

The long 1980s reframed

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Reflections on *The 80s: Photographing Britain* (Tate Britain, London, November 2024-May 2025)

The first image greeting visitors to *The 80s: Photographing Britain* is a photograph of Jayne Desai, one of the South Asian women at the heart of the Grunwick dispute of 1977. It is a striking choice to begin with: not Thatcher, not punk, but a woman of colour on strike. Desai stands as both an emblem of defiance and a reminder that the political terrain of the 1980s had already begun in the 1970s. The curators are clear that the decade cannot be told as a self-contained narrative of Thatcherite triumph or consumerist style. Instead, the exhibition insists on an expanded temporality, what might be called the long 1980s, one born out of the crises of the 1970s and carried into the neoliberal order of the 1990s.

The 2025 Tate Britain show is vast, extending across room after room, with more than 350 photographs and additional materials. Some critics have called it overwhelming and exhausting, but this sheer profusion is one of its political strengths. The density resists the neatness of a single storyline. By refusing to condense or streamline, the exhibition challenges the conventions of the art gallery itself, where the expectation is often of carefully curated highlights. Instead, the experience of walking through *The 80s* feels closer to rummaging through a social archive or a community darkroom: uneven, layered, and abundant. The very scale makes a statement about democracy: that the story of the 1980s cannot be reduced to iconic images or simplified narratives, but must be encountered in its complexity, contradictions, and multiplicity.

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A recurring impression is the reliance on grainy black and white photography, particularly in the documentation of strikes, protests and everyday working-class life. Chris Killip's *Helen and her Hula Hoop, Seacoal Beach, Lynemouth (1984)* captures a child playing against a backdrop of industrial ruin, joy framed by precarity. John Sturrock's photographs of miners confronting police at Orgreave in 1984 bear the hallmarks of reportage: blurred motion, dense shadows, the rough texture of fast film, conveying urgency rather than polish. These images are not artworks in the conventional sense but records of conflict, and yet, once displayed in Tate Britain, they acquire a new aura, echoing Walter Benjamin's warnings about the museum's power to transform documents into aestheticised objects.

Technological change plays a crucial role in shaping this visual archive. By the late 1970s, 35mm cameras and home darkroom equipment had become cheaper and more accessible. Photographers no longer needed to rely on commercial printing labs, which were oriented to weddings, portraits or advertising work. Instead, images could be processed and printed in collectives, workshops and community centres. This technical shift made photography a more democratic medium, enabling not only professional photographers but also activists and communities themselves to document their struggles. The very possibility of showing a strike, a protest, or a neighbourhood gathering depended on the ability to control the means of producing images.

Equally important is how photographs in the 1980s had a different kind of resonance than images today. A single image of a miner being dragged away by police, or women encircling the fence at Greenham Common, could circulate slowly but intensely. Reproduced in magazines, pinned on union noticeboards, and pasted to protest placards, scarcity gave each photograph a heightened significance. Each print embodied labour and risk. By contrast, in today's digital era, the sheer saturation of images, millions taken and shared daily, often blunts their political impact. If anything, the photographs of the 1980s now remind us of the value of slowness, of material presence, of images as carefully held documents of memory and resistance.

What is particularly striking in the exhibition is the decision not to segregate photography into separate categories of race, class and gender. Black photography, feminist collectives, queer experiments and images of class struggle are shown alongside one another, not divided into different rooms. The viewer moves, often

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abruptly, from one kind of social space to another: from Chris Killip's coastal working-class communities to Roshini Kempadoo's vivid reconstructions of Caribbean and diasporic life, where photographs act as fragments of memory, performance, and speculative storytelling.

Kempadoo's work, crossing rooms and themes, challenges any fixed notion of documentary. Her composite images, blending archival and contemporary material, refuse to stabilise identity or history, suggesting instead that the 1980s were already a time of visual reimagination and diasporic futurity. Nearby, Vanley Burke's *Boy with Flag, Handsworth (1970s)* appears alongside photographs of striking miners and feminist protests. The juxtaposition makes clear that questions of race, class, and gender were never lived separately, but were intertwined in the conjuncture of the decade.

The prominence given to Black photography is especially significant. Maud Sulter's 1989 series *Zabat* - large format portraits of Black women embodying the Greek Muses - confronts the historical exclusion of Black women from the European artistic canon. Rotimi Fani Kayode's sensual and allegorical photographs, such as *Sonponnoi (1987)*, bring Yoruba cosmology into dialogue with homoerotic imagery. These works complicate the assumption that political photography must be realist and documentary. Here, politics emerges through allegory, desire and the reclamation of myth. Their presence in the exhibition reminds us that Black and queer self-representation was as central to the 1980s as miners' pickets or punk subcultures.

Crucially, the exhibition is not limited to photographs alone. Alongside framed prints are magazines, posters, archives and letters, the infrastructures through which photography circulated and became a social practice. Copies of *Camerawork* and *Ten.8*, two of the most important photography journals of the time, remind us that debates about representation were not confined to art schools but were part of wider political arguments about race, gender, class and media. Community newsletters, strike leaflets and personal correspondence show how photography was embedded in the material culture of protest. These inclusions make clear that photography in the 1980s was never just about images. It was about networks, collectives and institutions that enabled oppositional voices to be seen and heard.

The role of collectives and workshops is central here. The Half Moon Photography Workshop in East London, Four Corners in Bethnal Green, and

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projects like the Hackney Flashers, created spaces where working-class and marginalised communities could learn photographic skills, access equipment, and exhibit their own images. These workshops blurred the boundaries between professional and amateur, artist and activist, art gallery and community centre. They embodied the democratic promise of photography: that the means of representation could be shared, and that the medium could be mobilised as a tool of resistance. By including these histories, the exhibition insists that the 1980s were not simply a decade of individual artists producing masterpieces, but of collective labour - often precarious and underfunded - that sustained oppositional cultures.

The cumulative effect of the show is to reveal photography as perhaps the most important medium through which the 1980s were both represented and constructed. The miners' strike lives in memory as much through images such as John Harris's *Policeman's Boot Kicking Miners at Orgreave* as through speeches or broadcasts. The Greenham Common peace camps endure in photographs of women encircling fences, arms linked in human chains. Derek Ridgers's portraits of punks in Soho or the androgynous performers at the Blitz nightclub likewise capture the emergent creativity of youth subcultures. More modestly, snapshots of family life, wedding portraits and community gatherings, many taken by photographers like Vanley Burke, remind us that everyday memory was also part of the struggle against invisibility. To move through the exhibition is to experience photography not just as representation but as memory itself, a counter archive that preserves what dominant institutions sought to erase.

It is here that the exhibition feels most resonant for our own moment. The 1980s were a decade when authoritarian populism, Thatcher's hard state, the policing of dissent, and the demonisation of Black youth, were countered by visible and militant resistance. Today, we face what feels like a similar slide toward authoritarianism, but one marked by fragmentation and often by the absence of sustained counter power. To look at Burke's photographs of resilience in Birmingham, or to revisit images of solidarity at Greenham, is to be reminded that struggles were once waged on a scale that unsettled the state, and that such struggles were documented and remembered not only by elites but by those within the movements themselves. Photography was a way of insisting that resistance took place, and that it would not be forgotten.

If the show had a limitation, it lay in its institutional setting. Displayed within Tate Britain, these photographs risked being absorbed into an art historical canon,

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appreciated for their composition and texture rather than their political urgency. The raw immediacy of a strike leaflet or a community darkroom exhibition cannot easily be preserved once framed and hung on white walls. Yet perhaps the expansiveness of the exhibition resists this very risk. Its refusal to be a neatly bounded narrative makes it harder for the institution to domesticate. By overwhelming the visitor, the exhibition does something the art gallery rarely allows. It insists on a collective history that is messy, wide-ranging, and unresolved.

Ultimately, *The 80s: Photographing Britain* was less a nostalgic return than a reopening of unfinished arguments. It shows us the long 1980s as a battleground over meaning, one that continues to structure the present. By foregrounding photography's relation to memory, and by displaying not just images but the networks, collectives and publications that sustained them, the exhibition insists that the decade's struggles are not closed chapters but resources for the future. At a time when creeping authoritarianism again threatens to erode democratic life, and when opposition often feels muted, these photographs, and the archives, magazines and documents that surround them, remind us that images of resistance are themselves acts of resistance, fragile but enduring.

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