

History Is Now



7 Artists
Take On Britain

Jane and Louise Wilson

'We are interested in crossing thresholds; in stepping
across perimeters and entering different zones.'

We have looked closely at three sites of conflict and contention during a particular moment in history through the prism of how artists at the time responded to them. The artworks we selected were made within very specific parameters and contexts. In gathering them together we have been mindful of their original contexts, as well as the fact that a selection like this can never be representative of a total body of work. These objects and artworks shouldn't function as artefacts or relics: by bringing them together we hope to draw attention to the energy and momentum inherent in what are, for us, extraordinary artworks, objects and documents.

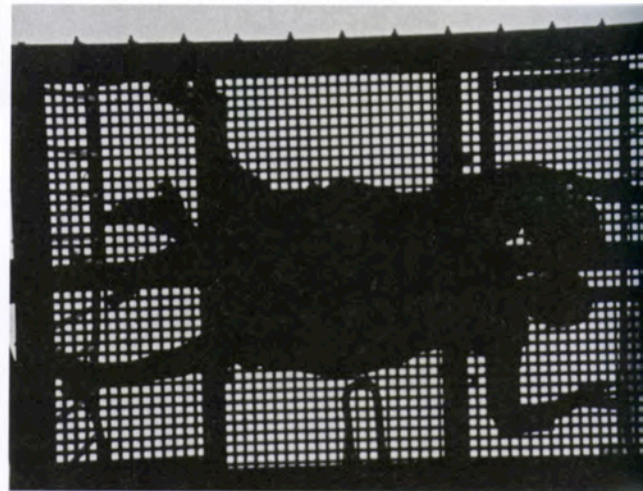
Victor Pasmore's Apollo Pavilion caused a great deal of controversy when it was first completed in 1970 – particularly in Sunny Blunts, the estate where the pavilion was erected. When we visited the pavilion in 2002 we found it overgrown and covered in moss: litter lined the undercroft and the upper part of the structure was completely sealed off. In 2011 the pavilion became a heritage site and was granted Grade-II listed status. This forced the local council to begin to engage with the structure. Partly because we grew up in that area of the country, we have a very strong sense of connection to Pasmore and to the impact that he had on the area; he is still the only artist ever to design and oversee the building of a new town in the UK.

In 1998 we made a piece of work called *Gamma*, filmed in one of the silos on the Greenham Common air base – a site on which, during the Cold War, Britain and the US planned to house cruise missiles as part of a NATO alliance. Growing up in the 1980s we were struck by the women's peace camps that grew up around the common's perimeter fence. While we were there in 1998 we saw what a physical ordeal it was to get inside one of these bunkers; to get access you first had to move a massive concrete slab. Despite these difficulties we discovered that one of the protestors had managed to get in and, once inside, to cut her hair. We loved that gesture: it was such a defiant act of transgression, a performance. We are interested in these kinds of performances and gestures, in crossing thresholds, in stepping across perimeters and entering different zones.

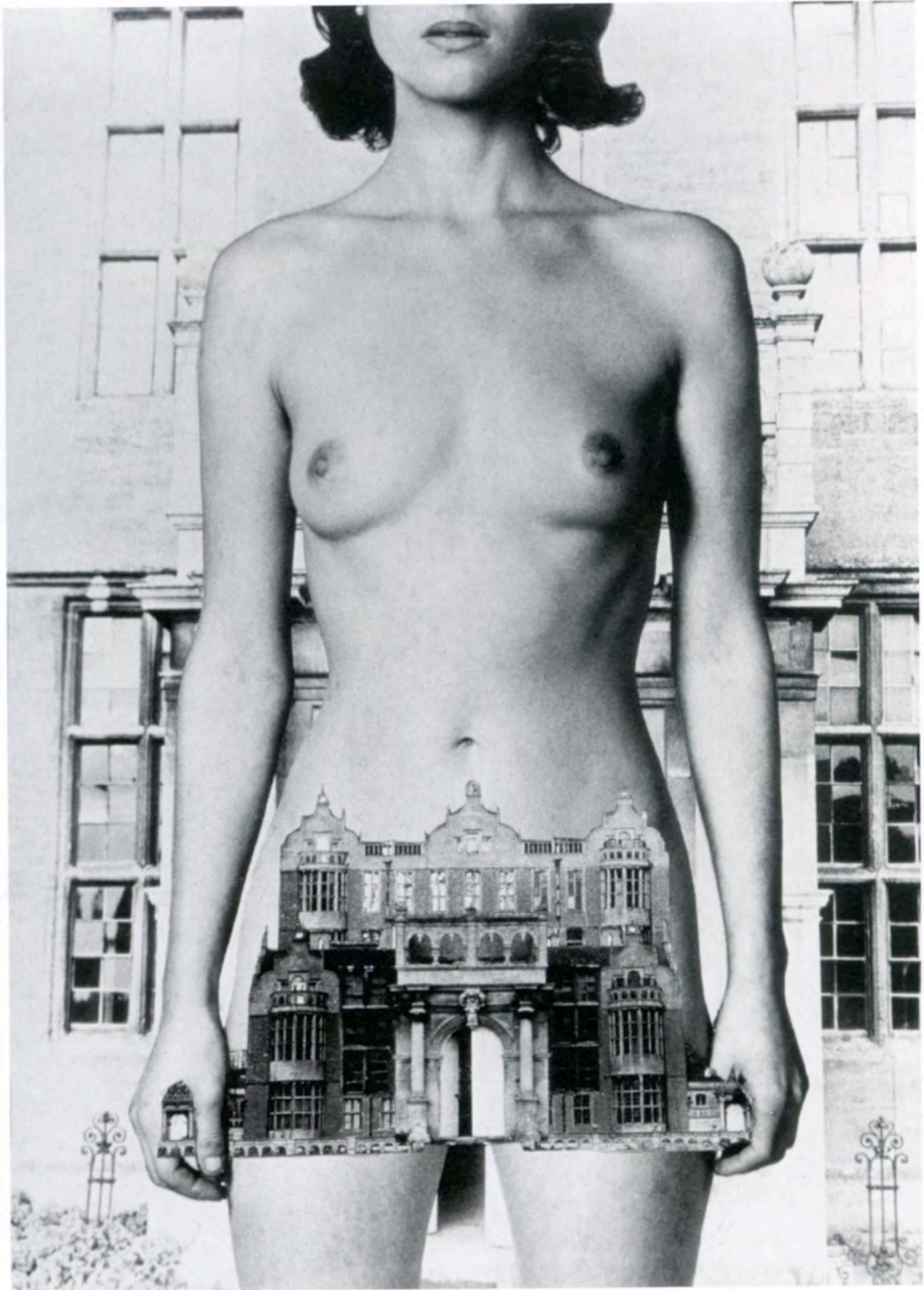
It has been fascinating for us to learn more about a generation of artists who came before us, artists such as Christine Voge and Penelope Slinger. Slinger – who has recently started exhibiting again – has a longstanding interest in the female body and its relationship to architecture. In her film *Lilford Hall* (1969) she works within a recognisable Gothic tradition, but manages to be confrontational and playful too. In contrast, Christine Voge was embedded within protest movements and places such as the first women's refuge; her work is concerned with social relations and social struggles. It seemed to us that Stuart Brisley bridged the two approaches of these women with his work *Beneath Dignity* (1977), which acts both as a performance and a protest.

Richard Hamilton, Conrad Atkinson and Rita Donagh made work directly about the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Combining conceptual art with political activism, Atkinson's *Northern Ireland 1968 – May Day 1975* (1975–76) was banned from being exhibited in the 1970s, in part because any mention of the Troubles suggested sympathy on the part of the artist with the bombing of innocent civilians. Rita Donagh used forensic precision in her aerial views of the H-Blocks near Maze, County Down – her aesthetic eerily foreshadows the perspective of drone technology.

Finally, Orford Ness is an island off the Suffolk coast that used to be owned by the Ministry of Defence. Its purpose-built laboratories were used for military testing during the Cold War. Using centrifuge and water pressure, scientists and technicians tested the strength of the casing of the hydrogen bomb. In 2012 we installed '*Blind Landing*' Lab 1 and '*Blind Landing*' Lab 4 – large measures based on the Imperial yard – in the island's disintegrating laboratories; their lengths representing the span of the hydrogen bomb test chambers. The yardstick – once used in the construction of set building for the purpose of filmmaking – is, like the Empire, now obsolete.



Penelope Slinger
Lilford Hall
1969



Penelope Slinger
Perspective
1977