Conference Report:

Speak, body: Art, the Reproduction of Capital and the Reproduction of Life

21-23 April 2017

School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies

Convened by Rose-Anne Gush, Tom Hastings, Sophie Jones and Gill Park

Speak, body: Art, the Reproduction of Capital and the Reproduction of Life, addressed the juncture of the “body” in art in relation to feminism(s) and capitalism, through the period 1960–1980. The “body” is taken to be a historically contingent concept, up for contestation. Today we are witnessing a massive conservative retrenchment in the political and legal spheres concerning images of the body, from anti-woman bans on images of female ejaculation in pornography to the far-right deployment of racist iconography in the mass media coverage of Brexit and the Trump campaign. Our conference sought to challenge the hyper-mediated landscape that has propelled the global right, by considering how a previous generation of artists, who focused on the body in their works, responded to dominant social conditions. Speak, body set out to investigate artworks that emerged coincident with the crisis of capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s in order to consider what they can tell us about contemporary transformations in art and politics.

Beginning with a screening of work from the 1960s-1080s by Yvonne Rainer, VALIE EXPORT, Martha Rosler and Chick Strand alongside an exhibition of work by Jo Spence, the conference placed emphasis on readings of artworks that counter the museal tendency to appropriate feminist art practices within conventional art-historical categories of movements, iconographies or styles; that is, we solicited papers that tracked the social implications of feminist investigation and critique conducted through a range of media (performance, photography, video, film, etc.). Speak, body aimed to reconnect artistic practices with feminism as a historic social movement, and to query its consolidation into an academic “-ism”.
The conference opened with a keynote by Marina Vishmidt, who convenes and lectures on the MA Cultural Industry at Goldsmith College. Marina’s paper *Corporeal Abstractions: Body as Site and Cipher* whose paper focused on the move from ‘body’ to ‘bodies’. Her paper asked, ‘what form of social relation makes such a thing as ‘the body’ not just legible but a departure point for any political subjectivation?’
For our second keynote we were immensely privileged to have a presentation by artist Martha Rosler via Skype, whose presentation *Some notes on a body in pieces*, re-presented, and commented on, a paper originally written in the 1970s that addressed the violent fragmentation of the female body through the advancement of technology under capitalism.

These papers were complemented across the two days by rich and varied papers by both established and emerging academics which explored, to name a few examples, the question of reproductive and affective labour in the films/photography of Martha Rosler and Carrie Mae Weems (*Kimberly Lamm*); the ageing body in the paintings of Joan Semmel (*Rosa Nogues*); the non-labouring female body (*Vanessa Parent*); the biopolitics of care (*Fulvia Carnevale*) and the body as site for psychic resistance in the work of Lygia Clarke (*Ana Carolina Minozzo*).
I decided to show how the order that seemed so "natural" could distinguish with one quick tuck... how her hands discovered a register, and I followed her to the places she indicated. I asked her about the way she practiced, because things often explain themselves. Sometimes 15th to discover for each, as loose she felt, became the solution of something.

—Chadil Aherman

Feedback

140 people attended across the weekend attended from across the UK, Europe, the US and Canada. A selection of feedback is as follows:

Thank you for such a wonderful conference. It was honestly a privilege to be included. So many great papers, panels and conversations. Congratulations on putting together such a well organized event and providing a space for important and timely conversations to take place.

I am so proud to have been part of this wonderful and very important conference.

Thank you for such a wonderful and interesting conference and for the opportunity to contribute to the discussions. I was feeling quite tired on my way to Leeds Saturday morning, but as soon as the conference got started, I felt inspired and thankful to be there.

I had a really lovely and thought provoking time. I’ve never delivered a paper before and I really appreciated how supportive and open for discussion you made the atmosphere of the conference.

It was a really interesting and engaging programme and I’m really happy to have been able to contribute to it.

A great event, still head buzzing in excited way.