

## MENTAL ILLNESS IS CLASS CONSCIOUS!

It can strike anyone - but it is more likely to strike someone from a deprived area

1 woman in 6, 1 man in 9, have treatment in a psychiatric hospital at some time in their lives - most are from deprived environments. Mental illness expectancy has been estimated as high as 40% for working class mothers with young children. The incidence of schizophrenia can be calculated with 95% accuracy according to the degree of poverty which prevails (PRA 'Poverty and Schizophrenia' 1973).

### EAST LONDON

19% above national average mental hospital admissions.

3 times the number of men diagnosed schizophrenic. The majority are single, homeless and without employment.

BUT FACILITIES ARE FEW

In Hackney the situation is acute - patients still requiring hospital treatment are discharged once extreme symptoms cease to make room for new urgent cases. The hospital at Epsom for long term chronic patients from the East End has been closed -

EAST LONDON NOW HAS NO PROVISION FOR LONG TERM CHRONIC PATIENTS

Nor is there provision for violent patients. They are currently dealt with by the police and are not receiving the psychiatric help they need. Government funds allocated for this purpose are being held back -

WE MUST DEMAND THAT THESE FUNDS ARE RELEASED IMMEDIATELY

The Department of Health aims to reduce hospital places for the mentally ill from 2.25 per 1000 of the population to 0.5, with the promise of an increase in more suitable community residences. However a MIND survey shows that this move would require 36,800 such residences - there are at present only 6,000.

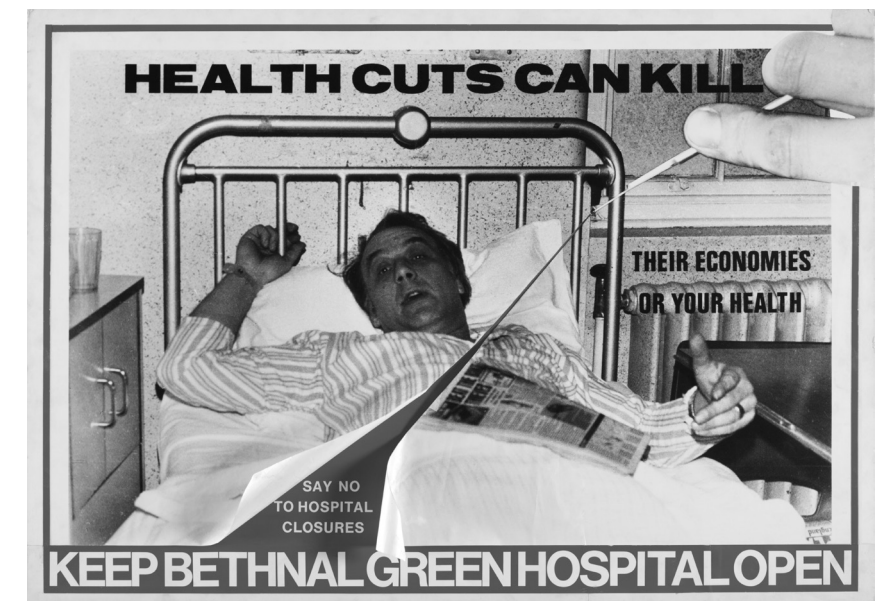
IT IS IMPORTANT TO FIGHT FOR THE RESOURCES ESSENTIAL TO A PATIENT'S SATISFACTORY RECOVERY, BUT THE NEED FOR AN IMPROVEMENT IN LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS MUST NOT BE FORGOTTEN - AN ENVIRONMENT SUPPORTIVE OF PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH SHOULD BE A RIGHT, NOT A PRIVILEGE

Lorraine Leeson, East London Health Project © Dunn and Leeson, 'Mental Illness is Class Conscious', 1979, A2 poster, offset litho. Produced and distributed in conjunction with East London Trades Councils, health workers' unions and the Women's Health Information Collective.

# THE THINGS THAT MAKE YOU SICK

## Lorraine Leeson

In the light of the current resurgence in feminist thought, I have found myself reflecting on the extent to which social engagement and activism in my art practice has been guided by the tenets of feminism. It certainly commenced at the height of feminist activism in the late 1970s, and many of those values and approaches have underpinned the work then and since. These encompassed a focus on social and civil rights, redistribution of wealth, economic and political equality, and recognition of the value of difference, issues that were addressed through processes of making visible, facilitating voice, valuing experience, exploring narratives other than the dominant, and addressing identities from the inside out, with consideration of representation playing a central role. This may not seem surprising, except that the



Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson, Bethnal Green Hospital Campaign, 'Health cuts can kill', 1978, A2 poster, offset litho



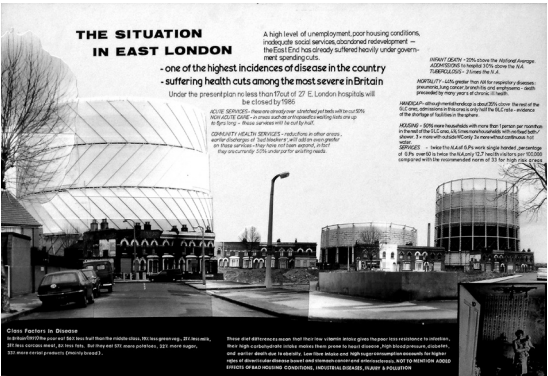
subject of the work has addressed wider social issues and only rarely focused on those specific to women. The Left at that time was nevertheless in many ways closely, though imperfectly, aligned with the women's movement, each with their multiple factions. *Beyond the Fragments*,<sup>1</sup> published in 1979, proved a useful point of reference for those of us straddling the productive, if shifting, positions of each.

Much of my confidence as a young artist was indeed fostered through involvement in women's groups and initiatives such as Tower Hamlets Women's Art Forum, and the various events and published articles generated through Camerawork, including the First Festival of Women Photographers,<sup>2</sup> though all still very much outside the mainstream. The work itself however was developed in collaboration with my long-term partner Peter Dunn. We had both studied at Reading University, where our art history tutor Caroline Tisdall, a close colleague of Joseph Beuys, introduced us to his works and concepts, and we subsequently became members of his Free International University. This provided a foundation for our ongoing creative practice and supported our growing interest in interdisciplinarity plus a belief that working outside of art institutions was where, as artists, we were most likely to contribute to social change. Following early attempts at exhibiting work on social issues in public, we were seeking situations where art might take on a more meaningful role. One such opportunity presented itself in 1978 while on a fellowship running community film and video workshops in Bethnal Green, East London. At around the same time, the local hospital went into occupation as a protest against threat of closure.



**all images**  
Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson, exhibition for Bethnal Green Hospital Campaign, 1979, A1 photomontage on card. Exhibition panels created for the foyer of Bethnal Green Hospital to inform visitors of the wider social and political context that lay behind the campaign. Also used in other hospitals under threat.

- 1. Sheila Rowbotham et al., *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London: Merlin Press, 1979).
- 2. The First Festival of Women Photographers was organized and curated by Shirley Read at Camerawork, circa 1982.

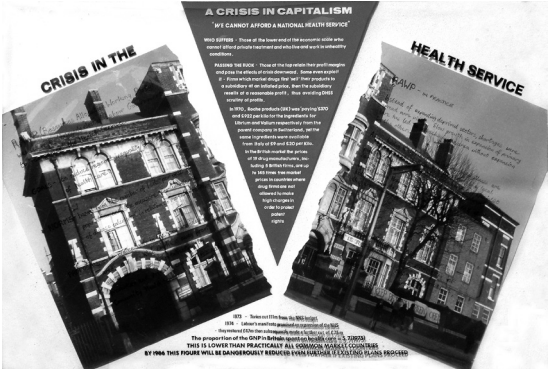


3. This and the following paragraphs are derived from a text produced by Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson for the exhibition 'The Things That Make you Sick', London, ICA, 2017.

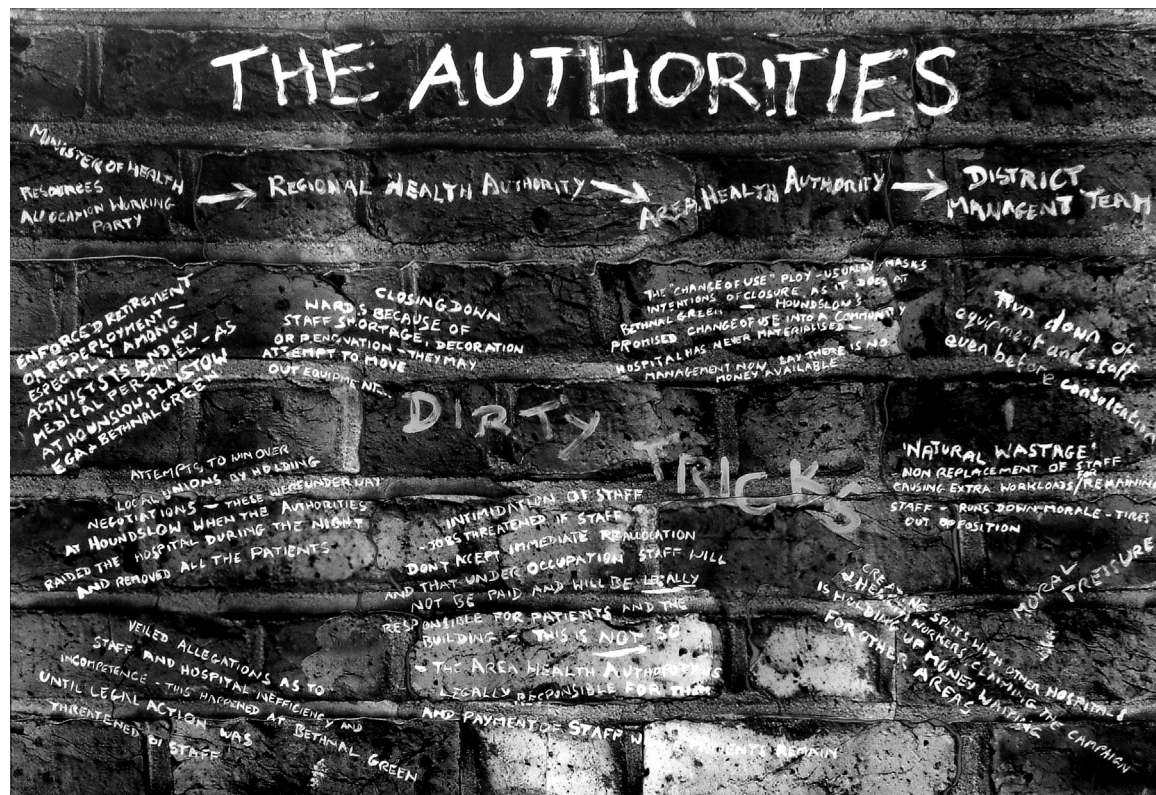


Bethnal Green's small community hospital was under threat as part of the first wave of cutbacks in the National Health Service, through which many small hospitals were closed. It was nevertheless highly valued for its continuity of care and accessibility to local residents, and continued to work to capacity. Once its facilities were withdrawn, patients would have nowhere to go except to extend already over-long waiting lists in other hospitals. In 1977, following orders for closure, its staff decided to "occupy" the hospital while a campaign was mounted to safeguard its future. The only people to move out of the hospital were therefore the administrators. Doctors, nurses and other staff continued to perform their duties, GPs continued to refer patients, people continued to attend the casualty department and ambulance drivers continued to respond to emergency calls. While patients remained at the hospital, the health authority had a duty to pay staff salaries—and so the occupation took effect.<sup>3</sup>

Peter and I were initially approached for a video to support the campaign. This led to a series of posters, followed by an exhibition for the hospital foyer to inform users of the hospital of the wider social and political context that lay behind the campaign. Background knowledge of the history of art had already informed us of art's ability to confer power, consolidate knowledge and celebrate achievement, and through the work for this campaign we sought to draw on these attributes to support a cause we felt worth fighting for. The experience offered fruitful lessons in the effectiveness of collaboration as an artistic strategy



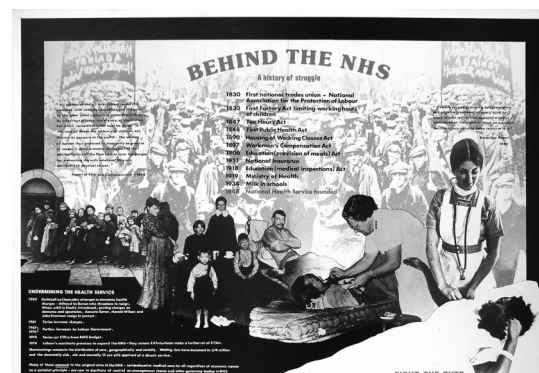




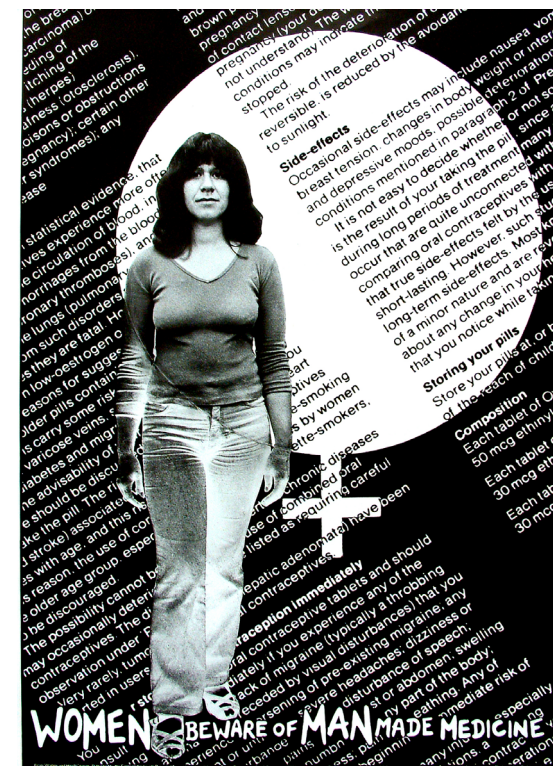
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together with the opportunity to explore the construction of narratives beyond the mainstream from the perspective of those directly involved.

Following the success of the campaign, the East London trades councils planned to use leftover campaign funds to disseminate information about health issues to the local population in light of further NHS cuts. They recognized the potential role of art in this as offering a new, visual approach for the broader campaigning. A steering committee was established that included members of local trades councils and health workers' unions. Peter and I worked with this group to determine a visual form most suited to its potential audience, and arrived at the idea of the "visual pamphlet"—essentially a poster containing information that could be used in health venues such as doctors' surgeries and hospital waiting rooms. The collaborative processes employed in devising and realizing this work, learned from the union activists, thereafter continued to inform our art practices.

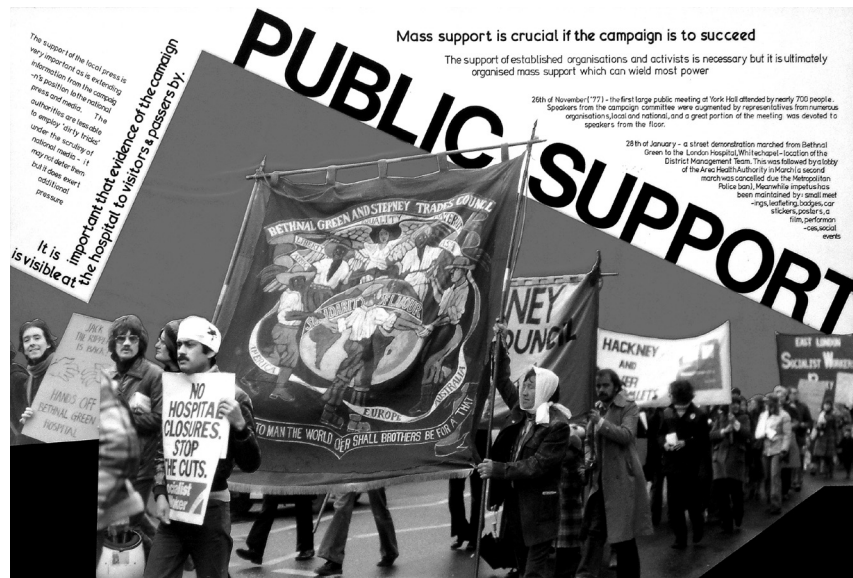


Loraine Leeson, East London Health Project © Dunn and Leeson, 'Behind the NHS', 1979, A2 poster, offset litho. Produced and distributed in conjunction with East London Trades Councils, health workers' unions and the Women's Health Information Collective.



Loraine Leeson, East London Health Project © Dunn and Leeson, 'Women beware of man made medicine', 1980, A2 poster, offset litho. Produced and distributed in conjunction with East London Trades Councils, health workers' unions and the Women's Health Information Collective.





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Eight different posters were produced over the two years of the project and widely distributed within the health sector. Through these we developed our use of photomontage, experimenting with “cut and paste” methods, while Peter also introduced photographic “sets”. One of the steering group’s priorities was on women’s health, which led to a series of posters that I produced with the Women’s Health Information Collective.

Although this work was created for locations outside of art institutions, wider interest in socially orientated art was growing, leading to inclusion of the Bethnal Green hospital campaign work in ‘Art for Whom’, curated by Richard Cork at the Serpentine Gallery in 1978 and the East London Health Project posters in ‘Issue—Social Strategies by Women Artists’, curated by Lucy Lippard for the ICA in 1980. All this work then returned to the ICA in 2017 as ‘The Things That Make You Sick’, curated by Juliette Desorgues.



From 'Women and Health' series. Published by the East London Health Project of Women's Health and Health Workers' Union in 1980. Produced by NALGO, NUPE, Tower Hamlets Arts Committee, Greater London Arts Association. Photomontage by Loraine Leeson.