

Bodies of Work

Curated by Benison Kilby

Berwick Street Film Collective

Ursula Biemann

Manuela Gernedel

The Hackney Flashers

Sidsel Meineche Hansen &

Therese Henningsen

Morag Keil

Eugenia Lim

Sandra Lahire

Emma Phillips

Zoe Marni Robertson

Benison Kilby would like to thank the artists, Channon, Nina and Kathryne at Bus Projects, Francis Parker and Monash University Museum of Art, Katrina Schwarz, Andre Franco, Will Foster, Nic Tammens, Olivia Radonich, Elise Routledge and the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

The title of the exhibition comes from a book of essays by Kathy Acker.

Bus Projects is supported by the Victorian Government through Creative Victoria. Bus Projects' 2017–19 Program is supported by the City of Yarra.

Bus Projects acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we operate: the Wurundjeri people and Elders past and present of the Kulin nations.

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.



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“the body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male waged workers: the primary ground for their exploitation and resistance...”¹

The current moment has been defined as a moment of crisis both in terms of work and in terms of care or social reproduction,² the two are fundamentally entangled and disproportionately lived through by women. The pressures of this integrated crisis have sparked a revival of interest in reproductive labour by a new generation of artists. As low-waged, precarious service work replaces unionised industrial labour in the global North and becomes ‘feminised’, wages fall below the cost of supporting oneself and others. Since the 1970s, the shift to flexible work contracts has been accompanied by the recruitment of more and more women into the paid workforce and the state’s disinvestment from social welfare. Areas of life which were formerly protected, maintained and reproduced by national welfare states, who sought compromises between capital and organised labour, have been transformed into areas of life structured by the principles of market-based competition. Furthermore, by reducing real wages, financialised capitalism has increased the amount of paid work necessary to support a family. So while care work has become the responsibility of families and communities, their capacity to perform it has been diminished.³ In cases where individuals can afford to pay for domestic help, it is typically provided by migrant women, who are often compelled to leave their own children behind in order to try and make a living.⁴ The restructuring of capital to commodify more and more reproductive activities makes it clear that increasingly this type of work cannot be confined to unpaid work in the home.

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Bodies of Work
08.05.19 –
01.06.19

While these shifts are intensifying the pressure on women, they have also given renewed momentum to the international feminist movement. In Autumn 2016, Polish activists called for a massive women's strike to halt a parliamentary bill against abortion. The Argentinian activists, Ni Una Menos also adopted this tactic in October 2016 to protest violence against women. Encouraged by mass participation in these strikes, feminist activist organisations worked together to promote an international day of mobilisation, held on the 25th of November 2016, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against women. Further to these protests, the International Women's Strike on the 8th of March 2017 voiced the demand for, and invoked the possibility of, a global counter-offensive to the oppression of women. The strike sought to connect women's power in production with their power over reproduction, as women withdrew from both paid work and domestic labour.⁵ In addition to these protests, growing interest in the work of feminist theorists and activists associated with Italian Autonomist Marxism suggests that contemporary capitalism's assault on labour is bringing about a new feminist consciousness.

The concept of social reproduction in feminist theory emerged in the 1970s, especially in Marxist and socialist feminism. Theorists of social reproduction instigated a critique of orthodox Marxism, highlighting the shortcomings of its analyses of labour and its exclusion of the home and the domestic sphere, where women were responsible for the majority of the work. Marxist feminists such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici and Selma James redefined unpaid domestic work as producing value, arguing that it produces the commodity labour power, in other words the worker. In this way, Italian Marxist feminists showed how women's work in the home was central to the survival and reproduction of labour power and capitalist relations. Silvia Federici popularised the radical analysis of women's reproductive work as vital, both economically and socially, for the reproduction of workers and the

accumulation of capital, arguing that housework has been imposed on women and, further, that it has been framed as a natural attribute of the female physique and personality, in order to justify the fact that it is unpaid.⁶

But as hard-fought gains of waged and unwaged women's struggles in the 1970s are currently being undone, this prompts reflection not only on the question of social reproduction, but on women's place with regards to labour more broadly. Taking a number of influential works of feminist labour activism from the 1970s and 80s as a point of departure, *Bodies of Work* is an exhibition that brings together a group of ten Australian and international artists and collectives using a range of approaches to draw attention to women's work both inside and outside the home. In many instances, the artists have used artistic processes that resist traditional methods of art production, such as working collectively and using experimental techniques. Their works attest to the multifaceted experiences and effects of work by broaching the related issues of the commodified, discarded and diseased reproductive female body; sex and sexuality; exhaustion and psychic investment.

Maintenancer, 2018, a video work by Sidsel Meineche Hansen and Therese Henningsen provides a view onto the labour required to clean and restore the inanimate sex dolls at the BorDoll brothel in Dortmund, Germany. Here we witness the convergence of two forms of feminised labour, cleaning and sex work, as well as the fact that the particular types of labour deemed appropriate to women are frequently related to the body and its commodification. By showing the adult market for frictionless silicon bodies, the work documents a transition towards post-human prostitution, where sex work shifts from the physical body of the sex worker onto the sex doll or robot. Today sex work reflects some of the conditions that are inherent to contemporary labour more broadly,

such as pervasive digital communication, technological content provision and affective service work, which is accompanied by infrequent or precarious payment and a lack of social security protections.⁷

Using a kaleidoscopic array of experimental techniques, such as superimposition, re-filming and changes of speed, Sandra Lahire's films *Uranium Hex*, 1987, and *Serpent River*, 1989, focus on women working in uranium mines in North Ontario, Canada, and the destructive effects on both the environment and their bodies. While the films appear to subvert the gendered division of labour, by showing women working in an industry where they are generally underrepresented, any positive shift is undercut by the adverse effects of the work on the women's health. Further, Lahire gestures towards the additional caregiver roles of the female workers by showing the Uranium Capital Nursery School and threading images of children playing throughout the films.

Ursula Biemann's video work *Performing the Border*, 1999, takes as its subject the feminisation of low-skilled factory work in the city of Ciudad Juárez in northern Mexico. Divided into three chapters, 'The Plant', 'The Settlement' and 'The Killings', the video essay focuses on the maquiladoras of the Mexico-US border, where many American corporations have their factories and assembly plants. Long and medium shots alternate to the rhythm generated by the spoken commentary. The border's mountainous desert landscapes, shot from a moving car in low-resolution footage, are animated by vehicles, factories and poorly constructed housing. These shots are interspersed with other forms of image making, such as night-vision images that suggest the surveillance of the border for illegal immigrants. One of the issues addressed in the work is the fact that these companies prefer to hire young women. The reasons for this have been widely discussed: nimble fingers make for better and faster precision work in electronics assemblage and young women with little experience are less likely to organise into unions. As discussed in

the video, the wages women receive at the maquiladoras are so low that on the weekends many of the women are forced to supplement their wage through prostitution. The voice over explains that the border becomes a metaphor for various forms of marginalisation, as well as the regulation of gender and sexuality by corporate and social forces.

The example of the maquiladoras in Mexico reflects the wider trend of multi-national corporations to relocate to the global South where they can find cheap labour and target female workers. In addition, the video reflects on mobility and violence against women. Ciudad Juárez is a notoriously dangerous place and since the early 1990s, it has witnessed hundreds of murders of poor, young female workers. The interchangeability of these women is reflected in the fact that their bodies are frequently discovered wearing clothes belonging to a different woman. By drawing attention to these issues, Biemann highlights the harsh conditions of the global capitalist environment in which gendered, labouring bodies circulate, paying close attention to the effects of these new politico-judicial zones and the lack of access to human civil rights protections within them. Because of the North American Free Trade Agreement, commodities enjoy more mobility and protections than female workers. In the networked maquiladora system, time, productivity and the body of the female worker are strictly controlled; in many instances, the reproductive functions of the women are policed by their managers to ensure that they do not become pregnant. But while unveiling these issues, Biemann distances her work from conventional documentary filmmaking by using a strategic disjunction of image and spoken word, as well as a deliberate mixing of documentary and other forms of narration. Conscious of the subject's ideological over-determinations, the video essay becomes a mediating mechanism where images and discourses converge in a new model of representation; interviews and testimonies alternate with theoretically astute critical commentary that also manages to retain a poetic edge.

In 1970 the Berwick Street Film Collective was approached by May Hobbes, an activist for a group of night-cleaning workers and a night cleaner herself, to make a film about the task of unionising women working as contract cleaners in large office blocks at night. *Nightcleaners*, 1972-75, began as a straightforward agitprop film but after four years in post-production editing what hit the screen was something quite different. When it was screened at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in August 1975, Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen claimed that it was the apotheosis of a new feminist avant-garde, because of the way it diverged from conventional documentary models.⁸ The Berwick Street Film Collective filmed the female cleaners over an eighteen-month period: while they were cleaning, in meetings with feminist activists and male union representatives, in interviews with the cleaning company boss and at large-scale demonstrations. However, these documentary passages are continually interrupted by sections of black leader tape, an editing effect that darkens the screen. Instead of serving as a conventional pause in *Nightcleaners* the black leader tape is on screen for much longer and appears between almost every segment of the film. Additionally, the filmmakers repeatedly isolated individual shots that were processed and re-filmed to emphasise the properties of 16mm film. These images include close-up shots of faces, isolated gestures and ambiguous visual details that further interrupt the expectations of documentary. The film's staging of ambivalent emotion through these strategies points to the psychical effects of the work on the women and shows work to be a site of subjectivity and even desire.⁹ In addition, the tropes of reflexivity draw attention to the labour of filmmaking, as well as serving to make the viewer critically aware of the illusion being presented.

Connecting the women's paid and unpaid labour, in a short interview one of the women explains that even though her doctor has told her to stop night work because of the damage that it is doing to her health, she persists because it is the only way that she can

adequately provide for her children. She is not able to work during the day because she must fulfil the gendered labour of childcare which is expected of her. As the children's mother, she has primary responsibility for her children and her husband is either unable or unwilling to offer adequate support and care.¹⁰ The woman's dilemma is acutely felt because the risks to her health are likely to be fatal. She is trapped by the social expectations of her gender, which she experiences as a moral imperative that is fatally exacerbated by exterior social forces.

Domestic Labour and Visual Representation, 1980, was the final work made by The Hackney Flashers, a London based socialist feminist photography collective. Taking the form of an educational pack for schools and community centres, it includes twenty-four image slides and an accompanying booklet with reading suggestions and discussion questions. The pack repurposes images from their two projects *Women and Work*, 1975 and *Who's Holding the Baby?*, 1978, which were originally presented on cheap, portable laminated panels. The images from *Who's Holding the Baby?* examine the lack of state-funded childcare and how this intersected with issues of low income and poor housing, as well as the effects that these factors had upon caregivers, who were predominantly women. Showing a community nursery in North East London that was established by local women as an attempt at self-organisation, they throw into relief the ways in which the reproduction of life came into increasing conflict with the demands of capitalism. The project combined research into childcare facilities and interviews with parents and workers at the nursery with visual material, including photographs, cartoons and appropriated advertising images.

In the images we see the collective power of women working together, washing, cooking, cleaning and looking after children. While work, sociability and reproduction are shown to coalesce, attention to portability, reproducibility and audience access

link their projects to a clear pedagogic intention. Additionally, the images demonstrate that the group were acutely aware of emergent models of consumerism and the effects that these ideals had upon women. A glamorous model in a red dress, posed upon a sofa, is sharply contrasted with the phrase, ‘mustn’t be late for the evening shift at the bread factory’. The gap between luxurious consumerist fantasies and the lived experience of the majority of women is emphasised by the ironic arrangement of image and text. While the work of The Hackney Flashers speaks to the current crisis of social reproduction and care labour in which the gains of second-wave feminism appear under threat¹¹, they also show how we might re-politicise child-rearing in the face of these challenges and present viewers with a tangible alternative based on solidarity and collectivism.

Taking inspiration from these important works of 1970s and 80s feminist activism that bring into dialogue women’s paid and unpaid labour, the exhibition similarly seeks to underline how these two types of work are interrelated. The fact that the responsibility of domestic work and child rearing still largely falls to women has a direct affect on their paid employment, predisposing women to an increased likelihood of being in casual, part-time and low-paid work. At the same time, forms of work traditionally deemed women’s work and those occupations geared towards women, are also devalued. It is therefore the aim of this exhibition to develop consciousness around the issue of the gendered division of labour and its social construction, with the awareness that it has particular urgency today due to the pressures that the dismantling of the welfare state and the commodification of domestic and care work are placing on women unequally across the globe.

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- 1 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2014), 16.
- 2 See Nancy Fraser, “Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), Helen Hester. “Care under capitalism: The crisis of “Women’s Work””, *IPPR Progressive Review*, Volume 24 (4), (2018): 343-352. and Marina Vishmidt, “Permanent Reproductive Crisis: An Interview with Silvia Federici”, *Mute*, March 2013, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/permanent-reproductive-crisis-interview-silvia-federici>
- 3 Nancy Fraser, “Crisis of Care? On the Social-Reproductive Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism” in *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 25.
- 4 Ibid, 34.
- 5 Angela Dimitrakaki & Kirsten Lloyd, “Social Reproduction Struggles and Art History,” *Third Text* 31, no.1 (2017): 6.
- 6 Silvia Federici, *Revolution Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 16.
- 7 Julia Bryan Wilson, “Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work Since the 1970s,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2012): 85.
- 8 Siona Wilson, *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 3-4.
- 9 Ibid, 5.
- 10 Ibid, 30-31.
- 11 Victoria Horne, “The Art of Social Reproduction,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 2 (2016): 189.

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