

Miens of Production

JULIA BRYAN-WILSON ON WOMEN AND WORK

NOW CELEBRATED as a milestone of Conceptual art, Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt, and Mary Kelly's *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-1975* entered the historical record unassumingly. The minutes of the March 19, 1973, meeting of the Women's Workshop, a feminist group within London's Artists' Union, note that Harrison, Hunt, and Kelly formed a minicollective in order to examine conditions faced by women workers at a local factory. The decidedly activist bent of this quasi-sociological study was clear: According to the minutes, the trio aimed for the project to "seek links with relevant trade unions and anti-discrimination campaigns." Their research endeavor took shape as an ambitious installation of black-and-white photographs, audiotapes, charts, film, and text panels and was first displayed in 1975 at the South London Art Gallery, not far from Bermondsey, where the factory was located. Its most recent London venue was Tate Britain, where it has been part of the permanent collection since 2001 and was on view this spring.

During Harrison, Hunt, and Kelly's multiyear investigation, they gathered a wealth of material on gendered pay scales and the reorganization of work shifts in the midst of the implementation of Britain's Equal Pay Act. The artists were eventually barred from the factory, which made metal boxes, but not before they had conducted interviews and observed all aspects of production. Among

the many components of the piece are time cards, medical-department records reporting workplace accidents (laccations, tin lodged in an eye), and typed schedules by both men and women detailing their daily activities. Photographs capture the hands of workers in action—gloved and ungloved, young and old—along with phrases that indicate the systematic sex segregation by which women are disproportionately assigned small, repetitive motions. Two short silent films, shown on dual monitors, juxtapose female labor, largely manual and stationary, with more mobile or managerial male labor: As women wipe down the sides of cans, men drive forklifts or shuffle papers. A listening station in the middle of the gallery at Tate Britain played audio files, including testimony about the gendered wage gap and a male manager discussing, among other things, the minimal safety precautions taken to guard against the dangerous, "physically painful" decibel levels at the factory. On top of the listening stations sat binders stuffed with photocopies of the artists' archival finds, including historical collective-bargaining agreements and texts about management theory.

The intensity and sheer volume of information in *Women and Work* makes for dense spectating, and there is little interpretive text or editorializing by the artists to suggest how the viewer should process all this data. Yet the installation, with its careful, feminist attention to structures of patriarchal capitalism as well as glimpses of textured individual stories, is consistently

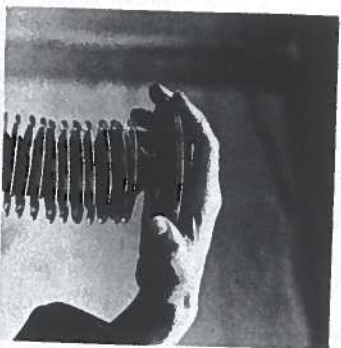
riveting, rewarding, and moving. Next to a list of the many women that Harrison, Hunt, and Kelly consulted during their project was the unexpectedly affecting center of the installation, a large grid of 128 close-up portraits. It is a multiracial group, diverse in age and stylistic inclination. Not all the women look right at the camera, and not all smile, but many do—*most* do. With their warm, frank faces, they convey dignity as well as openness toward the artists who are photographing them. The portraits propel the installation beyond reportage about aggregate, anonymous lives, strategically marshaling photography to provide a further, emotive, record.

At Tate Britain, the *Women and Work* gallery was one of a series of spaces highlighting labor issues in the

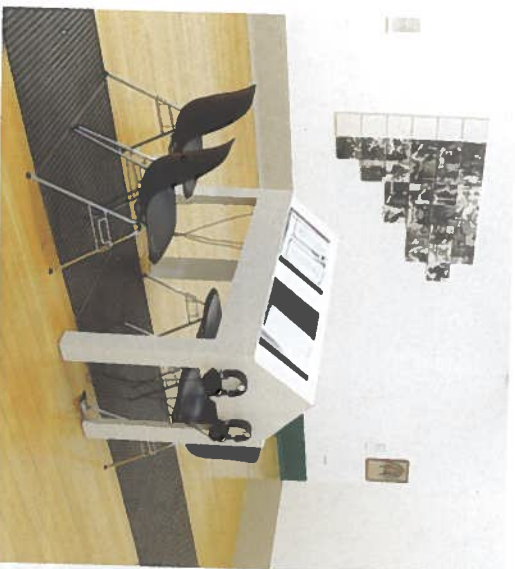
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UK in the twentieth century. Alongside Harrison, Hunt, and Kelly's project were Allan Sekula's slide show *Fish Story—Chapter 8: Dismal Science, 1989-92*, and Sylvia Pankhurst's 1907 paintings of female boot makers and child laborers toiling under grim conditions. All of these exhibits were featured under the rubric "BP Spotlights," with prominent space given to the logo of BP, one of Tate's sponsors. Considering the appalling labor conditions—including the use of incarcerated workers—under which the BP oil spill of 2010 was "cleaned up," this sponsorship felt dissonant, to say the least. (Leftist artists' groups in England continue to agitate for Tate to sever its relationship with BP.)

It's an old tale: Corporate interests encroach even on the projects that expressly resist such interests. Yet this infelicitous, indeed jarring, context indicates that local artistic responses, exemplified by *Women and Work*, might illuminate current reorganizations—more specifically, the feminization—of globalized labor. Women's manual factory work is marginalized in contemporary accounts that focus on "immaterial labor," which, of course, was already present well before late capitalism in the guise of "women's work"—i.e., that which fell outside the normal parameters of the workplace, such as craft, domestic labor, and service. Harrison, Hunt, and Kelly's fine-grained elucidation of women's labor maintains its potential to speak to these reorganizations today. (Think of the response to the McDonald's workers' "budgers.") Such evidentiary material still has political currency. In light of these resonances—not to mention the increased attention to sociological methods within artistic practice—*Women and Work* feels as potent and powerful as it must have forty years ago. □



HOPPER FEEDER
1 WOMAN
NO MEN



Left: Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt, and Mary Kelly, *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-1975* (detail), mixed media, dimensions variable. Below: Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt, and Mary Kelly, *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry 1973-1975*, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Tate Britain, London, 2014.

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