

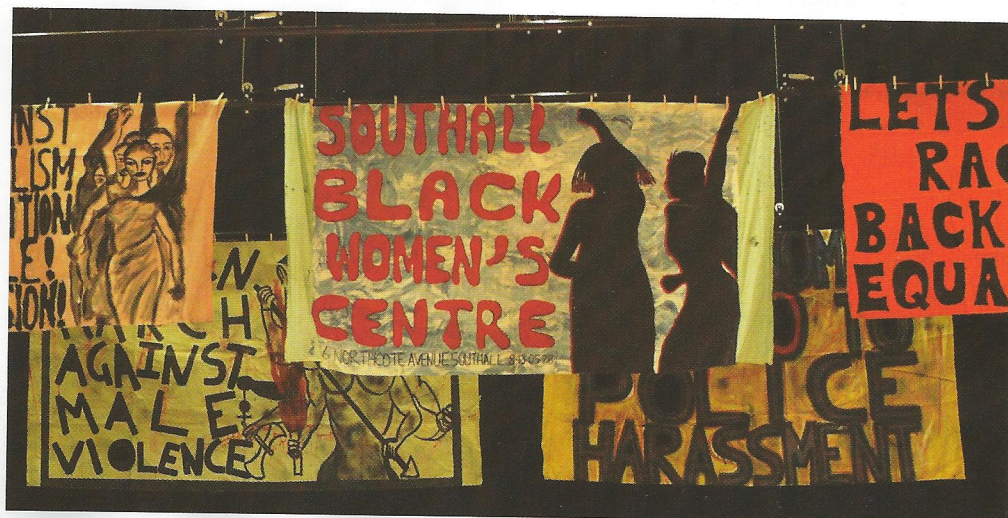
A CURATOR DISCOVERS THAT IT'S NOT ONLY SISTERS BUT ALSO SMALLER ART ORGANISATIONS WHO ARE DOING IT FOR THEMSELVES

The shots are low and steady. Close-ups of hands – female – and not idle ones at that. They fill in forms with ballpoint pens, type away on keyboards and prepare snacks in a kitchenette. Then phones start ringing and voices disturb this otherwise quiet scene; conversations about domestic violence and other forms of abuse begin. Bursts of collective activity take place: the women sit down for meetings (both formal and informal), educational sessions and encounters with visitors. Often, such activities take place surrounded by framed black-and-white photographs of protests in which some of the women present feature. The shots are edited to form a slow, calm progression, in contrast to the intensity and speed of the typing and talking. But there is no doubt that this is an environment of engagement.

Petra Bauer's film *Sisters!* (2011) is styled as a 'collaboration' between the Swedish artist and the Southall Black Sisters, a feminist and antiracist organisation that, since 1979, has been advocating for black and minority women's rights. Southall is home to one of the largest communities of South Asian people outside the subcontinent (55 percent of the borough's population are Indian or Pakistani) and the Sisters have made it their task both to act on the ground with individual cases and to affect public policy on issues such as 'mature multiculturalism' – a notion from the late 1990s that has increasingly replaced cultural relativism (in which immigrant communities were allowed to deal with social issues, particularly as they touched on women who were perceived to be 'errant', according to their own customs, because of the belief that to intervene would be racist) and seeks to recognise cultural difference while protecting women from abuse.

In *Sisters!* we get a carefully constructed peek into the daily, unglamorous work of the Sisters over the passage of one week, as well as a condensed history of women's rights in the UK over the last three decades, a period full of achievement and loss. Particularly, when it comes to the latter, the loss created by the ongoing and drastic cuts to legal aid, which prevent the Sisters from doing what they do best: enabling women of immigrant origin to access state services.

As Bauer's film unfolds, I am compelled to think about the function of another kind of small-scale, engagement-focused organisation – the organisation that commissioned the film in the first place and in whose gallery I am now watching it, projected onto a screen placed on the floor: the Showroom, a small-scale London-based not-for-profit visual arts body that exists under the radar of the mainstream but where essential work is being done.



The Showroom, together with a group of similarly scaled art organisations in London (Afterall, Matt's Gallery, Chisenhale Gallery, Electra, Gasworks, Lux, Mute Publishing and Studio Voltaire), have recently come together to work as an advocacy group under the name Common Practice. Their first research paper, *Size Matters: Notes Towards a Better Understanding of the Value, Operation and Potential of Small Visual Arts Organisations*, written by Sarah Thelwall, was published recently, and makes a timely case, in the face of funding cuts, for such organisations, demonstrating how crucial they are as components of the arts ecology. They specialise in generating work of artistic, social and societal value, which is missed by the metrics of most funding bodies and governments, partly because the effects of such work often become palpable as much as 20 years after the projects take place. Social value, by its very nature, accrues slowly, and then it's more-mainstream institutions and the commercial sector that benefit from that deferred value. Despite the lack of scope for development, these

smaller organisations take considerable (but necessary) risks by commissioning work such as *Sisters!* and in developing new ways to present and discuss art and related issues.

More than that, the organisations involved in Common Practice have been inspirational in taking things into their own hands and doing what funding bodies, policy makers and politicians should have done long ago – acknowledging and properly assessing the importance of this foundational work. At this time of budget cuts, disturbing instrumentalisation by the neo-bureaucracy that now comes along with public funding and the ever more influential commercial art market, I for one am eagerly awaiting their next report.