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# ***STILL WORKING: PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY***

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## **ABSTRACT**

This photographic essay explores a series of photographs which are concerned with the representation, identity, and invisibility of older working women in the United Kingdom. It contextualizes the social and cultural environment in which these photographs were taken and offers a critique of the media landscape in which visual images of older women are scarce. The project *Still Working* offers older women the kind of visibility that has so far been so rare.

## **KEY WORDS**

Photography; Older Women; Working; Retirement

## **Introduction**

*Still Working* is a series of photographic portraits that are concerned with the representation, identity and invisibility of older working women. This work was made in response to a commission from Solihull Gallery, Birmingham in 2012 and challenges the notion that women past retirement age are no longer working. The invisibility of older women, due to ageism, and the supposition that older women are inactive have inspired this project. The series consists of 12 photographic portraits of women, over the age of 60, who were employed either in a paid or voluntary capacity in Solihull. Underpinning the photographic work is a body of evidence that provides the rationale for the project. This includes issues relating to the invisibility of older women in the media and the relevance of Freudian psychoanalysis. This photographic essay explores the images taken for *Still Working* through this framework.

## **Rationale**

Older women and the realities of their ageing are culturally invisible as indicated by a steady flow of writing from older female authors over the last 10 years including: Athill (2008), Bakewell (2006), Miller (2010), and Neuberger (2008). Individually they

present differing reflections on the challenges that life presents to them as an older female. Apart from Neuberger their writing is primarily a reflection on older life, but Neuberger goes much further by presenting a manifesto for old age that has 10 demands including: 'Don't make assumptions about my age,' (pp.21-49) 'Don't waste my skills and experience,' (pp.50-76) and 'Don't take my pride away' (pp.77-104). These 3 demands are very relevant when considering the cultural invisibility of older women.

The dismissive treatment of older women is particularly apparent in visual culture and most noted within the media that tries very hard to exclude the face and body of the older woman. As Bond et al (2007) state, 'Almost all studies on older people in the media have found that they are not well covered whether in popular films, TV series or advertisements', (p.241). This issue is further highlighted by the results of the 2010 survey commissioned by Anchor Housing Trust to explore the actual and perceived presence of older people on terrestrial television programmes. The results showed that the underrepresentation of over 50 year olds was particularly marked for female compared with male television presenters, and cast members, and was apparent on the 4 premier television channels. Many women over the age of 50, working in media roles, have been dismissed from their posts because of ageism while men, such as David Dimbleby, are allowed to carry on well into their seventies. Some of the women such as Miriam O' Reilly, who was removed from Country File, have sued the BBC for unfair dismissal and won. But despite these landmark cases the number of older women presenting television programmes and thus representing the older woman on screen has hardly changed. It is this attitude to older women that originally inspired *Still Working*.

The benchmark age of 60 was chosen for this project because in 2012 the retirement age for women in the UK was in the process of changing from 60 to 65 in 2018, and to 66 by 2020 when the retirement age for women will become the same as men. So why, when women will be working as long as men, are they still invisible? The reasons for this are complex and are based on a perception of how older women are

seen. A perception of the ageing women was noted by Beauvoir (1978), in her writing about old age, when she noted:

As men see it, a woman's purpose in life is to be an erotic object, when she grows old and ugly she loses the place allotted to her in society: she becomes a 'monstrum' that excites revulsion and even dread (p.184).

It is this perception of the older woman as a 'monstrum' that renders her invisible and removes her authority. But why should an older woman be seen in this way? The answer, to some extent, can be gauged by the absence of the older woman in Freudian psychoanalysis, a fact that has been noted by Woodward (1995), and others. One of the many reasons for this absence is highlighted within Freudian scopophilia where the active male gaze is only for the younger, more sexually attractive woman. As Mulvey (1988) points out 'the male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly,' (p.11).

If the older woman is not the object of the active male gaze she must therefore be seen, as Beauvoir points out, with disgust. Feminist gaze theory therefore goes some way towards explaining why television companies favour young, attractive female newsreaders and presenters. Older people, however, are becoming annoyed by the lack of representation of older women in the media, an issue raised by Harriet Harman (2010) in her article 'Where are the welllderly women?' Harman argues that there is nothing wrong with seeing older women on television screens and she is concerned that television does not allow women to age. Harman urges media channels to take up the challenge of encouraging and allowing more older women onto our screens.

### ***Still Working***

In this series women between the ages of 60, and 91, who were working or volunteering in Solihull Birmingham in 2012 are represented. Twelve women were photographed in their place of work across a range of locations including the supermarket and the hospital. They were all photographed confronting their

audience, looking into the lens and out of the picture. This stance compels the viewer to look back at them and to become a voyeur into their places of work.



(Image 1: Cynthia, from *Still Working* © Vicky Hodgson, 2012)

Cynthia was photographed in the meeting room at Age UK. When this photograph was taken in 2012 Cynthia was aged 91. She was working, in a volunteer role, as a deputy director and trustee of Age UK Solihull. She was also on the finance sub-committee overseeing the smooth running of the organisation in terms of finance, staffing and services. In addition she was involved in a care housing association, a nursing home and several sheltered housing schemes. In her 80s she received a MBE for services to the voluntary sector. When Prince Charles presented her with this award, he asked her “When are you going to give up?” She replied, “I am not, I am going to die in my tracks!”



(Image 2: Irene, from *Still Working* © Vicky Hodgson, 2012)

Irene was 83 when photographed and worked as a bakery assistant in Morrisons during the day, and afterwards she moved onto her evening work as a cleaner for Solihull Borough Council. Irene said “I feel good working at my age, I wouldn’t want to stay at home. I like meeting people and getting on with everyday things.” She loved selling bread and had a good relationship with many of her customers who knew her by name. Some of them saw her photograph in Solihull Gallery and afterwards came into the supermarket for her autograph, commenting that she was now a film star!



(Image 3: Mary, from *Still Working* © Vicki y

Hodgson, 2012)

Mary, who was also over 80, was a volunteer at Solihull Hospital. Her job was to meet and greet people coming to Out-Patients and to show them to the appropriate waiting room. She did this job because she enjoyed helping people out and thought that members of the public appreciate a friendly face, especially as when most people who come into the hospital are worried and disorientated.



(Image 4: Irene, from *Still Working* © Vicky Hodgson, 2012)

Finally Irene aged 73, the Mayor and first citizen of Solihull in 2012 photographed here in the Mayor's chamber. Irene was Mayor from May 2011-May 2012. In this role Irene represented the Borough on civic occasions and was a figurehead for the community. During her year in office she entertained many groups in the Mayor's chamber including groups of deaf people, blind people and children from Chernobyl. The most poignant event of her year was laying a wreath on remembrance Sunday. In May 2012 she returned to her role as a councillor.

## **Conclusion**

The project *Still Working*, although based on a small sample of women, has illustrated the need for many older women to be engaged in work and to be more visible. Also, as it has been seen, they make a valuable contribution to their local communities and to the economy. The talent and expertise of so many older women goes unnoticed and many more opportunities need to be made available for them. The women photographed in this series willingly volunteered and were only too



happy to be involved in the project as they considered the exposure of older women and their work to be important.

This series of photographs has given these women the visual exposure that is so badly needed in order for older women to have an equal role in society with older men. It is also possible that raising the profile of older women will influence the prestige of younger women, as *The Old Women's Project* (2010) suggests:

Ageism is a central issue for women, because as long as they are erased in the last third of their lives, women will continue to have a perilous footing during the other two thirds.

Younger women need more positive, visible role models of older women to look up to and admire and the women photographed for *Still Working* have, in a small way, helped to provide them.

### Notes:

*Still Working* was exhibited at Solihull Gallery, Birmingham from 17<sup>th</sup> September to 17<sup>th</sup> November 2012 and at Brighton Photo Fringe from 22<sup>nd</sup> October to 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2012.



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