Look at Ciara Philips’s *Every Woman* — her dazzling contribution to the 2016 Edinburgh Art Festival — and what do you see? Firstly and fundamentally, you see a ship: the MV Fingal, a decommissioned lighthouse tender, forty feet across its beam and two hundred and forty feet long. Today moored in the Port of Leith, this Glasgow-built steamship was for many years tasked with delivering supplies and ferrying workers to remote Scottish lighthouses, helping to maintain those essential beacons — those dependably perceptible signals — that warn other ships to steer clear of unseen hazards. In shipping terms — considering both its scale and type of service — the MV Fingal would surely be seen as a modest sort of craft. When in use, no doubt, it was a relatively discreet presence on the Scottish seas. We can imagine it engaged in routine, low-profile transit rather than naval high drama, embarking on regular, dutiful voyages from its bases in Oban and Stromness, Orkney, to rocky outposts in the waters beyond. (At the same time — recalling the title of a song recorded by The Unthanks — we could also speculate on how much it might have meant to some, waiting expectantly at tense or emotive moments, to see ‘the tender coming’.)

Now, however, dramatically up-cycled as an extraordinary artwork, the MV Fingal becomes something more imposing and spectacular: something we see very differently. For though professional mariners might see it as a relatively unassuming vessel — ‘tenders’ are, in general, supporting players on the sea, chiefly tending to the needs of other, more sizable ships or structures — it is nonetheless a very large work of art. Ciara Philips’s *Every Woman* has the conspicuously out-of-the-ordinary stature of large-scale public sculpture; its size alone establishes it as a powerful, impactful visual presence. But in taking on the commission to transform this retired tender as a contemporary ‘dazzle ship’ — responding to a peculiar, recondite piece of naval history, as well as to a wider context of commemoration — Philips has also been able to produce a work of instantly detectable distinctiveness and vitality. In its
startling bespoke attire — the unique, outlandish new livery designed by Philips, broadly mimicking the flamboyantly bewildering styles of ‘dazzle’ camouflage first tested on ships during World War I — the MV Fingal stands out with bold individuality. Freshly coated with hundreds of litres of sharply contrasting paint colours, it calls for and captures our attention. Philips has altered the appearance of the ship’s hull and superstructure by applying curving, swooping, criss-crossing bands of black, yellow, pink and blue — and the result is riotously, gloriously cartoonish, giving the boat’s outward bearing an unruly dynamic urgency, even while moored and motionless. Philips’s radical makeover upgrades the MV Fingal’s seafaring prominence: it is a ‘minor’ vessel that has become radiantly high-profile within its harbour setting.

2.

This shift in position and perception perhaps declares, on one level, a need to re-appraise and re-present what might otherwise hold a secondary classification in our histories or daily practices — a thought consistent with many aspects of Phillips’s ongoing work. In recent years, crucially, she has been committed to experimenting with the medium of print — a form of production long-relegated to second-class status within the hierarchies of art history — developing projects that often explore modes of collective making, while, on occasion, granting renewed, energetic visibility to the activities of under-represented groups and individuals. Melissa Gronlund has noted that Phillips draws on ‘an alternative history of art-making: one that is about collaboration and use-value as much as possession and display’. But Gronlund also, rightly, sees rigour and sophistication in what is actually developed for display, praising the ‘buoyant, raucous or quietly seductive’ range of the resulting work. (And how serendipitously prescient the word “buoyant” now seems.)

So, for instance, the main work of the Workshop (2010-ongoing), commissioned by London’s Showroom gallery, centred on a screen-printing process in which Phillips helped members of the group ‘Justice for Domestic Workers’ to produce idiosyncratic and eye-catching protest banners. The Workshop space itself was set up as a visually arresting installation: a studio environment decorated with
serially repeating photographic imagery, intricate patterns of geometric forms and fragments of text — including the statement ‘new things to discuss’, a proposition which, depending on circumstances, could seem either optimistic or ominous. In a similar vein, *Pull Everything Out* at Spike Island, Bristol (2012), paid tribute to the California-based designer, activist and educator Sister Corita Kent — an often undervalued pioneer of 1960s Pop aesthetics — again by dedicating temporary space to collaborative creation. Kent’s influence has been important to Phillips, helping license a spirit of aesthetic freedom and enlivened engagement between art and the everyday world. As Jan Verwoert has written, Kent’s ‘graphic approach explodes any format’: when she uses text, he says, it ‘stretches, undulates and spreads dynamically across the space’, while her colours are mixed ‘more freely than the most abstract Expressionists and as freshly as the best Pop artist’. Learning from such vivacious designs, Phillips cultivates an equivalent spirit of exuberant openness in her ardently democratic artistic endeavours. She uses the repetitive possibilities of print to enable subjective and collective creative discovery, but also to make viewers look and look again at accumulating and adjusting configurations of image, text, line, shape and colour. With great practical and compositional skill, she brings diverse interests and identities — including, on occasion, more personal concerns and inclinations — into striking, distinctive scenarios of public visibility.

3.

Looking again at *Every Woman*, thinking of it as a work which values the marginal and the minor in elevated terms — while doing much else besides — I find that a number of other seafaring artworks float into view. I’m reminded, for instance, of *Ghost Ship* (1999) by the Irish artist Dorothy Cross: an audacious experiment in public visibility for which Cross entirely re-coated a decommissioned lightship with phosphorescent paint. Over several weeks this glowing boat would sail out into Dublin bay at night, appearing on the horizon as a mysterious, spectral presence. Then there is the beached, broken boat featured in Tacita Dean’s *Teignmouth Electron* (2000): a strange, trashed trimaran, discovered on the Caribbean island of
Cayman Brac, that had once been disastrously sailed by tragic round-the-world race competitor Donald Crowhurst. The sight of this decaying vessel was for Dean, somewhat perversely, an image of ‘welcome neglect amidst the neat housing and air-conditioned world of the ideal holiday location’; but it also had ‘at other times, at other angles ... the look of a tank or the carcass of an animal or an exoskeleton left by an errant creature now extinct’. It was an object that, seen in various ways, distinguished itself within its environment: deriving from a different place, seeming to exist in a different time. Dean, like Dorothy Cross, finds tremendous mystery and offbeat beauty in such run-down, washed-up objects. Both, in their own ways, artistically revitalize these disparate remnants of life at sea.

But thinking of such things, I’m also put in mind of a poem by the American writer Elizabeth Bishop (entitled ‘Arrival at Santos’) in which, while describing the experience of landing at a Brazilian port, she articulates an odd admiration for a boat of similar status to the MV Fingal. ‘The tender is coming,’ Bishop writes, and it is ‘a strange and ancient craft, flying a strange and brilliant rag’. This twice-identified ‘strangeness’ in one small ship’s demeanor is intriguing — and the phrasing sets up an ambiguous connection, not only with the non-descript appearance of multiple nearby boats (the ‘twenty-six freighters waiting to be loaded with green coffee beans’) but also, perhaps, with the surrounding harbour landscape:

Ports are necessities, like postage stamps, or soap,

but they seldom seem to care what impression they make,

or, like this, only attempt, since it does not matter,

the unassertive colors of soap, or postage stamps—

wasting away like the former, slipping the way the latter

do when we mail the letters we wrote on the boat ...

These manifold ‘necessities’ may merit re-appraisal too: places, objects, routine communications, appearing and disappearing in our lives without much fuss or consequence. A valid poetic ambition might be to somehow retrieve them, to
celebrate them in all their apparent inconsequentiality and fugitive, chaotic multiplicity — bringing them into aesthetic high-definition, seeing them differently.

One corresponding quality of Ciara Phillips’s achievement in creating Every Woman is the care taken in setting up a situation in which an ordinary ship is ‘made strange’: it is promoted from the humdrum to become something extravagantly exciting. We recognise that it has been visually enhanced to an extreme degree, with extreme effects — and that it will make, against the backdrop of familiar port surroundings, a profound ‘impression’. (In passing, it is perhaps worth noting that in a maritime context Bishop’s word ‘impression’ could recall the related term impressment, referring to the practice of enforced recruitment that once took place at ports — an etymological echo that might remind us of the frequently assertive character of such places, despite their ‘unassertive colours’.) But as we celebrate the vivid appeal of Phillips’ work — considering the ways in which this present-day dazzle ship impresses — it is important to once again acknowledge her interest in what evades our immediate gaze. Within this situation of intensified, activated visibility, Phillips is also alert to the invisible, and sensitive to the inevitable uncertainties of seeing. With Every Woman, as with a great deal of her work, she dutifully tends to the unseen.

4.

Dazzle ships were designed to deceive. Their incredible, zig-zagging, this-way-and-that-way patterns were created to frustrate straightforward seeing: giving the impression that a ship was moving in multiple directions simultaneously. The dazzle camouflage — trialled as a radical, speculative solution at a time when the British fleet was experiencing devastating, day-by-day losses during the First World War — fragmented the perceived form of a vessel at sea, decomposing its recognizable appearance into an already-exploded set of intersecting swirls, slices and shapes. So, as the plan proposed, a ship’s orientation, trajectory and speed would become extremely tricky to track: the ‘image’ of the ship couldn’t be stabilized and, thus, accurately targeted in the sights of the enemy. Adorned with their individual dazzle
designs, ships would become both seeable and unseeable; they would be made strange.

There are, right away, tempting analogies here to the aspirations and achievements of artists. What we often admire in visual art is a combination of captivating and enigmatic appearance. The experience of viewing art can involve the thrill or anxiety of a specific, surprising encounter, along with the disconcerting awareness of having discovered something beguilingly elusive and cryptic. (Equally, there are times when faced with an image or object that we can’t quite ‘capture’, we sense that we are, somehow, missing something.) Art, of various kinds, can both dazzle and disappear. Art that we repeatedly return to — or in some way successfully participate in — can seem special, singular and utterly specific as a worldly phenomenon. Yet as we look again (or think again) we might also find it to be multi-directional, always-in-motion, differently positioned depending on our point of view. Noting related tendencies in Ciara Phillips’s style of screen-printing, Moira Jeffrey has hailed the degree to which she ‘makes print feel simultaneously static and moving ... immediate and mysteriously esoteric’. vii But we could add that, in following paths that are variously process-based or exhibition-based, subjective or collaborative, dependant on personal motivations or public situations, Phillips keeps her operating concept of art in productive motion. The outline forms of her art are coherent and clear, but capable of shift-shifting.

These leaps between the design principles of dazzle ships and the experience of art are perhaps made more plausible by pointing out that the idea for the former is generally attributed to an artist: the marine painter and Royal Navy volunteer Norman Wilkinson. Though others had attempted to convince British military chiefs of the merits of such bizarre notions (a zoologist named John Graham Kerr had, for example, pitched a version of the plan to Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty), it was Wilkinson’s arguments for the dazzle strategy, formulated from a painter’s perspective, that eventually convinced naval strategists. Much later, a more well-known artist would claim credit too: on seeing varieties of camouflage in 1938, Picasso declared (with typical modesty) that these perception-and-deception tricks originated in Cubism: its convulsive challenge to representational conventions having forever changed the visual ‘composition’ of the world. viii For Ciara Phillips,
however, a vital factor in reflecting on this art-camouflage connection is the need to recall other, less definitively ‘authored’ contributions to the dazzle scheme — so bringing into historical visibility a realm of under-acknowledged artistic participation. In order to develop designs for the dazzle ships, Wilkinson established a dedicated studio in a basement room of the Royal Academy in London — and in this space a team of artist-workers collaborated to undertake research, draw experimental patterns and construct models. A significant majority of these creative contributors were women, but despite their profound influence on the entire dazzle ships project, they have, as artists and individuals, largely disappeared from historical sight. In one remaining photograph of the ‘naval camouflage unit’, held in the archive of the Royal Academy, nine women are shown at work in the studio; each seems deep in concentration, absorbed by the drawing and making process. There is little background information available to accompany the photograph; the women’s names are not given.

Phillips’s Every Woman is partly named in tribute to these — and other — neglected women war artists. As a component of the design, the words of the title appear on the ship too, but they are not immediately legible. Rather, they feature within a morse code message that Phillips has imprinted onto the boat’s bow. This is the enigmatic, aphoristic statement ‘every woman a signal tower’, a slogan that has been prominently visible in Phillips’s work before. Drawn from another relic of an earlier seafaring era, Phillips’s motto and title arise from a dual act of appropriation and abrogation. Her source in this instance is a guidebook outlining the principles of a pre-semaphore system of at-sea communication known as ‘the homograph code’, its basis a type of bodily sign-language, summed-up in the author’s phrase ‘every man a signal tower’. Phillips has amended the ‘homograph’ definition, re-casting an historically skewed, patriarchal foundation for communicating and seeing. The coded message, ‘every woman a signal tower’, therefore becomes, in the context of the dazzle ship project, a discrete call for heightened historical visibility. It is a low-key declaration, within a high-profile project, pledging commitment to renewed, expanded conditions of visibility.
The Unthanks album is *Here’s the Tender Coming* (2009). The ‘tender’ referred to in the song is one that arrives to press-gang men into naval duty.

Melissa Gronlund, in an essay written to accompany the exhibition *Just You* at Bergen Kunsthall, 29 August - 19 October 2014.


Another point of reference in the development of the dazzle ship project was the war photographer Olive Edis. In an interview, Phillips explains how she was ‘trying to find out more about women’s work’ and she discovered that Edis ‘had been stationed in France photographing women’s efforts there … she was (I think) commissioned by the Imperial War Museum as the first female photographer to be sent out as a war correspondent.’ The interview is featured on the website of 14-18 Now: *WW1 Centenary Art Commissions*. Available at: www.1418now.org.uk/dazzle-ship-scotland-every-woman-signal-tower/ [Last accessed: 10/09/16].

Further information is included in the *14-18 Now* interview.

*Every Woman* was co-commissioned by Edinburgh Art Festival and 14-18 NOW: *WW1 Centenary Art Commissions* with support from Scottish Government, Creative Scotland, City of Edinburgh Council, The Royal Yacht Britannia Trust, Forth Ports, Sherwin-Williams, the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund and by the Department for Culture Media and Sport.