments which were precursors to *Three Perspectives* (Pollock 1978 and Pollock 1987, 22, 168–169).

The *Hackney Flashers,* however, were initially at odds as to whether to participate in the exhibition. When approached by Tagg, they were divided concerning whether exhibiting their political work in a 'high arts' institution was an act of selling out. The alternative photography agency *Report/I.F.L* also in Tagg's section experienced the same uncertainty.[28] However, they were persuaded that their works' inclusion would beneficially impact an institutional space (Tagg 2003). Similarly, the *Hackney Flashers* decided that their participation would challenge high art and utilize photography as a political tool. They also conditioned their participation on allowing them to host events related to nursery care rather than typical gallery artist's talks (Mullen 2011). Thus, in addition to organizing the demonstration and party mentioned earlier, the *Hackney Flashers* and Tagg organised a talk about nursery care. The *Hackney Flashers* talk about nursery care was chaired by Murray who brought her one-year old son to the panel. Other participants were Tessa Woodcraft, Under Fives Officer of the National Association of Local Government, and Linda Smith from the Southwark Trade Council (The Hackney Flashers 1979b). Among the questions raised at this event were why prams were not allowed inside the Hayward and why the gallery did not provide facilities for young children (Mullen 2011). During this event, the *Hackney Flashers* supplied a crèche as well as children's entertainment (Tagg 2003). Additional events featured by the exhibition were an open slide show for women photographers and a panel on race, class, and sexuality with Burgin, Spence, and Rashid Areen and chaired by Angela Kelly.

The reception of the *Hackney Flashers*' events and works was unfriendly. The Hayward considered the events vulgar and intrusive and the Arts Council investigated the Photography Advisory Committee and eventually abolished it (Bate 2009, 5 and Tagg 2003). A review in the *Evening Standard* attacked the *Hackney Flashers*' work for being something an earnest schoolmistress might pin on a noticeboard in a church hall (1979). A similar criticism was made against the majority of the works in the feminist and socialist sections. For example, a review in *Art and Artists* by Richard Ehrlich criticised the photographers for making polemical arguments rather than displaying photography's special qualities (1979, 37). Likewise, Ian Jeffery suggested that the general attitude guiding Tagg's and Kelly's selections was that 'anything goes as long as we cover the walls' (1979, 47–49).' However, both Ehrlich and Jeffery praised Hill's section for its aesthetic quality. Similarly, a review in *The Guardian,* a major left liberal newspaper, denounced the *Hackney Flashers'* exhibition and argued that the group's 'amateurism was refreshing as it was deceptive' (The Guardian 1978). A review in *Spare Rib* by Laura Margolis, in contrast, was positive towards *Three Perspectives* and particularly towards Tagg and Kelly's section suggesting that they recognized the importance of feminist and socialist work (Margolis 1979, 34–35). The negative reception of *Hackney Flashers* likely was a reaction to the group's transgression of fine arts conventions that ultimately shed light on fine art institution's cultural hierarchies.

Eventually, the *Hackney Flashers*' participation in *Three Perspectives* caused a break in the group. Differences developed within the collective as to whether they should exhibit in a fine arts institution and a number of the *Hackney Flashers*' members left the group. As a result, collective's participation in *Three Perspectives* marked its final major project (Mullen 2011).

The entry of the *Hackney Flasher's* works into the museum and their negative reception can also be viewed in the context of a similar process that feminist art underwent towards the late 1970s. Feministo's 'Portrait of the Artist as Housewife' initially exhibited at provincial galleries and was exhibited in 1977 in the London Institute of Contemporary art (ICA).[29] This show met with a largely hostile reception. According to an article in *Spare Rib*, several male visitors claimed that they did not see why there was a fuss around the show and that its artists were 'miserable, bitter, and twisted.' Additionally, a female visitor accused the artists of wanting to make viewers as unhappy as they were (Parker 1977).

The reaction in the press to Feministo and the *Hackney Flashers* reflected a general dismissive attitude towards exhibiting feminist art and photography in fine arts institutions. Thus, the inclusion of feminist photography at the Hayward also challenged these contemptuous reactions.

In the following decade, the notion of photography as a fine art, as advocated in Hill's section, prevailed along with standards such as aestheticism, commercial value, and individual expression. While photography collectives like the *Hackney Flashers* challenged these very standards, a new generation of British artist photographers, like Karen Knorr and Mitra Tabrizian, who were Burgin's students at PCL, addressed feminist issues but also gave their images 'artistic' treatment and geared them towards gallery exhibitions (Bate 2009, 6; Roberts 1998, 154–155).[30] Socially conscious photography, nevertheless, continued to prevail in the shape of community photography projects and other forms of documentary and reportage.[31]

These shifts in photography coincided with broader cultural and political changes such as Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government coming into power in 1979, its determination to reverse Britain's economic decline, and its advocacy of economic individualism. Thatcher's government also imposed cuts on public bodies like the Arts Council, a step that increased the role of the art market as a source of support for photography (Hewison 1997). These changes compelled photographers to compete according to art market values and demands. The Arts Council continued to fund a number of politically engaged photography projects, yet in the 1980s it began to favor photography projects that would have a market (Bate 2009, 4–6 and Watney 1986, 2).

This article suggests that *Three Perspectives* and its reception marked the shift that British photography would take towards a fine arts exhibition. This development would affect photography's inventive forms of production and display and the diversity of its political arguments.

In 2010, four decades after the *Hackney Flashers*' disintegration, twenty-three panels from the *Who's Holding the Baby* project were acquired by the National Museum Reina Sofía Center of Art in Madrid for the 'Feminist revolution' section of its 'From Revolt to Postmodernity 1962–82' collection.[32] This collection was initiated by Manuel Borja-Villel, the museum's current director and Rosario Peiró, Head of Collections, who saw a need to further explore feminist, social and political photography.[33] Their collection also exhibits works shaped by the 1968 uprisings in Paris, the Cuban Revolution, the rise of feminist movements, the economic crisis and the expansion of popular culture. Moreover, the collection displays practices that challenge fine art conventions and traditional forms of artistic production.[34] Alongside The *Hackney Flashers*' work are photographs of the Spanish feminist artist Ester Ferrer's performance piece 'Intimate and Personal' (1977), for which she measured parts of her nude body in order to criticise women's fetishisation, as well as the

video 'Boy Meets Girl' by the feminist Spanish film maker Eugenia Balcells, which challenges images of romantic couples in Hollywood cinema (1978).[35] In recent years the National Museum Reina Sofía exhibited other political photography exhibitions on the topic of work curated by Jorge Ribalta: *Una luz dura, sin compasión. El movimiento de la fotografía obrera, 1926–1939 (*A Hard, Merciless Light. The Worker Photography Movement, 1926–1939) in 2011 and *Aún No. Sobre la reinvención del documental y la crítica de la modernidad* (Not Yet. On the Reinvention of Documentary and the Critique of Modernism) in 2015.[36] Thus, while the *Hackney Flashers* initially met with hostility by the art museum, there is a current institutional interest in their arguments, visual strategies, and organizational structure. Their contemporary inclusion in the National Museum Reina Sofía Center of Art perhaps corresponds with developments in the institutional reception of feminist and political photography and art practices. Among these is *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution,* which was curated for the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles in 2007 and which offered an extensive international survey of feminist art practices produced around the 1970s. While some participating artists like Judy Chicago and Marina Abramovic were by then canonical figures in the now established art history, others like the Black women's artist group 'Where We At'' and the Native American based group 'Spiderwoman Theater' were less known and were thus offered an institutional platform and recognition of their work.[37]

Furthermore, the current moment of economic crisis, social unrest, and technological developments in image production and circulation perhaps propel a desire to reexamine the interventionist potential of photographic and cultural activity produced in an earlier moment of upheaval.

Conclusion

The *Hackney Flashers* offered a distinct feminist contribution to the field of photography in 1970s Britain. Their work corresponded with debates that took place in the British women's movement and the British left around the concept of 'representation' and the field of photography. Additionally, their activities took place in a period when photography and other forms of cultural activity were viewed as capable of making powerful political arguments and affecting the social field.

The *Hackney Flashers* whose collective form of organization drew on the women's movement strategies challenged the marginalisation of women in the field of photography. Moreover, their inclusiveness toward members with varying degrees of photographic skills and their sharing of photographic skills made a feminist statement regarding the accessibility of photographic practice. Thus, within these contexts, the *Hackney Flashers* viewed their photography projects as a means of communicating their demands for working class women's rights, articulating a shared working class woman's experience, and generating collective political mobilization.

The group's participation in *Three Perspectives on Photography* marked a significant shift in its activity as well as in its cohesion. The *Hackney Flashers*, which initially exhibited outside the art museum, were divided as to whether participating in the exhibition was an act of selling out. While the *Hackney Flashers*' work and activity at the Hayward were negatively received, their inclusion in *Three Perspectives* signals a shift towards the institutionalisation of photography as a fine arts practice. Although this shift was disputed within the *Hackney Flashers*, it marks their contribution to this process of acceptance.

Panels from *Who's Holding the Baby* are currently exhibited in the National Museum Reina Sofía Center of Art in Madrid, arguably their first museum exhibition since *Three Perspectives on Photography*. Thus, in retrospect *Three Perspectives* emerges as an innovative event in the history of photography as well as in feminist photography, bringing together diverse photography practices that belonged to different cultural registers and to conflicting aesthetic and political dispositions.

The current inclusion of the *Hackney Flashers'* work in a fine arts institution is suggestive of a shift in the institutional reception of feminist and politicised photography practices, and of their arguments and forms of production that earlier might have been viewed as controversial.

Additionally, the interest in the *Hackney Flashers* is indicative of a contemporary inclination in feminist museum practices to 'uncover' transnational feminist art practices and to situate them within narratives of feminist artistic activity.

Furthermore, the interest in earlier models of cultural political strategies produced in a moment of social upheaval relates to the present social and economic crisis and its global surges of cultural political activity. Related contemporary developments include demonstrations by the *Occupy Movement*, feminist actions by groups like the Russian *Pussy Riot*, transnational *SlutWalk* marches, and the circulation of political content and images in social networks.

Ultimately, the exhibition of the *Hackney Flashers'* works in a fine arts institution framed it as a historical 'art object' and took it away from its initial sites of circulation, forms of display, and the challenges it posed to fine arts practice. Nonetheless, this development granted their work a visibility that calls for further investigation of the intersections between politics and cultural production, inventive forms of organization, and their interventionist potential.

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Notes

1. The Hayward Gallery, initially operated by the Arts Council, opened in 1968 and exhibited modern and contemporary shows . (Thomas 2006, 465).
2. Maggie Murray, a Hackney Flashers member, mentions that people were transported from a nearby nursery and were given placards to use in the demonstration (Murray 2011).
3. Cunning Stunts were an all-women theatre group formed in 1977. Their shows combined music, dance, mime, magic and acrobatics. They performed in locations such as community centres, housing centres, and the street (Spedding 1978, 30–40).
4. Murray and Greenhill studied photography at the London Regent Street Polytechnic in the 1960s (Williams 1986, 168–169).
5. *Photography Workshop* held free photography workshops on adventure playgrounds where they used an old ambulance as a mobile dark room and exhibition space. This undertaking was influenced by the 'American Floating Foundation of Photography' project during the 1970s, which traveled on the Hudson River by barge, stopping on the way to give lectures on photography (Dennett 2011).
6. Roche joined the group for its second photography project, *Who's Holding the Baby?* Christine Roche e-mail exchange with author 16.8.15.
7. Christine Roche was from French Canada, Gerda Jagger from Germany, Ann Decker from Holland, Michael Ann Mullen from the United Stated, and Liz Heron from Scotland. Christine Roche e-mail exchange with author 16.8.15.
8. –In the early 1970s, socialist feminism prevailed in the British women's movement. Towards the mid-1970s, strands of separatist feminism groups were progressively becoming influential. At the end of the 1970s, Black feminism was increasingly demanding its place within the predominantly white women's movement (Caine 1997, 267).
9. This was manifested in community photography projects, emerging political photography agencies, and a variety of feminist practices.
10. The Arts Council of Great Britain (established in 1946) operated in different British regions and cooperated with government departments and local authorities. It provided employment for artists, fostered national activity in the arts, developed the knowledge of art, and increased accessibility to art (Upchurch 2004, 203–208, 215). Other organisations that funded photography in the 1970s included regional Arts Council organisations, trade unions, local education authorities, private sponsors, various forms of commercial exchanges, and individual museums and galleries (Watney 1986).

11. See pamphlet 'Hackney Flashers Photography and Allied Media Workshop for Women', circa 1975-1979, Jo Spence Memorial Archive.

12. Wendy Ewald, founder and director of the Half Moon Gallery, initially wanted to organise a show of women photographing women. The idea was informed by similar contemporaneous exhibitions in the United States. Ewald ultimately returned to the United States and the project was taken over by Meadows (Meadows 2011).

13. In an e-mail message to the author on 9.11.2011, Meadows mentioned that among the photographers were Maggie Murray, Sally Greenhill, Angela Phillips, Val Wilmer, Claire Schwob, Diane Orson, and Jessie Ann Matthew. Other women who attended the planning meetings included Val Williams, Caroline Forbes, Angela Williams, Dorothy Bohm, and Fay Godwin (Williams 1986, 172).

14. By 1984 the agency consisted of Maggie Murray, Val Wilmer, Pam Isherwood, Joanne O'Brien, Jenny Matthews, Raissa Page, Anita Corbin, and Sheila Gray. They were joined two years later by Brenda Prince and three administrators. (Murray 2010).

15. The Hackney Flashers collaborated with two radical statisticians who worked for the government (Mullen 2011).

16. The cartoons and illustrations are attributed to Christine Roche (Heron 1979, 125–129).

17. Black women workers were depicted in *Women and Work*. A panel in *Who's Holding the Baby,* for instance, portrayed a black working mother alongside a text explaining her need for child care (Spence 1986, 69, 76). Towards the end of the 1970s the issue of race was gaining visibility within the feminist movement. This was manifested for example in the founding of the Asian and Afro-Caribbean feminist group *Southall Black Sisters* in 1979 as well as in a number of publications (Carby 1982 and Southhall Black Sisters 1990).

18. Na'ama Klorman-Eraqi 2014, "Feminism and Photography in Britain in the 1970s and Early 1980s," PhD dissertation, SUNY Binghamton.

19. *Spare Rib,* 68 (March 1978): cover; *Spare Rib* (1972- 1993) initially operated as a feminist collective was founded by Marsha Rowe, Rosie Boycott, and other women who previously worked in the underground press (Campbell 1983, 17). *Spare Rib* had a strong visual component and was designed to serve as a feminist alternative to women's magazines sold on the newsstand (Rowe 1982, 13–15).

20. Cf. John Roberts' discussion on photographic realism in John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption* (1998, 144–145).

21. Burgin's edited anthology *Thinking Photography* epitomises the social and political engagements of photographic theory that emerged in Britain in 1970s among which was questioning the idea of the documentary as truth (Burgin 1982).

22. This paper was originally given as a talk at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London (ICA) in 1979 as part of the series "Over-Exposed: A Look at the Current Situation in Photography," organized by Sarah Kent to coincide with the exhibition "Photography as Art – Art As Photography." (Tagg 2012).

23. Foucault's theories of the Bentham's Panopticon examine its use in prisons to facilitate continuous social surveillance, control, and knowledge production (1975).

24. The largest British conceptual art venue was *The New Art* exhibited at the Hayward gallery in 1972 and curated by Anne Seymour. It included artists such as Gilbert & George, Art and Language, and Burgin (Kelly 2010 and Seymour 1972).

25. The second photography show was planned for 1981; it was to continue the concept of different perspectives on photography and was to include a section on commercial photography. See Barry Lane letter to John Taylor 21 August 1979, in The V&A's Archive of Art and Design, Three Perspectives on Photography exhibition, ACGB/121/1096.

26. *Portfolio: Contemporary Photography in Britain* dedicated its.

50th edition to *Three Perspectives* and considered it to be the occasion that marked the arrival of contemporary British photography into the art world (Bate 2009, 5).

27. Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union, a subgroup of the British Artist's Union formed in 1972 and addressed issues distinct to women artists. Among the group's artists were Mary Kelly, Margaret Harrison and Carol Kenna (Parker and Pollock 1987, 7).

28. Report/I.F.L were among the then-emerging political photography agencies and photography libraries, who set out to offer a 'truthful' alternative to the national newspapers (*Camerawork* 1983–84). Their project, 'A Statistical Survey of Lost Working Days in 1978,' for instance, used photography to document unemployment in Britain.

29. In 1976 Feministo exhibited at the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol, Blue Coat Gallery in Liverpool, Richard Demarco in Edinburgh, Rochdale Gallery and Midland Group Galley in Nottingham (Parker and Pollock 1987, 23).

30. –During this time, the theoretical climate of the photography department was infused with psychoanalytic, linguistic, and feminist theory (Roberts 1998, 154–155).

31. 'Mount Pleasant Photography Workshop' (1977–92) developed by Judy Harrison in South London was a community project funded by the Arts Council which that focused on challenging racism (Harisson 2013); *Photography Workshop* and *Format* both continued to operate until the early 1990s.

32. In an e-mail message to this author on 24 April 2014, Concha Calvo, employed at the Collections Department of the National Museum Reina Sofía Center of Art, mentioned that the *Who's Holding the Baby* panels were not the original version from 1978 but a later version made by Spence around 1980. These were acquired by the Museum in 2010 from Terry Dennett, but the complete set of original panels is held by the Arts Council Collection in Britain.

33. e-mail communication with Concha Calvo, 10 September 2015.

34. http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/collection-3

35. http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/room/room-10407

36. e-mail communication with Concha Calvo, 10 September 2015.

37. Butler, Cornelia H., and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, *WACK!: art and the feminist revolution* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art), 2007.

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