

THE POWER OF MANY

by Tracy Piper-Wright

“Activist photography is intent and process. It is an act and a filter through which a photographer perceives the world. It is a passionate voice and a moral vision.” (Bogre 2011: xii)

Photography has always been used as a tool to highlight the things that are and the things that should be changed, to paraphrase the social documentarian, Lewis Hine. The camera’s ability to dispassionately record has always been its chief advantage; creating records of working conditions and city streets, providing evidence that could support legislative change or showing us life as it is lived. As the principles of ‘documentary’ photography developed, the photographer became a witness to social and political inequalities, her camera a tool in the quest to inform and educate. Documentary’s Latin word root *doc* arises from *docere*, meaning to teach or instruct, highlighting the potential of photographs to become powerful tools in broadening our knowledge about the world.

Through its projects and workshops femLENS has chipped away at the edifice of established knowledge, creating windows and doorways through which women in many parts of the world have shared their experiences. The accessibility of the mobile phone camera and the simplicity of taking a photo and sharing it, is part of this opening up of the visual media landscape to more women. femLENS projects and workshops have ranged far and wide, but it is in their use of social media and in the rousing of women’s voices toward several global campaigns, where we see a new potential for women’s vision not just to tell us stories of how things are, but to actively point to what needs to be changed.

femLENS’ campaigns follow in a tradition of visual activism that began during first wave feminism. Rallying around the central tenet of “the personal

is political”, feminist activists in the 70s and 80s used the democratic and everyday medium of photography to document lived experience and to undermine established tropes found in advertising and the media. This type of practice goes beyond documentary and takes on a political urgency, moving the photographer from the position of witness to advocate. Requiring a different level of personal investment from the photographer, activist photographs are not just ends, but means to a solution, even if that solution is uncertain.

Activist photography is often a life’s work. Pioneering activist photographer Jo Spence saw herself primarily as a photographer-educator and used her practice as an example to others of how photography could be a tool of empowerment. Her work as part of the Hackney Flashers between 1974-79 was key in showing how a political, collective and everyday photography could raise awareness of women’s lived experience. The collective drew together women with different levels of photographic experience in North London communities, producing two major pieces of work: *Women and Work* (1975) and *Who’s holding the baby?* (1978).

Women and Work used images of women in the workplace, most often in factory or piece work settings, alongside commentary which highlighted levels of employment and differences in pay between men and women. Responses to the project highlighted the lack of discussion about childcare for working women, which informed the collective’s next project. *Who’s holding the baby?* explored the difficulties of women caught between the necessity to work and the lack of publicly funded childcare. This second project was far more critical in its intent, exploring how the absence of childcare impacted on women, children and society at

large, and addressed the complexity of women’s roles as mothers and workers inside and outside the home. The work was formed of 23 panels, each exploring a different facet of issue, using provocative titles such as ‘What are mother’s made of?’ and ‘childcare is a matter of money and class’. Each panel comprised photographs and text along with collage, advertising imagery and graphics, making the critical, agitprop nature of the work unmistakable.

Who’s holding the baby? was shown at conferences, trade union meetings, libraries; anywhere it could reach as wide an audience as possible. Its role was to educate, but also to press for actual change and improvement in existing conditions, rather than just depict them. The fact that this was a collective issue, a problem that affected large numbers of women gave it additional weight in terms of its relevance and importance. It proposed a significant counter-narrative to idealised societal ideas of motherhood and childcare, revealing a reality which up until that time was barely recognised or appreciated by society at large.

Contemplating the early years of feminist visual activism can show us how far we have come, and perhaps how far we have yet to go. The nature and scope of activist photography has been transformed by the advent of digital photography, the mobile phone camera and social media. Despite these developments, it’s apparent that the campaigns that femLENS

have instigated via their Instagram platform over the last two years share much in common with the activist principles espoused by Jo Spence and the Hackney Flashers.

The areas of interest in contemporary campaigns echo those which were of concern many decades ago. femLENS’ *Women at Work* campaign sought images that celebrated women’s manual, intellectual and domestic labour. The campaign drew attention to invisible labour carried out in the home under the auspices of being ‘women’s work’, and the intersections of class and economics which valorises some forms of work while diminishing others. The *Mothers at Work* campaign in 2022 followed up on women’s unpaid labour, highlighting the 70% of working women who do all or most of the caregiving at home. The campaign’s focus on the emotional and health impacts of this doubled workload, moves the territory identified by the Hackney Flashers into a contemporary context where the expectation of ‘having it all’ needs to be challenged.

While contemporary and historic campaigns share a focus on issues that have universal impact on women, what differs in the contemporary context is international reach. Economic independence, caring responsibilities, gender-based violence and women’s health are ongoing, shared battles, and femLENS campaigns have brought women from across the world to the collective fight. This is the advantage of social



Image and design by Rudy de Souza for femLENS “Women at Work” campaign, 2022.

media, and femLENS' campaigns form part of a continuing trend of online activism which exploits the instant connectivity of social networks to break down barriers to communication. As Hester Baer argues, digital spaces have been an important strand of contemporary feminist activism:

"Digital platforms offer great potential for broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge." (Baer 2016: 18)

Intersectional feminism recognises shared experiences but also how these are differentiated with regard to culture, ethnicity and economics. The campaigns that femLENS have organised form a kaleidoscope of experiences through which we can understand both what we have in common and where our experiences differ. The acknowledgement of difference and diversity, alongside shared concerns, is the sign of a mature and democratic feminism and one that aims to raise the aspirations and potential of all women.

The shared domain of the social also contributes to the accessibility of women as producers of activist images and texts. With access to a mobile phone, women can make their voice heard without the need for gatekeepers and the wave of feminist activism on social media is evidence of how an event or issue in one part of the world can ripple outward from the local to the global. For Tara L. Conley, the founder of Hashtag Feminism, the power of social media lies in the real time interaction and communication that the platforms enable. Using hashtags to identify key issues, users can follow and contribute to events that are overlooked by mainstream media, leading to the extraordinary impact of campaigns such as #MeToo, #Yesallwomen and #NotBuyingIt.

Conley's Hashtag Feminism is an archive of feminist social media activism between 2013-2015, documenting a key period of time when internet culture and social justice intersected. Conley's site demonstrates how the hashtag can be used as tool to draw together and document discreet strands of activist commentary on a single issue, creating a repository for consciousness raising and future activism. This type of archive

contradicts the perception that social media is ephemeral or disposable and points to an important means through which collective voices can be heard together and maintained for the future.

Over the last two years, femLENS' campaigns have drawn in an ever-wider range of participants to comment on issues ranging from women's protest to environmental awareness, gender bias to affordable housing, offering a polyvalent expression of women's insight and commentary on issues that matter to us all. Social media creates rhizomatic connections between individuals, places and voices; weaving together threads of individual experience that may never have crossed outside of this shared domain. Feminist activists have always used the tools of the everyday, subverting them to reveal new truths and press for change. Contemporary feminist activism uses the everyday tools of social media, subverting the apparent individualistic or superficial aspects to create sites of lasting significance in the campaign to raise women's voices and vision. It's the power of many.

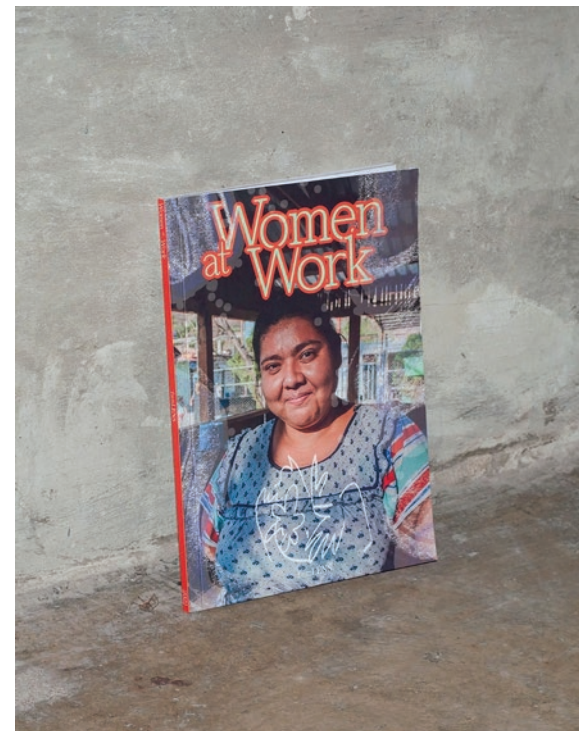


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