

ANARCHY IN THE ICA

COUM Transmissions' Queer Aesthetic

Siona Wilson, City University of New York

Tuesday, 22 September 2015, 3:30 PM
Foster Auditorium, 102 Paterno Library

The performance art collective COUM Transmissions' controversial 1976 retrospective installation, *Prostitution*, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London was the third in an escalating series of art scandals to hit the news that year. Immediately following Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* at the same venue, COUM's work, like Kelly's constellated a set of issues around feminist politics, sexuality, and gendered labor that reached the levels of moral panic in the tabloid press. This talk is drawn from the third chapter of Wilson's book, *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in British Art and Performance* (Minnesota, 2015) where she argues that COUM mobilize feminist codes in order to stage a queer aesthetic. This is realized through the performative way in which the media were staged by COUM as part of the installation. From the framed and signed pages from pornographic magazines featuring the nude modeling of COUM's most prominent female participant, to the presentation of the group's archive of press cuttings that continued to be added to during the course of the exhibition, the media were a central component of *Prostitution*. Moreover, only weeks before the infamous TV appearance of the Sex Pistols that led to their own media notoriety, COUM staged the emergent punk scene as part of the installation. All of this was then incorporated into the installation's wall of press clippings generating an entropic feedback loop.

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