


## Carmen Winant animates the archives of two support organisations for victims of domestic abuse

by [ALEX MEROLA](#)

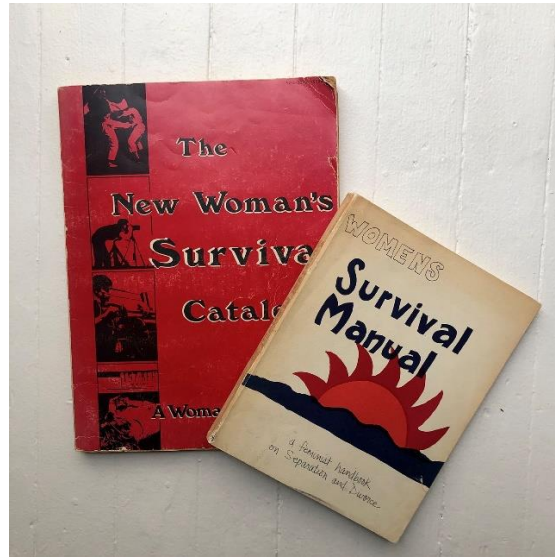
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**The artist’s multi-part, genre-defying exhibition employs representations of oppression and liberation to examine feminist modes of survival, revolt and self-determination.**

In Carmen Winant’s ambitious new exhibition at The Print Center, Philadelphia, a projector shows a photograph of a T-shirt decorated with the words: “Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new end.” The T-shirt is part of the *Clothesline* project, set up by [Women in Transition](#) (WIT) in the 1990s to give domestic abuse survivors the opportunity to testify their experiences in a public space. The affirmation inspired the title of Winant’s show – *A Brand New End: Survival and Its Pictures* – for which she has drawn material from the archives of WIT as well as the [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#) (NCADV). Leaning into these representations of oppression and liberation as an extension – and agent – of their histories, Winant investigates the potential for photographs to not only make domestic violence survivors visible, but to contend with how we “see” in the most literal sense. Winant’s project is particularly urgent now, as the Covid-19 pandemic has put intimate partner violence into sharp focus.





**Alex Merola: In first delving into the WIT archive, I suppose you were, naturally, braced for material of a quite brutal nature? But what surprised you?**

Carmen Winant: Yes, I think the curator, Ksenia Nouril, and I feared that we might encounter really grisly material. Instead, across this 50-year-old archive, we found so much more: material that was collected from the outside world (newspaper clippings) and generated for public access (35mm re-enactment slides), documentation of their organisational efforts (photographs), teaching and learning material (appropriated pictures made into “puzzles”) and so on. These were tools, so many of them photographic, in service of empowerment. That was what kept us going on this project, to be honest. While it was filled with horror, it was also amazingly life-affirming, full of joy and feminist coalition-building.

Later, NCADV, another domestic violence organisation based in Denver, also shared their archive, which likewise fed the project in so many ways. Both organisations were founded at the height of the second-wave feminist movement, 40 and 50 years ago, respectively, and that movement philosophy – confronting and undoing patriarchal power structures through strategies of care and coalition – lives on.

**AM: Because domestic violence so often (if not always) happens in the “shadows”, how did you navigate the problems and possibilities of visualizing it? Could you speak about the large newspaper clipping constellation, for example?**

CW: It’s the most confrontational work in the show, and indeed about looking as much as anything. It offers tremendous (if painful) evidence of domestic and gendered violence all in one place. But there’s also something coded about it. [The clippings] are pieces of media. Determinations have been made about what sort of images should attend which stories, and how those stories should be told at all. So they are primary documents yet also exist at a distance from the experiences of survivors.

More and more, I try to have a light touch. My job as an artist, a feminist, a student of this history, is to animate the archive, which already holds such immense power. In this sense, I think of myself less as an “archives artist” or something, and more as an artist who often uses or assembles archives in service of the agendas of feminist histories, organisations, individuals. Of course, I was terrified to make “artwork” of a subject and experience like domestic violence – to aestheticize it. So little artwork contends with this subject, and when and where it does, it is most often (or always) documentary.



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**AM: How you have animated the archives is really powerful, showing how their “material” is inseparable from humans and their labor. After all, the archives are not only about the stories of survivors but the custodians of these stories...**

CW: Right, real people make these places run. And it’s the staff who appear in so many of the photographs in the archive: attending conferences and after-parties, staging and taking pictures for training purposes (such as self-defense exercises, obtaining legal services, conducting job searches, what to pack when leaving an abusive relationship) ... It was important for us to learn from them and to inculcate their ways of working where we could. So, for instance, the plants in the exhibition are derived from the plants around their offices – indications of life, blooming and sustaining. The construction paper in the collages is derived from the paper and colours that are in the window in WIT’s childcare room. The pictures of the T-shirts from the *Clothesline* project were



made across the WIT office. The buttons in the plexus box pinned into corkboard is a move to echo how their offices function, and hold relics of their movement history. The project is as much about these spaces, these organisations and the staff that uphold them as it is about “domestic violence” as a category of experience.

**AM: In your recent book, *Instructional Photography* (2021), you theorized the ways in which photographs can teach us *how to live*... How printed matter can – through its power to reproduce – facilitate social organiz]sation and “self-actualization”. The logic between the book and the exhibition seems totally related...**

CW: I wrote the essay (that became the book) somewhere in the middle of working on this project. I think I’ve always been interested in instructional photography; I just never knew how to name it. In my studio, I’ve generally organized found material in terms of its content: pictures of breast self-exams, pap smears, pottery, dealing with bodily injury, healing... Slowly, I started to realize that the through line between these pictures was that they sought to teach something to their viewer. This is such a specific goal, so “un-Art” ... Maybe, for that reason, it took me some time to understand and appreciate it as its own meaningful, and viable, category. Once I hit on that, those rigid categorizations between images started to dissolve. This project is enmeshed with those same problem-sets. Fundamentally, it asks: how can we use pictures as pedagogical tools? How can they be weaponized against us? What is the capacity for pictures not only to teach, but to disseminate life-saving information?



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**AM: A primary example of closing this space between art and information is the “Power Control Wheel” ...**

CW: The question of how art and photography can function to help women and deconstruct violence against them is at the center of the project, and the wheel embodies this. It’s a commonly used tool of domestic violence support organisations (as well as rape crisis centers and beyond) to help identify abuse. It’s really functional and immediate: a graphic device (in a non-hierarchical, circular configuration) that can be very easily shared. So it felt really important to not only have in the exhibition, but make as a risograph take-away. As in, people who come to the show can bring its information and points of access home with them.

**AM: This transcending of the gallery space is perhaps most prominent in your bus shelter interventions, which provoke critical (and social) responses from pedestrians in a very Brechtian way...**

CW: Yes, I’m really excited about this piece. There are several dozen public transit bus shelters across Philadelphia that hold images of the T-shirts. Each is a single image, larger than life, with basic information about the show as well as WIT, along with their website. These are not only public spaces but commercial ones, where WIT or another organisation might list their hotline. The idea here is that, much like the take-away, this material lives in, and is circulated across, its world. It’s a question that I’ve come to wrestle with more and more as an artist: can art be serviceable? What are its capacities in movement-building and life-saving? I don’t know the answer to that, but I feel incredibly driven by the attempt.

**AM: Do you feel optimistic about how the project might relate to national conversations and even policy today?**



CW: Well, depending on the day, I feel more or less hopeful about the capacity of art to effect (and shift) discourse and policy. This project has two real aims: to create undeniable visibility as it comes to the matter of domestic violence and abuse, which lives in the shadows of our society. It also hopes to affirm the values of feminist organizing; its pedagogical tools, coalition strategies, profound imagination and investment in care.





**AM: Regarding this investment in care, I'm interested to hear about how you see your artworks in relation to the future of the archive.**

CW: The question is an interesting one: what happens to the archive, any archive, after it has been re-arranged, picked apart, re-animated in a new context? The answers have varied and are still being worked out, but the idea was never to subsume them into a single body. Some material will go back into the archive from which it came. Some will stay intact, in a new form (in a framed collage, let's say) and will live on the walls of its organisation. And, for some, the conversation takes a new shape entirely: in the case of NCADV, we are now working together to place their materials in a public-facing, institutional archive, conversations that have stemmed from this collaborative process.

**AM: How was this experience for you on an emotional level?**

CW: Honestly, I found that I often had to almost dissociate to carry on. It can be too painful otherwise. An entire box of restraining orders. 500 newspaper clippings that describe women being beaten and tortured and murdered. For the most part, I kept it at an arm's length so as to continue through it. Now that the exhibition and the bus shelters are up (with public programs and a publication to follow), I find that it is all beginning to pour in. A wall came down once I had seen its installation. And so, I find that although I am relieved and grateful, I also can't stop crying. While it has only affirmed my belief in feminist movement-building and building spaces that affirm the dignity and agency of women and vulnerable people, the grief is there too. We carry on.

[A Brand New End: Survival and Its Pictures](#) runs at The Print Center, Philadelphia, until 16 July 2022.

<https://www.1854.photography/2022/05/carmen-winant-animates-the-archives-of-two-support-organisations-for-victims-of-domestic-abuse-2/>

