Marie Yates, Works 1971–1979, Richard Saltoun Gallery, Great Titchfield Street, London, 24 June–22 July 2016

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The solo exhibition of work by Marie Yates, presented at Richard Saltoun Gallery in London from 24 June–22 July 2016, is reflective of a wider 'recovery' of feminist art practice from the 1970s that is currently taking place within the contemporary art world, as signalled by exhibitions such as the recent BP Spotlight of Jo Spence at Tate Britain (19 October 2015–Autumn 2016) and the major two-year retrospective of Chantal Akerman's work at The Institute of Contemporary Arts (26 September 2013–22 October 2015). I write 'recovery' within scare quotes as this suggests work that has been lost and rediscovered when in fact what is taking place in the current context is the presentation of work by feminist artists that, even at the time of its emergence, was largely illegible to the officiators of art. While institutions such as The ICA, The Hayward Gallery and The Arnolfini were, at times, notable exceptions to the tendency of the art world to exclude work by women artists, the art that is now recognized as feminist depended, during the 1970s, on a network of alternative spaces – community halls, workshop spaces and small DIY galleries (many of them in the regions) – that existed on the fringes and that was often subject to ridicule, suspicion and disdain. So it was that the presence of Marie Yates' work in a smart, white-cube, commercial gallery in West London in 2016 signified the extent of feminism's intervention in the art-world, even while it obscured the conditions of its emergence.

Marie Yates (b. 1940) began her art practice as an abstract painter living and working in St Ives during the 1960s but became dissatisfied with the inequalities she experienced as an artist on the grounds of her sex. In 1968 she went to study Fine Art at Hornsey College (now Middlesex University) in order, in her own words, to explore this problem. Her work was initially influenced by conceptual art, notably the seminal exhibition When Attitudes Become Form, which she encountered when it was presented at The ICA in September 1969. As well as the writing and curatorial work of Lippard, she was also influenced by the practices of artists such as Art and Language, Victor Burgin, and John Latham, and in 1971 she showed with the Artist Placement Group at The Hayward Gallery, a collective which sought to break out of the gallery system in order to have a more direct engagement with the public. Thus, working in the 1970s, Yates was one of a set of artists in Britain who were questioning accepted categories of the artist and the artwork, challenging the values of Modernism and disrupting established notions of art's autonomy.

Marie Yates, Works 1971–1979 was the second in a programme of four exhibitions co-curated by Joy Sleeman and Richard Saltoun that took place during 2016. Titled Some Dimensions of My Lunch, the curators sought, through this programme, to make visible the major protagonists of British conceptual art from 1956–79. The exhibition of Yates' work revealed the important, but much over-looked presence of a woman among the boys club of British conceptualism (Terry Atkinson, Roelof Louw, Keith Arnatt, John Latham to name a few) The curators structured the show around three main bodies of work made by Yates during the 1970s that emphasized not only the artist's engagement with the principles of conceptual art but, in particular, her engagement with landscape and, relatedly, an exploration of the image as inflected by

the politics of the Women's Movement, a focus that became increasingly important as her practice continued.

The first of these bodies of work was grouped together under the title The Field Working Papers, a set of scripto-visual sequences made between 1971 and 1974. Works from this series were shown twice during the 1970s at The Arnolfini Gallery (Bristol) although in the intervening years they have been barely shown at all. The Field Working Papers documents a series of journeys that Yates made in the South-West of England, many of them in the remote setting of Dartmoor. Photographs depict ancient dolmens, dry-stone walls, granite tors and wooded landscapes as well as temporary sculptural interventions made by the artist within the landscape. These visual documents are accompanied by semi-poetic descriptions that convey the artist's observations and experience of that place on a given day. For example, a text written on 30 April 1971 accompanies a photograph of trees in Dean Wood, Dartmoor:

> old woods on steep slopes/ swift running stream at the/ bottom. damp, much moss and/ lichen. Dead tress. old leaves./ remains of old buildings./ numerous sounds with the/ stream continuous. clear/ atmosphere. Some pockets of/ stillness where the leaves/ were deep and dusty.

It also describes the day: 'fine, with intermittent/ breeze. Cloud moving fast./ warm, blue sky, sunshine./ gold glittering light'. In her statement on The Field Working Papers, published on the artist's website, Yates writes that she was drawing on Brecht's strategy of distanciation in order to enable the viewer to become 'an active participant in the production of meanings across an event which was recognized as

representation but which also referred to our understanding of social reality' (Yates 2016) Through this work, the artist seeks to disrupt what she has described as the 'passive identification with fictional worlds' that is naturalized through traditional representations of landscape in art.

In this same statement, written retrospectively about the work, Yates also writes that 'The image or presence of a woman in those photographic records would have changed the whole event – the image would have transformed the event or non-event into a problem'. In the second grouping of work, titled Signals, there was evidence of Yates beginning to explore this problem. On one wall of the gallery there were pairs of images originally printed in an artists' book produced by the Robert Self Gallery in 1978, each with four words, one word printed along each side of the photograph. One of these image pairings depicts a cluster of trees. The left-hand image is in colour, surrounded by the four words: 'External/ Body/ Female/ Underdeveloped'; next to it, the same image is printed in black and white. The four words accompanying the right-hand image are the binary opposite of the words on the left: 'Internal'/ 'Male'/ 'Mind'/ 'Developed'. Like The Field Working Papers, which breaks the illusion of landscape as natural and fixed, revealing the false dichotomy between nature and culture. By showing the same image, printed in both colour and black and white, the work reveals the role images have played in creating a fixed, idealized view of nature. At the same time Yates is associating this false dichotomy with the naturalized hierarchies of sexual difference and the positioning of 'male and female' on either side of the nature/culture divide. Writing in 1977 in Studio International, in a text re-printed in the catalogue for this exhibition, Fenella Critchton argues of this work that 'By dwelling on the dichotomy which we have imposed between culture and nature,

[Yates] began to consider the existence of other dichotomies, most of which we usually accept without hesitation' (Critchton 1977).

While Marie Yates 1971–1979 was an important exhibition for its inclusion of a significant woman artist into the history of Land Art, it was most illuminating for the shift it presented in Yates' practice towards an engagement with questions of sexual difference. In 1977 Yates went to University College London where she enrolled on a Social Anthropology course as part of her continuing interest in Field Work. It was while at UCL that Yates heard a lecture on feminism by Mary Kelly. That same year she also attended a screening of Laura Mulvey and Peter Woollen's experimental feminist film The Riddles of the Sphinx. These events were transformative for her practice.

The third and final work in the exhibition is evidence of the shift that took place through Yates' engagement with, and contributions to, the discursive and theoretical work of Mulvey and Kelly among others that began in the late 1970s. Titled Image/Woman/Text (1979), this work consists of two grids of photographs that, unlike the other bodies of work within the show, are peopled through close-up images of human faces. One corner of each photograph is folded over, emphasizing the materiality of the image. The effect of this physical manipulation of the image is to obscure parts of the faces, evoking anonymity. On the left-hand grid the faces are further obscured through a wash of white paint. The faces of the photographs are cropped and close-up. Some of these images are discernable as faces of women where the sexual identity of others is rendered more ambiguous: indeed, Yates is interested in the clues we use in order to locate sexual difference. The source of the images are

also unclear: some images appear to be taken from magazines while the relaxed, smiling faces in others denote personal snapshots. Overlaying the photographs are slogans printed in bold type that again shift between different sites of representation. ‘The sight made her gloomy’ could be lifted from a novel, where ‘I thought something was wrong’, from its first-person perspective, suggests a confessional diary entry.

Image/ Woman/Text was made in 1979 in response to an invitation by Lucy R. Lippard to take part in the exhibition Issue: Social strategies by women artists at the ICA. Lippard was, like Yates, driven by a concern with a dematerialization of art and the breaking down of hierarchies between artist and spectator, a belief that ‘the most “exciting” art might still be buried in social energies not yet recognised as art’ (Lippard 1997). Despite Lippard’s long engagement with conceptualism, however, Issue: Social strategies by women artists was an important mark in the sand for feminism, echoing the convergence of conceptual art and feminist politics that is evidenced in Yates’ work.

In 1978 Lippard had been invited to write the catalogue introduction to the second Hayward Annual, which she describes, in her essay for the Issue catalogue, as being ‘inaccurately called “the woman’s show”’ because of its more equitable inclusion of women artists (sixteen women out of 23 artists in contrast to just one woman out of 30 artists the year before) and its all-women committee of curators (Lippard 1979). In curating Issue, Lippard’s intention was to produce a counter to The Hayward Annual that aimed to do something more for feminism than simply show a set of work by women: she wanted to make visible the issues facing women in the social and

political sphere. Lippard saw the exhibition as being part of work of the Women's Movement in its presentation of feminist art practice as having a relationship to the political, this being in the sense of addressing social change. In the Issue catalogue, Lippard describes what she perceives as the development of feminist art practice over the previous decade:

> [i]n ten years, the needs, contexts and development have changed. In the early days of the feminist art movement we were looking for shared images – or rather they popped out at us and demanded to be dealt with. For some of us this preoccupation then led to a search for shared esthetic and political approaches, for a theoretical framework in which to set these ubiquitous images. Now we are in a stage where we tend to take that earlier data on image and approach for granted: the real challenges seem to lie in analysing structures and effects. Thus the time seemed right to begin to break down the various kinds of feminist political art (all truly feminist art being political one way or another) (Lippard 1980)

The Hayward Annual 1978 was, as Mary Kelly has explained, an indirect result of the 1970 Whitney Museum Picket, in which the museum raised its quota of exhibiting women artists by 20 per cent. Once art institutions had begun to let women in, it was necessary to think about how an exhibition might take on the reigns of the Women's Movement, which, according to Susan Hiller, had no grasp of the value of art to its cause other than that artists could make the posters (Hiller 1982). During the 1970s women in Britain were beginning to organize and speak out against the major inequalities experienced by women, as manifest through the social situations of paid

employment, health care, education, the home and indicated by issues such as low pay, lack of opportunity and violence. Issue was one of the first major public presentations in Britain of the way in which these concerns were being taken up in visual art. In her text, Lippard goes on to outline this focus on the relationship between art, feminism and broader social struggles:

> Issue scrutinizes that branch which is 'moving out' into the world, placing so-called women's issues in a broader perspective and/ or utilizing mass production techniques to convey its messages about global traumas such as racism, imperialism, nuclear war, starvation and inflation to a broader audience. (Lippard 1980)

For Lippard, Yates' work Image/Woman/Text supports this curatorial premise, which she describes as addressing 'social preconceptions about images of women' and working to 'expose the codes of gender identification in this society' (Lippard 1980). The presence of Image/Woman/Text within Issue was complicated, however, by the work itself. Over the top of each folded corner in Yates' work is typed text that reads as a broken-up essay, reflections on the nature of images, of the feminine and on women's art. One of the texts reflects on the premise of Lippard's exhibition:

> [t]he theme 'Issues' is problematic for this work: My practice denies that a 'meaning' or a 'content' can be already present in the work. Instead the production of meanings and contents is approached as a process of the social and discursive fields, which are the content of the work.

Yates' work is not a documentary practice of the sort typified by the campaign photographs of Lorainne Leeson, for example, whose poster-project East London Health Project was also included in Issue. Looking at Yates' photographic montage, with its white-washed photographs and proliferation of text, her work reads as a kind of 'non-photography', a refusal or interruption of the image. As Yates states in the text above, her photographs do not depict something recognisable, a social issue, but instead she takes the production of meaning itself as her subject. It is not that Yates is uninterested in social issues but rather that she takes 'the image' as part of the problem of the social world. In another excerpt of the text pasted onto her photographic images, Yates explains how this focus on the image relates to sexual difference:

> [w]ithin these representations we seek woman-ness or man-ness; we locate what we identify as a clue, and decide on the basis of it that we have discovered a 'real' sexual difference located as a property within the discrete person captured in the 'reality' of the photograph.

Thus, in Image/Woman/Text, Yates is questioning both the reality of sexual difference and the reality of the photograph. In this collage of photographs and slogans, recognizable in their tropes, Yates is cleverly and complexly destabilizing both the category of woman and the certainty of the photograph. She is showing how both the female subject and the image are reinforced through each other and thus how it is necessary to address the image if she, as artist, is to confront the politics of sexual difference. While the work's title is clearly a reference to Roland Barthes' important work Image/Music/Text, which draws on Saussure's structural approach to read

photography, film and narrative as signifying practices, Yates is doing something quite different from the theories of structuralism by inserting the question of 'woman' into the accepted theories of ideology and representation.

Marie Yates, Works 1971–79 was thus a significant exhibition, primarily because it made visible to a contemporary audience the way in which the question of sexual difference brought about an intervention into the premises of conceptual art. It revealed the way in which Yates took up photography as a tool for a conceptual investigation into the way in which the subject is ideologically produced and fixed through the conventions of representation. The radical significance of this work is perhaps best summed up by a statement made by Roberta Smith in 1985, in response to the 1984/5 exhibition, Difference: On Representation and Sexuality at The New Museum (New York), of which Yates was part, that 'in feminism, conceptualism may have found its greatest and most urgent subject' (Smith 1985).

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