

# 117 | book review

## **art labor, sex politics: feminist effects in 1970s British art and performance**

Siona Wilson, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2015, 320pp., ISBN: 978-0-8166-8573-8, \$105.00 (Hbk)/ISBN: 978-0-8166-8575-2, \$29.95 (Pbk)

In *Art Labor, Sex Politics*, Siona Wilson brings to light the important relationship between sex and labour politics in British feminist art of the 1970s. With case studies spanning photography, installation, film, performance and political actions, *Art Labor, Sex Politics* provides a detailed look at the historical context in which images of working bodies are produced, disseminated and received.

Partly conceived as a project to redress the idea of the 1970s as the 'undecade', whereby both art and feminist politics had come to signify a cultural sense of 'post-'68 malaise' (p. 15), Wilson points to the lively and transformative nature of feminist practices in the 1970s. Specifically, she looks to artists whose innovative or transgressive work is often relegated to the margins of art history or which necessitate contemporary rereadings.

*Art Labor, Sex Politics* asks: to what extent does a sustained focus on the relationship between sexual difference and political inquiry inform our approach to aesthetic debates? And how does the emphasis on gendered labour affect conceptions of 'the political' in cultural practices? Addressing the triangulation of gender, politics and art, Wilson maps the connections between aesthetic and intellectual practices of the 1970s, drawing on theories and frameworks from art history, film studies, and psychoanalytic and Marxist debate. Wilson makes a persuasive case for the close, formal analysis of images and events, rereading structural elements of artworks in detail—particularly striking are her readings of COUM Transmissions' *Copyright Breeches* and Jo Spence and Terry Dennett's *Remodelling Photo History* series—but also offers a clear departure from art historical accounts into new ways of theorising the work in relation to gendered labour.

After an introduction situating the book's focus on sex politics as 'the collision of private/public and intimate/social' (p. 14), Wilson divides her discussion into four chapters focussing on case studies characterised by gendered labour in its many different iterations: the Berwick Street Film Collective's experimental documentary film *Nightcleaners* (1972–1975); Mary Kelly's early film work, such as *Antepartum* (1973); COUM Transmissions' *Prostitution* exhibition (1976); and Spence and Dennett's *Remodelling Photo History* series (1979–1982). Each chapter builds on what Wilson describes as 'a productive instability in the relationship between feminism and the left' (p. 19), and considers wider themes including the ambiguity of activism, reproduction, queer aesthetics, abjection and amateurism.

Collaboration is at the heart of these case studies (although the discussion of Mary Kelly's involvement in making *Nightcleaners* and the focus on her films in Chapter 2 amount to a more

sustained focus on this artist's work) and is essential to Wilson's characterisation of the diversity of British art in the 1970s. Specifically, Wilson departs from the women-only model to focus on mixed gender collaborations—not to prioritise male contributions to feminist work, but to explore how gender dynamics are revealed through rereadings of significant works through the lens of gendered labour. Wilson is careful to highlight that whilst all of the works discussed are either initially shaped by or provoked feminist debate in their wake, not all can be described (by the artists themselves or in curatorial terms) as 'feminist art' (p. 20). As an example of these gender dynamics, Wilson points to the significance of male–female co-authorship—particularly in the Berwick Street Film Collective's *Nightcleaners* and COUM Transmissions' *Prostitution*—but where, problematically, the role of the female participants alone has come to define these projects. Wilson looks to re-establish these as collaborative works that address the challenges and assumptions of gendered authorship.

The influence of curatorial categories such as 'feminist art' is also present throughout the chapters; the public visibility and reception of the works discussed are important to how Wilson characterises feminist work of the period. Through rereadings of COUM Transmissions' *Prostitution* exhibition and public viewings of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–1979) and reproductive series—both were exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London in 1976—Wilson focusses on the political power of these projects beyond their initial controversy and flirtations with exploitation and the excremental. In her analysis of *Nightcleaners* and Brechtian legacies of the spectator as producer, Wilson lingers on an extended scene of toilet cleaning, emphasising 'the base materiality of the work that the women perform' (p. 10). Wilson links the structure and duration of the film not only to the formal qualities of durational art, but also to the abject and gendered labour division of work and rest, which is echoed in a later comparison with Warhol's voyeuristic film *Sleep* (1963).

The book has been published at a moment of renewed interest in, and visibility of questions of, gendered labour in academic and curatorial spheres in the UK context. Public symposia bringing together artists, activists and scholars, such as 'Working it: an interdisciplinary conference on sex, work and performance' in 2015, pursue contemporary questions around sexual politics and social reproduction that *Art Labor, Sex Politics* situates historically. In Tate Modern's new Switch House wing, an installation of *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973–75*, an extensive sociological art project, highlights the gendered division of pay and labour of factory work in the 1970s.

*Art Labor, Sex Politics* is an important contribution to scholarship on British feminist art of the 1970s, offering a sustained and in-depth focus on the complex and often ambiguous relationship between sex and politics in cultural practice. The precision with which the case studies are presented and analysed is perhaps its most prominent strength; in each instance, Wilson presents a compelling argument for the social and political power of art.

Harriet Curtis  
King's College London

<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-017-0073-8>