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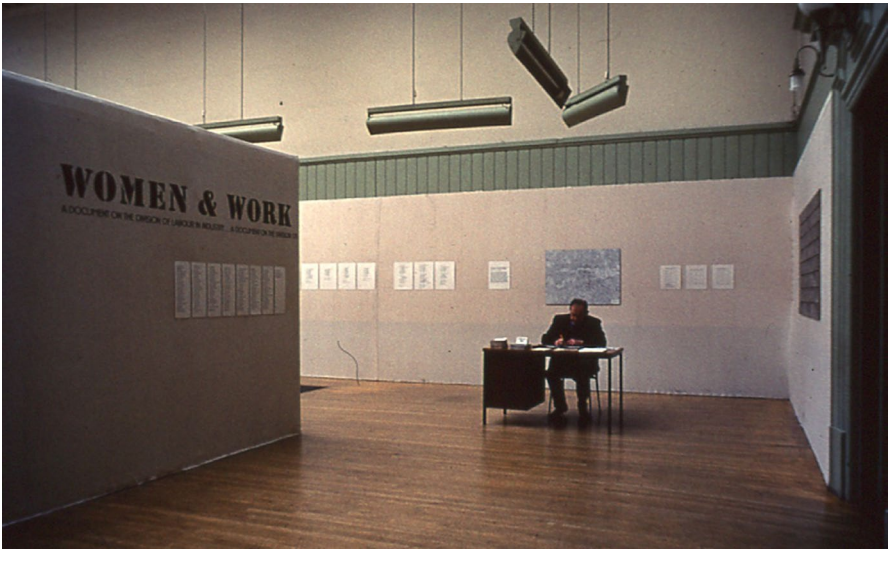
Women and Work: Feminist Factory Interventions in 1970s London

The establishment of the Artists' Union in London in 1972 led to the formation of the internal Women's Workshop, an advocacy group for female members that campaigned for more studio space for mothers and greater visibility for women in exhibitions.[1] The objective was thus to strengthen the intersection between women artists as «a group of largely unemployed people (who make no money from their art)» and women «who are generally not paid for their work, i.e. housework and child-rearing».[2] The next step, therefore, would be to network with women in other trade unions:

> «The Women's Workshop maintains that women, whatever sector they are employed in, are largely unorganised and consequently receive the lowest wages and work in the worst conditions; it is our intention to support our sisters in their struggle for unionisation and also in their actions as organised workers.»[3]

The interest in working conditions also extended to artistic practice. Building on the agenda of the Women's Workshop, an affinity group consisting of Margaret Harrison, Kay Fido Hunt and Mary Kelly decided to work as a collective on women's working conditions in industrial contexts.[4]



1 Margaret Harrison, Kay Fido Hunt, Mary Kelly, *Women and Work: A Document of the Division of Labour in Industry*, 1975, South London Art Gallery, exhibition view

kritische berichte 52, 2024, Nr. 4. https://doi.org/10.11588/kb.2024.4.106267

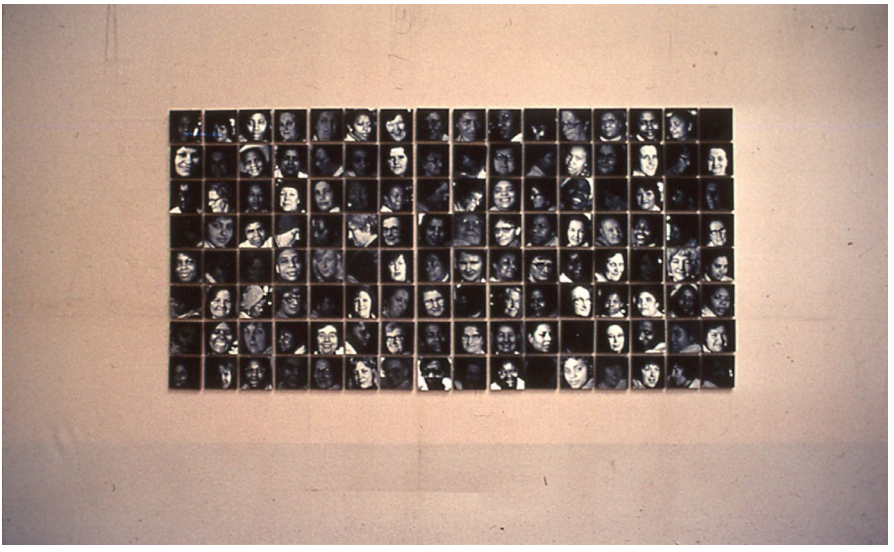
The result of over two years of research conducted in a canning factory in East London was their 1975 *Women and Work: A Document of the Division of Labour in Industry.* It can be described as a conceptual artistic work, a sociological investigation and an exhibition all in one. The focus was on the question of how the Equal Pay Act of 1970, a law that provided for the abolition of gender discrimination in factory wages by 1975, affected women's work. In 1975, the artists presented the findings of their artistic research at the South London Art Gallery, situated in close proximity to the factory. The exhibition, which employed a variety of media, including tables, diagrams, documents, photographs, sound recordings and two projected film loops, depicted the identical work processes of a female and a male factory worker (fig. 1). I propose to argue that by means of the research conducted in the factory, the translation of the findings into an exhibition format and the application of a scientific-conceptual artistic technique, Harrison, Hunt and Kelly exposed the unequal gender relations within industrial production and their causes. Furthermore, I will contend that they used their artistic practice to establish a connection to their own artistic production relations, which, like their industrial counterparts, they also made visible as a site of sexual differences by means of their curated factory intervention.

Exhibiting Exploitation

The setting and subject of Hunt, Harrison and Kelly's research was the canning factory of the South London Metal Box Co. in the Bermondsey neighbourhood of Southwark, which had employed women for over a century. In the exhibition catalogue, the artists described their approach as follows:

> «200 women participated in the documentation, 150 were individually photographed, more than 40 interviewed and every job (un-skilled, semi-skilled, skilled), for both men and women, was discussed, filmed or photographed. T & GWU [Transport and General Worlers' Union] shop stewards and covenors at the factory were consulted on every issue and the personnel managers and some section supervisors cooperated in providing relevant information on wages structures and job evaluation etc.»[5]

The research findings were presented in sections. The initial section comprised an inventory of over 150 geometrically arranged photographic portraits of female workers (fig. 2). It was followed by an overview of the history of the factory and the involvement of female workers in the production history of manual labour, mechanisation and automation as used in the cannery since the beginning of the twentieth century. The principal section, which addressed the evolution of labour relations between 1970 and 1975, commenced with an examination of working conditions. It presented the numbers, distribution and economic status of female employees, their income and the average salaries of women and men in the cannery and industrial sectors in England from 1948 to 1973. The second section, entitled «Hourly Paid Employees Only», comprised a series of photographs and the names of all female employees, along with tabulations of their marital status and salaries, photocopied time cards of female and male workers, as well as photocopied records of their turnover and 24 daily schedules transcribed from interviews with the artists (fig. 3). Parts of the Equal Pay Act negotiations between the trade unions and the factory were presented on a table, including photocopied original documents and photographs of all the jobs carried out by women and men, divided into levels of difficulty, including those that were performed exclusively by women. In addition, there were explanations of the evaluation of work, reports from nurses on injuries,



2, 3 Margaret Harrison, Kay Fido Hunt, Mary Kelly, *Women and Work: A Document of the Division of Labour in Industry*, 1975, South London Art Gallery, exhibition views

documents on working conditions in relation to sick pay and pensions, and reports on the resolutions of the TUC [Trades Union Congress] Women's Conference of 1975. Furthermore, a series of documents was displayed on the wall, accompanied by a reference system comprising reading material on tables, two films and audio recordings in which workers discussed their experiences of working in the factory.

The results of Harrison, Hunt and Kelly's quantitative and qualitative analysis indicated that, as a consequence of the Equal Pay Act, the factory had negotiated a pay system that would apply to workers of all genders.[6] However, the findings of the artistic research also demonstrated that, since the implementation of the Act, women had been predominantly engaged in work that required low levels of skill and responsibility and were paid less accordingly. For instance, in 1975, all female employees paid by the hour were engaged in «unskilled» roles, including «operatives, assemblers, packers, inspectors, cleaners and canteen assistants». Conversely, 77 % of female employees paid by the month were employed in grades two to three, which included «clerks, cashiers, secretaries, typists and office machine operators.»[7] In 1975, 44 % of employees were women, 95 % of whom earned less than £ 1,500 per year. In contrast, 42 % of men were paid more than £ 2,000 per year, with 10 % earning more than £ 3,000 per year. In 1974, the majority of hourly-paid women were between the ages of 51 and 60. Additionally, 45 % of hourly-paid women workers were employed on a part-time basis, and 95 % of women working part-time were married.[8]

Harrison, Hunt and Kelly's research revealed that the South London Metal Box Co. had implemented new labour and pay structures in compliance with the Equal Pay Act. However, female workers continued to face disadvantages. They were repeatedly promoted into roles and contracts that did not result in improved pay, perpetuating the existing gender-based pay inequality. Additionally, the cannery underwent a restructuring of its work and production processes during the final phase of artistic research.[9] The introduction of shift work and machinery was intended to compensate for the financial losses incurred during the recession.[10] Consequently, part-time working models and simple manual tasks were de facto banned, and a significant proportion of the work previously carried out by women was eliminated. This ultimately resulted in the loss of employment for a large proportion of female employees.[11]

However, *Women and Work* also made visible what the traditional recording of labour was unable to capture, namely that women were generally less qualified, more often engaged in manual and physically demanding work, and were paid under worse conditions. The reasons for this, as the exhibition demonstrated, extended beyond the factory gates. These included, first and foremost, gender-based disadvantages in terms of work, education, salary and health, as well as the women's dual role of industrial and care worker. The high number of part-time jobs among women and the daily routines on display indicated that a large number of female workers engaged in another job before and after the factory shift, that is reproductive work. According to the statistical data, this double burden had had a long-lasting effect on the way they worked in the factory, on their qualifications, their flexibility, their employment, their salary and therefore on all levels of their working and living environments. *Women and Work* thus revealed what the British Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s also made an issue, namely that the gender-based disadvantage of women extended to the industrial sector and was largely due to

the double burden of care work, which in turn was not recognised as work.[12] The female workers' production conditions were shared by the artists, as emphasised by the Women's Workshop, which was equally influenced by the women's movement. In other words, the production conditions were as gendered in industry as they were in the field of art.

Exhibiting Antagonisms

Although the artists in *Women and Work* did not explicitly address their own work in the factory, key information about the research phase could be derived from the exhibition. The photocopied documents made it evident that Harrison, Hunt and Kelly were in communication with the factory management, gained insight into internal processes and policies, and finally received permission to exhibit in the South London Gallery both the factory's own documents and the knowledge acquired on site, thus making it accessible to the public. Further documentation revealed that the artists held communication with the works councils, who provided them with both information and documents pertaining to their work and permitted them to gain insight into the negotiations with the factory management regarding the implementation of the Equal Pay Act. The total of 150 photographic portraits, the 24 written daily routines of individual employees and the sound recordings also demonstrated that the artists had engaged in conversations with the workers and had therefore spent time together. This focus brought *Women and Work* close to the political and artistic factory interventions that had become popular since the 1960s. They include the work of Chris Marker and Mario Marret, who filmed in an occupied factory in Besançon in 1967 and subsequently supported the formation of the Groupe Medvedkin film collective.[13] Another example is the Berwick Street Collective, which, along with Mary Kelly, accompanied cleaners who worked in large office buildings at night for their film *Nightcleaners Part I* (1975), as well as the efforts of a campaign to organise them into a union.[14] Furthermore, the Artist Placement Group (APG), founded in London, is worthy of note for its long-standing involvement in organising collaborations between artists and industrial companies since the mid-1960s.[15] It is reasonable to posit that the management of the factory in Bermondsey had anticipated a collaboration with the artists akin to that which the APG had facilitated, rather than the harsh criticism that was delivered in the exhibition. The final outcome of the research provoked such a strong reaction from those responsible that they banned the artists from the premises following the opening.[16]

For Harrison, Hunt and Kelly, this response was arguably foreseeable, if not inevitable. After all, it was precisely the kind of political reaction that the artists had sought to meet through their conceptual techniques. Namely, that their artistic investigations would be recognised as serious analyses and evidence for their research theses, so that their artistic work would have a political effect – on the factory, on the public and on the workers. In order to achieve this, they adopted the exhibition format that had been employed within conceptual practices since the 1960s. And with the South London Art Gallery, Hunt, Harrison and Kelly had selected an exhibition venue close to the factory with the intention of appealing to as many local workers as possible and encouraging them to visit the exhibition.[17] This decision to target a demographic that was both non-artistic and socially precarious was consistent with the conditions of the Greater London Arts Association Thames Television

Fund to benefit lower-income communities across Greater London, which provided the financial backing for the exhibition.[18] According to various reports, the artists' efforts were successful, and some of the women workers whom Harrison, Hunt and Kelly had interviewed for the exhibition attended the opening.[19] The exhibition programme also included a public event at which trade union representatives and activists from the women's movement were invited to discuss women's working conditions and strategies to improve them. Judith Hunt, the female representative of the trade union T.A.S.S. [Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section], took part in the discussion, as did Rosalind Delmar from the National Council for Civil Liberties (N.C.C.). Also in attendance were representatives of the civil liberties advocacy group Liberty (L.), a co-founder of the Night Cleaners Campaign, which sought to unionise night cleaners and the Metal Box Factory women's shop steward Jean Alexander, as well as workers from the factory.[20]

The structured scientific research and the integration of the addressees, that is the workers, into the artwork, brought the exhibition close to another political practice: the conricerca (‹co-research›). The so-called ‹militant investigation› was developed in the political environment of the *Quaderni Rossi*, the journal of the operaist movement in Italy in the early 1960s, based on Karl Marx's questionnaires for workers (1880) with the intention of reactivating the workers' «antagonistic class consciousness» and encouraging them to resist.[21] Sociological methods were to be used to examine working conditions on site in the factory, whereby, in contrast to a purely scientific approach, «the worker would not simply be the object of investigation, but would actively participate in the analysis of his integration into the production process» and «the analyst would not see himself as outside the relationship under investigation».[22] In *Women and Work* , the employees were both the subjects of the inquiry as well as the recipients of the exhibition, which served as a forum for discussing their insecure working and living conditions together. In this manner, the exhibition at the South London Art Gallery became the place that the philosopher Gerald Raunig actually ascribed to the industrial factory, that is the «place of its shared exploitation», that had consequently served to unite the workers.[23] However, Harrison, Hunt and Kelly did not bring the factory into the art institution; rather, they created a space with their exhibition that had a similar organising effect for women workers as the factory had for the male workers. The lower numbers of trade union memberships compared to their male colleagues and the lack of resistance from female workers in Bermondsey indicated that the factory did not serve the same function for women – and therefore could not provide the basis for a militant investigation and the resulting strike.[24] Consequently, *Women and Work* represented an attempt to provide the missing organising platform and to make the exhibition a more conducive environment for organising or even resisting.

Exhibiting the Means of Production

The artists presented the results of their research at the South London Art Gallery, utilising a range of media, including copied documents and film recordings. The graphics created using sociological notation methods constituted an integral component of the exhibition and aimed to facilitate the reading of the texts and the deciphering of the statistics, diagrams and other graphic models, in addition to viewing the film material and listening to the tape reports (fig. 4). The history and

4 Margaret Harrison, Kay Fido Hunt, Mary Kelly, *Women and Work: A Document of the Division of Labour in Industry*, 1975, South London Art Gallery, exhibition views

analysis of factory work were presented in a chronological and linear manner, in order to guide the viewer through the exhibition. The path was defined by fixtures combined with other materials that could be read in depth while seated at the tables or standing at a reading desk. Accordingly, the documents were not packaged behind glass or in other displays, but mounted directly on the wall with small nails at the same height next to each other. In this way, the research findings, exhibition architecture, hanging and other curatorial interventions together contributed to a highly accessible and straightforward presentation of the information, as well as a plain, scientific and objective aesthetic, in line with the established style of conceptual art from the mid-1960s onwards.[25] This aesthetic employed information and text-based media, as well as the «primacy of the linguistic sign» to supplant the conventional «credo of self-evident visuality and objecthood», as art historian Sabeth Buchmann observed.[26] The objective was to «relativise the central topoi of expression and subjectivity, of individual handwriting and craftsmanship in Western art from the 1940s to the 1960s – in other words, a work- and author-centred concept of production», ideally replacing phenomenological values of experience with cognitive processes of reception that also allowed very little subjective leeway.[27]

The utilisation of conceptual methodologies in *Women and Work* initially served to reinforce the integrity of the research outcomes and elevate artistic practice to the level of scientific research, as evidenced by the reaction of the factory. At the same time, the necessity of the artistic approach, which transcended scientific methods and made the ‹sexual difference› of the industrial mode of production visible, demonstrated that both scientific notation and conceptual art had their limitations. In fact, the conceptual commitment to language and information-based media entailed working with the same linguistic systems, thereby implying an acceptance of the gaps that primarily affected women. From a psychoanalytically influenced linguistic perspective, writing and language were regarded as media that categorically excluded women and their ‹female› concerns because they could not be represented.[28] In examining the work of Mary Kelly, who employed conceptual techniques in her *Post-Partum Document* (PPD; 1973–1979), curator Helen Molesworth has argued that the artist's engagement with ‹women's issues› compelled her to challenge the conventional procedures of conceptual art.[29] In the case of PPD, Kelly had transposed the work of a mother, which was considered ‹natural› and ‹essential›, and therefore outside of social relations and categorically not work, into a scientific language that was usually used to analyse industrial work. By employing this strategy, Kelly would have undermined conceptual art, which, despite its political aspirations, was constrained by the modernist paradigm and thus perpetuated the dichotomy between public and private domains.[30]

In this sense, *Women and Work* can be understood as both a feminist variation of conceptual art and a feminist deconstruction of conceptual art. As a feminist variation of conceptual art, it employs conceptual methods to reveal the sexual difference of the capitalist-industrial mode of production. As a feminist deconstruction of conceptual art, it makes the limits and gaps of its own artistic mode of production visible, demonstrating how deeply sexual differences are also anchored in the production of art. Consequently, *Women and Work* represents an investigation of both the field of industrial labour and the field of art, with the objective to demonstrate that women, as both workers and art workers, are subjected to the same working and production conditions.

Notes

1 This article is a revised version of the chapter ‹Arbeit ausstellen: Feministische Fabrikinterventionen & Streikpraktiken› from my book *Arbeit sichtbar machen. Strategien und Ziele in der Kunst seit 1970* (Edition Metzel, Munich, 2021). Mary Kelly: A Brief History of the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union, 1972–1973 (1973), reprinted in: Hilary Robinson (ed.): Feminism-Art-Theory. An Anthology 1968–2000, Oxford 2001, p. 87.

2 Tate Britain Archive, Protocol of the Artists' Union Women's Workshop, 16 April 1972.

3 Kelly (1973) 2001 (as note 1), p. 87.

4 Tate Britain Archive, Protocol of the Artists Union Women's Workshop, 19 March 1972.

5 Women and Work. A Document of the Division of Labour in Industry. By Kay Hunt, Mary Kelly, Margaret Harrison, exhib. cat., London, South London Art Gallery, London 1975, p. 3.

6 The evaluation method was also disclosed in the exhibition, and the exhibited document is reprinted in the catalogue as «Description of the Direct Consensus Method of Job Evaluation which was used to establish the basis for a new wage structure at South London Metal Box Co. in 1971». See exhib. cat. Women and Work 1975 (as note 5), pp. 17–18.

7 Cf. Kay Hunt/Mary Kelly: Women & Work. A Document of the Division of Labour in Industry. A Brief Summary of Findings from the Exhibition, in: Social Process/Collaborative Action: Mary Kelly 1970–75, exhib. cat., Vancouver, Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver 1997, pp. 83–90, here p. 84.

In the course of the evaluation, the tasks were divided into three grades according to competence and salary, and there were no female employees in the third grade, which included managers and directors. See Women and Work 1975 (as note 5), pp. 5–8.

8 See exhib. cat. Social Process 1997 (as note 7), p. 83.

9 See ibid., pp. 87–89.

10 See ibid.

11 See ibid.

12 Four central themes were negotiated at the 1970 National Women's Liberation Movement Conference, which is regarded as the inaugural event of the English women's movement: «(1) Equal pay for equal work, (2) Equal education and equal opportunities, (3) Free contraception and abortion on demand, (4) Free 24 hour nurseries.» Siehe Florence Binard: The British Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s: Redefining the Personal and the Political, in: Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique 22, 2017, pp. 1–17, here p. 6. Many of the artists at the Women's Workshop were themselves active in the women's movement. See Roszika Parker/Griselda Pollock: Fifteen Years of Feminist Action: From Practical Strategies to Strategic Practices, in: idem. (eds.): Framing Feminism. Art and the Women's Movement 1970–1985, London 1987, pp. 3–78.

13 See Trevor Stark: ‹Cinema in the Hands of the People›: Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film, in: October 2012, no. 139, pp. 117–150.

14 See Siona Wilson: From Women's Work to the Umbilical Lens: Mary Kelly's Early Films, in: Art History 31, 2008, no. 1, pp. 79–102.

15 See Antony Hudek/Alex Sainsbury: The APG Approach, in: The Individual and the Organisation: Artist Placement Group 1966–79, exhib. cat. London, Raven Row, London 2012, pp. 3–6.

16 See Rosalind Delmar: Women & Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry, in: Spare Rib 1975, October, pp. 32–33, here p. 32.

17 See Janet Watts: Pandora's Tin Box, in: The Guardian, 19 May 1975.

18 See exhib. cat. Women and Work 1975 (as note 5), p. 4; see Press release to the exhibition Women & Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry, South London Art Gallery, May 1975, https://slgarchive.org/index.php/women-work-press-release-page-1, last accessed on 8 July 2024.

19 See John A. Walker: Left Shift. Radical Art in 1970s Britain, London, New York 2002, p. 147.

20 See Note on a Discussion Event in the Course of the Exhibition Women &. Work: On the Division of Labour in Industry, 24 May 1975, https://slgarchive.org/index.php/women-and-work-event-1, last accessed on 8 July 2024.

21 See Dominik Götz: Operaismus. Geschichte & Philosophie des autonomen Marxismus in Italien, Vienna, Berlin 2020, pp. 46–78. Marx's questionnaires, which he had conceived for the purpose of a larger survey, also aimed to raise workers' awareness of their exploitative working conditions through questions and answers. See Karl Marx: Fragebögen für Arbeiter [1880], in: Marx-Engels-Werke (MEW), Berlin 1962, vol. 19, pp. 230–237.

22 See Götz 2020 (as note 21), p. 69.

23 See Gerald Raunig: Fabriken des Wissens. Streifen und Glätten, Zurich 2012, vol. 1, p. 15.

24 See exhib. cat. Women and Work 1975 (as note 5), pp. 27–28.

25 This aesthetic applies mainly to the conceptual art of Europe and North America. Although the «linguistic techniques – which enquire into the structural conditions of what makes art art – were certainly influential», argues Sabeth Buchmann, they were «nonetheless of a locally specific character». See Sabeth Buchmann: Conceptual Art, in: Hubertus Butin (ed.): DuMonts Begriffslexikon zur zeitgenössischen Kunst, Cologne 2006, pp. 49–53, here p. 50.

26 See Sabeth Buchmann: Denken gegen das Denken. Produktion, Technologie, Subjektivität bei Sol LeWitt, Yvonne Rainer und Hélio Oiticica, Berlin 2007, p. 12.

27 Ibid., p. 11.

28 See Juli Carson: Excavating Discursivity. Post-Partum Document in the Conceptualist, Feminist, and Psychoanalytic Fields, PhD Thesis, Department of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2000, https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/9386, last accessed on 8 July 2024, pp. 287–312.

29 See Helen Molesworth: House Work and Art Work, October 2000, no. 92, pp. 71–97.

30 See ibid., p. 86.

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1–4 Margaret Harrison, Kay Fido Hunt, Mary Kelly, *Women and Work: A Document of the Division of Labour in Industry*, 1975, South London Art Gallery, exhibition views, courtesy of the South London Gallery, https://slgarchive.org/index.php/women-work-a-document-on-the-division-of-labour-in-industry