Text and textiles

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By the turn of the nineteenth century, after years of gentle persuasion, of petitioning and lobbying, women's suffrage in Britain remained elusive. The Women's Social and Political Union, formed in 1903, advocated a more intemperate agenda. It incited its members to adopt more violent measures, targeting the bastions of male power. Politicians' homes were bombed, the windows of high-street stores smashed, and suffragettes invaded the very seat of male governance, the House of Commons, unfurling a banner proclaiming their right to vote. Their actions were condemned by politicians and press, who denounced such anarchy as unwomanly and unrepresentative, dismissing it as the crazed antics of middle-class, intellectual harridans. The suffragette movement began to be lampooned. Cartoons appeared sporting its campaigners armed with rolling pins and umbrellas. The suffragettes were portrayed as women who cared nothing for their families or for their appearance: women devoid of feminine sensibilities.

A new tactic was urgently needed if the suffragettes were to safeguard the support they had mustered and court greater public sympathy. What was needed was an undeniable show of women's capacity and resolve – across class, geographies and generations. The idea of mass rallies was born. In a Victorian era characterised by a fascination with spectacle and scale – elaborate theatricals, gaudy fairgrounds, music-hall marvels – the rallies the suffragettes organised were designed to be thrillingly magnificent: thousands of women marching together through city streets accompanied by a swell of mass choirs, the blast of pipe bands, a rainbow drift of processional colour animated by the sway and silken gleam of hundreds and hundreds of beautiful banners held high above the throng.

It was the artist and designer Mary Lowndes who masterminded the banner pageantry. For the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies rally on 13 June 1908 she distributed a banner-making guide to participants to ensure that what she termed 'women's own adventure' was manifested in glorious visual splendour, insisting that 'a banner is a thing to float in the wind, to flicker in the breeze, to flirt its colours for your pleasure . . . Choose purple and gold for ambitions, red for courage, green for long-cherished hopes.' Women gathered in local halls and their own homes to make banners which proclaimed who they were and where they belonged: the villages, towns and cities they came from; banners that celebrated the women through time who had championed female advancement: Josephine Butler, Jane Austen, Elizabeth Fry, Marie Curie, Mary Wollstonecraft amongst them and, most audaciously of all, Victoria, Queen and Mother.

Participants made their banners in fabrics displaced from the drawing room – silks, velvets, brocades – and purposefully embellished with delicate embroidery to emphasise a woman's presence. This was, Lowndes encouraged, to be 'a declaration', a visible assertion of women's protest, of women sprung from the confines of domesticity to defiantly parade on the streets and claim their rightful place in public life. Over a quarter of a million people came out to watch them pass.

For PROCESSIONS, Artichoke's 2018 event in honour of those marching women, it was my privilege to be commissioned to follow in Mary Lowndes' footsteps and devise a banner-making kit for participants. Thousands of women and girls followed in the footsteps of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers to fashion banners from scraps of fabric and multi-coloured threads as visual expressions of twenty-first-century women. These were banners that had no need to be delicate. They were flamboyant and multi-textural, reflecting the diversity and creativity of their makers. Their slogans told of confidence and energy: 'Our Voice is Powerful and Will Be Heard', 'We Will Have What We Want', 'We Are Here', 'We Know Where We're Going', 'Girls Bite Back'. And, while many referenced the suffragettes' struggle, others emphasised contemporary concerns about pollution, domestic abuse, racial inequality and social exclusion. The hundreds of banners made for PROCESSIONS were heart-warming celebrations of challenges overcome and heartfelt manifestos for those that lay ahead: autographed in an exuberance of multi-layered colour, pattern and texture to materialise collective action. As the thousands of participants conjoined in their violet, white and green scarves and streamed through Britain's city streets, their banners punctuated their flow as spirited exclamations of promise and power.