

Older Women Rock!

Leah Thorn

Abstract: In this article artist/activist Leah Thorn shares the processes and rationale underpinning ‘Older Women Rock!’, a project creating pop-up political art spaces to raise awareness and explore issues facing early-old-age women in their 60s and 70s. Through poetry, performance, retro clothes, film, consciousness-raising and listening skills, ‘Older Women Rock!’ celebrates older women, unites them across differences, challenges their invisibility and subverts society’s assumptions and prejudices about them. The project arose out of a 10-month Leverhulme Trust artist residency undertaken by Leah in 2015 at the Kent Academic Primary Care Unit, University of Kent, and the England Centre for Practice Development, Canterbury Christ Church University. The project was developed in 2017 through a Fellowship at Keele University Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Keywords: ageing; women; feminism; fashion; clothes; poetry; pop-ups

Note on the author: Leah Thorn is a spoken word poet, activist, workshop facilitator and speaker. Working in collaboration with filmmakers, her award-winning poetry films have been screened at feminist, Jewish and poetry film festivals internationally. Leah has extensive experience of leading expressive writing workshops across the prison estate nationally and in 2012 she undertook a Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship, visiting women’s prisons across the United States with theatre companies. In 2013 she received a Royal Society for Public Health Special Commendation Award for her contribution to Creative Arts and the Criminal Justice System. Leah is an Honorary Senior Fellow with the ImpACT Research Group, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of East Anglia. Her latest project, ‘a:dress’, is a campaign of art/activism using textile art, poetry, film and conversations to raise awareness about fast fashion and its contribution to climate crisis. The focus is on women and girls as they are disproportionately impacted by climate crisis globally and the main target, and makers, of fast fashion.

leah@leathorn.com

blood memory

I am an old age, all age woman,
 no way past my use-by date.
 Walking in ancestral sisters' footsteps,
 I am an archive on legs,
 a time traveller, alive to life,
 I embody time, provide testimony,
 a radical, lyrical, womanist legacy
 Women's blood memory speaks in me

a found poem by Leah Thorn, created after reading 'Out of Time'
 by Lynne Segal and 'How to Age' by Anne Karpf

'Older Women Rock!' creates pop-up art spaces in which to raise awareness and explore issues facing early-old-age women in our 60s and 70s. The project challenges our invisibility by placing us centre stage on our own terms; unites us across differences of class, race, sexual identity, physical and learning abilities; strengthens our resilience and our networks as we move into older age; and importantly, subverts society's assumptions and prejudices about us.



Figure 1. Left to right: 'Dress Your Age' crochet dress by Deborah Nash; Shoe poem by Leah Thorn; Brooch by Leah Thorn. Photos by Clare Unsworth.

Using poetry, personal stories, 'fashion', consciousness-raising and listening skills, an innovative archive of poetry-adorned clothing and films is being co-created and produced by early-old-age women.

Being an Older Woman

I am of the generation of women whose thinking and actions made decisive change. We had many victories and we are learning to acknowledge the defeats and move toward the recognition that the defeats may not be permanent. What I hope for myself and for the women of my generation is that we never give up our vision of the world we want and our intention to have it. This means leading on the major issues of our time (including climate justice), understanding how sexism and male domination impacts women at different stages of our lives and fully backing younger women to fight for themselves. It means reminding myself that old-age oppression is systemic, brutal and relentless – and not just in my mind. It means confronting fears of ageing, death and dying, the death of peers and witnessing the struggles of other elders.

As I age, I struggle increasingly with the combination of old-age oppression and sexism, which results in trivialisation, marginalisation and enforced invisibility. Daily I am inundated with messages that I am inconsequential and my thinking outmoded and no longer needed. This attempted invalidation builds on decades of oppression as a female, where our existence has been diminished and erased.

As an older woman, I have had the experience of caring for a father with dementia and committing him into psycho-geriatric care; providing company for a widowed mother; being alongside my parents as they died harsh, working-class deaths; witnessing physical deterioration of friends; acknowledging my own losses and limitations. A woman could be scared and discouraged.

I have to constantly make a decision to stay significant and powerful, to lead a meaningful life, to remember I am no less female than when I was young.

Seven years ago, when I was 65, I decided to make a creative response to gendered ageing. I wanted to explore and expose what I was feeling and thinking and to challenge the ways I was beginning to internalise invalidating beliefs about myself and other older women. And I wanted to ‘hang out’ with older women to contradict a sense of isolation and individualism.

Starting ‘Older Women Rock!’

The project began in 2015 when I was awarded a 10-month Leverhulme Trust artist residency, working jointly with the Kent Academic Primary Care Unit at the University of Kent and the England Centre for Practice Development at Canterbury Christ Church University. Although birthed in academia, ‘Older Women Rock!’ has always functioned as art/activism in local communities and with specific identity groups.

At the beginning of my Leverhulme Trust residency, I was introduced to Professor Julia Twigg and was immediately inspired by her work on fashion, women and ageing. Having been raised in the ‘shmatter’ (rag) trade, I was excited that within academia I could unite an exploration of sexism and old-age oppression with my passion for retro clothing.

‘Older Women Rock!’ Workshops

As an artist/activist I am committed to the women’s movement ethos that ‘the personal is political’. My creative work stems from issues that I am grappling with, trying to make sense of, and contextualising within a wider political context. I then engage with others and broaden the narrative of my personal perspective and experiences by facilitating workshops and setting up opportunities for conversation.

‘Older Women Rock!’ followed this pattern. Alongside writing poetry about the issues I was experiencing, I led multiple series of workshops with diverse groups of women in their late 50s to early 70s in a range of settings in Kent, London and the Midlands. I worked with women who attended a centre for people with physical or learning disabilities; women in a Zumba Gold class; women in prison; a deaf women’s group; women at a MIND Day Centre; lesbians in an Age UK Older LGBTQ project; daughters of Holocaust survivors; Women’s Institute members; unpaid carers; women who identify as feminist and those who resolutely do not.

Recipe for creating a community of older women

Take women of a certain age
 a D-cupful of expectations
 a sprinkling of trepidation
 an abundance of experience, finely chopped
 a ladle of openness
 a few drops of tears
 a swirl of conversation
 a pinch of depth

Gather women together. Stir ideas around. Add a dash of eye contact. Fold and mix gradually. Whisk into soft peaks of giggles. Take turns to hold the mixing bowl. Sprinkle in crushed chilli to add heat and spice. If too hot, calm down with yoghurt. Fold in thick slices of laughter and a dash of recognition. Stick together. Leave to rise. Heat slowly. Put your feet up. Taste. Share. Burst with flavour. Blog about the wonderfulness.

a group poem by Angela, Anne, Brenda, Jacqui, Karen, Leah, Lotika, Marjorie, Mo, Stella, Sujen and Suzanne, Newcastle-under-Lyme, 2017

In ‘Older Women Rock!’ workshops, we addressed issues including:

- the lack of older women in the media or the misrepresentation of us as a stereotype or a joke
- the fortune the beauty industry makes from the insecurity we feel that is manufactured by sexism and intensified by old age oppression
- poverty and the fact that many women have small State pensions because of low-paid work and/or breaks in employment to raise children or to care for ageing parents
- the need to conceal or be ‘discreet’ about physical changes, like greying hair, facial hair or incontinence
- body image
- sexuality
- being a carer

Each workshop used expressive writing, particularly poetry, as a tool for self-reflection and communication of thoughts and feelings. A sense of community was built through the creation of group poems, discussion groups and listening exercises. Key themes emerged that enabled us to see our struggles as part of structural oppression rather than individual failings:

‘I enjoyed hearing the writing of the other women because it made me consider aspects of the subject I hadn’t thought of and the multiplicity of ways we can associate with something.’

‘I am energised to find that women of a certain age are discovering they have a voice and truly becoming themselves. The trust and creativity is amazing and inspirational.’

‘You can laugh with other older women because of the shared secrets you know. We’re our own tribe.’

Here is an extract of a group poem, this one constructed during one of the older women carers’ workshops:

Caring is a whisper turning to a scream. It is every echo drowned,
it is listening to a voice with intent as it gradually fades away
Caring is a day in the sun: Not Allowed. It is the rough edge of my tongue.
Caring is the blue bit attached to my red heart, cold death
interlaced with light, bright, desperate love
Caring is a Jenga tower of carefully balanced, precarious pieces.
It is almost rain, the soft, dark security of the night gone. And touching you.
It is polka dots of time, memory and forgetfulness, laughter and tears
Caring lives in a tunnel of love, concrete hard, baby pink soft

For the majority of women participating in ‘Older Women Rock!’ workshops, writing poetry was a completely new, and risky, undertaking:

‘I don’t really write – but I think I do now.’

‘The structure of the workshop has been perfect for me. The steps are easily trod.’

‘I never write a poem and I can’t believe I’ve come so far and I enjoy writing a poem. I never thought I could. It makes my brain tick.’

‘I love the fact that I’ve written and read out a poem. They usually stay hidden in a secret file on my computer.’

Considering the inexperience of participants, the quality of the work produced was high and women were eager to read their poetry at performances or in the ‘Older Women Rock!’ pop-up shops/exhibition spaces.

For some women to engage fully in ‘Older Women Rock!’, they had to overcome their initial resistance:

‘I didn’t like the title “older women” because I don’t think of myself as an older woman.’

‘I’m not old. I’m mature.’

‘I was a reluctant member of the group. The idea of writing poetry was totally out of my comfort zone but being in this group has widened my horizons. I have discovered people in the group, people who I would not necessarily have chosen to have in a friendship group, but with whom I have so much in common.’

‘I didn’t want to come particularly, my friend “dragged” me. It’s made me “re-frame” a lot of things in the light of other women’s experience. It’s been life-enhancing and I’ve enjoyed it.’

Within the diversity of participants, it was moving to witness the growth in awareness of the additional oppressions experienced by other women.

‘I cried when Rosalind told us about the racism she lives with. It’s made me think about what I do and say.’

‘I’ve been thinking a lot about all the awful racist things I was taught when I was a girl and although I don’t agree with them now, some of them still pop into my head and that shocks me.’

Listening Exchanges

The pilot phase of the Kent and London workshops highlighted the emotive nature of the issues we were addressing. Many women readily shared painful stories and frequently and openly showed emotion.

When the opportunity arose in 2017 to develop ‘Older Women Rock!’ through a Fellowship at Keele University Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences, I decided to intensify the use of listening skills by introducing more formalised listening exchanges. I taught basic theory and tools of peer counselling and encouraged women

to alternate listening and being listened to. We told each other our ‘speed’ life stories, we celebrated highlights of our lives, what we love about ageing and what we find hard and challenging.

Negative experience of the mental health system (or just living in a society where the showing of feelings is pathologised and medicalised) meant that a few women were very wary of exposing what they saw as vulnerability. Once they realised they were totally in charge of what they disclosed, the uncertainty about sharing attention in this way vanished. They found taking turns useful and became more at ease with disclosure and the expression of emotions, both theirs and others.

Feelings

Allowing them, describing them
admitting them, accepting them,
flowing words into feelings,
feeling power from words,
confidence from hope,
a possibility I have something in me that’s useful.
Pull it all together,
these feelings, emotions and words.
Make sense of it all

Carol

Some women reported that they found the theory and practice useful in their lives outside of the workshop and that they felt more confident to support each other:

‘Explaining my feelings is not always easy for me. You don’t want others to see that side of you. This has been good for me, given me more calmness. The past can play havoc with you. This is an opening into things I didn’t want to talk about.’

‘We don’t cry aloud. We’ve learned how to hide it inside because other people don’t like it.’

‘When my husband died I “put a brave face on” but after a while I got sick and my body showed me that I had to face the feelings.’

‘The mother, grandmother, wise woman cannot break, because if she does the world splinters.’

‘When we cry we say “Sorry”. Why are we sorry when we cry? I wasn’t going to break from crying. It makes you feel better.’

‘There’s a lot to cry about, now and in the past.’

‘I like it when I cry with someone and they aren’t worried about me but look pleased with me, like they know it’s a good thing to do.’

One woman who had expressed the most resistance at the beginning went on to write a moving poem that she shared with the other women at the end of the series of workshops.

As well as leading workshops to support women to write poetry, I created my own body of work. Once the Leverhulme Trust artist residency finished, I wanted to publish my poetry in an accessible and impactful way that contradicted stereotypes of older women.

I collaborated with older women artists to interpret messages onto retro clothes that I sourced from local charity shops. We embroidered, burned, printed, beaded, engraved and spray-painted words and images onto clothing.

The collection has been shown through pop-up shops, a film and Subversive Catwalks in which older women ‘model’ the garments while I perform the poems. Venues for the catwalks have included a hotel ballroom, complete with sequin-curtained stage, dance floor and disco glitter balls, a shopping centre, an art gallery and academic conferences.

Here are a few examples of the poetry clothing:

Fear of Ageing

fanfare

You speak of me in metaphors
of catastrophe. Soon I will be
an agequake, a grey tsunami.
My age is your nightmare.
A numerical fanfare
to fan your fear



Figure 3. ‘Bar of medals’ by Nicholette Goff.
Photo by Clare Unsworth.



Figure 4. ‘Fanfare’ jacket by Nicholette Goff.
Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Sculptor Nicholette Goff interpreted my poem ‘fanfare’ through the adornment of a 1940s jacket. She constructed a long grey plait that hangs down the back of the jacket and snakes across a shoulder, emerging from a cuff. It is both playful and an evocation of grey hair as a thing of beauty. She also made a bar of medals in honour of our resilience and a broken mirror brooch to reflect the notion of ‘agequake’. I found the jagged glass a fitting image for the painful intersection of ageism, sexism, disability oppression and loss and for the way that just by being older women, we can trigger younger women’s fear of ageing.

Media Representation

screen

Only men grow old on screen.
Women disappear from film and TV by fifty,
hit dread and disgust in early middle age
and suddenly we’re no longer fit for public display,
unless we’re flogging stair lifts, baths or wills
or we have a frozen face
or we’re de-aged by digital alteration.
It’s a kind of symbolic annihilation

In the past few years, a range of older women have been ousted from news, dance and nature programmes on television and replaced by younger women who do not



Figure 5. ‘Screen’ jacket by Claire Angel. Photo by Leah Thorn.

possess the same deep-lived experience and lifetime of skill development. With the designer Claire Angel, I talked about the anger I feel at the relentlessness of the message that older women are dispensable, 'surplus to requirements'. We came up with the idea of burning words into a leather jacket, searing heat dangerously into skin. We chose key words to describe older women, such as 'witch', 'old bag' and 'cougar'.

For each garment, it is an interesting task to choose lines from the poetry that are succinct yet give a flavour of the nature of the interweaving of sexism and ageism. For 'screen', the one line we used to encapsulate the issue was 'Only men grow old on screen' and this has been a very useful provocation for animated discussion amongst older women.

The Beauty Industry

cream

The beauty counter screams Buy This Cream.

Stay Young, Be Happy, perpetual happiness

by virtue of a billion pound industry that drip drip feeds

the need for chemical warfare,

for cosmeceutical skin care that hydrates, replenishes, regenerates

Got taut, tight skin? You're in. Got ticking clocks? Botox. Detox.

Resist signs of ageing at all cost. Stop. Reverse. Hide. Slo mo.

Smooth your skin ego. Feel the urge for a youth surge?

Want a victory of science over time? Want to reignite your youthful light?

Deny age. Defy age.

You're in control with phenoxyethanol. Replump with sodium phytate.

No. Retaliate. Fight age hate. It's a diabolical conspiracy

for women to age agelessly, line-, scar-, crease-free.

I refuse to let the forever-young drug erase

the handwriting of life across my face

It was challenging to interpret onto a garment the impact of the beautification industry on older women. I wanted to be respectful of women who do use 'anti-ageing' products (as well as cosmetic surgery) and I certainly did not want to pathologise them. The problem lies not with individual women but rather the sexism and ageism expressed by the beauty industry, an undermining that breeds insecurity and then sells 'solutions'. Yet I wanted to contradict the notion that 'anti-ageing' products and cosmetic surgery are an issue of individual choice and if you 'choose' to do it, it is fine. I want to hold out for a society that accepts the accumulated experiences that manifest on our faces.



Figure 6. ‘Cream’ embroidery by Allie Lee. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Sexuality

The impetus for poems about sexuality came from frank discussions covering regrets about the loss of sexual feelings; heightened sexual feelings; shock at the sexualisation of girls and young women; disbelief about sexual products that are readily available; relief at no longer being objectified; and sadness at feeling invisible as a physical being.

Three garments were made by women in the Profanity Embroidery Group, each explicit and playful. People have found them amusing and a good contradiction to the belief that older women are de-sexed, joyless and prudish. When displayed in a pop-up shop, they moved a few younger women to talk about their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse. There was a danger that exhibiting them in Subversive Catwalks could risk reinforcing the sexualisation of women and/or seeming to make fun of older women. But audiences were very appreciative and the older women who chose to wear the garments found it an empowering experience.

landing strip

Want low-maintenance
cultivation of that
landing strip?
Here's a tip.
Axe wax.
Age.



Figure 7. 'Landing strip' corset by Dee Cartwright. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Dee Cartwright printed and sewed the poem onto a black corset. The model said, 'Wearing the corset ended up being quite a deep internal process, which I needed to go through to help free myself of the Internal Misogynist.'

button

Vulva lost its youthful lustre?
Want a quick fix?
Try My New Pink Button,
rouge for labial lips

Annie Taylor of the Profanity Embroidery Group interpreted this poem onto a vintage negligee:

vajazzled

I'll never have
a designer vagina
that vajazzle dazzles
and permanently dilates



Figure 10. 'In My Day' wedding dress, a collaboration between Leah Thorn, Nicholette Goff and the Profanity Embroidery Group. Photo by Leah Thorn.

A collaboration between members of the Profanity Embroidery Group, sculptor Nicholette Goff, and myself, an extract of this poem was emblazoned onto a vintage wedding dress.



Figure 11. Detail from 'In My Day' wedding dress, a collaboration between Leah Thorn, Nicholette Goff and the Profanity Embroidery Group. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Older Women in Prison

Having worked extensively with women in prison, I wanted to make visible the situation for older women within the prison estate. I wanted to highlight facts like women over 50 are the fastest-growing age group entering prison, make up less than 10 per cent of the women's prison population and, as a minority, have needs that are often overlooked and unmet, for example, lack of appropriate health care, less access to work and association with peers. This has a significant impact on mental and physical health as well as limiting opportunities for successful rehabilitation and preparation for release and resettlement.

Claire Angel and I customised a prison issue-type sweatshirt with handwritten notes of quotes from older women in prison and a chatelaine of chains and keys:

'I can't cope with a lot of noise. I just want peace and quiet.'

'Nothing is private. I don't like going to a male officer for things. I wasn't brought up like that.'

'Prison ages you. No proper nutrition, no fresh air, no medication to aid me as I age.'

'I never felt old till I came to prison.'

'You can't put two older women in a cell together. We can't get up on the top bunk.'

'If you're old and quiet they think they can move you about. We have to stick together and say "You can't do that".'



Figure 12. Prison sweatshirt and chatelaine by Claire Angel and Leah Thorn. Photos by Leah Thorn.

Older Lesbians

During workshops with Pink Link, women were asked to bring in photographs of themselves as young women and this led to some wonderful stories and reminiscences:

‘The images of lesbians weren’t me. I wish I’d known when I was fifteen that Dusty Springfield was a lesbian.’

‘There were the codes, the ring on the little finger, the tell-tale signs.’

‘We were walking down the street, not holding hands or anything, and these boys shouted out “Are you lesbos?” and I shouted back “Are you ASBO’s?”’

‘I didn’t come out till I was 40 so I want to own the word “lesbian”. It was hard-fought for. I’d waited so long.’

Artist Dawn Jutton printed the photos onto silk and lined the blazer with them. The women’s words trail down from the jacket.



Figure 13. ‘Lesbian blazer’ by Dawn Button. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

The blazer served as a great awareness-raiser amongst older heterosexual women who saw the piece and were particularly moved by the quote:

‘My youngest son has never come to terms with my sexuality. He doesn’t talk to me. It breaks my heart. He was my baby. I’ve never seen his three children and they don’t know their granny. I’m 73 and all I wish for is that before I pop my clogs, he comes to see me.’

One of the heterosexual women reported:

‘Seeing the words of the older lesbians stayed with me all day and the next day. I told my husband about it twice. He said “You’ve already told me” but I just needed to keep telling. As a heterosexual woman I cannot imagine not being known to my grandchildren because of my sexuality. The emotion those words evoked in me was unexpected. A very powerful feeling.’

Carers

Older women are the largest group of unpaid carers in the UK today. The care an older woman provides could be for her partner, older relatives or grandchildren and older women often find themselves ‘sandwich carers’, looking after both older and younger generations at the same time.

Carers often do not actually identify themselves as such and as a result will not look for support, such as carers’ assessments. Only when carers see themselves as carers will they be able to access the provision made for them, either in terms of benefits, employment options or information and support.

‘I can’t say “No, I can’t do it”.’
 ‘The world becomes very small.’
 ‘I can’t tell them she’s my lover.’
 ‘Ask me how I am ... and listen.’
 ‘Laughing helps me cope.’

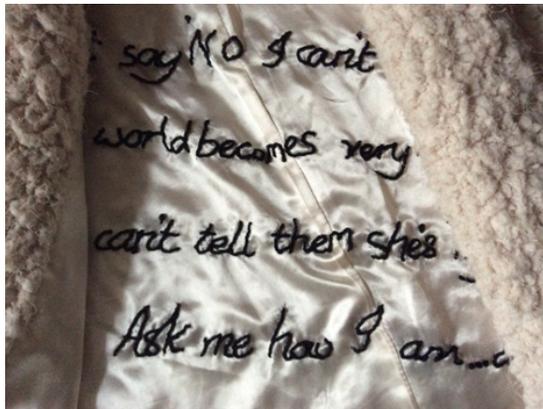


Figure 14. ‘Carers’ coat’ by Deborah Cheworth. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

This proved to be the most challenging of all the collaborations I undertook with designers and textile artists. Deborah Chesworth of the Profanity Embroidery Group

suggested that we turn a coat into a straitjacket and line it with the words of older women carers. A series of straps that wrap the arms around the body would reflect the nature of the unpaid, unsupported, isolating role of caring for loved ones. I initially balked at the idea, as I did not welcome imagery imported from the mental health system. But in conversation with Deborah, I came to realise that it was a straitjacketing situation for women given the very limited recognition they get for the role they play and the very limited financial assistance.

Subverting a Narrative

There is a fine line to walk as an artist/activist, with the danger of reinforcing stereotypes at the very same moment that you're trying to undercut them and expose them for what they are. In 'Older Women Rock!' pop-up shops, women repeatedly asked to buy a piece of clothing and even when I pointed out the harsh issue it was addressing, women still said they would wear it, not as a political statement but because they liked the garment.

The dress most requested for purchase was the Domestic Violence dress. This is a tailored vintage dress from the 1950s, onto which are burned the words: 'Listen. Silence. Older Women. Domestic Violence'.



Figure 15. 'Domestic Violence' dress by Claire Angel. Photo by Leah Thorn.

The accompanying label gives the information that 'Services for women experiencing domestic violence are typically designed to meet the needs of younger women with

dependent children.’ Older women are often invisible in estimates of demand for these services and figures from the Women’s Aid federation indicate that less than 1 per cent of women using refuge services are over 60 years. The domestic violence experienced by many older women may not trigger the local government’s ‘high risk’ threshold for accessing older adult services. Another limiting factor might be self-censorship by older women due to shame and fear.



Figure 16. Shoes containing poem by Leah Thorn. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Another example of where subversion ‘backfired’ was a pair of spiked shoes. Inside them I had placed a poem about how my vulnerability to sexism as a young woman meant that I ruined my feet by wearing high heels through my teens, 20s and 30s.

These were among the most coveted items in the ‘Older Women Rock!’ collection.

‘Older Women Rock!’ Pop-Up Shops/Exhibitions

There have been three pop-up exhibitions of the poetry clothing in shops in Folkestone, Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle-under-Lyme and one extended exhibition in the art gallery of Keele University.

Many visitors commented on the use of humour in the production of the poetry clothing and laughter was frequently heard as people viewed the work. Combining



Figure 17. Pop-up shop, Folkestone, Kent. Photo by Leah Thorn.

humour with harsh realities had a markedly dramatic effect and did not detract from, or compromise, the power of the messages. Some of the issues explored, like domestic violence, were very emotive and several visitors openly shared their emotions and experiences. Some of the words and images on the clothing were confrontative, for example those highlighting older women's sexuality, and there had been an initial fear that visitors would be affronted by the material, but this did not happen.

One interactive exhibit encouraged older women to contribute their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about what they have gained and lost as a result of ageing. They wrote messages onto fabric which were then attached to the dress.



Figure 18. Pop-up shop, Folkestone, Kent. Photo by Leah Thorn.

Events have included:

- A film programme curated by Nuala O’Sullivan, the Director of the ‘Women Over Fifty Film Festival’. Documentaries, shorts, animation and experimental films were shown, each with a woman over 50 at its centre on the screen or behind the lens in the core creative team as writer, director or producer.
- The documentary, ‘Stories from the She Punks’, made up of interviews with women who played in punk bands in the 1970s. After a Q&A with the filmmaker Helen Reddington, instruments were supplied and some of the audience took part in a glorious punk jam session.
- A panel discussion with Polly Russell, British Library curator of the ‘Spare Rib’ digital archive and Linda Bellos from the Spare Rib collective. *Spare Rib* was an active part of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the late twentieth century, running from 1972 to 1993 and challenging the stereotyping and exploitation of women, while supporting collective, realistic solutions to the hurdles women face. Several members of the audience had been *Spare Rib* readers and lively discussion was generated, and memories shared, about involvement in the women’s movement.
- Two well-attended Profanity Embroidery Group workshops, one for women over 55, the other open to everyone. Profane embroidery embellished handkerchiefs, pillowcases and clothes.
- Screenings of a short film, ‘watch’, which I made with filmmaker Ewan Golder, about the impact of dementia on a father–daughter relationship.
- A panel, ‘Older Lesbians Rock!’, featured Linda Bellos, Sue O’Sullivan and Alison Read charting changes they have seen over the past decades, as well as exploring issues that impact their lives now.
- A talk by Professor Julia Twigg about her research on older women and fashion, followed by a lively and informative panel of older women presenting images of clothes they have worn through their lifetime and through their journey with feminism.
- A disco, which attracted feedback like:

‘A big transformation was prompted by the disco last night. Despite having been someone who had loved music, the closed person I had become couldn’t even hear music, let alone feel it. Then last night “Ride On Time” broke right through, lifted me off my chair and inspired me to regain my music. In the 80s I had done so much DJ-ing and had access to hundreds of singles and had the sense to make cassette tapes of the best. So this morning I spent a couple of hours listening to some of those tapes and bopping round the living room (admittedly holding on to the furniture). It was energising. Not only did it take me back to some good times but it was good exercise. If the next time you walk along the promenade it is throbbing, it will be because I am still dancing.’

- A performance line-up of older women singers, musicians and poets. One male member of the audience wrote in the visitors' book:

'I didn't get it at first when my partner said she was going to be part of an 'Older Women Rock!' performance. Thoughts of ageing rock chicks in leathers recalling and lamenting former glory days came to mind. I couldn't have been more wrong. 'Older Women Rock!' is for me a brilliant example of the reintegration of art into the very way we live our lives. A brilliant, thought-provoking, bloke-challenging, multi-sensory project.'

Getting the Word Out

I wanted to publicise events in innovative ways to reach a wide audience of people who might not be drawn to a feminist exhibition or talk.

Lines from a group poem on the theme of the power of older women have appeared in shop windows. I found a company that produced rhubarb and custard-flavoured 'Older Women Rock!' sticks of rock and sweets which were distributed along with flyers.



Figure 20. The 'Older Women Rock!' rock sweets. Photo by Clare Unsworth.

Posters and flyers were designed with layout, colours and images to contradict 'boring' and 'bland', words often associated with ageing.

I organised a joyful Zumba Gold flashmob in Folkestone Shopping Centre. The women had never performed in public before and initially struggled with issues of confidence and feelings of vulnerability. The process of bringing the group together to perform was exciting and hopeful.

A Zumba Gold class in a local hotel attracted many older working-class women from the town. New contacts were made by approaching older women in supermarkets



Figure 21. 'Older Women Rock!' poster.

and at social events and through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram and a Crowdfunder. One such contact led to the pairing of 'Older Women Rock!' with an International Women's Day flashmob of older women in Newcastle.

Film

Two 'Older Women Rock!' films have been made, both imparting a flavour of the vibrancy and power of older women.

- 'Older Women Rock!: The Documentary' by filmmaker Clare Unsworth is a creative record of the pilot project in Folkestone, showing poetry-emblazoned retro clothes, the Zumba Gold flashmob and 19 older models strutting a Subversive Catwalk. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aS5D0wEAcII>.
- 'Lines', a public service announcement film was shown on performance artist Tammy WhyNot's YouTube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V9I8Q29LkGU>.

'Older Women Rock!' and Me

'Older Women Rock!' accompanied me, inspired me and comforted me through my mid- to late 60s. The project demanded of me that I face full-on the harshness and

relentlessness of oppression while remaining positive so I could impart hope to the older women I was meeting. It is easy to get discouraged in the face of the collapse of an individualistic, for-profit society where older women are hit hard, especially when sexism and old-age oppression is compounded by racism, classism, poverty and disability oppression.

In running the project, I experienced the fabulousness of falling about laughing as we reminisced and talked about all the changes we have lived through. And I had to witness the isolation of older women, our fears of what the end of life will look like for us, especially women who do not have a strong support network of family and/or friends.

A major challenge in facilitating ‘Older Women Rock!’ workshops and events was the unpredictability of older women’s lives. Continuity is key to building safety and trust and it was not always possible to rely on women’s attendance for any number of understandable, age-related reasons – ill-health, hospital appointments, bereavement, caring responsibilities for parents, friends and grandchildren – and the occasional, more joyful reason of spontaneous holidays.

Society expects little of us as we age, the message is we should ‘slow down’, ‘take it easy’, ‘leave the big things to the younger people.’ I have no intention of doing so. Yet the project brought home to me the reality that as a child-free woman who has built my life on women’s liberation activism, I have had many privileges. The majority of the women I met, especially the working-class women, had worked hard all their lives running a home, raising children, supporting a husband, while holding down paid work that was often gruelling and low-paid. They wanted to slow down and enjoy a well-earned rest. They took what they wanted from the project – companionship, new skills, an enhanced sense of their value. But as with all artist-led, time-limited projects, I will never know if the gains were sustained. Fortunately, I am still collaborating with the older women artists in East Kent and London and we remain firmly in each others’ lives.

What Next?

Now, in my early 70s, I am ready to restart creative connection with women of my age.

Fashion designer and stylist Claire Angel and I have responded to requests to buy ‘Older Women Rock!’ jackets by creating pieces for sale, which have been featured in pop-up shops in Kent.

My goal for the next phase of ‘Older Women Rock!’ is ‘A Woman’s Lifetime’. Fundraising permitting it will be a six-month ‘residency’ in a women’s prison, focusing on intergenerational dialogue about experiences of sexism at different stages of

a woman's life course. Prior to COVID-19, a collaboration was established between myself, Women in Prison, the Centre for Policy on Ageing, and the Social Responsibility Unit of the London College of Fashion.

I plan to lead workshops featuring the 'Older Women Rock!' collection of clothing to:

- assist women to experience new insights into life transitions by learning from each other.
- provide a peer support environment which nurtures resilience, confidence and self-esteem and promotes enhanced emotional wellbeing.
- create garments, adorned with poems and facts about experiences of sexism across the life course of women.
- evaluate benefits of the intervention, including group cohesion, raised awareness of issues facing women as they age, the development of understanding of fashion and ageing and fashion as a tool for social change.

A spin-off from 'Older Women Rock!', 'a:dress' is a Folkestone-based campaign about women, fast fashion and climate justice. Clothes have been embellished with poetry and messages about the devastating contribution fast fashion makes to the climate crisis. A beautiful collection of poetry clothing has been created by women and girls, taken onto the local streets in intergenerational Subversive Catwalks and recorded on film. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qTjVxyNt_SCNEbneMz2At5QRckLOcazp/view?usp=sharing.

And finally, as a woman who acquired a tattoo to mark her 70th birthday and another to mark the death of her life-partner, I am excited to identify and interview older women who have been tattooed as a later-life 'rite of passage'. A vintage ballgown will be covered with our poetry, images of our tattoos and the stories behind them.

How to Find Lost Stuff

Arm yourself with a map, a letter,
a photo, a diary, a document of murky
provenance.
Learn digging etiquette. Learn to crack code.
Pack a detector, a small shovel, tweezers.
Buy a techno gadget that counts tears.
Travel to remote, difficult-to-access locations
[islands are excellent].
Discover stuff right under your feet.
Mine complex tunnels. Drill deep.
Notice clues, the blackbird, white feathers,
camera jam, a frozen screen.

And when you do find your
shedded pubic hair and eyelashes,
your stash of memories,
the urge to dance wildly at 2am,
the cache of your long-gone monthly blood,
your mother, your father, the touch of your late lover,
make a mental note of how each sounds.
Then commit them
to your skin

Leah Thorn

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