

A PAVILION OF ONE'S OWN

Siona Wilson on *To the Editor of Amateur Photographer*



Mark Fell and Luke Fowler, *To the Editor of Amateur Photographer*, 2014, digital video, color, sound, 69 minutes. Archival photograph of the Pavilion, Leeds, UK.

THERE IS A STRANGE IRONY in an institution like New York's Museum of Modern Art presenting Mark Fell and Luke Fowler's film *To the Editor of Amateur Photographer* (2014), as indeed MoMA did this past November under the auspices of its Modern Mondays series. For the Pavilion, the feminist photography gallery and arts organization in Leeds, UK, that constitutes the subject of this 16-mm film essay, couldn't be more different from New York's bastion of dominant culture.

The Pavilion, which began as a grassroots feminist collective, was founded in 1983, at the tail end of what we think of as the organized women's liberation movement and early in Margaret Thatcher's second term as prime minister. For the photographers, art historians, feminist organizers, and radical educators of the collective's early years, their endeavor belonged to a broader political critique of culture wherein photography played a central role. This is before the art world had embraced the large-scale "tableau form" photograph, a time when MoMA stood as the lone defender of photography as a modernist form. Back then, the medium was seen as a way of challenging artistic autonomy (of the culturally elitist sort), because the photograph could operate as a vernacular practice, a mass medium and a commercial form, a mode of state surveillance and of scientific management, a tool for education, and so forth. Without secure footing as an art form, photography in the 1980s was seen as a kind of Trojan horse within dominant culture, a potent instrument for radical education and the subject of (and means for) the work of feminist and socialist history from below.

But that was another era, and although photography's place within a broader critique of culture must indeed be historicized, this isn't the work that Fell and Fowler's project attempts to do. Nonetheless, *To the Editor* is concerned with the Pavilion's founding decade—so much so that viewers could be forgiven for thinking the institution had closed long ago. But the Pavilion has remained operational for more than thirty years, no longer as a gallery space or—owing to the politics of arts funding—as either a specifically feminist or photographic organization. The younger generation running the Pavilion today commissioned this film (together with Hyde Park Picture House in Leeds) in commemoration of the project's thirtieth anniversary. But their role as intermediaries between the filmmakers and the documentary's living subjects remains largely invisible in the finished work.

To the Editor intersperses excerpts from oral-history interviews, scenes shot in the archives, and field recordings of the now empty and dilapidated site of the former gallery space in Woodhouse Moor throughout its stylized presentation of archival materials and documents. This image track is, for the most part, set against a minimalist musical score (punctuated by extended periods of hushed ambient sound) that functions as a kind of elliptical parallel for developments within popular electronic music during the same period. The film begins in seeming silence, but in fact field recordings from Woodhouse Moor are laid over a sequence of black-and-white photographs, mainly of women. These unremarkable portraits and scenes of group activities are presented in landscape format irrespective of the orientation of their composition. Each print remains on-screen for the same time, approximately one second; the filmmakers thereby grant more importance to the quantity and variety of images than to their representational content or aesthetic merit.

The relentless flow of vernacular photographs is a recurrent visual component in the film, and it operates as a powerful figure for collectivity as an antihierarchical form of political practice. The images evoke the lived and varied social texture of the Pavilion's constituency: We move from groups of South Asian women unpacking food for a public event to punks hanging out at home to kids goofing around on playgrounds. This visualization of collectivity as a kind of anonymous leveling stands in contrast to various conflicts and differences that emerge in the filmed interviews with the few women participants actually named in *To the Editor*. Here, a different understanding of collectivity as the basis for political practice begins to surface. If the stream of vernacular photographs invokes an abstract idea of equality, the interviews suggest disagreement and discord. This is the more fraught terrain of collectivity as social reality and political process.

Several interviewees question the right of two men to tell the history of a feminist organization. There is more than one reference to “robust conversations” that have clearly occurred off camera, but, as Dinah Clark, the first interviewee in the film and a founding director of the Pavilion, puts it, this is something that the filmmakers will need to find a way to confront in the film. We are thus alerted early on to conflicts over gendered authorship and authority in relation to the film’s production and its approach to the making of historical knowledge.

Fell and Fowler do not address these feminist critiques discursively, as the film’s subjects do, but their response operates at an aesthetic level via decisions about gendered labor and film form. Importantly, they hired a female cameraperson, Margaret Salmon (a film artist in her own right), to shoot the interviews. Although Salmon is invisible to viewers, the political significance of her presence behind the lens should not be discounted. As Gill Park, the current director of the Pavilion, has suggested, this may have been one of the reasons why all of the women interviewed finally consented to participate despite significant reservations.

Salmon’s is a pensive style of filming, and the sound is not synchronized with the image. When we hear the voice of the speaker, we typically do not see the woman’s body on-screen. Instead, the camera lingers on her hands or background details (a window, a coffee mug, pictures pinned to the wall). These lyrical episodes of filmed environments operate in counterpoint to the more structured sequencing of the vernacular image stream, evoking another kind of “feminine” poetics of the everyday.

If the dislocation of body and voice initially feels like a literalist response to Laura Mulvey’s widely influential critique of the “male gaze,” a flat-footed and nostalgic gesture toward the feminist politics of another era, this stylistic device nevertheless reinforces the significance of gendered voice and of women’s speech as the primary source of historical knowledge in the film. Our understanding of the organization and of the feminist politics of the era is clearly incomplete, since these interviews do not add up to a coherent narrative account of the history of the Pavilion.¹ Similarly, the wildly heterogeneous materials drawn from the archives, such as photocopied newsletters from other feminist groups in northern England, theoretical pamphlets by Selma James and Christine Delphy, and the *Women’s Work* calendar from 1983, can only inadequately index the vivid political space and social texture of the era. The film’s structuralist treatment of history-as-fragment offers a potent reflection on the difficulties of depicting both collective projects and collectivist politics, in which disagreement and dissent play an inevitably constitutive part. But the making of the film was also generative beyond the frame: Fell and Fowler printed numerous photographs from mainly anonymous negatives held in the archives (now housed in the University of Leeds’s Feminist Archive North), and the much lengthier oral-history interviews the filmmakers conducted with the Pavilion’s founding participants are all now part of its precarious archive.

Each of the thirteen interviews includes a verbal description of an image selected by the interviewee. We typically do not see the image, except in a couple of instances, and even then it is usually partially obscured. Instead, each woman gives a first-person account of the significance of this particular photograph in relation to the history of the Pavilion. Once again, voice and memory are privileged over image. But so is each individual’s particular account. These histories, however, are not *individualistic* but rather attest to the discrete parts that make up the sum of long-term collective work, offering glimmers of insight into the intensity of the debates that shaped some of the differences within this feminist project.

The photograph selected by feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, which shows her outside the Pavilion together with photographers Joanne O’Brien, Sirkka-Liisa Kontinen, and Mitra Tabrizian, becomes emblematic of her social-historical approach. She briefly invokes Kontinen’s documentary practice in the depressed communities of South Tyneside, touching on the question of industrial history and the shifting labor politics of feminism during the Thatcher years. While the photographers work with the camera, Pollock is shown armed with the text. Her description offers the idea of theoretical and historical work as another kind of political practice, with the photograph as the binding glue. When we get to Kontinen’s interview, it becomes clear that she is using her own image—one of her documentary shots—as the occasion for discussing the same event at which Pollock’s photograph was taken. But Kontinen’s is a more uncomfortable memory of being challenged about the gender politics of picturing girls in dance tutus. Although she doesn’t remember who made the censorious remark, it’s clear that the politics of representation could sometimes seem more restrictive than enabling.

According to Park, *To the Editor* “generated an ambivalent response from those involved in the Pavilion’s early years. The project was an intense and at times contentious process,” she noted, “and not everyone was happy with the outcome.”² Listening to Park recount the audience’s difficulties with the structuralist presentation of the photographs, the monotonous electronic score, and the avoidance of sync sound, I experienced a kind of *déjà vu* regarding another, much earlier film. The Berwick Street Film Collective’s *Nightcleaners, Part 1* (1975), a documentary about the campaign to unionize female custodial workers in London during the early years of second-wave feminism, must have served as a kind of model for Fell and Fowler. Both their film and *Nightcleaners* were made predominantly by men about women’s struggle and deployed many of the same unsettling filmic techniques. Moreover, each elicited a strongly negative response from many of the feminist viewers closest to the events under consideration. Most important, however, both films deal with the desire for collectivity and the necessary contradictions and conflicts that come with antihierarchical forms of political organization. *To the Editor* may not quite have found its feminist audience, but this is likely because its focus on difference, or collectivity-as-contention, must necessarily risk failure in the present.

To the Editor of *Amateur Photographer* made its New York debut at the Museum of Modern Art on Nov. 16, 2015.

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NOTES

1. For a more straightforward historical account, see Shirley Moreno, “The Light Writing on the Wall: The Leeds Pavilion Project,” in *Photographic Practices: Towards a Different Image*, ed. Stevie Bezencenet and Philip Corrigan (London: Comedia, 1986), 113–23.

2. E-mail to the author, December 1, 2015.