

# LIFE

14 August – 16 October 2021

Forms of Care in  
Art and Activism

# S

# E

# P

# P

# O

# R

# F

Glasgow  
Women's Library

*How have individuals and collectives  
imagined alternative ways of living  
and organising?*

Inspired by Glasgow Women's Library's  
communities and collections, Life  
Support considers how artists and  
activists have addressed and challenged  
experiences of care, health, education,  
housing and home life.

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	4
<b>ACROSS THE BUILDING</b>	8
<b>GROUND FLOOR</b>	10
<i>Conversation with</i> <b>UBUNTU WOMEN SHELTER, ALBERTA WHITTLE and LIFE SUPPORT</b>	17
<b>FIRST FLOOR GALLERY</b>	24
<i>If You Lived Here...</i> <b>VIDEO LOUNGE</b>	27
<i>Conversation with</i> <b>OLIVIA PLENDER</b>	29
<b>READING LIST</b>	32
<b>EVENTS PROGRAMME</b>	34

## INTRODUCTION

*Life Support: Forms of Care in Art and Activism* takes the history, collections and communities of Glasgow Women's Library as a starting point to explore how art and activist production from the 1970s through to the present day have challenged existing systems of care, support and maintenance, and imagined vital alternatives. Presented as part of GWL's 30th anniversary, these interrelated concerns take on a new urgency as the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic continue to impact upon lives across the globe. A series of questions have informed the research for the exhibition: what are the support structures needed to maintain life? Who is included and excluded from them? How have individuals and communities organised to gain access to these systems, and to change them? What expanded notions of 'life support' have been pursued via activism, strikes, and protest, but also ritual, utopianism, and the creation of alternative spaces and domesticities? How might housing and anti-gentrification struggles overlap with ecological concerns and intersectional feminisms? How have artistic communities of care challenged private and state attempts to control whose lives get support?

Bringing together work by artists, archival materials and activist contributions, *Life Support* looks across private life and public infrastructures. With a focus on the intersections between feminist, queer, anti-racist and decolonial thought and organising, the practices gathered here engage with housing, health, and pedagogy, while encompassing myriad themes including ecology, domesticity, food, memorialisation, nurture and sustenance. Rather than drawing clear distinctions between 'art' and 'activism', and between the 'abstract' and the 'political,' *Life Support* seeks to challenge divisions between them. We hope that the result provides a space for feminist thought, reflection, and also action.

The exhibition opens in the foyer with a display of materials relating to GWL's history, drawn from its own archives. Three decades after its founding in 1991, these items afford an opportunity to think about the ways in which GWL has operated as an indispensable feminist resource, providing physical and intangible support for women and non-binary people in a variety of different ways. This centring of the library itself is

then carried throughout the exhibition as it unfolds across the building, from the first floor gallery spaces to the events area, as well as via durational projects. Designed to highlight and enhance GWL's resources, and its active contributions to feminist thinking and struggle, this emphasis on integration is intended to reflect the organisation's enduring spirit of conversation, collaboration, and exchange.

In the ground floor spaces beyond the foyer, artworks and interventions by Kate Davis, Greer Lankton, Alberta Whittle, and Veronica Ryan, together with displays of archival materials, explore questions of care, containment, holding, memory and salvage in different but intersecting ways. The first floor galleries play host to an exhibition within an exhibition of Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here...* (1989-ongoing). Presented in partnership with Living Rent, Scotland's tenants' union, this space features material from Rosler's extensive archive together with contributions from the artist Shona Macnaughton and photographer Franki Raffles, among others, and has been curated with Joey Simons, Keira McLean, Rachel Boyd and Weitian Liu. Making connections between housing struggles in Scotland and transnationally, this collage of voices and perspectives asks us to think about how we define 'home', how healthcare and education intersect with housing, and how the provision of shelter as a basic human need is racialised, gendered and classed. Next door in the Community Room, the artist Olivia Plender has reimaged the space, drawing on her research into feminist healthcare activism and pedagogy.

In recent years, the politics of care has received widespread attention from artists, curators, and institutions alike. As the Covid-19 pandemic further exposes skewed and violently unequal systems to scrutiny, the relevance of this topic has only increased. *Life Support* has evolved within this fractured context, where society's reliance on undervalued gendered labour and infrastructures of care such as housing, education and healthcare has been pressed to the fore. Marginalised communities, particularly cis and trans women, non-binary people, especially Black people and people of colour have borne the brunt of the crises that have ensued. One way that feminists have sought to analyse and understand how the fabric of society is maintained, distorted and, sometimes, reimaged, is through social reproduction perspectives. This term –

social reproduction – encompasses all those life-making activities that enable human beings to survive and thrive. It covers 1) biological reproduction (for example, through pregnancy or the ecosystem), 2) the maintenance of workers over the course of our daily lives, 3) the cleaning of the world, of domestic, commercial and ecological spaces, as elaborated by Françoise Vergès, as well as 4) those activities associated with the production of social values, such as culture and education. These processes are all engaged with in a variety of ways by the materials presented in *Life Support*.

First popularised by feminists in the 1970s, social reproduction perspectives were used to draw attention to undervalued and often unwaged forms of labour – particularly care work associated with the home and with domesticity – to show how these are fundamental to the replenishment of both life and the capitalist economy. In this exhibition, we have expanded this focus to consider the broader infrastructures of social reproduction which also scaffold the formal economy, from education systems to healthcare and the provision of food. The ongoing pandemic has both illuminated the bonds between these different infrastructures, while also foregrounding the necessity to build connections and solidarity across different areas of struggle and movements. We are in agreement with recent theoretical contributions, such as those presented in Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser in their *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto* (Verso: 2019), Lola Olufemi's *Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power* (Pluto: 2020), and Françoise Vergès' *A Decolonial Feminism* (English translation, Pluto: 2021), which make clear that feminism is inseparable from class struggle, queer and trans liberation and anti-racism.

The question of what constitutes a feminist curatorial approach has also consistently shaped our discussions in the development of this exhibition, as a way of working as much as a theoretical guide. Social reproduction perspectives have oriented us towards artworks and materials that negotiate acts of care and support from a structural perspective, and which are able to connect these processes with a variety of wider concerns, from Black radical thought to housing struggles, from transgender health to staff rooms, from food production to processes of

memorialisation and remembrance. These also inform *Life Support's* wider engagement with communities and groups alongside the exhibition itself. At the same time, our methodology has been collaborative, while also trying to recognise different levels of responsibility and areas of expertise. A number of different voices have joined together to create both this booklet and the exhibition. While drawing out shared concerns and connections, we have also tried to retain a sense of this polyphony and the valuable contrasts in approach and thinking it brings. Both the exhibition and the guide offer a range of different formal and conceptual ways about thinking about the theme of 'life support', with the aim of opening up rather than shutting down connections across time periods, media and geographies.

This exhibition is part of a longer ongoing research project, and it consciously does not seek to deliver a definitive statement, but rather to identify processes and politics of care for future exploration. In this respect, the 'living archive' of the Glasgow Women's Library is exemplary in that it is responsive to and supportive of the needs, concerns and histories of the individuals and groups it works with, constituting an evolving organism rather than a fixed point. In celebrating the thirty years of support that GWL has provided, we also seek to trace new stories, collaborations, and histories, looking forward to future forms of support as well as gathering strands from existing archives and histories. While remaining conscious of the violence of the archive, its elisions, marginalisations and oppressions, the practices in *Life Support* consider the act of archiving as a form of resistance, restitution and self-actualisation, inscribing into history and memory. The act of archiving as a form of care recurs across different practices and concerns, and will, we hope, ultimately feed back into GWL's collections and communities.

**GREER LANKTON**

(1980s); please see wall texts for details of specific images. Photographic prints, including photographic print on a flag. Courtesy Greer Lankton Archive Museum

*Life Support* presents the first exhibition of Greer Lankton's work in the UK, featuring photographic prints, digitally reproduced, courtesy of the Greer Lankton Archive Museum. The photographs focus on Lankton's life-size dolls (or figures), captured in staged and constructed everyday scenes – in New York City, and sometimes in shop displays. The dolls themselves are layered sculptures made with plaster, wire clothes hangers, fabric and paint, adorned with taxidermy eyes. They reflect forms of glamour and social life that, in the austerity of NYC in the 1980s, could be fashioned from readily available materials.

In *Sissy Outside Einsteins*, 1986, Sissy sits slouching on a doorstep, smoking a cigarette next to a small white (living) dog, Cherry. In this incarnation, Sissy is a pale figure made up with red lipstick, rouge and strong eye-makeup, donned in a blue apron and black pinafore like a maid. In other works, we find Sissy alongside Lankton's other creations in various states of undress – in frilly underwear, naked, or even with her skin and hair removed, her plaster and wire ribcage and hips exposed. Party scenes such as *VALENTINES D* show the dolls with joy writ large upon their faces; there are also shots of moments of affection, desire, and physical transformation, reflecting the profundity of such experiences.

Lankton modified her creations throughout her life. Some of the dolls – following Lankton's own embodied experiences – are transsexual and underwent gender reassignment surgeries;

others are very skinny or fat. To a conservative viewer, these figures might seem grotesque. And like other extravagant, downtrodden, brilliant but marginalised people, they often had it rough. In a 1984 interview with *i-D Magazine*, Lankton described how her creations have 'all the normal problems that all of us have': 'eating disorders, depression, they can't get jobs, their apartments [are] too small', '[t]hey stay up too late, smoke too much'. Lankton also made life-size works of New York's influential fashion figures, such as *Peggy Moffitt*, 1986 and *Diana Vreeland*, 1989. Echoing themes throughout the show, Lankton's work is threaded throughout the *Life Support* exhibition, including on a flag, flying outside the entrance of the Library on Landressy Street.

**MANUAL LABOURS**

*The Global Staffroom* (2019–21) Manual, podcast and workshop Contemporary Art Research Collection, The University of Edinburgh

Hosted by Manual Labours (Sophie Hope and Jenny Richards), the *Global Staffroom Podcast* is a series of live conversations and interviews with people exploring what it feels like to care, be cared for, and not be able to care at work. Each episode contributes to an ongoing dialogue centred on spaces for rest, socialising, eating and organising in different work settings. While, like the workplace itself, staffrooms are often sites of exclusion and structural injustice, for many they are rarely encountered, as labour conditions become yet more isolated, individualised and precarious. Through these informal lunchtime chats, we are asked to imagine an itinerant staffroom as an intersectional space for politicisation, collectivity and transformation that foregrounds care on the basis of our different needs and desires. Across the 17 episodes a range of topics are explored including gen-

dered and racialised experiences of lockdown, sick pay, the emotional labour of care and health workers, staffroom architecture, food insecurity, care ethics and resistance tactics.

Each phase of Manual Labours' research culminates in a manual that is published and available to download or buy through the website. The first prototype of *Manual #5: The Global Staffroom* is available through the *Life Support* exhibition where it will be expanded, adapted and modified as GWL volunteers, staff and users interact with it. This initial publication is not seen as a final output or conclusion, but rather as a way to activate further dialogues, invite feedback and bring new perspectives to the material. As part of this process, they have worked with the GWL volunteer and staff team to rethink the provision of spaces for breaks in line with restrictions put in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

As part of *Life Support*, Manual Labours have created a listening station complete with useful props where visitors can take a break, read the manual and listen to episodes from the podcast which are being re-released on a weekly basis throughout the exhibition.

Manual Labours welcome your thoughts, feedback and questions. Feel free to contact them via their website: [manuallabours.co.uk](http://manuallabours.co.uk)

**ARCHIVAL COLLECTIONS**

In researching *Life Support*, we have drawn out elements from GWL's own collections, weaving them into the fabric of the exhibition. These include items from the Take Root archive, the Scottish Women's Aid archives, the Castlemilk Womanhouse project initiated by Women in Profile, the *Harpies & Quines* archive, and the Lesbian Archive. These are

combined with resistance materials materials from other collections including the Bishopsgate Institute in London which holds items associated with the Format Photographers Agency, an all-women photographers agency founded in 1983, the members of which took extensive photographs of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, among other events, and the Switchboard Archives for this pioneering LGBTQ+ helpline, founded in 1974 (as London Gay Switchboard). Located in the First Floor Gallery, Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here...* project operates as a 'living archive', evolving and expanding as it travels from place to place. Its invitation to Glasgow has catalysed new work around the development of Living Rent's archive (both analogue and digital) which will continue after the *Life Support* exhibition ends.

**HITHERTO UNKNOWN: TILLIE OLSEN'S READING LISTS**

Book boxes

Tillie Olsen, a communist activist, union organiser, writer and teacher, published a series of four Reading Lists in the Feminist Press's *Women's Studies Newsletter* between 1972 and 1974. Most of the books on these lists reflect a deep interest and investment in understanding power relations in order to attack and change them. Books from the Reading Lists were donated to GWL as part of the *Hitherto Unknown* workshops led by Bechaela Walker and Joey Simons in 2019. Identified by a special bookplate pasted into the inside cover, they are usually shelved with other books in the Main Library. For the duration of *Life Support*, they have been brought back together and are stationed throughout the building in specially designed boxes. As Walker has pointed out, many of the volumes deal specifically with housing issues, whether directly or indirectly.



**KATE DAVIS**

*The Glory of a Great Picture is in its Shame I* (2012). Pencil on paper, digital pigment fine art print. Contemporary Art Research Collection, The University of Edinburgh

On the left-hand side of *The Glory of a Great Picture is in its Shame I*, Kate Davis has used pencil to reproduce a sketch of a small child standing on a plinth, together with an anatomical diagram of the skeleton beneath, taken from an 18th/19th century book which taught people how to draw. On the right-hand side, the artist has created a silhouette of a classical Greek sculpture using a stock advertising photograph, which shows a mother holding a child. The result is a deeply uncanny image, which fragments and re-makes the bodies of the mother and child, while bringing stillness and movement – life and death – close together.

Across her artistic practice, Davis questions how histories might be re-written, and established ideas about representation challenged. The artist has described how: 'My artwork often contests the notion of a "hard history" in order to claim the past as a critical and ongoing process of revisioning'. *The Glory of a Great Picture is in its Shame I* contrasts the detailed, static diagram of the child and the living, breathing bodies in the collage. Yet stock imagery of the kind Davis uses here often reinforces stereotypes about families and gender roles. By placing these modes of representation side by side, Davis's work questions the ideologies perpetrated by both. At the same time, Dominic Paterson notes that, 'at the heart of what Kate tries to do in her work is an aspiration to the drawn line as cutting and joining at once, a kind of radical care'. The material processes of drawing and collage thus also have a reparative effect.

**KATE DAVIS**

*Charity* (2017) Print. Contemporary Art Research Collection, The University of Edinburgh

Kate Davis's print *Charity* shows a white plastic milk carton against a black marbled background. The outline of the carton contains part of a pencil reproduction of a 16th century painting of a woman breastfeeding a baby. Davis overlays a mass-produced household item, which contains sustenance from farmed animals and is intrinsic to the contemporary agricultural-industrial economy, with an image that ostensibly shows unwaged care work or a so-called 'labour of love.' However, by overlaying these images *Charity* undercuts the latter, showing how breastfeeding has always been part of the reproduction of life in a capitalist society. It has throughout history been outsourced by more privileged women, especially by wealthy white women to working class women and women of colour. Childcare and nutrition are sites of significant power imbalance, misogynist condemnation, and the formation of deeply gendered and racialised power constructs which circumscribe and limit notions of parental care.

In a 2017 interview about the larger film project which this print relates to, the artist described how: '*Charity* builds on the essence of my practice, which often uses feminist approaches to rethink the ways in which histories are produced and perpetuated. The production of human milk to feed babies is usually unrecognised as "work" – in economic terms it is unpaid and of no financial value. Yet it has inspired artworks for centuries. *Charity* was a way for me to investigate these contradictory determinations of value through the fallibility and subjectivity of my art practice and personal experience.' The print that Davis made touches

on the experiences of containment, nurture and support, but also the significant pressures, stereotypes and inequalities embedded into constructs of the maternal. It draws attention to an everyday, overlooked object, and uses a feminist lens to highlight the wider social infrastructure of often unacknowledged and unwaged socially reproductive acts that it is intrinsically part of.

**VERONICA RYAN**

*Lamentations in the Garden* (2000) Acrylic on silver bromide prints. Arts Council Collection

*Lamentations in the Garden* is a series of five silver bromide prints of the same repeated photograph, which the artist has overlaid with abstract oval shapes using black and white acrylic paint. Sometimes, these partially obscure the two young girls pictured in the photograph; other times, the shapes veil them entirely. These mixed media pieces are part of a larger body of work that Veronica Ryan produced during a residency at Tate St Ives in 1998–2000. The residency provided an opportunity for Ryan to reconnect with the sculpture of Barbara Hepworth, which she had first encountered as a student. Prior to the residency in 1995, the Soufrière Hills volcano in Montserrat erupted with devastating consequences, burying the lower half of the Caribbean island in ash and mud, including the city of Plymouth where Ryan was born. In response to this environmental disaster, the artist made two reliquary-like sculptures during the Tate St Ives residency, *Quoit Montserrat* (1998) and *Mango Reliquary* (2000) (both in the Tate collection).

In parallel with the two sculptures, Ryan also explored using photographs and acrylic paint as another way to reflect on these events. The photograph in *Lamentations in the Garden* is

a family image of Ryan with one of her sisters, standing in their back garden in London. The work is in part a response to Ryan's loss of siblings to suicide, meditating on the connections between individual grief and collective mourning. The abstract shapes also suggest ideas of protection, containment, and preservation. Recently, Ryan has started working with volcanic ash as a material, and has long noted its mineral richness: 'Paradoxically this ash is very fertile and from the destruction comes the possibility of regeneration'. The shapes here are also infused with connotations of regrowth and re-emergence.

**VERONICA RYAN**

*Particles* (2017) Mixed media. Wakefield Permanent Art Collection (The Hepworth Wakefield).

*Particles* is a tall structure made from a metal shelving unit, onto which the artist has arranged several abstract sculptural forms. These include a tray divided into repeating compartments, stacks of cushions or pillow-like items, a knotted ball of scrunched and ruffled fabric, and fragments that suggest the outer cases of seed pods, nuts or shells. This work was made during a residency that Ryan undertook at the Art House in Wakefield, and co-commissioned with the Hepworth Wakefield – a museum which celebrates the work of the artist Barbara Hepworth. As such, it continues the dialogue with Hepworth's sculpture that Ryan explored in the work that developed from the Tate St Ives residency, including *Lamentations in the Garden*.

While in residence at the Art House, Ryan conducted research at a nearby psychiatric prison for high security inmates and became particularly interested in the padded cell and 'that kind of insulated space'. The pillow-forms

in *Particles* might reference this history of confinement, as well as the use of cushions as supports and props in medical procedures. Ryan's use of stainless-steel shelves to display the objects in *Particles* further underscores these medical qualities, but the shapes and forms also communicate ideas of support, care, salvage and preservation.

In 2004, a large amount of Ryan's work was destroyed in a fire at the Momart storage unit in London. This major loss has obscured the significant connections and continuities across 40 years of the artist's practice. Although *Particles* is very different from earlier works like *Lamentations in the Garden*, displaying different moments from across Ryan's career together in *Life Support* allows us to trace her consistent concern with containment, support and salvage, and with the relationships between inside and outside, personal experience and shared histories.

## VERONICA RYAN

*Cocoa Passion* (2021)

Porcelain. Private collection

Throughout her practice, Ryan has repeatedly returned to the imagery of seeds, pods and organic forms. Made in connection with her 2021 exhibition *Along a Spectrum* at Spike Island, Bristol, *Cocoa Passion* is a small porcelain sculptural edition made from a cast of a cocoa pod, which continues the artist's longstanding interest in a range of fruits, including soursops and mangoes. Ryan has recounted how she is particularly intrigued by the dual connotations of nurture and decay which such vegetal matter might evoke in the viewer: 'I have had this ongoing interest in soursop fruit because they grow in an irregular way – they are all different shapes and sizes. They are also medicinal. Often fruit rots, but if you don't eat soursops within a given amount of time, it just goes hard. I have been quite

intrigued by the way they metamorphose.' *Cocoa Passion* similarly plays on these ideas through its use of porcelain, which renders soft and friable organic matter into a hard and brittle, but also delicate and breakable, object. The result is extremely ambiguous: on the one hand, *Cocoa Passion* is a seed, a point of new life and germination. But rather than a soft, yielding surface, this sculpture would break the teeth of anyone who tried to taste it. The small form provides a direct link back to the bronze objects contained in Ryan's earliest works from the 1980s like *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams* (1985) showing how Ryan continues to work with and develop the ideas that have infused her art practice from the beginning of her career. This can be understood as a mode of artistic life support, whereby forms and ideas are continually revived, developed and regenerated, gathering new associations and implications as they change and grow.

## ALBERTA WHITTLE

Alberta Whittle's close engagement with *Life Support* follows several intersecting paths. As well as producing a new floor sculpture for display amongst existing works, she is collaborating with Ubuntu Women Shelter on a durational project which will include a residency at GWL later in 2021. More information on Ubuntu's work and this partnership can be found in the conversation included in this booklet. The *Life Support* exhibition has also afforded Whittle an opportunity to present her series of three recent films *HOLDING THE LINE: a refrain in two parts, business as usual: hostile environment (a remix)*, and *RESET* simultaneously under the working title *Creating dangerously (we-I insist!)*. Discussing this development of this series over the past year and a half, Whittle has said:

'After a devastating eighteen months of socio-political catastrophe, *Creating dangerously (we-I insist!)* speculates on the optics of protest, channels of refusal, as well as the desire for pleasure and softness. The title of the trilogy entangles research by Edwidge Danticat on the potential for creative action to become a communion between audience and maker, with the title of Max Roach's album, *We Insist: Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite* (1960). Researched and produced as urgent meditations on freedom, this trilogy of films attempts to straddle a sense of looking back and looking forward whilst still being immersed in both epidemiological and political strife.'

*Life Support* provides the chance to think both about the ideas and concerns of each of the these works, but also about how the process of creation itself – its revisions, developments, edits and transformations – bridges the individual and the collective in fundamental ways, constituting an act of care and support in its own right, while constantly balancing the need for

response and action with memory and historical record. In her 2010 essay 'Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work' from which the trilogy takes its name, Danticat asserts: 'there are many possible interpretations of what it means to create dangerously, and Albert Camus, like the poet Osip Mandelstam, suggests that it is creating as a revolt against silence, creating when both the creation and the reception, the writing and the reading, are dangerous undertakings, disobedience to a directive.' This notion of creating dangerously is fundamental to the work Whittle is presenting for *Life Support*, while weaving through many of the interventions and actions in the exhibition.

## ALBERTA WHITTLE

*HOLDING THE LINE: a refrain in two parts* (2020–21) Digital video, 21 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Copperfield London

*HOLDING THE LINE: a refrain in two parts* shows starkly divergent approaches to the act of holding. It contrasts state-sanctioned police violence and its maintenance of white supremacist, neo-colonial containment, with the softness of touch, cradling, mutual support, and group solidarity. Whittle's film incorporates footage taken from body cameras and phones during invasive and aggressive police stop and search during lockdown. This explicitly racist apparatus of control, which continues to be used disproportionately against Black people and people of colour amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, relies on hard bodies for its execution: armoured, weaponised, encased in uniforms and high-visibility jackets. These are contrasted with the fluid movement of protesters shown coalescing in rivers of resistance during the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020, including the moment when activists toppled the statue of Edward Colston into the waters

of Bristol docks. Countering barriers, borders, systemic anti-blackness and police brutality, *HOLDING THE LINE* foregrounds waywardness, following Saidiya Hartman's evocation of this state as: 'the avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or the police. The errant path taken by the leaderless swarm for a place better than here.' Sound is key to Whittle's invocation of waywardness, though the refrain of a sharp-sweet note generated on a quick intake of breath, which then mingles with the moving exhortations of protestors: "No justice, no peace." "Stop killing us." When the sound ceases, and the names of the Black and Brown people who have been killed in the UK by police fill the screen, we are invited to remember together, to keep their names constantly on our lips.

In *HOLDING THE LINE*, hands touch and fingers interlace. A small boy dances and plays in the surf as waves gently break on the shore. A protester swerves and leaps in the air with supple grace. All manifest refusal and resistance using softness, in pursuit of what Hartman calls 'the everyday struggle to live free'.

### ALBERTA WHITTLE

*business as usual: hostile environment (a remix)* (2020–21)

Digital video, 36 minutes.

Contemporary Art Research Collection, The University of Edinburgh

*business as usual: hostile environment (a remix)* is about both long and short journeys over water. It takes a careful look at histories of immigration, and in particular that of the Windrush generation, who, between 1948 and 1971, were invited to the UK from Caribbean countries to help fill post-war labour shortages. Via this history *business as usual* takes infrastructures of healthcare as its focus, pointing to the places where this fragile ecosystem, supported by a diversity of underpaid essential

workers, is threatened by the UK government's continued drive to place profit above human life. Through the lens of the current crisis, Whittle brings our attention to lives less seen, navigating hostile environments fashioned over a long time through imperial imaginations and violent austerity measures. These lives surface in different forms, as a reasoned text, an anxious digital rendering, in intimate conversations and emotive dance scenes, and through voices that shatter 'respectable' lines of silence drawn around them as subjects, resonating deeply and demanding attention.

It is a film with a double consciousness combining a sharp critical focus on recent immigration policies (and longer colonial legacies), designed to exclude those who have put their bodies on the line to offer healthcare and other forms of life support during the pandemic, with a softer view, showing moments of poetry as people move with each other in found footage, expressing grace and poise as well as joy. In amidst this grappling with history and memory a small boat navigates a canal in Glasgow, once part of a support structure for colonial systems, now holding figures at play, sisters doing what they do, and adults guiding them. We are also guided by the different voices in the film, asked both to rebel and resist violent policies but also to give thanks and find hope collectively. Ending with water the film suggests that perhaps its softness is the best response to the hard edges of manmade landscapes.

### ALBERTA WHITTLE

*RESET* (2020) Digital video, 32 minutes. Courtesy the artist and Copperfield London

Completing the trilogy *Creating dangerously (we-I insist!)*, Alberta Whittle's *RESET* is a film meditation of deep healing practices. The film addresses the need for reparative softness

and pleasure in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, the hostile environment and the legacies of colonial violence. *RESET* holds space to feel through the grief that these systems seem to make inevitable for black lives. To this effect, *RESET* immerses us into Black feminist dreams of deep connection with desire, and communion with ancestors through black oceans.

From its opening, close-up shot of the artist's face, juxtaposed with photographs of ancestors and a swimming snake, *RESET* encourages viewers to connect into their own body, initially through breathing, reflection and humming. Structured as three lessons, the film presents texts and performances by collaborators, including writer and poet Ama Josephine Budge and choreographer and dancer Mele Broomes. *RESET* moves through hypnagogic scenes and sounds – dance and singing inside spacious rooms and archives, amid burnt woodlands and beside fountains. Ululations – wavering vocalisations – are invoked to 'soothe withered hearts', and then reflected in drawn out sounds of resonant electronic horns in a score performed by St Mozelle, that shift and bend in pitch.

Connecting the waves within singing, within Black bodies, and within seas, through dreams, *RESET* is charged with currents of solitary desire. It reflects into the 'well of replenishing and provocative force' of the erotic that Audre Lorde writes of in her important essay 'The Uses of the Erotic', that may flow through 'the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough'. The revelations spoken of in the film are strikingly represented in the marbles that 'slip and slither' out of bodies, to be caressed with dancing feet, and to fill the screen with burning colours.

### ALBERTA WHITTLE

*stormy weather skylarking* (2021)

Urethane resin. Courtesy the artist and Copperfield London

Commissioned for *Life Support*, *stormy weather skylarking* extends the soft, uplifting spaces opened up in Whittle's trilogy of films *Creating dangerously (we-I insist!)* out to incorporate GWL's floor space. Here visitors are invited to find their own rhythm and resistance through play. This sculpture riffs off both children's street games and the practice of laying out placeholders for teaching new dances while also hinting at the imposition of other, more oppressive rules and spatial delineations abundant in colonial apparatuses. Pointing to the transgressing footprint, Whittle has said that dance offers a means of evading entrapment, a refusal to 'stay within the lines' as it shifts from set moves to flights of creative improvisation. In this way, *stormy weather skylarking* offers a powerful resistance to inherited rules and the exclusions these create.

### ALBERTA WHITTLE

*Celestial Meditations II* (2018)

*Meditations on Welcome* (2018)

*C is for Colonial Fantasy* (2017)

Digital prints. Contemporary Art Research Collection, The University of Edinburgh

Many of the themes negotiated in Whittle's films and sculptures are anticipated in this earlier set of digital prints. Water as both a life-giving force and a site of catastrophic loss, shorelines as haunted intermedial spaces of arrival and departure and questions of hospitality are all negotiated through collaged fragments of drawings, photography and found imagery which the artist describes as 'a mash up' of different bodies of knowledge.



In *Meditations on Welcome* a figure draped in silver cloth addresses the horizon line at the site where the British first landed on the island of Barbados. Symmetrically overlaid on either side, hands hold aloft a pineapple, replicating a gesture Whittle found in a painting of Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean in which the indigenous inhabitants held the fruit in the air, apparently as a sign of welcome to their European colonisers. By symbolically reproducing this myth, Whittle punctures the sanitised and erroneous version of history it perpetuates.

Alongside the recurring imagery of the pineapple, seashells multiply across this series of works. The vulvic form of a conch shell is centred in *C is for Colonial Fantasy*, where the incessant glare of four detached blue eyes frame repeated images of the artist's splayed body positioned around the shell's opening. Here, the trope of hypersexualised Black bodies is set in explicit relation to the exhausting pressures of the male gaze and the realities of colonial experience.

*Celestial Meditations II* draws upon a similar set of images, this time against a psychedelic landscape of rocky outcrops and heavenly bodies. Apparently captured in the midst of a ritual, Whittle carves out a new almost futuristic space of possibility, healing and rebirth. Yet at the same time, the work signals histories in need of recovery, as denoted by the tartan wrap which points to Scotland's central role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

## Conversation with **UBUNTU WOMEN SHELTER, ALBERTA WHITTLE** and **LIFE SUPPORT**

As part of this project, Alberta Whittle and *Life Support* are collaborating with Ubuntu Women Shelter on a residency at Glasgow Women's Library in Summer/Autumn 2021. The collaboration intends to open and hold space for the women of Ubuntu within GWL – to facilitate a space for creative expression and coming together, to do bodywork and share joy. In the following conversation, Alberta Whittle, Loa Pour Mirza and Amna Ahmed who work with Ubuntu, and Nat Raha from *Life Support*, discuss the collaboration. They speak of the (often traumatising) burden of proof demanded of black and brown women when it comes to requesting resources from the state; and the accessibility of institutional spaces within Glasgow and the UK to women and non-binary people with lived experience of migration, asylum or destitution. They also speak of strategic identifications, and of creating the ground to remember one's needs, tap into past lives and explore future lives and desires. The conversation took place in June 2021 in the Community Room at Glasgow Women's Library.

**AW:** Something which I was mulling over after our conversation was around the nature of us coming together, and thinking about how often when we have these creative projects, there's this expectation to prove worthiness, or to prove trauma, or to prove that this project is necessary somehow. And that led me to think about how destabilising and how re-traumatising and exhausting those cycles of demand are. And I wonder, going into this collaboration, how we can think about changing that expectation for a burden of proof?

**LPM:** Mmmm. When we had spoken about it earlier it bought up a lot for me. I mean funding generally is a stressful experience. We're all grappling with each other, there's no sense of solidarity with other organisations – you are all fighting for this pot of money. And then there's the ways you have to prove that you are worthy for that money, which really means having to platform the women's trauma in a way that is really disempowering. It strips away their agency, it strips away their privacy, all the things that are so necessary for them. And the fact that there is something almost colonial about the way it works, where you have to play the victim to get access to spaces or to funding. At Ubuntu, we've always taken quite a clear line that we will never do that – we will never photograph the women, we will never disclose demographic info and personal stories of who we're supporting and in what capacity. We take quite a clear political and quite radical stance on a lot of things, and most people who know us or have

reached out to us are aware of that. There's this expectation, because we're set up as a charity, that we're going to embody the way these structures want us to behave, which is to be these sort of corporate charities, and it goes against the way Ubuntu works. And so when you say it's a fluid conversation and it can go where it needs to go and there are no expectations – that's how we like to work and that puts less pressure on us, it puts less pressure on the women to perform. Another thing that you see, and we did our own research on it, was that a lot of the women's identities are now shaped by their legal status. And so what ends up happening is everything else about them is stripped away, and they are just an asylum seeker, they are a victim. All these words are – in so many ways – disempowering. We want to pull away from that. I think there's something about them claiming the space at Glasgow Women's Library as themselves, as who they want to be in this space, rather than as asylum seeking women or as migrant women with no recourse to public funds. Pulling away from that language that is usually what we have to use when we are trying to get funding. How we can give them a sense of agency about how they wanna use the space, and the identities they can bring to the space that can go beyond just "you're a victim of state violence" and "you're a survivor of x, y and z".

**AW:** I'm listening to you and I'm writing down these words like privacy, legal status, (well for me) white patronage, and like almost this pressure to perform victimhood, even though there is obviously trauma there. Actually there's a sense of having to make these corporate institutions feel good?

**LPM:** Yeah

**AA:** Mm-hm

**AW:** That they have to feel good, that they have to somehow feel satisfied, that this is a way for them to derail their accountability for actually, like, supporting these structures, which then create these awful situations?

**AA:** I don't understand how we're supposed to quantify or label what the women have gone through – and the trauma – and then portray it in a way that they've gotten better and these spaces are helping them, because these spaces are not for other people. It's just for them: to take from the space; the work that they do in the space or the work that they don't do in the space; and what it does for them. And I don't think it should have to be portrayed in a way that – yes, they have found that

they've accomplished this, and for them to feel and behave and express what they want, the way in which they want. Because all the decisions that have been made for them have probably been without their choice, it's not what they've wanted in the matter. And I think this provides them choice, it provides them autonomy. It's not something that someone can take away from them. And I can come into this space that's just me and there's no one else expecting anything from me. No expectations from them, I think, is what they deserve.

**AW:** Absolutely. And like that sense of, like, deserving and feeling deserving. And it reminds me of like, my Gran – she would always talk about catching an ease. Just like, having an ease, just having a moment of peace, just taking a breath for yourself and actually how impossible that can be.

**LPM:** Mmmm

**AW:** How impossible that can be to make this machine of the state feel good, so that you can catch that ease. And what is the price, emotionally, physically, on taking that ease, because it's then just like there's a price that's going to come later?

**LPM:** Yeah. I think this whole idea of their identities becoming being an asylum seeker, so their identities are based off how the state sees them, and that's what they embody. And actually it is a very strategic one at the same time, cause bearing in mind, you are navigating a very hostile and very complex system. Because when you're going to lawyers meetings, when you're accessing services, you have to present yourself in a certain way, which is shit. It shouldn't have to happen, but we see it time and time again. And what I've found is that women find it really difficult to pull away from that, because they're so used to doing that now. So when they come to our space – and we ask them "what do you need" and "what's happening for you, what's coming up for you" – and because of the way we work, we're led by and for the women, we centre their needs and their choices, that's something that they're not very used to. So even when you try to pull them out of that headspace of *I am just an asylum seeker* into *I am this women with all these different identities, with all of these different needs*, they find it really hard.

We had done a nine-week wellbeing programme and it was just us bringing ourselves into a space, and we had done bodywork together, and we were doing reflections and discussions and poetry and all kinds of things, and you could see at first everyone was quite reserved. And then when you broke past that it was so liberating, it was so wonderful to

see. And the connections that people made within the community was unbelievable, because you're connecting beyond just "we're all just asylum seekers in the system", no, we are x, we are y, we are z, we have all these strands and threads that connect us. And once you get that, it's just a real beautiful space, and I would love for that to be in here.

There is also this important aspect – and I was thinking this now as I was looking around – being in this space is a form of reparations in so many ways, allowing these women to access spaces that historically aren't meant for them. Although Glasgow has pockets of resistance across it and spaces that are more autonomous, a lot of them are not accessible. Particularly to migrant women who sit at that intersection, it's just not there for them. And so something with like the Women's Library, we've been thinking about using it for a while, but wanting to do it on our own terms. When you were talking about infrastructure, I think that's actually a really interesting conversation between Ubuntu Women Shelter and Glasgow Women's Library, because when we like to use spaces, we like it to be *very* autonomous. We like it to be a neutral space where we don't have to necessarily tell anybody what we're doing in it, we don't have anybody watching. The thing about the white gaze is really important because you are in a white structure, physically, and questions arise about how do we ensure privacy for the women. So all those things came to mind, even just looking at the space we're in, like, it's beautiful. It's a reminder that this is a classic, historical building and like, what does that hold with it, what does that mean?

**AW:** And what's it referencing?

**LPM:** And what's it referencing.

**NR:** So this building was a Carnegie Library, built originally as a public library funded by the Carnegie Trust, so it's deeply rooted in those sources of the extraction of wealth and the directions they've travelled in.

**AW:** When I was listening to you and I was hearing you talk about, like, choice, and trust, it made me think about this collaboration and how – within that framework of only being perceived as an asylum seeker, and the nuances of knowing that one has to be strategic, literally just to survive in this environment against the state – how can one almost remember one's needs? Which maybe were preceding, were in place before you were stamped with this status – this legal status – or perspective, or gaze as an asylum seeker. And the lives which you had before that,

and I say lives particularly because we've all had many lives, you know, I think you change everyday and I am just sitting with that. Going into this collaboration, how can we settle things in ourselves, or make the kind of structures in place, so we can remember those lives and reconnect with those lives. And our own desires. Because desires, I think as well, are never really placed at the foremost?

**NR:** Mh-hm

**LPM:** No, never

**AW:** Like what would give one pleasure? I think pleasure's really important. You know, we're talking about catching an ease, taking a break, but actually what gives pleasure? And connecting with that part of ourselves.

**AA:** I also wanted to know: at the end of your wellbeing sessions, do you find that the women know how to articulate what they want, and what it is they need? Is that something that comes across?

**LPM:** Yes, but I think more so because it's taken time to build that trust and now people are at a point where they can communicate what they need. But what I found was – and it's something that we've learnt as we have gone along – that simply asking and simply verbalising it isn't enough. Using these different bodily practices, using more visual and creative forms of communicating actually work a lot better. That time we did the collage making – so much came from that because the women had their own time to create something and there was no time limit, no one watching over them. All they had to do was just show up with it. And things were just pouring out, and people were picking things up from each other's collages. When we moved into things like poetry and storytelling – through that people are communicating their needs although it is more abstract, and there was always a fear in participating because we were using the English language – and that's actually something we'd like to pull away from. Which is why the bodywork was really important, because that's not using any language. But even when we've had to use language, it's also about rethinking what we value in terms of knowledge production, and communicating through things like storytelling – it was amazing. I can't quite articulate it because I don't think there's words that can describe it. And with activities like bodywork, we have to be careful given we're working with a lot of traumatised women who've experienced for example gender-based violence, and other experiences which sit in their bodies, and there's a lot of trigger points. But once you approach it with care, with ease, and consensually, you're opening up a whole other

portal where people are communicating their needs with their body, physically. So I'd be interested to see if that's one thing we could bring into this space, cause actually that's something ever since we stopped the session, we've been getting calls like "I really miss that, I need that, because I'm so tired of talking all the time".

**AW:** Yeah.

**LPM:** When you had mentioned about prior lives, there's this assumption that before they were stamped as an asylum seeker they had agency, and actually that's not true for a lot of people, like, thinking about where they sit culturally, and just I mean that patriarchy knows no borders knows no bounds -

**AW:** of course, absolutely.

**LPM:** And I think what we really need to be focusing on is how we can get women to that point where they can actually tap into what they need and who they are. And I think about myself. I haven't had half the experiences they have, but even this sense - what was I like before x, y and z? And I don't know, because I've been socially conditioned in a certain way, and I feel like I've had to adapt and mould, particularly as a migrant, and I'm just at that breaking point where I'm figuring out who I am. And I think that's me, so what about all these other people, with all these other intersectional identities and experiences. There's so much there in terms of this idea of tapping into our past lives, it's more about a new life -

**AW:** Future lives -

**LPM:** A future life, one that hasn't been explored yet, that hasn't been tapped into yet.

**AW:** I think that's really exciting to think about like our future lives, planning for our future lives, and how that features in terms of thinking about what we want. You know saying *I want*. I mean, I still find that so impossible, this makes me really emotional, to think about that. Like, I feel with social conditioning, it's *so hard* to say those words aloud.

**NR:** We've been talking about how Ubuntu has been creating the space for certain kinds of bodywork to take place, certain kinds of creative practices that help break down the barriers, all the institutional jargon that the women have to internalise, and we have to internalise to navigate funding, etc etc. And getting to the future lives - how

do these infrastructures, how do we as the people behind these spaces, help facilitate the future lives once they've been figured out?

**LPM:** It's a really murky terrain, because actually for a lot of people, your future's not certain here.

**NR:** Of course.

**LPM:** When we've broached talking about the future, next steps, anything like that people shut down. So there's this real resistance to it, because it's scary, there's a lot fear. I don't really have an answer to that, but I think it's something that will evolve. I hope that we can get to a point where we have created some kind of community, some level of openness and safety for people to explore that, and to see how we can help facilitate further explorations of that.

### MARTHA ROSLER

*If You Lived Here...* (1989 – present)  
Mixed media exhibition and archive  
Courtesy the artist

*If You Lived Here ...* was first presented in New York in 1989. It included three exhibitions and four 'Open Forums' which addressed housing problems, homelessness and the impact of divestment and gentrification on communities across the city and beyond, and attempted to explore solutions. Its radical approach reimaged the highly exclusive Dia Art Foundation's gallery and select audience in several respects. The project solicited participation not only from 'recognized' artists and those in more marginal and counterculture scenes but also reached far beyond to include activist and advocacy groups, academics and schoolteachers, architects and urbanists, squatters and urban homesteaders, and local people. Contributions by over 200 invitees—in the form of documentary photography, woodcuts, collages, paintings, constructions, and children's drawings—filled the walls below real estate adverts and graphs illustrating housing unavailability amid steeply rising levels of wealth inequality. These adverts and graphs, hung above normal display height in the 'waste space' of the gallery, signaled the project's determination to expand the shape and scope of art world exhibitions, broadening the range of artwork, information, and participation accepted in such an institution.

In pursuit of that aim, the gallery included a free-standing library and reading room with books, pamphlets, and flyers as well as art works and a couch. This structure changed configuration for each exhibition. In the show on architecture and urban planning, it housed a coffin and an installation on undocumented worker camps in Southern California by the

cross-border group *Taller des Artes Fronterizos*. In the show on homelessness it was transformed into a multi-bed shelter, and although sleeping there was forbidden by building regulations, it served as a meeting space for Homeward Bound Community Services, the self-organized group of homeless people who served an advisory role in the project, maintaining a temporary office in the gallery for their activist work. The Mad Housers, an activist group of architects and designers, came up from Atlanta to build huts for homeless clients, building inside the gallery and elsewhere in the city. Unusually for the era, the show incorporated a regular schedule of over 30 film and video works from diverse sources, screened on television monitors in areas with comfortable sofas. There were also scheduled poetry readings and various workshops.

In the 30 years since the original project, the *If You Lived Here...* archive has continued to grow and evolve as it has travelled to venues across Europe and North America, accruing new materials along the way. Here at Glasgow Women's Library, it is presented in partnership with Living Rent, Scotland's tenants' union. We have worked with Martha Rosler and her team to select materials from the archive which represent the 1989 exhibitions as well as housing struggles as they have evolved in different international contexts. These documents are set in relation to the artworks, documentary photographs and local archives which excavate the histories and current realities of housing, gentrification and urban life here in Scotland. These include the proposed collective housing project Take Root which imagined alternative ways of living, items from the Living Rent archive, Nat Raha's poem (*london will die*) (2014/15) and protest banners. Across all the materials included in this exhibition, particular attention has been paid to women's experi-

ence. As the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on housing provision takes hold, *If You Lived Here...* offers a timely way to connect with and learn from past struggles.

### JOEY SIMONS AND KEIRA MCLEAN

*Glasgow Housing Struggle Timeline*  
(2021). Mixed media

The *Glasgow Housing Struggle Timeline* weaves together three narratives of housing change in the city to recover hidden histories of women-led tenant organising, challenge the inevitability of contemporary housing inequality, and imagine new futures rooted in a long tradition of resistance.

Drawing on the aesthetics of the original *If You Lived Here...* exhibitions and the Blueprint for Counter-Education, a series of key 'episodes' of housing struggle are presented through archival documents, leaflets, reports, texts, songs, poems, photos and film stills. Beginning with the rent strikes of 1915 in Glasgow, the timeline takes in post-war squatting movements, the Merrylee council housing campaign of 1951, anti-dampness organising in the Gorbals and Easterhouse in the 1970s, the Anti-Poll Tax Unions, and the current organising of Living Rent. Connections are drawn across time and place, as the tactics, demands, and visions of tenants' movements respond to the pressures of slum clearance, the modernist housing revolution, class restructuring, and political victories and defeats.

This history of popular struggle is set against official narratives of housing change. The promises, failures, and betrayals of the city's planners, politicians, and developers are critically examined through the Glasgow Corporation documentaries of the 1940s and 1950s, the PR campaigns of Glasgow's Miles Better

and the City of Culture, together with today's 'transformational regeneration'.

In response to these materials, GWL volunteers and Living Rent members have created their own personal timelines in a participative workshop, reflecting on their own narratives of housing change, and the forces that have shaped individual experiences of eviction, homelessness, ownership and resistance.

Visitors are invited to add their own material to this display: for details on how, please visit [lifesupport.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/participate/](https://lifesupport.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/participate/)

### SHONA MACNAUGHTON

*Progressive* (2017)  
Performance documentation including photography, audio recording and script booklet. Photography by Matthew Williams. Courtesy of the artist, photographer and the Contemporary Art Research Collection, The University of Edinburgh

Shona Macnaughton's performance *Progressive* took place in Dennistoun in the wake of the state-led regeneration project spurred by the 2014 Commonwealth Games. It began in a building occupied by Market Gallery on Duke Street where the contents of a government-issued 'baby box' were laid out across the floor. As the artist packed up the items, she began to speak to the audience before leading them out through the post-industrial landscape of the East End to Graham Square. Framed by the gates of what was once the agricultural market and labour exchange on one side and a block of new flats owned by Molendinar Park Housing Association on the other, she stood on top of the box and addressed the onlookers. You can hear a recording of her script as part of the exhibition. Though her talk took on the tone



of a rally, its content was made up of excerpts taken from official materials associated with the area's ongoing regeneration project but applied to her own pregnant body: "Change is a familiar theme for me" she began, before asserting the aim to "bring new blood", "Make me easier and safer" and to "mix old and new, but keep. My. Character".

Women are often seen as both the drivers and victims of gentrification. But unlike hothouse cities like New York and London, where this accelerated process has seen people and businesses rapidly moved out to make way for the wealthier middle classes, the experience of regeneration in Glasgow's East End is slower and takes on different forms. In *Progressive*, 'regeneration' is understood both in the biological sense (the regrowth of tissue or limbs), and as the attempted transformation of both urban space and local inhabitants. Presenting herself simultaneously as an artist, a mother and a brownfield site, Macnaughton plays with the notion of 'potential' that often features in discussions of creativity, pregnancy and urban development.

### FRANKI RAFFLES

Photographs from the late 1980s and 1990s, including: *To Let You Understand...* (1987–88), *Lothian Health Campaign* (1993) and *Zero Tolerance* (1991–2). Curated by Rachel Boyd and Weitian Liu. Courtesy University of St Andrews Photographic Collection, and the Estate of Franki Raffles

Between 1987 and 1988, Franki Raffles visited social housing estates across Scotland and produced a body of photographs about housing. Reaching beyond the binary of interior and exterior, Raffles pays special attention to liminal space: bus shelters, corridors, doorways, playgrounds, and parks, concentrating on communal areas that mark points

of encounter among tenants. The unification of tenants in housing schemes also took the form of mutual aid-based and small-scale organising, which Raffles photographed in an empathetic manner.

At the same time, Raffles was photographing women workers for the project *To Let You Understand...* produced in collaboration with the Edinburgh District Council Women's Committee. In the exhibition and pamphlet that followed, she combined her photographs with quotes from the women photographed and statistics designed to inform audiences about women's working lives. The project included documentation of protests against the Poll Tax, and showed how labour and care were inextricably intertwined for many women workers. Between 1992 and 1993, Raffles founded the Zero Tolerance campaign against domestic abuse, creating images which identified gender-based violence as a product of patriarchy, and directly challenged victim-blaming. Appearing elsewhere in the *Life Support* exhibition, themes of care and support also converge in her photographs of NHS workers in Lothian, distributed to raise awareness about health, safety, and wellbeing among staff across the Lothian Health Board.

Conversation was at the forefront of Raffles' approach. Furthermore, her photographs can be configured as discursive objects in and of themselves. Embedded in print media, billboards and related ephemera, the inclusion of Raffles' photographs signified the greater visibility of marginalised groups, often women and children, by virtue of their direct intervention in public space. As part of our presentation of *If You Lived Here...* for *Life Support*, we have selected images from across different bodies of Raffles' work that resonate with histories of housing struggles in Scotland, showing how a concern with housing and home occurs across different strands of her photography.

### *If You Lived Here...* VIDEO LOUNGE

*Museum City* (1989) 8:06 min  
Slideshow. Courtesy Janet Koenig  
In the near future, the MUSEUM-CORP has taken over all aspects of city life. There is no longer any pretense of separation between high art and consumer culture. *Museum City* was inspired by director Janet Koenig's observation that museum expansion in New York City during the Reagan years coincided with the increasing concentration of wealth and the surge in homelessness.

*Don't Move, Fight Back* (1985)  
29:37 min. Courtesy Matt O'Neal and Elena Garcia  
This video explores the different communities of New York City's fashionable Upper West Side, from the rich and the wealthy, to the tenants and activists fighting and organising for affordable and decent housing, taking on the landlords, investors and city policies that threaten their homes.

*Whose Town is it Anyway? Part 1*  
*Easterhouse: People and Power* (1984)  
30:00 min. Courtesy Tony Freeth and Concord Media  
One of a series of eight programmes focusing on the economic and political crises which faced towns and cities across the UK in the early 1980s. Part 1 is a portrait of Easterhouse. It conveys the pervasive sense of anger within the community at the failure of the authorities to get to grips with the housing and employment needs of the area and shows how residents struggled to make their voices heard.

*Home and Dry* (1987) 8.00 min. Leeds Animation Workshop. Made with financial assistance from the GLC for the Board and Lodging Information Programme. Courtesy Leeds Animation Workshop

Four women discuss their housing situations. None of them would describe themselves as homeless – after all, they've never slept out on the street. However, as they listen to each other's stories, they begin to understand that homelessness is something they've all experienced. The film analyses the inadequacies of housing policies in the UK and examines the political thinking that lies behind them.

*Life in the G: Gowanus Gentrified* (1988) 14:31 min. Courtesy Educational Video Center (EVC), Joan Jubela, Hector Sánchez and Steven Goodman  
Hector Sánchez, a Brooklyn teenager, revisits Gowanus Houses, the public housing project where he grew up. He interviews his mother and others about the way life used to be, before gentrification began to render the New York neighbourhood too expensive for low-income families. Along the way, he analyses how ethnic and income groups cluster in an apparently diverse area.

*Seattle: Hidden Histories* (1991–95)  
13:00 min. Courtesy Martha Rosler  
The city of Seattle was named after a prominent chief of the Duwamish, who were dispossessed of their land by settler-colonialists. In 1991, Rosler conducted video interviews with Native American residents of Seattle, on questions of history and heritage. She subsequently produced one-minute Public Service Announcements, or PSAs, edited in a style familiar from wedding videos. They feature contributions from among others Vi Hilbert, a Lushootseed linguist, and Roger Fernandes, Alcohol and Drug Prevention Coordinator at the Seattle Indian Health Board. At the time of the video's making, Seattle was one of America's fastest-growing cities: the subsequent tech boom has only sharpened the issues of housing and homelessness in the city.

*The House that Jill Built* (1998)  
14:21 min. Produced by Magda Ang,  
Karen Dickson and Helen Archer with  
Video Information Project. Courtesy  
Glasgow Women's Library

Made in 1998, the film documents the story of Take Root, a women's self-build group in nineties Glasgow. Here, members Adele Patrick and Sue John speak about the process and challenges faced in the project, as well as the anticipated relief on moving in day. The story after the film was made was a complex one involving misogynistic press coverage, withdrawal of support for self-building by Scottish Homes and group membership waning due to the urgency of needing adequate housing. The houses were built but with major compromises, chiefly that the houses could not be self built and by which time Adele and Sue were the only remaining Take Root members. The archive of the project is now held at GWL.

*Chinatown Tenant Stories: The Comforts of Home* (2015) 6:09 min  
A project of the Asian American Oral History Collective, in collaboration with Chinatown Tenants Union of CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities. Courtesy ManSee Kong

Ten years after Mr. Wong sought the help of the Chinatown Tenants Union, he recounts the number of times he and his fellow tenants fought evictions and advocated for their rights. After being evicted from their SRO single-room occupancy building in Chinatown, New York City and moved to another SRO far away on the Upper West Side, Mr. Wong and his fellow residents are finally able to return home.

*Minutes* (2019) 12:30 min. Courtesy Winnie Herbstein

*Minutes* (2019) draws on material from the archive of Take Root in the GWL. Working closely with minutes taken from the group's

meetings, moments were developed into scenarios and restaged by members of Slaghammers, a feminist welding group based at Glasgow Autonomous Space.

*This is an Address* (2020) 18:00 min  
Courtesy Sasha Wortzel and Field of Vision

*This is an Address* is structured by a 1995 interview with Sylvia Rivera, the Stonewall veteran and Puerto Rican Gay and Trans Liberation and HIV/AIDS activist. To the background of the demolition of an NYC municipal waste incinerator, Sylvia discusses her home - a homeless encampment at The Piers of River Hudson. She speaks about the social cleansing of homeless and poor LGBTQ people, especially people with AIDS, as part of gentrification and in the name of the 'Quality of Life' Campaign, and her political refusal of comfort while such struggles continue.

## COMMUNITY ROOM

For her contribution to the *Life Support* project, artist Olivia Plender has been invited to respond to GWL's building, programmes and archival holdings. Her residency-based commission begins with her intervention into GWL's Community Room which she has reimagined and domesticated through the introduction of new lighting, carpets and soft furnishings, as well as a carefully selected 'Lavender Menace' wall and ceiling colour. The design of posters mounted on the walls and a large-scale curtain hung across the room draws from her discoveries in the GWL archives. Plender's work in the space will continue throughout the exhibition and beyond when it will be used to instigate the production of a new workbook as she describes in the following interview.

Conversation with **OLIVIA PLENDER** June 2021

*Tell us about your plans for Life Support; what form will your contributions take?*

There are two different parts to my project. Initially, I've been invited to transform Glasgow Women's Library's Community Room, a space on the first floor that's already used for different kinds of workshops, community group meetings and education projects. My aim is to make it a space that people feel more comfortable using and that also reflects the values of GWL.

When I've worked with other organisations and groups in the past, mainly in London, such as Crossroads Women's Centre and Sylvia's Corner, which is run by a group of housing activists called Focus E15, I realised that many of the people who use these kinds of spaces often have physical or mental health issues. These can be caused by circumstances like bad housing or overwhelming care burdens, but I also noticed the frequency of chronic health problems amongst women that are not being taken seriously by the medical establishment. I became interested in how these women's spaces and centres work to accommodate various needs and, in doing so, what kinds of social experiences they create. By approaching time differently to the norm, for example, understanding that people's circumstances may mean that they arrive late to a meeting or have to leave early, and by attention to small things like providing enough places to sit down, they ensure that different bodies - not just able bodies - can access and use their resources.

My focus in the Community Room is on making it more welcoming and accommodating. There will also be different elements in the space that relate to material that I have pulled out of the GWL archive, about women's health inequality and women's health activism. These include some brilliant, funny, angry zines produced by women's health and disability activist groups, both in the 1970s and more recently. Other components will draw from my research into the histories of the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* which was first published in the US by the Boston Women's Health Collective in 1970. It then went on to be revised, republished and repurposed around the world, adapted to different contexts by local feminist organisations and women's health groups.

The second part of my project is a workbook which will be developed during and after the *Life Support* exhibition. I plan to work with groups in Glasgow, using the new Community Room as a kind of

'conversation piece' to provoke discussion. Together I hope we can reflect on the practices of care that go on in spaces like GWL – the sophisticated methods around group dynamics and support which are so often mistakenly thought of as being 'natural' and instinctual to women, but are actually complex techniques that we learn. I would call these feminist pedagogies, although that isn't necessarily how people would refer to such practices on a day-to-day basis. It's about the ways that people learn from each other, spend time together and develop forms of mutual education. The idea of the workbook is to name some of these practices and make them visible.

***Your plans connect to your previous investigations into women's experience, collectives, and the histories of feminist struggle.***

***How will your work with the Life Support project contribute to this research and take it in new directions?***

This is all part of a much longer-term research project for me around health. One of the reasons for my interest in this topic is that I have a chronic health problem which started eight years ago after a virus which left me with all sorts of problems, the most dramatic of which was the loss of my voice. I had to do voice therapy to learn to speak again. I also ended up with chronic fatigue and irritable bowel syndrome. These are quite difficult things to talk about because they're so personal, but this is why, when I started working with spaces like women's centres, I was struck by how different they are to the organisations that I am used to. When you're working with mainstream institutions there's a pressure to hide any illness or disability because you're trying to present yourself as a productive body who can keep going, no matter what. There's a pressure to conform in case you lose work. I was quite late to discover crip theory and critical disability studies, but I have found concepts like crip time – which is a kind of queering of how time works and a way to get away from the capitalist approach to productive time – very useful. When I started reading about that idea and others, they really seemed to describe my experience as someone with a chronic illness and to give a vocabulary to it which felt very empowering.

I had been struggling with these issues alone, so coming into women's spaces was an opportunity to be more open and to start having conversations with other people about how they manage a life with health problems, and to politicise this experience. I'm really angry about it! The kind of health issues that I have barely get researched, because it's usually women who have them. When you go to the doctor, your symptoms are often dismissed as being all in your head, so you're

left without any support. Of course, these issues impact marginalised groups the hardest, for example, if you're a woman of colour then it's even more difficult to get your pain taken seriously and trans people do not generally have happy encounters with the medical establishment.

Talking to others about their chronic health problems is a way to develop a set of tools for dealing with these situations and to articulate what we need and make demands. There's a lot of work to be done politically, to put pressure on the medical establishment to take women's experiences with their own health seriously. The zines I've found at GWL really speak to this practice of making demands and taking up space. A lot of it is about effecting shifts in the power dynamics, in relationships associated with healthcare.

***Can you tell us about the role that archives play in your practice? What kinds of things are you looking for at GWL and what can we learn from this material in the present day?***

My interest in history is always about trying to understand the present and the contemporary world. As we move through daily life, there is the sense that everything – structures, institutions and the ways that we live – are just normal. But, of course, there's a set of historical reasons which have led us to this point and if we can understand those processes then our circumstances seem less 'natural'. We can start to understand that there have been alternative ways of doing things in the past and things could have been different, could be different.

Archives are full of amazing resources. I'm interested in the practical knowledge that they contain. How did people organise campaigns? What vocabulary did they use to describe their situations? How did they set up new institutions? There is a wealth of material available which means that we can learn from different social movements rather than perpetually reinventing the wheel.

Glasgow Women's Library itself is a very special case, it has so many different functions and resources. I've always been interested in the role that art and culture can play within political movements and at GWL you see that happening on an everyday level. It's an everyday politics that's being practiced here, which has always been very much part of feminism.

## READING LIST

---

### KATE DAVIS

Victoria Horne, 'Kate Davis: Re-Visioning Art History after Modernism and Postmodernism.' *Feminist Review*, 110 (2015): 34-54.

Esther Leslie and Melanie Jackson, 'Milk's Arrays.' *Studies in the Maternal* 10, no. 1 (2018): 1-24.

### GREER LANKTON

One from the Vaults Podcast, 'It's About Me Not You' – Greer Lankton (#31), August 2019. <https://soundcloud.com/onefromthevaultspodcast/oftv-31-its-about-me-not-you>.

Lia Gangitano, 'Interviews: Greer Lankton – Lia Gangitano discusses the first New York Retrospective of Greer Lankton.' *Artforum*, 31 October 2014. <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/lia-gangitano-discusses-the-first-new-york-retrospective-of-greer-lankton-48864>.

### SHONA MACNAUGHTON

Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, 'The Fine Art of Gentrification.' *October* 31 (1984): 91–111.

Josephine Berry Slater and Anthony Iles, 'No Room to Move: Radical Art and the Regenerate City.' *Mute*, 2009. <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/no-room-to-move-radical-art-and-regenerate-city>.

### OLIVIA PLENDER

Kathy Davis, *The Making of Our Bodies, Ourselves: How Feminism Travels across Borders*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013.

### FRANKI RAFFLES

Sarah Browne, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Scotland*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014. Especially Chapter Five, 'Building a Network'.

Weitian Liu, 'Franki Raffles: Photography as a Social Practice.' *Photomonitor*, March 2021: <https://photomonitor.co.uk/essay/franki-raffles-photography-as-a-social-practice/>

### MARTHA ROSLER

Kirsten Lloyd, 'If You Lived Here... : A Case Study on Social Reproduction in Feminist Art History.' In *Feminism and Art History Now*, edited by Victoria Horne and Lara Perry, 283–201. London: I.B. Tauris, 2017.

Brian Wallis, ed., *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism*. New York: New Press, 1991.

### VERONICA RYAN

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994 [1958].

Jamaica Kincaid, *At the Bottom of the River*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983.

### ALBERTA WHITTLE

Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2019.

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

## EVENTS PROGRAMME

All events are free and online. For full details and booking information please see the Glasgow Women's Library website and the Life Support project website.

### STORY CAFÉ

Thursday 19 August, 1pm - 2.30pm

Join us for a Story Café that explores texts by writers including Saidiya Hartman and Cathy McCormack about housing and the concept of 'home' from approaches that span the activist to the poetic.

### OPEN FORUM: HOUSING IS A FEMINIST ISSUE

Wednesday 22 September, 2pm

Presented in partnership with Living Rent, this online workshop will feature short talks from a range of speakers including the artist Martha Rosler, followed by small group discussions and collective feedback. Together we will explore housing activism as part of feminist struggle, with a focus on creative organising and movement-building.

### ARTISTS IN CONVERSATION

Wednesday 6 October, 2pm - 4pm

This informal conversation between artists who have created works for the *Life Support* exhibition and members of the curatorial team will encompass themes including health and care.

Curated by **CAROLINE GAUSDEN, KIRSTEN LLOYD, CATHERINE SPENCER** and **NAT RAHA**

What does home mean to you? Visit the *Life Support* website to find out how to add your own photos and drawings to the *If You Lived Here...* exhibition.

[lifesupport.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk](http://lifesupport.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk)

Glasgow Women's Library  
23 Landressy St  
Bridgeton  
Glasgow  
G40 1BP

[womenslibrary.org.uk](http://womenslibrary.org.uk)

Realised with generous support from:



Art Fund





