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Social Care on Screen

By

Hazel Tsoi-Wiles

The world of care – from workers to organisers to those receiving it – was thrown into the spotlight by Covid. A new series of films reflects on their experiences, their challenges, and what care could be like.



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he soft, quiet voice in *The Body Blow*, Ilona Sagar’s film for Radio Ballads, intoned ‘emotional leakage’ several times in its sixty minute duration. And that is exactly what I experienced in this exhibition of four films and installations exploring social care: I unexpectedly started to cry in one of the rooms, and was so surprised at my own emotionally leaky response, I had to stare at the floor until I felt able to carry on watching.

The curators of Radio Ballads—Amal Khalaf, Elizabeth Graham, Layla Gatens—open the exhibition guide with an invitation to take care. They anticipate that the examples of vulnerability and resilience in ordinary people based in Barking and Dagenham might lead to vulnerability in viewers too. They invite viewers to allow for their feelings and to honour their responses. There is even a grounding exercise printed on the back. This is what they describe as ‘creative social care’, and it encompasses the well-being of

exhibition attendees. It is rare to non-existent for an art gallery to perform duty of care in such a direct and considerate way.

The Radio Ballads films are not manipulative or deliberately tear-jerking, despite their focus on domestic abuse, industrial injury, terminal illness, disability, and mental health—they are quite the opposite, presenting personal stories and lived experiences without any ‘angle’, which is perhaps why they are so affecting. Radio Ballads is named after a series of radio programmes broadcast by the BBC between 1957 and 1964. Ewan McColl, Peggy Seeger, and Charles Parker created eight programmes exploring the experiences of workers and groups overlooked by mainstream media, using song, music, and sound effects to bring alive their stories. Radio Ballads at the Serpentine Gallery, and simultaneously at Barking Town Hall, continues the aims of the original Radio Ballads in film and remain faithful to the ballad form. Ballads were traditionally first person poems set to song, linked to grieving and loss, and performed publicly so that they could be reproduced, with no specific ownership. Though the Radio Ballads films are deeply personal, they contain universal experiences at the same time; the stories told might be unique to the storytellers but their experiences are relatable to everyone.

There are a lot of people, groups, and initiatives involved in Radio Ballads: three curators, four artists, and seventeen partner organisations worked over three years to make the films and accompanying material. The Serpentine worked in partnership with New Town Culture, a curatorial initiative run by the Cultural and Heritage Service of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (LBBD). Radio Ballads is not a flimsy gallery outreach project, nor a distraction for locals and a little feel-good exercise for the borough council after the pandemic: it is meaningful research and radical change, and four very watchable films as well (the Radio Ballads films are *Yes, I Hear You*, *Bass Notes and Sidelines: The Voice as a Site of Resistance and the Body as a Site of Resilience*, *RAFTS*, and *The Body Blow*—it is important to note the latter two films are each an hour long, so bear that in mind if you intend to see them in full).

Yes, I Hear You by Sonia Boyce is a striking four-channel video installation, featuring

four performers who interpret transcripts of people who have experienced domestic abuse. Experiences range from survivors of domestic abuse, perpetrators of harm, care workers, harm reduction facilitators, and therapists. Viewers are invited to listen deeply to each of them, and to reflect on how we witness them.

Helen Cammock's film is more celebratory and direct, featuring social workers and social care users describing their experiences as themselves. *Bass Notes and Sidelines* draws on Cammock's own experiences as a social worker, and explores the deep responsibilities social workers have for others. There is singing, movement, footage of groups preparing for a workshop together; the collaborative nature of Cammock's project is uplifting to see, and everyone involved seems very game to lift their voices and make sounds together.

The participants in *RAFTS* by Rory Pilgrim also make sounds together, in a far more structured and consciously 'artistic' way. The film is centred around a concert performance of seven original songs, and narrated by eight residents of Barking and Dagenham from Green Shoes Arts. They each reflect on what a raft is to them—life-saving equipment, something fragile and improvised, something to be transported by. It's unpredictable and unconventional, and best to just go along with it, as you would on a raft: hold on and see it where it takes you.

The least musical but most devastating and destabilising film in the exhibition is *Body Blow* by Ilona Sagar. Sagar examines Barking and Dagenham's high level of asbestos and mesothelioma related illnesses, presenting long-term research and collaboration with the London Asbestos Support Awareness Group, social workers, end-of-life carers, asbestos removal experts, campaigners, and legal and medical professionals. The film shows the processes of claiming compensation for work-related illnesses, including the indignity of having your 'usefulness' measured and assessed for a claim, body part by body part.

Claimants describe how they get by, now no longer able to work, in the job that made

them ill. An asbestos remover talks through the choices workers faced when offered a job with asbestos—work now, worry about the cancer later. A campaigner explains that it is harder for women with asbestos-related illnesses to claim compensation, as they were not exposed to asbestos as employees, only as wives of employees. Footage of a lung operation and wide shots of the industrial landscape of Barking and Dagenham are sobering, chilling elements in this deeply affecting film. Have the grounding exercise ready, as *The Body Blow* truly delivers body blows.

Radio Ballads reminded me of mixtapes. I used to make cassette tapes with a compilation of songs that meant a lot at the time. I may not have liked the songs themselves that much (some choices were downright embarrassing or awful) but their symbolism of a specific time and moment is what matters. Like a mixtape, the films in Radio Ballads are a compilation of sounds and sights that symbolise certain meaningful moments and experiences, true to the contributors but also true to viewers.

Social care was disrupted and distorted during the pandemic: many services were denied or reorganised to be useless and service users suffered. Acts of care became grotesque and monstrous, such as the ghastly countdown to clapping for the NHS on TV, or the stub of raw carrot and half a tin of tuna in a leaky sandwich bag for a child's school lunch. The artists provide innovative and original forms in which care can be provided—sometimes, it's just listening. Or helping put a story into song. Or dancing together. Or filling out a form with someone who knows how to do it. Radio Ballads offers a chance to reflect deeply and honestly on what social care currently is like, and what it could be like. Each film is different but emphasises the same point: there is an art to caring, and art belongs in social care.

Radio Ballads *has ended at Barking Town Hall but continues at Serpentine North until 29 May 2022.*

About the Author

Hazel Tsoi-Wiles is a former editor of *Londonist*, a Live Art Development Agency writer in training, a repeat attendee of the Royal Court Young People's Theatre and later, the Royal Court Young Writer's Programme, and a Royal Court Theatre BEA writing group alumna. She was also one of the inaugural Almasi league writers.



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