

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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[HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.14324/111.2396-9008.038](https://doi.org/10.14324/111.2396-9008.038)

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

Building's spire, from her *Giant Women on New York* series (1969–74); and Strider's foam secretions of the late 60s. But Middleman is less interested in tracing continuities across these artists' practices than she is in studying how they each placed the question of sexual politics at the centre of art discourse. As a result, these artists often attracted criticism from both conservative and liberal critics: the former protesting the obscenity of their imagery, the latter the commodification of the female body (even if the male body was just as often their 'hard target').³ In this way, the practices discussed in *Radical Eroticism* anticipate the debates on the representation of sexuality that emerged in feminist theory and activism in the 1970s, and which would eventually split the movement along sex-positive and anti-pornography camps.

It is fitting, then, that Middleman's account concludes with the formation of the Fight Censorship Group in 1972, which advocated for sexually explicit art made by women. Steckel founded the group in the wake of the uproar caused by her solo exhibition 'The Feminist Art of Sexual Politics' in 1972, which featured a photo-montage of erect penises towering above Manhattan's skyscrapers. Comprising Edelheit and Wilke, along with other artists such as Judith Bernstein and Louise Bourgeois, the group contributed to the dissemination of many of these artists' work in radical feminist publications, men's magazines and mainstream tabloids alike during the mid-1970s. Middleman argues that the diversity of outlets interested in the collective is symptomatic of the politically ambivalent claims placed on 'erotic art' in this period. On the one hand, that such work was perceived as a novelty shows the extent to which eroticism had historically excluded women's

self-determination as sexual subjects. On the other, that it could be equally read through a feminist and masculinist lens suggests that its explicit subject matter overshadowed the critical and formal vocabularies developed by these artists. Middleman's close attention to the specificity of each of these artists' practices is therefore welcome. Her focus on the years before they firmly stepped into the spotlight, in particular, allows for a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which their representation of sexuality tested both societal and artistic norms beyond flashpoints of public controversy. When Edelheit's watercolours depicting S-M sexual fantasies were exhibited at the Byron Gallery in 1966, for example, reviewers ambiguously attributed their discomfort to the paintings' 'lack of taste'.⁴ Their failure to discuss the works' sexual content is as telling of the societal blindness to women's sexual desire as the overt threats of censorship riddling these artists' careers.

Perhaps one of the reasons that Edelheit's watercolours were not the object of the same vicious attacks as Steckel's photo-montages is because they were rendered in a figurative idiom that critics could at least read in terms of draughtsmanship. As Middleman notes, one of the challenges presented by sexually explicit art in the 1960s was the clash between high and low culture. Given that the sexual revolution that provided the backdrop to these practices was, in many ways, spearheaded by the mass media, the critical work that remains to be done is situating women's erotic art within the broader sexual culture of the 1960s. To this end, this book might best be read alongside two recent contributions to the study of sexuality in American film culture during this period, such as Ara Osterweil's *Flesh Cinema: The*

Corporeal Turn in American Avant-Garde Film (Manchester, 2014) and Elena Gorfinkel's *Lewd Looks: American Sexploitation Cinema in the 1960s* (Minneapolis, 2017).

- 1 Lucy Lippard, 'Eros Presumptive', in *The Hudson Review*, vol. 20, no.1, Spring 1967, pp. 91-99, p. 91.
- 2 Douglas M. Davis, 'The New Eroticism', in *The*

Evergreen Review, vol. 12, no.58, September 1968, pp. 49-83, pp.49-54 and 79-83.

- 3 Richard Meyer, 'Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s', *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, exh. cat., Los Angeles, 2007, pp. 362-383.
- 4 J. W., 'The Galleries: Martha Edelheit', *New York Herald Tribune*, 23 April 1966, n.p.

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