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Art in the North of England, 1979-2008. Gabriel N. Gee
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Mathilde Bertrand. Gabriel N. Gee, *Art in the North of England, 1979-2008*, London and New York: Routledge, 2017. 242 p.

In March 2016, news that the world-class photography collections of the Royal Photographic Society were to leave the National Media Museum in Bradford (where they have been housed since 2003) to be relocated in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London caused outrage in the Northern city. Vilified as an act of “cultural vandalism”, the transfer represented the assertion of a metropolitan cultural domination, in direct contradiction to efforts implemented from the 1980s to address the imbalance between the capital and the Northern regions.

The processes which made it possible for the Northern artistic scene to fully come into its own are painstakingly uncovered in Gabriel N. Gee’s book entitled *Art in the North of England, 1979-2008*. From Margaret Thatcher’s first election victory in 1979, through Tony Blair’s premiership, and before the crisis of 2008 undermined western economies, the author investigates the new contexts in which art was produced, the functions it was made to serve, the ideological discourses it was involved in, the themes artists tackled and the practices they created. He argues that while adapting and responding to social and economic mutations, art in the North of England thrived in singular ways, distinctive from London models, and became a full participant in the regeneration of the region: art was central in the process of transformation from an industrial past to a post-industrial economy.

Decade by decade, this extremely well-documented study, rooted in archival work and oral history, examines the evolution of artistic practices, cultural institutions and policies in the Northern cities of England, both from the perspective of policy-makers and that of artists with a commitment to a place, its history, its community, and to the value of collective work. Never separating his analysis of cultural evolutions from the economic context of the North of England in that period, the author sheds light on the frameworks in which art was produced and consumed in response to the specific social and economic shifts which profoundly transformed the North and the sense of its own identity.

Invoking Howard Becker, Gee takes into consideration the testimonies of a varied cast of participants from the “worlds of art”: artists, gallery managers, curators, regional art associations, the Arts Council but also foundations, local authorities, local audiences, as well as central government which strongly staked its claim in the cultural field in the period (in contradiction to the “arm’s length principle” which predominated before and ensured that the Arts Council remained relatively autonomous from government intervention). The multiplication of perspectives, enriched by 23 interviews made between 2005 and 2014 with artists, curators and directors of institutions, ensures a stimulating and many-faceted discussion. Such a choice allows the author not to fall into an institutional, top-down account of the evolution of the Northern artistic scene, but rather to include artists and less well-known collectives which formed fringe artistic spaces yet proved central protagonists in the inventiveness and diversity of artistic practices in the North. These conversations form a valuable addition to understanding the way the different actors defined their role and assess, with hindsight, the evolution of the Northern cultural landscape over the period.

The book is structured in three parts, each corresponding to a decade (1980s, 1990s and 2000s), yet the compartmentalization is never rigid, and historical analyses reaching back to

earlier periods are regularly included for a fuller understanding of evolutions in the longer term. This outline follows the author's argument that, in the period covered, the arts in the North went from a situation of embattlement to one characterised by emancipation and inventiveness. Each part is composed of three to four chapters, which all correspond to a development on a specific theme.

Thus the first part characterizes the 1980s as a decade both of disenchantment and the invention of new practices, through chapters which successively address forms of artistic resistance to the Conservative political and economic agenda, the impact of deindustrialisation on Northern identities and imaginaries, the development of grassroots artist collectives in the spaces left vacant in disused industrial sites, and the way artistic institutions started to embrace the principle of public/private funding partnerships while the first projects which harnessed the arts in strategies of economic regeneration were launched. The author accurately recounts the conflicting dynamics of the period, between on the one hand the appearance of management practices applied to the arts and on the other hand the ideological resistance to the new political order opposed by artistic practices rooted in feminist, socialist and post-colonial perspectives.

Building on these trend, the 1990s saw the development of an instrumentalist vision of the arts: cultural projects for the North such as Tate Liverpool were incorporated in major capital investment schemes, and art was made a participant in the massive redevelopment of areas considered as derelict, thus combining economic growth and a readjustment of cultural capital in favour of the North. Gee pays particular attention to the shifts in funding practices in the decade which saw the creation of the National Lottery and the replacement of the Arts Council of Great Britain with a more decentralized structure. The author analyses the period in terms of the new forms of consumption of art, notably through public art and sculpture, and examines how Northern cities attempted to reconstruct local identities in cultural terms. Outside of institutional contexts, "fringe" artistic spaces provided the forming ground of diverse alternative practices, leading to an emancipation of Northern artistic practices from traditional forms.

The final part analyses artistic practices and the functions of art and culture in the context of Tony Blair's premiership, characterized by the promotion of "cool Britannia", a concept heavily reliant on the concepts of social inclusion and the accessibility of culture. Notwithstanding the distinctively positive rhetoric of the slogan, Gee demonstrates that, as on more strictly economic issues, the New Labour government adopted principles, practices and values which nineteen years of neoliberal Conservative policy had firmly entrenched. He approaches the cultural field of the 2000s as the result (and validation) of policies favouring public/private investments, and the moment when Northern cities attempted to enshrine their status as cultural outposts. The rise of concepts such as "cultural industries" or "the creative classes", and the development of attractive yet closely monitored "cultural quarters" are traced back by the author to evolutions in this period. However, the assessment of the decade, whose dynamism was cut short by the economic crisis which broke out in 2008, is made more complex by the inclusion of discussions on more political artistic practices which contested the established neoliberal order and rhetoric. The role of the arts in the creation of what the author calls a "transindustrial condition" forms the argument of the final chapter, a condition which Gee defines as the "dialectic resolution of the industrial/post-industrial binary", a shaping of the present culture in continuity and dialogue with its industrial heritage.

Throughout this study, the author invokes examples from a variety of artistic practices, ranging from photography, sculpture, painting, to video, installations, performance or situationist practices. Analyses of specific art works, at the opening of each chapter and through the pages of the book are equally convincing, lively and thought-provoking. The selection of works of art reveals an attempt to give credit to the diversity of practices in the North of England. Ten good-quality colour plates are gathered in the central pages of the book, and 28 other illustrations are included in the pages of the different chapters. Seeing the diversity of examples used in the book, one regrets that more illustrations were not added. A rich and clearly organised bibliography supports the text, and the list of archival sources bears witness to the research work undertaken by the author. Useful and well-referenced notes are conveniently placed at the end of each chapter.

Overall, Gabriel Gee's *Art in the North of England, 1979-2008* alleviates a dearth of books on the subject. It will open new perspectives to readers (students, academics or the general public alike) who wish to develop a deeper understanding of a period which proved absolutely crucial in the formation of today's Britain, by approaching it from the point of view of the major cultural shifts and diversified artistic production of the period. It will prove an excellent read for those with an interest in the history of contemporary British art, as the author convincingly makes the case for the assertion, development and emancipation of the Northern artistic sphere through an array of innovative, challenging and mature artistic practices.

The study raises fundamental questions about the role of art, particularly in post-industrial societies, about the economic forces at work in determining the uses of art and culture, about the social, historical and political contexts in which artists can work, about the collective nature of art and the possibilities of engagement with its publics, in moments of deep social and economic transformations. These questions make the relocation to London of artistic treasures such as the Royal Photographic Society's collections appear as a form of rebuttal by metropolitan institutions of the North's newly gained artistic confidence.