

Images all need to have © See Red Women's Workshop reproduced with them:

Protest (1973)

A Woman's Work is Never Done (1974)

My Wife Doesn't Work (1976)

Alone We Are Powerless (1976)

Collective making as resistance? The contemporary appeal of See Red Women's Workshop

Harriet Atkinson

A strong resurgence of interest in the work of the See Red collective reflects continuing gender inequalities

Making together

For a few months of 2020 I met weekly on Zoom with a group of women academics, to stitch and talk. We had each agreed to sew a single square of a quilt, an act of solidarity in the face of the complexities of the pandemic. These sewn squares expressed our experiences of lockdown: the troubled entanglements between domestic and academic labour and between competing forms of responsibility and care to family, neighbours, students and colleagues. Some of my fellow stitchers were highly skilled in embroidery and appliqué, but I was new to such work, happily bodging my way through. I relished the intimacies these Zoom meetings allowed, working alongside women I had never met before, based in universities dotted across the UK. During our Zoom sewing sessions, we compared notes from isolation: laughing, venting and cajoling.¹ In my quilt square I sewed myself raking leaves in our small back garden, caught between responsibility to my children's home-learning and my academic work, my stitched laptop representing my portal to the outside world, at once a tie and an escape. Once sewn together as a quilt, the twenty-four squares created a powerful visual statement, and the mutual solidarities of this collaborative work sustained us all at a bleak time.²

A spate of recent exhibitions and displays have foregrounded the power of collaborative making through art, photography, craft and design. The Turner Prize for British Art 2021 shortlist was given over to four collectives, with Belfast-based artists' group Array winning the prize for their collaborative actions and street interventions on social justice issues. In the same year, London's Barbican Centre gave space to the work of Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative (1981-1994). Drawn from the archive of the feminist architecture practice, this exhibition explored the question of who shared spaces are designed for and who they exclude.³

Tate's popular exhibition *Women in Revolt*, which ran at Tate Britain from November 2023 to April 2024, touring to National Galleries of Scotland and opening in March 2025 at The Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, also foregrounded the importance of group creative work within the Women's Liberation Movement. In doing so the show recuperated the legacies of several collectives, including women printmakers Lenthall Road Workshop (1975-1990), agitprop exhibition-makers Hackney Flashers (1974-1980), women-only photographer's agency Format (1983-2003) and poster makers See Red Women's Workshop (1974 to 1990).⁴

[FIGURE 1: Protest near here]

The eye-catching and sharply humorous work of See Red featured prominently in *Women in Revolt*. Their vibrant green and red poster *Protest* (1974), centring on a woman vomiting out

sexist stereotypes, set the tone as the show's opening image. A series of See Red posters, including photocollages *Black Women Will Not Be Intimidated* and *YBA Wife?*, were sold as special edition posters in Tate's shop. Over recent months, See Red's images have been widely circulated on social media, via feeds like @womensart1, finding enthusiastic new audiences.

In interviews, two of See Red's founding members have told me of their enormous pleasure at this renewed interest fifty years on, with work that had been gathering dust under their beds for decades suddenly thrust again into public view.⁵ So why does See Red's work resonate so strongly with audiences now?

Founding See Red

See Red Women's Workshop was founded in 1974 by three art school graduates: Pru Stevenson, Suzy Mackie and Julia Franco. They had responded to an advertisement in a Women's Liberation Movement magazine, inviting women involved with visual work to start a group to combat degrading images of women in the media. All were keen to tackle the horrific sexism they saw around them every day. Recalling the moment of See Red's founding, Mackie said: 'people don't quite realise how bad it was then: you couldn't sell anything without a naked woman on the bonnet of a car'.⁶ Stevenson had previously started a small print workshop to produce posters for housing groups like the Camden Tenants Association in North London. She brought this experience of posters for community engagement to the group.

An early collective statement declared that See Red's intention was to create 'a positive image of women' by making posters, illustrations, cartoons and photographs. They planned to contribute visual material to women's publications and groups, offer poster-making facilities for use by other women, and create an archive of examples of the positive and negative use of women's images for use as a reference and an inspiration.⁷ Quite quickly, however, they realised that working across so many fronts did not work and, keeping the See Red name, the founder members split off to focus on what they did best: poster making.

Channelling Paris '68

Silk-screen printing became See Red's focus, as it was low-cost and portable, allowing the group to set up their equipment across a range of spaces - from squats to living rooms, and at women's conferences. Silk-screen printing was also immediate: 'the quickest, easiest and cheapest way to get an image out from your head onto paper and out onto the streets or into a school', as Mackie recalled.

Although their work can now be found in the collections of the Tate, the V&A and on the walls of the Museum of the Home in East London, See Red's work was made to be shown away from galleries and other dedicated spaces of art. Posters offered the potential for an unmediated form of social commentary, to be pasted up around the city in public spaces, schools and offices, where they could act as provocations and sharp social commentary. In this, See Red was channelling the spirit of earlier radical collective makers' movements - such as the Atelier Populaire, set up during the Paris worker and student protests of May 1968 - to make anti-capitalist statements in poster-form. Mackie told me: 'screen printing was the medium of protest at the time because, obviously, we'd known about Paris '68 ... we even used some of their symbolism for capitalists or for a factory: it had to have a jagged roof and it had to have a big chimney with lots of smoke coming out - there you are, you understood'.⁸

The group worked from wherever they could find space. They started off in a squatted shop in Camden, North London, but after two weeks the shop's front window was smashed by a brick, the violent response to their displays. So they moved on to a tiny squat at South London Women's Centre on Radnor Terrace in Vauxhall - a tiny basement room with very little ventilation, where they hung posters to dry on a washing line. They finally found permanent premises in 1977 at Iliffe Yard, a derelict mews off Walworth Road in South London. In response to the bold, anti-fascist messaging of posters like *Organise Against the National Front: Don't Let Racism Divide Us* (1978-9), the workshop was attacked on several occasions. Damage included smashing doors, pouring ink over machinery, urinating on materials and cutting phone lines. Working together allowed members to feel safer in places that were dangerous and liable to attack. It also meant that they could run their collective projects alongside their other paid work. For Pru this included teaching printmaking and giving adult literacy support, while Suzy worked in youth work and women's health.

The appeal of a collective

For See Red, working as a collective was fundamental to achieving their aims. It was a direct rejection of their art-school training, which they saw as having privileged 'The Artist', 'a strong, individualistic, self-engrossed person'.⁹ They believed the existence of artists relied on problematic gender stereotyping. As they observed in a joint statement: 'The ideological assumption behind the term "artist" is in direct conflict with the accepted meaning of the term "woman" (a woman creates life not art)'. They saw this sexist system as making it impossible for women to be taken seriously as artists - their work was seen as a 'subsidiary hobby'.¹⁰ The founder members of the collective had experienced male art school tutors' assumption that women were only at art school to spend time until they were married; the implication was that 'you don't really need to bother with this - just do your best', as Mackie recalled. Moreover, they felt that men were actively invested in dominating this domain: 'The idea that their identity - their mark on the finished creation - might not be seen, or the idea of having to share the glory with someone else, stems from fear of not being recognised'.¹¹

Several creative groups inspired See Red in this direction, including Lenthall Road Workshop, the Poster Film Collective and the Some Girls poster project. But to some of their contemporaries in the art world group creative work was anathema. Mackie remembers how bemused people were by their decision to work as part of a group: 'One of our male artist friends ... kept asking: "so who holds the pencil, who does the drawing, who does the design?" He couldn't understand that we all worked on the design'.¹² As well as enabling members to work anonymously and in solidarity, See Red were experimenting with how creative work happens. Mackie explained that they developed an iterative process:

somebody would come up with an idea, they might go and work it up, or somebody else might go and work it up. They'd bring it back, it would be worked on by the group, and it was very much a collective effort, and that was very much our decision from the beginning, not to be three people in a collective but to be 'the collective'.¹³

Art historian Amy Tobin suggests that working together provided a means for support at a moment when women's social and professional status was lower than men's.¹⁴ While rejecting the problematic, gendered, image of the solitary artist, See Red were asserting a provocative alternative. As they noted: 'The idea of working collectively or even with one other person is abhorrent to many artists'.¹⁵ Mackie later recalled with satisfaction how working as a collective annoyed the art world: 'It sounds a bit old hat now really, doesn't it.

But for us it was quite a novel idea to tackle it like that and it also got up a few people's noses, which we quite liked as well'.

Reappraisal

The reappraisal of See Red's work started in 2016 with the publication of *See Red Women's Workshop: Feminist Posters 1974-1990*. This compilation of See Red's work, accompanied by an autobiographical essay by four members - Pru Stevenson, Susan Mackie, Anne Robinson and Jess Baines - made See Red's work widely available in all its vibrant brilliance. The book was published by Four Corners Books, which has now made several books about activist, collaborative work, including studies of the Poster Workshop (1968-1971), Paddington Print Workshop (1974-1988), and Charlotte Dew's work on protest banners made by women at Greenham Common peace camp, *Women for Peace*.¹⁶

In their autobiographical essay for the book, See Red described the resurgence of interest in their work, from galleries and museums to zines and design festivals. 'Closest to our hearts', they said, was seeing the interest in their work of contemporary feminists.¹⁷ Mackie and Stevenson have both described their particular enjoyment in sharing a platform with younger feminists, including with the collaborative publishing practice One of My Kind (OOMK), led by Rose Nordin, Sofia Niazi and Heiba Lamara.¹⁸ The interest in See Red from contemporary feminists also underlines the depressing fact that a continuing struggle for women's freedom and equality remains necessary.

Uncovering gendered inequalities: from the Women's Liberation Movement to the pandemic

While revived admiration for See Red was underway before the pandemic, it is no coincidence that appreciation of collective creative work and of See Red was catalysed during the time of Covid 19, when so many of us were brutally divided from family and friends, schools and workplaces, and from the public places where people usually gather. Not only was there much solace in joint making during the uncertainties of those lockdown months; the pandemic also laid bare and often intensified the deep inequalities within our homes and cities.¹⁹

This context chimed uncomfortably with the inequalities identified by the Women's Liberation Movement fifty years before. The myth of gendered domestic equality was well and truly busted in the age of working from home - women were still carrying most of the domestic labour and caring duties. This realisation made See Red's material on gendered inequalities within domestic labour newly urgent, enraging and darkly amusing.

FIGURE 2: *A Woman's Work is Never Done* near here

Gendered domestic inequalities were the target of See Red's silk screen poster *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (1974). The poster denotes women as doubly exploited: on the one hand as cheap factory labour, and, on the other, as unpaid labour within the home, doing an endless mix of childcare, laundry and cooking. In the poster, a woman stands fixed in the middle of the image, meeting our gaze. Her dress is split between the uniform of her unrewarding production-line job and an apron worn as she goes about her domestic work. Meanwhile, her husband relaxes in an armchair after a 'hard day's work', watching sexist TV, with all the woman's work under the surveillance of exploitative capitalist masters peering menacingly through the windows. The unstable and looping quality of the image emphasises the nightmarish and continuous cycle of hard work in which the woman is trapped. Printed in red to denote their anger - and relating to the pun in the group's name - the rough print and

floating slogan 'A Woman's Work is Never Done' creates a strongly unsettling quality to the work.

FIGURE 3: My Wife Doesn't Work near here

Amidst the many shocks of the pandemic was the recognition that women were still trapped in a cycle of gendered domestic inequality, acting as the main caregivers to children and elderly parents, and the managers of domestic space. See Red's poster *My Wife Doesn't Work* (1976) exposed the farcical nature of this situation. A black and white grid of images show a woman's life drawn across twenty-four hours. She wakes with the baby at 6am, and spends all her time caring for the needs of her husband and children, attending to domestic duties continuously throughout the day. Meanwhile, her husband, chatting to a workmate over a lunchtime pint, delivers the line - highlighted in red - 'My wife doesn't work'. The ludicrousness of this statement is emphasised by the playful format.

The continued appeal of See Red's work is not only its relevance but its humour and lightness, which masks deadly serious subjects, including the devastating social effects of neoliberalism, which are ongoing and still resonate. The poster *Tough! - My Message to the Women of Our Nation* (1979) centres on a blue and white portrait photograph of Margaret Thatcher, in the year of her election. She is surrounded by a border of illustrations of the many ways in which women's lives had become harder under the new right: from hospital and day care centre closures to cuts in the housing budget and fare increases. In the face of this, Thatcher delivers her devastating message to the women of the nation: 'TOUGH!'.

Overcoming loneliness

[FIGURE 4: Alone We Are Powerless ... Together We Are Strong near here]

While See Red's work celebrated the power and solace of togetherness, it was also motivated by the urge to overcome loneliness and social isolation. This is another theme that resonates strongly now, with the Office for National Statistics reporting in 2024 that the number of people experiencing loneliness is rising steadily.²⁰ See Red's beautiful and poignant poster *Alone We Are Powerless ... Together We Are Strong* (1976) pictures the grid-like façade of a block of flats, revealing a woman and baby at each window. These women are all in the same boat, fixed in their isolation, whilst living out their lives in close proximity. A small caption underneath the main image voices the question of a clueless husband upon his return home from the office: 'What did you do to-day dear?'. While the image is of social isolation - 'alone we are powerless' - the title of the poster imagines another formation - a coming together to empower and dispel loneliness: 'together we are strong'.

While collective work provided a stimulating focus for exploring solidarities, collective living offered a potentially liberating alternative to the suffocating daily grind of the nuclear family. Like many members of the Women's Liberation Movement, See Red members were interested in exploring alternative domestic structures. They created work in solidarity with what is perhaps the most celebrated experiment in alternative domesticities: the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, established outside RAF Greenham Common, near Newbury, in 1981. Their poster *Support the women's peace camps* (1983) combined images of the intermeshed airbase fence with photographs by feminist photographer Pam Isherwood, showing varied strategies for resistance, all in the purple and green of the women's suffrage movement.

Some See Red members joined the protestors at Greenham, living in a variety of formations around the air base for almost two decades. Some See Red members also lived communally,

sharing homes and incomes, or living in or otherwise using squatted accommodation - and asserting that such space was a right rather than a commodity. This was a form of protest in the everyday that sought to disrupt the capitalist system of home ownership and landlordism - but it has since been criminalised. Other See Red members developed communal elements to aspects of their lives, for example through sharing cooking rotas on weekday nights across several households.

Walking on eggshells

It is easy to slip into nostalgia while thinking about collective work in the 1970s: a lost world of squats, radical independent bookshops and women's consciousness-raising meetings. But working as a group was by no means easy. Feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham has described how tough it was for See Red to get sufficient perspective on the important issues they were dealing with while at the same time managing group dynamics and clashes, as well as maintaining communication with people who were not necessarily sympathetic towards experimentation with form.²¹ Forty-six women joined the group across its sixteen years, with each new member bringing a succession of intersecting interests, from anti-racism to anti-apartheid and women's health. As a result, the group was never static, and always dealing with new ideas and challenges. Some members recalled that there was much 'internal politicking in the women's movement with respect to image-making', which often made the group feel unstable, like you were 'walking on eggshells'.²²

The funding requirements of the Greater London Council unwittingly contributed to a split between See Red members from 1984, when newer members decided that new, paid, positions in the collective should be reserved for black or working-class women or lesbians, on the principle that it was harder for them to get paid employment and the kinds of training the workshop offered. The two founder members, Mackie and Stevenson, did not fit these criteria and left.²³ But despite all these challenges, the group managed to survive for sixteen years and to work across a vast range of important campaigns. See Red recalled: 'we survived for so long despite the sometimes heated political and other disagreements because of the overriding commitment to the collective, its work and to each other'.²⁴ See Red inspires interest today both because it made such a notable success of collective work over a long period and because it produced images that endure and continue to speak to us so clearly now.

Countering Trumpism

A new exhibition of See Red's work has recently opened in San Francisco to coincide with the 2025 presidential inauguration of Donald Trump. The Haight Street Art Center's new exhibition - *See Red Women's Workshop: Feminist Posters, London, 1974-1990* - is accompanied by a lively programme of events, talks and making. In this new context, the Center describes See Red's work as providing 'a tonic' and showing 'protest' as 'the most active of verbs rather than the gloomy tenor of a society under which we must grudgingly live'.²⁵ At a time when basic rights, including the right to protest, are threatened on both sides of the Atlantic, See Red's work offers a timely reminder of what is possible through making together.

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[the Streets](#) is screening in the Marie-Louise von Motesiczky Archive Gallery at Tate Britain until July 2026.

Notes

- ¹ The quilt-making project, entitled ‘Domestic Academics’, was coordinated by Vanessa Marr at University of Brighton: <https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/thedomesticacademics/>.
- ² Similar ideas were explored in Amy Twigger Holroyd’s project Crafting the Commons: <https://amytwiggerholroyd.com/Crafting-the-Commons>; and in Carol Tulloch’s article ‘If I don’t do some couching I will burst’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1-10, 2022.
- ³ *How We Live Now: Reimagining Spaces with Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative* was held at the Barbican: <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/how-we-live-now-reimagining-spaces-with-matrix-feminist-design-co-operative>. It was accompanied by the reissue of the Matrix’s 1984 book *Making Space: Women and the Man-Made Environment* (Verso 2022), which described itself as about ‘women’s relationship to buildings and to the spaces between them’, p1.
- ⁴ *Women in Revolt* has since toured to the National Galleries of Scotland and is due to show at Manchester’s Whitworth Art Gallery from March to June 2025: <https://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/womeninrevolt/>.
- ⁵ Suzy Mackie, interview with Harriet Atkinson for *Graphic Interventions* podcast, 11 October 2021: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6UT8sUT7ePZH02fYoDeK7L?si=mVX0fhXUTb6axLyJf6LMhQ>; Pru Stevenson, interviews with Harriet Atkinson, 1 August 2023 and 20 November 2023. Sadly, the third founder, Julia Franco, died in 1980.
- ⁶ Mackie, *Graphic Interventions*.
- ⁷ *See Red Women’s Workshop: Feminist Posters, 1974-1990*, London, Four Corners Books, 2016, p3.
- ⁸ Suzy Mackie, *Graphic Interventions*.
- ⁹ Collective statement from See Red Women’s Workshop, 14 Radnor Terrace, London SW4 reproduced in *See Red*, p8.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, p8.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, p8.
- ¹² Suzy Mackie, *Graphic Interventions*.
- ¹³ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁴ Amy Tobin, “‘Little Circles’: On Group Work, Feminism and Art By Women’, *Women in Revolt! Art and Activism in the UK, 1970-90*, London, Tate, 2023.
- ¹⁵ *See Red*, p8.
- ¹⁶ Four Corners books published 2018, 2019 and 2021 respectively.
- ¹⁷ *See Red*, p32.
- ¹⁸ One of My Kind (OOMK): <https://oomk.net/about.html>.
- ¹⁹ ‘Covid has intensified gender inequalities, global study finds’, *Guardian*, 2 March 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/02/covid-intensified-existing-gender-inequalities-global-study-finds>.
- ²⁰ Office for National Statistics, ‘Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain: personal well-being and loneliness’, 20 December 2024: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/publicopinionsandsocialtrendsgreatbritainpersonalwellbeingandloneliness>.
- ²¹ *See Red*, px.
- ²² *See Red*, p32.
- ²³ *See Red*, pp28-30.

²⁴ *See Red*, p22.

²⁵ See Red Women's Workshop: Feminist Posters, London, 1974-1990 – Haight Street Art Center: <https://haightstreetart.org/pages/see-red-womens-workshop-feminist-posters-london-1974-1990>.