

HOME ECONOMICS

11-27 June 2021

Margaret Salmon
Franki Raffles

Essay by
Kirsteen Macdonald

HOME ECONOMICS is an exhibition in the Billiard Room at the Pearce Institute focused on women at work before and during COVID-19. It responds to the GI Festival 2021 theme of 'attention', is influenced by ideas drawn from feminist economics and traces some of the historical foundations of this field through archive material from Govan's industrial past displayed in a vitrine in the foyer of the building. As Professor Sara Cantillon explains, 'the term feminist economics came into use at the beginning of the 1990s, although its origins can be dated much earlier. With gender as a central category, feminist economics seeks a more holistic understanding of the economy (...) and calls attention to the importance of non-market activities, such as childcare and domestic work, to economic development.'¹ In the parallel field of Social Reproduction Theory,² attention is also paid to the effects of gender disparities in both waged employment and work within society more broadly. It considers the daily responsibilities that stop someone from experiencing leisure time and that constitute the binding together of human existence into a collective experience.

It is an understatement to say that over the past fifteen months we have experienced dramatic changes in the way that work is organised and paid. The term furlough instantly became part of our vocabulary as the government began subsidising businesses to stay closed and workers to stop working or to work from home. As school pupils dispersed, the adverse effect of home-schooling responsibilities, especially on women hit the headlines, while a UN briefing published in April 2020 identified a plethora of reasons why in 'every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex.'³ It has been well documented that the current global health pandemic and its management by national governments has disproportionately affected Black and Minority Ethnic citizens, people living on low or no wages, those with disabilities and women. Often, it is the same people who are expected to ease human suffering of the kind we have been experiencing. This raises concerns about a rapid reversal of decades of social progress, not least because women globally are already doing an average of three times as much unpaid domestic and caring work as men, which reduces their capacity to access decent paid employment and financial independence.

At the heart of HOME ECONOMICS is a new 35mm film by Margaret Salmon, *Icarus (after Amelia)*. The film's title and aspects of its narrative structure refer to Amelia Earhart's 1932 solo transatlantic flight from Newfoundland to Paris, interrupted when she landed in a field in Derry, Northern Ireland, after almost 15 hours flying through ice, wind and mechanical problems. Earhart was promptly fed, clothed and sheltered by the family on whose land she appeared, before she left the next day to complete her journey. A long process of conversations and creative collaboration has been critical to the development of Salmon's film, which features musicians Tracyanne Campbell and Donna Maciocia, economist Professor Sara Cantillon, writer Maria Fusco, Kurdish singer and teacher Midya Jan, Govan Allsorts Community Choir, local mothers and workers from businesses and social enterprises including Govan Dental Care, Govan HELP, Govan Pantry, His & Hers Alteration, Jackie's One

Salon, Mother Africa, Morris & Spottiswood, Starter Packs and The Magpie's Nest. In Salmon's words, 'a practical deconstruction of contemporary economics is central to this conversation – beginning with the true sense of the word's etymology – *oikos* (household) and *nomoi* (laws, rules, constraints), or in other words, the laws of ruling or managing a household, and women's central role within the true home economy.'

The film creates equivalence between the paid and unpaid work on which society depends. From her starting point, meeting people inside the Pearce Institute, Salmon went on to film women in their workplaces, their homes, local parks, streets, cafes and from the sky in aerial shots taken from a light aircraft. *Icarus (after Amelia)* is presented here alongside photographic prints and *auto-objects* through which Salmon expands this gendered labour study into a realm of material statements, poetics and puns. The sculptures are collages of objects from her own life and items bought at the Magpie's Nest shop that speak to the original function of this room as a space for men's leisure pursuits. Together, these works are an anthem in celebration of women in their everyday lives, ardently looking at and listening to each individual experience.

The social documentary aspect of Salmon's work is reflected in Franki Raffles' photographs, which have been selected from thousands that she shot for her prolific study of women at work in Scotland and throughout the world during her short career. The images in HOME ECONOMICS record women in Govan and nearby, working in factories, offices and schools, highlighting the shifting and static nature of employment practices and the training initiatives that moved the UK from an industrial to a service-based economy in the 1980s. Raffles took these photographs in 1988–89 prior to her solo exhibition *Women Workers* (of photographs and texts that recorded women at work in the USSR) held at the Pearce Institute as part of the European City of Culture programme in 1990. Raffles didn't present her photographic work as art objects. She said, 'the content of what I'm doing matters much more than the process. I want my pictures to say something (...) I believe that by people opening their eyes and actually seeing, then that's the way to start to change.'⁴ In her exhibition at the Pearce Institute, as with her campaign and education work, testimonies in the women's own words about their experiences of work accompanied the photographs.

Raffles' images include workers in the offices and yard of Kvaerner the year after this previously nationalised shipyard was bought by the Norwegian company in a move that was seen to herald new vitality for Govan's waning shipbuilding industry. Kvaerner stood on the former site of the Fairfield shipyard, the source of funds from which the Pearce Institute was built in 1905–6 by Lady Dina Pearce in honour of her late husband Sir William Pearce, Govan's first MP. Known for their philanthropic work, Lady Pearce and her contemporary Isabella Elder (who took a particular interest in education for women) invested in the architectural and social fabric of Govan by providing facilities for local residents. Nevertheless, the shipyards their husbands had owned made their profits through a form of extraction from the working-class labour force, producing tools for oppression and violence in other countries.

Throughout history, responses to crises have determined and shaped what work is done by whom. During the First World War, 'dilutees' (unskilled men and women) took the place of skilled workers entering new job markets in the industrial economy of factories, healthcare and agriculture. By 1919 around 31,500 women were working in munitions and shipbuilding on Clydeside⁵. Alexander Stephen & Sons in Linthouse were amongst the first to employ women to make up the shortfall caused by the loss of skilled men volunteering for military service. Stephen & Sons built torpedo boat destroyers and undertook repairs, constructed wooden fuselages and wing sections for aircraft, and artificial feet and ankles for the limbless hospital at Erskine.⁶ Alongside another photograph of women working at Stephen & Sons during the Second World War is Leonard McCombe's *Picture Post* photo story on Stanley Spencer, the war artist posted to Port Glasgow in 1943. Spencer sketched women workers in the yard, but his final large-scale paintings are

populated by strong, heroic male characters. Spencer was amongst a number of war artists featured in *Out of Chaos* (1944) by one of Britain's first female documentary film directors, Jill Craigie, a film that argued for the importance of the artist's place in society. Craigie went on to make *To Be a Woman* in 1951 – an entertaining and didactic film that explores a range of views on the political progress of equal pay for equal work.

Identification with industrial action and community protest is critical to the history of workers' struggles. The organisational power of unions waned in the post-industrial economy engineered by the Thatcher government at the time Raffles was commissioned to document the economic regeneration company Govan Initiative in 1988, but the idea of unions as universal champions of workers' rights is somewhat problematic. Following the First and Second World Wars, women working in local shipyards were made redundant with the backing of the unions, setting back the progress made in other public spheres since the suffragette movement. 2021 marks the 50th anniversary of the industrial action and famous speech by Jimmy Reid against the closure of Upper Clyde National Shipbuilders, the nationalised company that included the Fairfield yard. The 1971 Govan Work-In became recognised as a revolutionary tactic of workers' occupation whereby the men remained in the workplace and continued production without pay. It succeeded in illustrating the viability of the company and protecting jobs, but it was also clearly a gendered labour struggle.

By the time Raffles and her colleagues, including Elaine Samson and Evelyn Gillian, were working with the City of Edinburgh District Council's Women's Unit in the mid-1980s, their research into women's working lives revealed a number of key barriers including 'gender stereotyping for school leavers, the lack of childcare facilities, the low status of women's work in catering and domestic roles and the ways in which casual work resulted in low pay.'⁷ These issues underpin campaigns throughout the past century, as feminists formulated concepts such as the 'second shift' and 'emotional labour' to identify unpaid domestic and care work that was traditionally undertaken by women alongside their paid employment. Socialist feminists such as Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, whose thinking was intrinsic to the international *Wages for Housework*⁸ campaign (1972-77), have become the focus of recent attention as historical markers for contemporary propositions such as the Universal Basic Income, anti-capitalist commons and connections between the exploitation of women and the environment.

As we emerge from this strange contemporary moment to reassess the implications of recent social changes, it is imperative that we pay attention to the foundations on which our current models of work and social care were established and consider how this is accounted for politically and socially. In order to heal and repair, and maintain continuity in taking collective responsibility for the health and wellbeing of those around us, new conceptualisations of economics are absolutely essential. This exhibition draws attention to work that has typically been under-represented, ignored or rendered invisible over time. It is an analysis of contemporary life through the lens of feminist thinking in an effort to offer what Salmon calls 'an emotive, intuitive discussion of value, production and hope' with you, the audience.

Kirsteen Macdonald is a curator and researcher based in Glasgow and a founding member of Chapter Thirteen.

References

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² For examples see: Tithi Bhattacharya (Ed.), *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, Pluto Press, London, 2017 and Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour and Social Reproduction*, Pluto Press, London, 2017.

³ Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women, 9 April, 2020. Published by United Nations <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf?la=en&vs=1406>

⁴ Franki Raffles interviewed by Catherine Lockerbie, *The Herald*, 12 July 1988.

⁵ Trevor Royle, *The Flowers of the Forest. Scotland and the First World War*, 2019.

⁶ Administrative history of Alexander Stephen & Sons from the records held at the University of Glasgow archives.

⁷ Alistair Scott, *Re-examining the aims and context of Raffles' photographic practice*, 2017 in 'Observing Women at Work: Franki Raffles' published by The Glasgow School of Art with support from Franki Raffles Archive Project, Edinburgh Napier University.

⁸ Louise Toupin, *Wages for Housework*, Pluto Press, London, 2018.

Other Sources

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