

## FORMAT PHOTOGRAPHERS AGENCY 1983–2003

From 21 January 2010

Room 38a



ABOVE  
Joan Ruddock, Chairperson,  
Campaign for Nuclear  
Disarmament (1981–85)  
by Pam Isherwood, 1983; for Format  
Photographers © Pam Isherwood /  
Format / National Portrait Gallery,  
London

THE FORMAT PHOTOGRAPHERS AGENCY has a unique place in British photographic history, as the only agency that consisted of, and promoted the work of, contemporary women photographers. Format started in 1983 with eight founding members: Anita Corbin, Sheila Gray, Pam Isherwood, Jenny Mathews, Maggie Murray, Joanne O'Brien, Raissa Page and Val Wilmer. During its twenty-year history, the agency represented twenty leading women photographers.

This new display in Room 38a, from 21 January 2010, will celebrate the work of Format's members by highlighting portraits of significant figures, focusing on the period 1983–2003, including Joan Ruddock, John Pilger, Margaret Atwood, Angela and Maria Eagle, and Toni Morrison.

The 1980s saw Britain experiencing a time of social and political change, which frequently manifested itself in the form of public protest. On 14 November 1982, more than 20,000 women surrounded the Greenham Common American airbase to protest against the installation of US cruise missiles. Raissa Page, Jenny Matthews, Maggie Murray and Brenda Prince photographed the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp (1981–2000) and the 1984–5 miners' strike. Format not only documented such events, in personal relationships, family structures and politics; it was also part of the movement that brought about social change.

From its beginning, the Format ethos and working practice were based on three key principles. The agency aimed to encourage its members to develop their creativity and careers, while remaining sensitive to the context in which their images were used and distributed. It portrayed people and issues that were under-represented in the mainstream media of the time. By photographing women and men in non-

traditional roles, its members aimed to break down gender stereotypes, and changed the way women and other marginalised groups were perceived.

Format's strength came from the trust and empathy often achieved in its personal relationships between photographer and subject. Its members presented an alternative perspective on world events. Joanne O'Brien's project *A Matter of Minutes* (2002) used interviews and portraits to explore the emotional legacy of Bloody Sunday in the lives of 33 people in the decades following 30 January 1972. Melanie Friend's book *No Place Like Home, Echoes from Kosovo* (2001) did not follow traditional conventions of war photography. By combining formal studio-style portraits with personal testimonies, Friend's portraits gave dignity and autonomy to the Albanians, Serbs, Roma, Turks and other ethnic communities whose stories she presented.

Throughout its existence, Format Photographers maintained a varied client base, working for international magazines, small pressure groups, charities, publishers, television and national newspapers. In 2003, despite the agency's many achievements, the difficult decision to close was reached. Like so many independent photographic agencies, Format found itself unable to secure the resources required to compete in a growing market of downloadable stock agencies. The majority of its archive is now with Photofusion, who held a celebratory exhibition, *Ultimate Format*, in February and March 2003. While Format itself has closed, its ideals and outlook continue with the success of individual former members, notably Melanie Friend, Roshini Kempadoo and Karen Robinson.

**Helen Trompeteler**

ASSISTANT CURATOR OF PHOTOGRAPHS

RIGHT  
Greenham Common protest,  
dancing on the silos at dawn  
New Year's day, 1 January 1983,  
USAF air base, Berkshire  
by Raissa Page  
© Raissa Page / Photofusion

