



The politics of the workshop: craft, autonomy and women's liberation

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Abstract

The women's liberation movements that emerged in Britain in the late 1960s are rarely thought of through their relationship with technology and technical knowledge. To overlook this is to misunderstand the movement's social, cultural and economic interventions; it also understates how the technical environment conditioned the emergence of autonomous, women-centred politics. This article draws on archival evidence to demonstrate how the autonomous women's liberation movement created experimental social contexts that enabled de-skilled, feminised social classes to confront their technical environment and the deficits they experienced within it. The context for forging such politics was the workshop. More than a one-off, skill-sharing event, the workshop was a mobile habitus, adapted from a Marxist craft politics that prioritised the distribution of collective knowledge and responsibility and enabled the realisation of women's self-determination and autonomy. The workshop was discursively extended through women-authored publications in the 1970s and 1980s and designated a specific orientation within knowledge that supported women to practise a range of technical knowledge and gain expertise. An important, and largely forgotten political legacy of women's liberation is its world-making activism: how it created social contexts that supported de-skilled, feminised classes to substantially intervene, shape and re-build their environments. Such histories can inspire how we practise politics today within an environment characterised, some theorists claim, by dramatic scales of de-skilling and dispossession.

Keywords

Autonomy, computerisation, craft, expertise, infrastructure, techne, technology, women's liberation, workshop

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The women's liberation movements¹ that emerged in Britain in the late 1960s are rarely thought of through their relationship with technology and technical knowledge. To overlook how these activisms interacted with the technical environment in different ways is, I argue in this article, to misunderstand the movement's social, cultural and economic interventions. To elaborate these largely forgotten politics, it is necessary to theorise how the movement evolved from experiments with the material conditions of existence (Papadopoulos, 2018). Such practices enabled women, historically classified as de-skilled (Moss, 2015; Hicks, 2017), to realise a contingent 'embodied relationship to technology' which created collective opportunities to fashion 'learned and socially habituated way[s] of doing things with machines, tools, interfaces, instruments and media' (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015: 242).

This infrastructural craft politics was incubated within the movement's different workshops and organised through the re-distribution of collective knowledge and responsibility. The workshop, in this arena, was much more than a one-off, skill-sharing event, nor was it simply moored in physical space; the workshop was a mobile habitus, discursively extended through the proliferation of women-authored publications in the 1970s and 1980s. 'We are the workshop. There is no division. It does not exist outside of ourselves', claimed members of the London Women's Liberation Workshop (LWLW) (1974: 9). In this sense the workshop designated a specific orientation *within* knowledge that supported women to practise a range of technical knowledge and gain expertise.

The workshop established a direct and practical challenge to areas of life that *materially* excluded women. 'The material of male power', as activist and theorist of technology Cynthia Cockburn (1981) conceptualised it, encompassed the conditions that perpetuated women's social, economic and technological subordination to men. This included socio-political concentrations of male dominance, enshrined in networks and institutions, as well as the physical dimensions of male power extended through technology, space and embodied capability. The material of male power was reproduced through practice, realised by men's privileged access to culturally and socially legitimate time and space to practise 'being' men, with all the attendant social meanings attached to that category. The spaces invented within the autonomous women's liberation movement (WLM) mimicked the male-only territories of public culture. They constructed women-only events and networks within which women gained confidence to critically read a text, learn how to operate a Rotaprint machine, play a musical instrument, tackle the plumbing or re-wire plugs, among other things. In doing so they practised an everyday politics that sought to erode the institutional, embodied, social and spatial basis of male power. Some of these encounters with technical knowledge made lasting, material incursions; others were more ephemeral and did little to break down the concentrations of male power across economic, cultural, political and technological fields. Such practices were diverse and applicable across a range of areas, whether that was architecture, manual trades, publishing or political organisation, but were consistent in how they enabled women to encounter technologies and practise techniques.

Workshop practices were adapted from a Marxist craft politics that echoed the socialism of William Morris and prioritised the distribution of collective knowledge and responsibility. Within the workshop it became possible to explore how to use instruments to refuse a condition of instrumentalisation and deploy tools to build alternative infrastructures – to enable activists to learn the worldly ‘handicraft’ that would support their ‘revolt against the tyranny of the excess of division of labour in the occupations of life’ (Morris, [1888] 2010: 148). These interventions created often-ephemeral social contexts where women could flourish, no matter how briefly, as *autonomous* subjects.² Autonomous politics, in this context, were grounded in ‘material interconnectedness, practical organizing, everyday connect-edness and the fostering of ontological alliances’ between ‘Women’ as an emergent political class and the material environments they set to create, rather than the ‘modernist humanist value of individual independence and the seclusion of the personal and the private’ (Papadopoulos, 2018: 3).

Such political practices arose within a brief and ‘specific historical conjunction of technological possibility’ (Baines, 2012: 31) which enabled women as a feminised, de-skilled class to seize tools to fashion experimental forms of sexual, cultural, economic and social self-determination. These politics were contingent and evanescent, embedded in the industrial conditions of the 1960s and 1970s that were undergoing rapid transformation through de-industrialisation (Tomlinson, 2016: 96). The politics of the workshop were compromised in the early 1980s when computerisation came to condition the infrastructural, collectively orientated craft politics of the women’s movement, rendering its forms of socio-technical organisation functionally obsolete. Piecing together the social body that activated this sense of agency in the face of dispossession is an act of re-membering. It necessitates re-situating and recasting the everyday technological-historical context to shock perception outside of familiar, habituated terrains in order to question what a politics of technology and technological expertise (Bassett et al., 2015) might mean.

The revaluation and recovery of the WLM’s workshop histories are important for feminist knowledge politics, certainly. Yet they also have much to tell us about the political relationship between technological autonomy and social self-determination, and how new social, cultural and technological realities can emerge when de-skilled and dispossessed social classes acquire control over their technological environment and re-materialise power for their own ends.

This article presents readings of archival material to demonstrate how the autonomous WLM created energetic and experimental social contexts that enabled participants to transform their de-skilled social position into one of empowerment through political engagements with techniques and technology. We begin, then, by exploring several encounters recorded in reports from WLM conferences and workshops from the early 1970s that reveal women’s lack of technical skill and familiarity with technologies and the technical environment. I then move on to elaborate the politics of the workshop within which practical, distributive politics were crafted. I conclude this article by reflecting on the demise of the workshop

within the context of computerisation and de-industrialisation, before speculating that the material politics invented in the WLM were displaced to other sites of women-centred collective struggle that emerged in the 1980s, namely Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (Feigenbaum, 2015).

Autonomous politics and technological confrontation

Skegness was quite an event and we always said, 'Remember Skegness'. (McIntosh, 2011)

The rise of the WLM in Britain is often associated with the first national conference held at Ruskin, Oxford in February 1970. Documentation of the event, captured in striking black and white photographs and written testimonies (Wandor, 1990), communicates the excitement of a generation whose political awakening was ignited by what Sheila Rowbotham ([1969] 1972) called the 'new' politics of women's liberation. For the development of an autonomous and decentralised women's liberation movement in Britain, however, it was the second national conference in 1971, held in a Butlin's holiday camp in Skegness, that was more significant. Until Skegness, men had, in theory, been welcome participants in the WLM. They famously ran the crèche at Ruskin that enabled many women to participate fully in political activism – unusual for the male-dominated politics of the time. Men were also active participants in mixed-sex Maoist groups such as the Women's Liberation Front and Union for Women's Liberation. These groups, however, opposed and even 'despised' the idea of women's autonomous political organisation (O'Sullivan 1982: 78; McIntosh, 2011). At the Skegness conference, tensions between Maoist and women's liberationist groups aligned to various factions on the left 'erupted into plenary violence' (O'Sullivan 1982: 78). Within the heat of the chaotic plenary, women 'snatched the microphone' (Garthwaite, n.d.) and 'Mary O'Shea [...] spoke very tellingly from the platform and she just basically said men should leave this room, it was a women-only movement' (McIntosh, 2011).

Ursula Owen, who had a pivotal role in establishing the feminist publishing company Virago Press in the 1970s and 1980s, described these events as follows:

[What] I remember vividly is this group of lesbians going on to the platform and talking about being lesbians and what that meant and it was gripping, it was riveting for us heterosexuals. It was an extraordinary moment actually and they were sort of showing, they were talking about *other ways of being a woman, other ways of being a feminist, other ways...* (2011; emphasis mine).

These 'other ways of being a woman, other ways of being a feminist, other ways...' were to be explored in the re-configuration of the WLM post-Skegness when it became a women-only movement shaped by 'a deep distrust of structures and methods of organising [...] associated with the male left' (Anon., n.d.).³ Skegness was therefore *decisive* for the organisation of the movement and the

political practices it was to create. The declaration of female political autonomy called for artificial and experimental social contexts in which women could explore what it meant to be autonomous from men, and man-made institutions, in cultural, economic and sexual terms. Through this it would be possible to embody other ways of being a feminist, other ways...

The determination to be autonomous, which escalated after Skegness, meant women had to operate within, and negotiate their relationship to the socio-technical environment *without men*. Technological knowledge, or *techne*, is social and habituated; it actively shapes how we act and what we do in the world (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015: 242). As such, *techne* requires socialisation, and learning a radically new embodied relationship to technology can require people to rail against the limitations of their sexed position. Substantial integration into the public world of tools and techniques for women was not, however, an automatic process. As we see below, the everyday confrontation with technology and technical knowledge was at first experienced as shock and estrangement. Nevertheless, the collective ethos of the movement – a politics cultivated in the workshop – engendered confidence and determination to force incursions into social, cultural and economic territories historically designated as ‘male’.

Acton 1972

Why should women be deprived of the independence and pleasure that comes from having a measure of control at least over their own environment and the instruments of their own labour? (Cockburn, 1985: 228).

What if we approach social movement action not as targeting existing political power but as experimenting with worlds? (Papadopoulos, 2018: 3).

All forms of life, and not only noetic [thinking] life, confront accidents. Technical life is not simply confronted by accidents, but it is constituted by accidentality (Stiegler, 2017: 111).

Post-Skegness, the autonomous WLM became a novel social laboratory within which the question of what a woman was – that is, her nature and ontological constitution – was probed, extended and, ultimately, transformed. In this time and space, women practised the ‘beginnings of enjoying ourselves and each other as women, being women-identified instead of social appendages’ (Gillian, 1972: 3). This process was not without anxiety or contestation; what woman was, and what she was to become in this accidental, world-making social experiment – accidental because the constitution of autonomous women-only space was grounded in the *contingent decision* to organise without men – was a practical question *opened* for exploration, calibrated through technoscientific innovations of genuine historical novelty. Within this milieu, Woman, as individual subject, and Women, as insurgent political collectivity, could create ‘alternative forms of existence that reclaim[ed] material justice from below’ (Papadopoulos, 2018: 3).

Maintaining the parameters of women-only space was nevertheless hard work; it called for new forms of negotiation with the man-made environment. At the fourth national conference held in November 1972 at Acton Town Hall, London, ‘the caretaker and porters were tipped in advance and told not to let any men in but we also had bouncers (women) covering entrances which could not be locked’ (Gerwin, 1972: 4). Less alcohol was consumed at the evening social because the ‘unpleasant male chauvinist pig’ (Gerwin, 1972: 4) contractor refused to supply barmaids. Male servers were, of course, prohibited.

As well as the male domination of everyday infrastructures, the commitment to autonomous women-only space meant participants encountered substantial technical deficits that shaped the female sex’s social existence in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was to have a real impact on the movement’s ability to fulfil the political objective of constructing independent social space and time where women *could* become autonomous agents. Simply put, taking men out of the equation revealed, in sometimes startling terms, the extent of women’s embodied and psychic distance from technical know-how within everyday life. Reflecting on events at the conference, one attendee wrote: ‘is it too frivolous to beg that you have a *woman* electrician present next time, to deal with the inevitable breakdown of the microphone?’ (Sebestyen, 1972: 2; emphasis in original).

The request, as it turns out, was not frivolous at all: it demonstrated the limited skill-set of women who came to this large, national conference. Nearly 2000 women attended the Acton conference, it was not a small event. The malfunctioning microphone – contrasted with the bold and glorious seizure of amplification recounted at Skegness – points to women’s fragile relationship within the wider public, resonating environment. It demonstrates that the assembled women did not move seamlessly into the world of communication, the world of emphasis and projected articulation. Despite the *inevitable* breakdown of the microphone, among the 2000 present there was not a single female electrician ready-to-hand. Even within such temporary autonomous women-only events it was vital women learnt how to take responsibility for the *whole social infrastructure*, which included all aspects of its technical operations. In the early days of the women’s movement, participants lacked the ‘knack, strength and intimacy with a technology’ that are ‘all in large measure learned or acquired through *practice*’ (Cockburn, 1981: 50; emphasis mine). Calling out for a woman electrician was therefore a call to action, an early evocation of a ‘feminist politics of fracture’ located in ‘failures and breakdowns’ (Rosner and Fox, 2016: 560) that helped articulate the technical skills and knowledge women *had to* acquire if the WLM’s autonomous politics were to be realised in deeds, as well as words.

Carolee Gerwin (1972: 4), the co-ordinator of the Acton conference, also reflected on the operational challenges faced by the autonomous women-only movement:

Th[e Acton] conference was planned for 1000 though in fact we had almost twice that number. However, we arranged accommodation for 300 women and housed only 150 [...] the sound system was the biggest problem. Electricians are unionised and must be

on duty at all times. They are all men. It is also possible for the music workshop to set up mikes. I would recommend also that a couple of loudhailers be hired as the electrician cuts off power spot on time even if the conference is running over. It's also possible of course to overload a circuit and short out [sic] your entire power supply.

Since the nineteenth century, women were systematically excluded from manual and craft professions, a situation supported by male-dominated trade unions (Cockburn, 1985: 39–41; Clarke and Wall, 2006: 35–59). Given this, the absence of skilled female electricians at the conference is hardly surprising. The organiser is clear in her assessment: if there was an electrical fault, the only professional who could help was a man. Asking for such assistance was not an option, however, given it would immediately dissolve the integrity of the autonomous politics women's liberationists were determined to create.

The problem WLM activists faced exceeded the need to call upon *individual* men to help re-wire the technical environment. These documents demonstrate how, in the early 1970s, women's social existence was essentially positioned *outside of* technology. They also evidence how the social, cultural, economic, technical and political project of women's liberation continually butted against this reality. This problem was exacerbated, feminist architects later argued, by the design of the man-made environment that segregated work and home life, which served to 'keep women "distanced" from the public world' and tied to specific localities (Matrix, 1984: 4).

Women's relative powerlessness before technologies and within the technical environment was historically engineered through cultural and social prohibition. This was augmented through labour classifications that de-skilled the technically competent female worker and hindered her access to professional mobility and earning power (Moss, 2015; Hicks, 2017). Women had limited social opportunities to appropriate 'muscle, capability, tools and machinery' too, and this acted as 'an important source of women's subordination, indeed it is part of the process by which females are constituted as women' (Cockburn, 1981: 44; emphasis in original removed).

Women also lacked the knowledge of how to manage energetic forms like electricity that animated the scale and intensity of industrialised space. They had an abundance of initiative and cunning – the deployment of the loudhailer demonstrates determination to remain animated, present and extensive – which compensated for their limited technique, skills and confidence. The use of the mobile and autonomous loudhailer demonstrates willingness to bypass limitations, to get around the problem of technologies they could not operate. The microphone, spatially located and integrated in a circuit, remained silent, as activists employed alternative strategies to sustain the amplified female voice and relay its power to a collective audience. At the same time the loudhailer was clearly a short-term remedy: called upon in realisation that a male electrician would come and *knowingly* cut off the electrical supply. This reality was a threat and crude technical disciplining of the social and political excess of women-only space.

From impotence to action

Through the practice of constructing women-only space, activists opened up a compelling social question lived through action: who has access to power – its tangible materials – and why. The disassociation from the material environment discussed above revealed pointedly how those who control technology define the temporal and spatial parameters of social space, and the energies that flow within and from it. Participants moved through and ground against this emergent social knowledge, and – quite remarkably – transformed their lack of power into determined, collective strength. This encounter with women’s technological experience could have been, in a different historical milieu, disarming. Yet within the women’s movement the frisson became pedagogical, an opportunity for collective reflection. Recording experiences became a habitual activity. Sharing closely typed records among women’s liberation networks was a vehicle for processing what was learnt and a way to extend the circuit, enabling others to benefit from the experience. Conference reports, manuals and other ‘how-to’ guides, as we shall see below, were how women made *sense out of* the social knowledge that emerged through the experimental practices they participated in. Activists knew, somewhat intuitively, that their actions unfurled within the untested grounds of a self-fashioned women-centred public culture; the distribution of such knowledge was central to the wider structuring of that organisation. The textual and social reproduction of women’s liberation were, in this material sense, intimately conjoined.

Beyond temporary autonomous spaces created at National Conferences, inhabiting physical spaces in towns and cities was an important strategy for women’s liberation activists in Britain. From around 1973 onwards, Women’s Centres began to emerge across the UK and were host to a range of different activities. Sometimes they became ad hoc refuges for ‘battered women’ and many provided regular pregnancy testing – itself a practice in which activists ‘domesticated’ existing medical technologies to support women’s reproductive freedom (Olszynko-Gryn, 2017). The account below, published in *Peace News* in May 1974, echoes many of the frustrations of the Acton conference. ‘How Not To Start A Woman’s Centre’ outlines the problems women encountered when they attempted to set up an autonomous women’s centre in a semi-derelict building:

Despite best intentions, most of our bad habits prevailed. A friendly male specialist who lived down the road connected the electricity and fixed the odd bits of wiring. One or two women assisted him, but many others who wanted to learn this practical skill were somehow never included. Plumbing was a similar story, although this was organised by a woman, and one or two teaching sessions were held (Penny et al., 1974: 11).

As with the Acton conference, these experiences record how women had limited access to ‘practical skills’. Inherited roles automatically reproduce ‘bad habits’, passivity was a pressing problem. Even when a woman plumber was available it was not enough to rectify women’s disempowerment. These authors reflect on their

tendency to sit back and watch a specialist do the work. To challenge this reality it became imperative to establish means to distribute responsibility among the group in order to support an alternative crafting of the social:

Our hope was that the new centre would provide the space and physical focus to expand in a personal and political way. It was a very mechanistic view, which has only been half validated by experience. But we are caught in a vicious circle. Many women, accustomed to relating to events in the supportive capacity rather than taking responsibility themselves, bring the *same conditioned response* to women's activities. They create a dichotomy whereby 'they' (the leaders? Everybody else?) are responsible for failing to provide what I want. But we all cannot be the client 'I's. A friendly, productive centre cannot be created until women accept responsibility for making it. (Penny et al., 1974: 11; emphasis mine)

Such reports were common in the WLM. They were evaluations written with hope for social transformation, acting as generative social pedagogies through the relaying of frustrations and failures. Their intention was to facilitate new embodied practices that would enable women to interact with, and leverage, technical knowledge in new ways, transforming disempowering encounters with the technical environment into new forms of collective action.

Such practices are evident in ventures such as She Can Do It, a not-for-profit employment agency set up by four women who met at the LWLW. She Can Do It effectively supported women to practise their technical knowledge under the auspices of a hired-help paid work directory. The range of services She Can Do It covered included painting and decorating, electrical work, carpentry, academic research, babysitting, typing and removals. Crucially, She Can Do It did more than provide customers with individual services. Those aligned with the agency 'all stress the importance of sharing the knowledge any of the group acquires, by learning about so-called male jobs, and of realising that their traditional skills can be a useful way of earning money' (Rowe, 1973: 14). She Can Do It emphasised that women could turn their hand at anything, including skilled manual trades.

They helped rewire the West London Women's Centre, a derelict house acquired by several Women's Liberation groups in the area, from Hammersmith Council. They had no experience of wiring and no knowledge of electricity, so sat down and considered their assets 'common sense, willingness and literacy'. From reading several books on the subject 'we discovered the mystique surrounding technology had kept us from finding out how simple such work is' (Rowe, 1973: 14).

Here we can see that women's liberationists drew on a tool-kit composed from common sense, willingness and literacy. This was a generation of women whose parents had been educated under the provisions of the 1944 Education Act, and 'we were educated to be happy, healthy, thinking people, and more was invested in and expected of us than ever before' (Segal, 2017: 66; see also: Bunkle, 2016; Bruley,

2017). Through education and training, this cohort of women had acquired *techniques* (the ability to read, reason and solve problems).⁴ When women left school, however, there was a marked contrast between women's technical socialisation, mandated through institutions like the school and complemented by further study at universities or secretarial colleges, and existing public contexts in which women could practise their skills. The women who became active in women's liberation movements were products of post-war social engineering and possessed resources to be productive on their own terms. This potential was the foundation of the workshop, which I elaborate below.

The politics of the workshop

The practical politics of the WLM crystallised in the workshop, an imagined yet material environment that enabled women to take responsibility for their lives through grasping substantial understanding of how and why the world operated. This *form* of politics, that lacked a 'fuller place' (Cockburn, 1981: 43) in the theory of the movement since it resided in action, and in practice, was expressed through the ideal of the workshop; a material, organisational, discursive and lived environment through which women cultivated their social power via the collective distribution of craft and practical knowledge. This distributive politics gave rise to new forms of individual and collective responsibility, acquired through the ability to reproduce social space and relationships, cultural and economic activity which empowered women to build society in a different – and not 'man-made' – image.

The allure of the workshop harked back to an era prior to the capitalist enclosure of the commons, a time when craftsmen and operatives had full control over the flow and pace of work and production, ungoverned by managers or leaders. Such orientation lay at the root of the movement's ideological opposition to 'stars' and 'experts'; they were not 'artists [who] laboured alone', but 'craftsmen [who] learned their trade in workshops, as part of the collective' (Tenen, 2017: 62). The conjunction of 'craft' and feminist politics of the 1970s often evokes connections to domesticity, handiwork and revaluations of artistic practice (Adamson, 2010). The craft politics of the workshop I elaborate, in contrast, reside in an appropriation of craftsmanship that 'referred to industrial skills' (Edgerton, 2018: 201); it was an inhabitation and public exposure of masculine knowledge. In the hands of women's liberation activists, tools and techniques were meant for common ownership, on transparent, public display. Participants constructed the workshop as an accessible time and space that invited women to gain familiarity, experiment and acquire expertise with whatever knowledge they needed to practise self-determination.

Within the women's liberation workshops, 'skill was acquired on the job' (Edgerton, 2018: 202) and apprenticeships aimed to re-make existence. Political practice re-shaped social contours through the deliberate erosion of materialised power concentrated in sediments of institutions, laws, habits, policies, bricks, mortar and know-how. Creating technical knowledge about all aspects of social

life, and distributing it within the movement, was fundamental to the worlds their actions sought to create. Whether learning how to cut wood to size or analyse theoretical ideas, procedures in the world were broken into workable parts: 'Sometimes this is a *mechanical procedure* – going through, taking notes, trying to pull together the main ideas and arguments. I think this is particularly important if we are to learn *how to use* what we have been reading' (A Women's Political Marxist Group, 1973: 6; emphasis mine).

The workshop acted as a social-pedagogic time/space realised across different strata of the women's movement. Sometimes a physical site for sharing skills, it enabled women to socialise new sensory experiences *within* technology.⁵ In the workshop, the strange could become familiar and relief could be experienced through practice. This is evident in the example below which reports on a workshop organised by the Women and Music group in the late 1970s:

Last summer eleven women met, all of whom felt there was a musical gap—no place to sing and play, no place to hear other women, no place for new women to come forward and be heard, no place to rehearse, and no place to meet other women interested in music [...] 'the Do's and Don'ts of Using a Microphone' ... was so useful and enjoyable ... amongst other things [the facilitators] sang songs from their shows illustrating how NOT to use a microphone which was quite hilarious. Then most of us sang or played using the microphones and those listening made helpful criticisms. *To have some understanding of how that strange object sometimes placed in front of your nose actually works is a great relief* (Women's Music Group, 1978; emphasis mine).

Here again we encounter a recurring motif that propelled these new forms of practice: women's structural exclusion from the public world of tools and instruments. The cultural and practical need for the workshop is indisputable: this extract clearly articulates that there was *no place* for women to gather, practise, make collective noise and share interests around the common object of music making. There was no place; therefore it had to be made. The workshop was the remedy to this lack of space – an avenue to rectify women's lack of functionality within the cultural, economic and social environment. While the workshop reclaimed physical spaces, it permeated the wider milieu of the women's movement. As the site through which knowledge was generated, the practical ethos of the workshop – its determination to lay bare experience, to pass on techniques (no matter how 'obvious' or common sense) and demystify expertise – was extended through periodicals and pamphlets, or integrated into dialogic, public exhibitions. Such words were intended for activation, to be materialised in the everyday, tools rather than texts, manuals for re-making the world:

The Women's Liberation Bookbus has existed for two and a half years, in order to provide bookstalls of feminist books, pamphlets and magazines. Although it has been a struggle to keep going we feel committed to the idea of the Bookbus and would like

to see it continue, and we would also like to see other women in other parts of the country setting up Bookbuses. *We have written this pamphlet to explain how we have done it – and how it can be done!* (Women's Liberation Bookbus, 1980: 2; emphasis mine).

Accompanying the display [of posters from the See Red Women's Workshop] are a pair of well-used overalls and a squeegee—some of the essentials for silk screening posters. *A simply written guide on how to make posters demystifies what could otherwise seem to be a magical process* (Shaila, 1983: 7; emphasis mine).

We had long discussions on what kind of paper might be most useful to other women either already in study groups or wanting to start one. We finally decided to present some of our individual responses to the study group experience, rather than write a collective theoretical paper at this stage. *This is because we feel that the introduction to the process of study is as important as the theoretical work itself* (A Women's Political Marxist Group, 1973: 1; emphasis mine).

These different examples capture the tone and politics of the workshop as they evolved within the WLM. They all emphasise the importance of explaining *how things are done* and reveal the manual construction of different activities, whether that be the distribution of political literature, making posters or learning how to think theoretically. These examples share a mechanistic deconstruction of the activity in question; they break down the parts so they might be re-built by others, extending competency and understanding in order to smash social, cultural and technical illusions.

In other contexts the workshop was explicitly adopted as an organisational form, as in the case of the LWLW, an umbrella organisation that served over 300 local, study and campaign groups in London during the 1970s. Eve Setch outlined how the LWLW was defined by its 'constantly changing' (2002: 178) organisational structure as activists sought to develop techniques, such as job rotation, that could effectively distribute power and responsibility among movement participants. 'Laying bare these structures' (Setch, 2002: 177) in newsletters and organisational practices was how members of the LWLW attempted to create an accessible, inclusive and open environment that those new to women's liberation could participate in.

While workshop-style, collective politics permeated counter-cultural and labour politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s (see: Coates, 1976; Bauer and Kidner, 2013), the manner of their appropriation in the WLM posed a direct challenge to the material perpetuation of male power (Baines, 2012: 34). In women's liberation workshops, activists grasped the possibilities available in a contingent set of technological, political and economic conditions which supported historically de-skilled classes to seize technical knowledge in order to carve out new organisational, embodied and epistemological realities that reworked the material of social power. The collective redistribution of technical knowledge was meant to

interrogate the *whole social environment* – its operations, assumptions, structures and emphases. These practices designated a very particular orientation within knowledge production, a technical politics that explored *how* to re-skill the technically dispossessed as a means to transform social structures and operate without experts, or leaders. The conditions that gave rise to such politics were rapidly changing with the onset of computerisation from the 1970s onwards. Within this emergent technical milieu the coherency of the workshop's collective politics waned, as I now go on to explain.

The demise of the workshop

Although coterminous and entangled with the ascendancy of neoliberalism and financialised capital, the impact of computerisation is rarely given consideration in analyses of the political, economic, social and cultural changes of the 1980s. Within the women's movement, the computerisation of the technical environment eroded the consistency, practicality and social legitimacy of the collective politics of the workshop. It privatised technical knowledge under a cloak of opacity and elitism, regenerating a "black box" which meant that 'as technology itself becomes more "intelligent" [women's relationship to it] has become less, not more interactive' (Cockburn, 1985: 226). Computerised instruments such as the IBM Selectric (manual) composer did enable some women to claim economic independence, for example by setting up typesetting businesses in their homes (Cadman et al., 1981: 52). Yet the image of the individual woman, working at home, whose livelihood and existence is mediated by a screen, stands in stark contrast with the public workshop, animated by struggle, skill-sharing, conversation and social purpose.

Perhaps the most potent example of how the workshop – a social environment supported by ephemeral technological conditions – had more or less disappeared by the late 1980s can be found in the story of Adena Franz, proprietor of Lilith Publications Inc., a one-woman press from Montreal, Canada. Franz published her reflections on computerisation within the catalogue for the 3rd International Feminist Book Fair, held in Montreal in 1988.⁶ Feminist publishers can 'save time and money using computer technology', she enthused; indeed it is 'possibly the "goddess" dream come true for many one or two-women publishing enterprises' (Franz, 1988: 63). The computer's capacity to fulfil different productive and administrative functions was central to its technological and economic value. Desktop publishing (DTP) was becoming influential at this time, enabling the feminist publisher to 'enter a text into a computer at our desks, edit it, format it, enter it into an electronic design and subsequently print it out – all in one place. We can prepare brochures, letters, books, magazines, and newsletters and save a bundle doing it'. Furthermore, 'when the computer is resting from DTP, we can [...] employ it to balance our accounting books, analyse our finances on a spreadsheet, track promotions and sales, spit out mail merge letters and generally everything else, except clean the office and make the coffee' (Franz, 1988: 63).

Franz's enthusiasm for the computer's multi-functional flexibility is well reasoned – it is very easy to see the economic rationale for introducing computers, especially in small publishing operations. Yet we should note how the computerised technical environment conditioned particular kinds of social activities. Unlike the working practices that characterised small feminist publishing enterprises of the previous decade, Franz did not work in a publishing collective because she didn't need to. She worked with her computer. She did not need to rely on several members of a collective to set a text and print it – she could do that by herself, from her desk. She didn't need to go *out* to the workshop to produce a newsletter. She could manage such activities from the comfort of her own home or some other domesticated office space. This is not to undermine Franz's technical competency, which is clearly impressive. The point is that the computer could do everything she needed to run her operation efficiently, except the emotional labour of coffee making and drudgery of office tidying.

For feminist publishers who privileged their autonomy, computerisation was also presented as central to its *survival*: 'we need [...] to take advantage of today's technology. Without this initiative, our presses will literally stay stuck at the same level of doing things, an expensive and inefficient way of doing things' (Franz, 1988: 63).

At the same time, the introduction of computers into the technical environment transformed the kinds of decisions women involved in political acts of cultural production had to make. The computer was not the answer to all problems, and is 'only as good as its manager' (Franz, 1988: 63). In particular, Franz recommended that small feminist publishing companies, typically those with one or two workers, should 'look at automating only one part of their operation at a time' in order to learn how use a computer for word-processing, accounts and mailing lists. This is to 'alleviate the pressure of *now that we have a computer, we can do everything on it*' (Franz, 1988: 63; emphasis in original). This graduated approach nonetheless has one goal in mind: to remove what we might call the 'human element' in the interests of efficiency and cultural survival. Such is the logic that underscores ideas about innovation and technological development within capitalism, where more and more processes are automated in order to increase profits.

This example of the individualised publishing project, fundamentally enabled by the conditioning context of computerisation, is clearly very different to the collectively operated workshop, where tools are on display, and knowledge has to be co-owned and distributed so that 'the system' – the world created within its foundations – can work. As computerised tools became adopted and integrated, the practices of the mechanical-electrical workshop, and the wider social milieu that grew around it, were perceived as wasteful, time-consuming, inefficient and old. This point is clearly evoked in these words from See Red Women's Workshop, a printing collective, which describe the technological changes that conditioned its closure: 'By the mid 1980s, screen-printing itself was increasingly seen as being an expensive way to produce publicity. Photocopying had become much more widely

accessible and creatively used and desktop publishing was in its ascendance. *After four years of trying to be self-sufficient the workshop closed in 1990* (See Red Women's Workshop, 2016: 32; emphasis mine).

By this account we can see how the collective politics that flourished in the WLM were, by the late 1980s, no longer able to sustain themselves. Other collective feminist projects were on the horizon, notably riot grrrl and cyberfeminism, but they did not seek autonomy, or what See Red term 'self-sufficiency', within the material environment on the same scale as the WLM. The WLM, as I have argued, emerged at a rare historical moment. Its interventions were staged in the twilight of mechanical-electrical power amid a de-industrialising economy on the cusp of the digital revolution. Women, as new sociotechnical actors, were simultaneously cast adrift and absorbed within the modified – computerised – milieu, enveloped in a new relation of dependency upon a technical environment they may have helped build, but did not managerially control (Hicks, 2017).

'It's almost impossible now, more than 30 years on, to recall how labour-intensive the processes were in making up the finished pages (no computers/emails/mobile phones/fax or even photocopying machines)', *Spare Rib* collective member Ruthie Petrie (2015) wrote, reflecting on how the collective met the magazine's monthly production deadline. *Almost impossible to remember* because the technical environment changes so quickly – and such technologically conditioned memories become even harder to recall within the accelerated innovations of digital capitalism. It therefore becomes imperative to *re-member* – as this article has attempted to do – the socio-technical conditions that enable communities to take control, practice autonomy and invent alternative infrastructures that create essential – that is, ontological – building blocks of *different* worlds (Papadopoulos, 2018).

The forms of technological knowledge developed in the workshops of the women's movement employed a 'politics of expertise' practised as 'a question that concern[ed] everyday life', and these feminist 'models of expertise developed in earlier eras' offer 'useful jumping off points, in their detail [...] their intervention remains valuable' (Bassett et al., 2015: 331). Grasping the dynamics of the technical environment, then, especially during a time when computerised systems and instruments became deeply embedded throughout society, aims to support a wider appreciation of the technical politics of the WLM. This includes a grounded reassessment of the political stakes of the WLM's intervention, and how it helped build a world in which subsequent generations of feminists could live. Doing so will enable understanding of the historical novelty and contingency of the movement's political practices, located in actions that supported de-skilled, feminised classes to seize technical knowledge, and how this carved out pedagogical orientations within the social that enabled material power to be re-distributed.

The material politics cultivated in the WLM's workshops did not disappear entirely during the 1980s. Rather, we might speculate, they were displaced to other sites of collective, women-centred struggle. At Greenham Common the workshop became a protest camp, built from residents' technical capacity to tinker with and re-configure their material environment (Feigenbaum, 2015). In this way, the

Greenham women inherited *the learning* that unfolded in the women's liberation workshops and such inheritance functioned as common sense. The ability to build autonomous infrastructures, to interact with and re-formulate the material environment of the camp, was held in protestors' bodies; it formed part of their immediate psychic life. Such social knowledge was built upon erosions already made and materials already recast; the workshop cleared the path for participants whose habitus was honed to the sense they had capacity to build alternative feminist worlds.

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Notes

1. I use the plural 'women's liberation movements' in this opening statement to acknowledge that women-centred social movements of this era took different forms, employed diverse strategies and addressed varied constituencies. Such variance is hard to capture through appeals to catchall terms such as 'second-wave feminism'.
2. Such practices later supported the emergence of women-only organisations, such as the Women's Design Service and Women in Publishing.
3. In reality, men continued to have involvement with women's liberation through the guise of anti-sexist men's groups (see: Delap, 2017), and activists in the Black Women's Movement organised with men to counter the impact of racism in Black communities (see: Watt and Jones, 2015).
4. This education was nonetheless highly gendered. Girls were directed to domestic economy rather than woodwork at school; further differentiation through the 11+ created distinctions between academic and technical education. Thank you to Margareta Jolly for this insight.
5. An important legacy of the WLM was establishment of physical workshops. The Bristol Women's Workshop and the East Leeds Women's Workshop, both set up in 1981, trained women in skills such as carpentry, joinery, computing and electronics (Morris and Withers, 2018). Although these interventions emerged from the WLM and are an example of putting its politics into practice, in this article I make a distinction between the politics of the workshop – as an ethos and orientation within action that permeated the WLM – and these permanent workshop sites.
6. The very existence of this global event reveals the remarkable way feminists of the 1970s and 1980s leveraged tools to create infrastructures that supported the growth of a transnational book trade filled with writers, readers, sellers, publishers, printers and distributors. See Hogan (2016) for further discussion, from the perspective of booksellers.

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