

frequently noted, as images of transnational trade and black and Indigenous labour invariably reference the violent colonial realities that made them possible. Perhaps the most important contribution this book makes is connecting the multiplicity of locations and actors that participated in creating the visual culture of Atlantic slavery. These visual modes of narrating place have contemporary trajectories, as tourist imagery regularly omits difference and racialised experiences. Where the dominant Western construction of place unravels is precisely in the stark contradiction between quiet spaces delineated on printed paper and the multi-sensory, visceral reality of lived life.

- 1 Nicholas Mirzoeff, 'The Right to Look,' in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, issue no. 3, spring 2011, pp. 473-496, p. 475.

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'A1: Britain on the Verge', Art Bermondsey Project Space, London, 16 January 2018 – 20 January 2018

Taking its name, *on the Verge*, from the preface to Paul Graham's 1983 photobook, *A1: The Great North Road*, Peter Dench's exhibition at Art Bermondsey Project Space is a study of Britain in the wake of the European Union membership referendum. In 65 colour photographs taken while travelling north on the A1 from London to Edinburgh, Dench remakes Graham's project almost frame-for-frame. Quotidian shots of kitsch cafes and bleak urban landscapes run alongside cavalier images of discarded lads' mags, fast food and

ramshackle service stations. An image of an elderly woman reading the *Daily Mirror* on a run-down, windswept corner in Archway, North London, is set-off by a photograph of faceless businessmen in crisp blue suits. Elsewhere, a yellowing copy of the Collins Britain Road Atlas hangs from a coat hook in a transport cafe, the date of its publication, 2010, marking the decline of the Labour Party and the advent of a Conservative government bent on ideological austerity. Collapsing 2017 into 1983, Dench indicates that history is in a state of repeat. Once again, economic failure has been transformed into a national identity crisis inextricable from a discourse on immigration. Fifty years on from his jingoistic 'Rivers of Blood' speech, Enoch Powell's reactionary myth endures: the promise to "Make Britain Great Again" requires an isolationist turn.

If deconstructing this myth and the Right's profoundly exclusive image of Britain necessitates that we complicate notions of the working class and of the Left itself, how – if at all – does Dench contribute toward this project? Something – the project's embeddedness in *history* – has been lost in translation. It is not simply that Dench lacks Graham's sensitivity, but that Graham's name is erased from the exhibition entirely. Thus, for those who are not well versed in British documentary, the photographer's nod to the eighties falls flat. Meanwhile, to those familiar with documentary's long trajectory, Dench's attempt to make his antecedent's project paradigmatic of a socially concerned practice seems, in a way, myopic. By refusing a contextualising frame beyond the cursory captions that accompany the images, Dench repudiates a more rigorous documentary practice that preceded Graham. This situated model mobilised the voice of the

excluded to suture the gaps and silences that pervaded liberal humanist representations of underemployment. ‘Invented’ during the 1930s by the Worker Film and Photo League, it was rediscovered during the 1970s by collectives such as Photography Workshop and Exit Photography Group.

If Dench’s task, as he implies, is to comprehend the complex and contradictory motives that compelled ‘leave’ voters, he needs more than a series of facile stereotypes: a cardboard cut-out of the Queen, crumpled tabloid newspapers, a fridge-freezer emblazoned with the Union Jack. Dench’s project tells us little about the socio-political climate that conditioned the referendum and its aftermaths. As opposed to a lesson in the political failures of history, the exhibition inadvertently schools us on the unhappy fate of Allan Sekula’s mission for ‘an art that deals with the social ordering of people’s lives’.¹ While the Left are at pains to account for what it means to live and survive under capitalism, as recent history attests, attempts to explicate this experience are frequently unsuccessful.

This inadequacy is disclosed by a photograph of an articulated lorry surging forth beneath a fluttering St George’s flag. The image directly recalls the Labour Member of Parliament Emily Thornberry’s startlingly misdirected #Rochester tweet.² Posted on the eve of the Rochester and Strood by-election in which Conservative defector Mark Reckless gained a second parliamentary seat for the UK Independence Party, the tweet represented the constituency’s inhabitants precisely through the tropes deployed by Murdoch’s press in its evocation of “Little England”.

Proffering an alternative image of Britain dictates that the terms of representation

be wrested from the Right. Yet Dench’s journey “up north” is already an ideologically fraught one. As Steve Edwards shrewdly notes in an article that was contemporaneous with Graham’s project, the othering of the Northern subject has functioned historically to reproduce uneven power relationships across space, between North and South. Popular discourses since the 1930s have promulgated a myth of ‘perpetual contamination’ through which the decimated North came to stand for the decay of the social body more generally.³ The Northern subject, vis-à-vis the working class, became a scapegoat for national decline.

It is easy to dismiss as ‘naïve’, ‘ignorant’ or ‘Northern’ that overwhelmingly underprivileged sector of the population who have become Brexit’s cannon fodder both discursively and, going forward, economically. Yet, while such caustic accusations are convenient, they are not, however, useful. They afford the liberal Left an excuse not to examine its own place within a matrix that subjugates not only those who occupy entrenched positions within Britain’s class system, but also low-paid migrant labourers, as well as those marginalised by virtue of race and gender. Arguably, staging such an exhibition on London’s affluent once-working-class Bermondsey Street speaks to the skewed socio-economic situation that harboured the discontents leading to June 2016. Yet, it is hard to shake the feeling that we would be better served by an exhibition that puts pressure on the self-professed ‘truths’ promulgated by the media, through which the Right has been able to script how economic failure is lived and comprehended in relation to questions of sovereignty, nationhood and identity. A more apposite exhibition would,

in other words, make visible the extent to which Britain's unspoken colonial legacy continues to inform attitudes and actions in the present. Before this work can begin, it is necessary to treat histories of photography and their contexts reflexively. It is necessary, in other words, not to look again through Graham's frame but to look beyond it, to a moment when social documentary promised something more than a fleeting jaunt up the A1.

- 1 Allan Sekula, 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)', in *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 19, no. 4, 1978, pp. 859–883, p. 862.
- 2 Emily Thornberry, 'Image from #Rochester', 20 November 2014, <https://twitter.com/emilythornberry/status/535450556199075840?lang=en> (Accessed 8 December 2018).
- 3 Steve Edwards, 'Disastrous Documents', in *Ten*:8, vol. 15, 1984, pp. 12–23, p. 15.

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Rachel Middleman, *Radical Eroticism: Women, Art and Sex in the 1960s*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2018, 265 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780520294585, \$65.

In the mid-1960s, a swell of 'erotic art' exhibitions swept across the American art scene. With titles such as 'First International Girlie Exhibit' (Pace Gallery, New York, 1964), 'The Arena of Love' (Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, 1965) and 'Erotic Art '66' (Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, 1966), these shows succeeded in attracting both public controversy and huge crowds. The critical response was overwhelmingly negative, however, and many reviewers

decried them as opportunistic publicity stunts. Writing in 1967, Lucy Lippard typified the predominantly figurative work in these exhibitions as 'third rate Pop and warmed-over neo-Surrealism', advocating instead for the abstract approaches to corporeality that she had showcased in 'Eccentric Abstraction' at the Fischbach Gallery the year before.¹ Still, other commentators read the eclecticism of the 'new eroticism' as a welcome assault on the supposedly disinterested gaze of formalist modernism.² Following this line of argument, in *Radical Eroticism: Women, Art and Sex in the 1960s*, Rachel Middleman shows that a handful of women managed to infiltrate such exhibitions with Trojan horse-like offerings, with which they reimagined the sexual body from a distinctly feminist perspective.

The book is structured around close readings of works made by five artists during the 1960s, which provide a cross-section of media and styles. They include: Carolee Schneemann's diaristic exploration of female sexual pleasure through film and performance, Marjorie Strider's and Hannah Wilke's sensuous abstract sculptures, Martha Edelheit's lyrical depictions of sexual fantasies and Anita Steckel's parodic photo-montages. The juxtaposition of such disparate practices is one of the book's strengths, placing the work of well-known artists like Schneemann and Wilke in a new context while also shedding light on the lesser known practices of Strider, Edelheit and Steckel. Across its richly illustrated pages, one can see how an amorphous concept of flesh progressively replaced the defined contours of the idealised body. This is apparent in Edelheit's watercolour study for her *Female Flesh Wall* (1964–65); Steckel's photo-montage of a woman's body pierced by the Empire State