

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY

December 1, 2016

Proceeding Together: Martha Rosler in Conversation with Anna Dannemann

Loose Associations, Question and Answer, No Comments



Image: Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (film still)(detail), 1975.

Alongside our current exhibition Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works From the Verbund Collection, the new issue of our quarterly publication Loose Associations takes feminism as its subject. In this interview – which is available along with other writing and images in the publication via our shop – artist Martha Rosler considers the past, and the future, of feminist art practice.

Anna Dannemann: *I am interested to hear about the beginning of your work as an artist. How were these first, formative years?*

Martha Rosler: I thought I was an artist from the earliest age, and was always drawing, even though it got me into trouble at school. I didn't think of it as a career, but as a vocation. Everyone knew you didn't make any money as an artist.

AD: *Video art was considered a much freer medium and not as determined by male artists. How did video and filmmaking influence your work?*

MR: In the 60s, when I just finding myself as an artist, movies were considered the most important, and the most unifying, art among the New York avant-garde. The movies in question were what we now think of as European art-house movies (primarily by French, Italian, and British directors, with a few Japanese filmmakers, a couple of Swedes and Eastern European ones, and Satyajit Ray). The work of experimental film from the earliest days to more contemporary work, including structuralist or materialist filmmakers – Deren, Warhol, Morrissey, Anger, Brakhage, VanDerBeek, Smith, Rainer, Frampton, Snow, Jacobs, Conrad, to name just a few.

For me the most important influence was Godard, for his experimental approach to narrative filmmaking and his insistence on rethinking and renegotiating every element of filmmaking.

Some of us talked of making movies, and some of the use of the new medium of video, for the simple reason that video was cheap and easy to distribute, whereas film was expensive and required a distributor. Another factor in its favor was that the visual qualities of video, such as resolution and sophistication of editing, were so abysmal that much could be forgiven in production.

AD: *Was there an artistic female community around you that you became aware of and influenced by? Do you consider gender significant in the creation of art or do you consider this aspect dismissible?*

MR: As a young woman I became part of the feminist movement, and it took only a couple of years for a feminist artist movement to emerge. By that time I was living in Southern California, which in many ways was the epicenter of the feminist art movement because of the establishment of the first feminist art programs by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.

The feminist art movement (incorporating the developing ideas about gender in society, investigating cross-society differentials, matters of class and race, and power dynamics) was intent on overturning the shibboleths and axioms of the contemporary art world. By and large we

succeeded in doing so, by draining of their power the myths of genius and abstraction, of a nonobjective art of separation, and above all of mastery predicated on masculinist understandings of art and meaning. The women's art movement, was for me, embedded in the larger feminist movement, where we read feminist analyses and critiques and benefited from the consciousness-raising techniques developed within the movement. We also saw ourselves as part of the social movements of the day, including struggles for black liberation, the antiwar movement, and the gay and lesbian movement. In other words, we were a political and cultural force. My group in particular, the Women's Liberation Front, defined itself as a socialist-feminist group.

In the development of my own work, other women artists were a powerful spur to me, particularly Yvonne Rainer, but also my long-time friend Eleanor Antin and the younger women in my own age group, including Nancy Buchanan, Suzanne Lacy, and Laura Silagi, and quite a few other women, many of them at the Women's Building in Los Angeles.

The women artists' movement on the East Coast placed a greater emphasis on influencing the policies of the major art institutions, especially museums. Feminist art historians were not only rethinking the question of "greatness," they were creating new paradigms of what should constitute an art-historical account.

I soon became friendly with Martha Wilson and, a few years later, with Loraine Leeson, at the time partnered with Peter Dunn, and Jo Spence and Terry Dennett, and Mary Kelly, as well as Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge of Toronto.

Back in Southern California, our favored media were primarily performance and video, and we did not hesitate to incorporate photography in our work. For *Issue!* – a historically important show organized by the noted feminist critic Lucy Lippard at the ICA in 1980 – a fair percentage of my work exhibited there was in photo-text, which seemed to occasion some grumbling among the local women artists, who felt it was taxing for audiences to be asked to read.

AD: *What were the prevailing issues around gender equality in the 1970s? How have they changed and what do you think are the important issues ahead for the next generations of women?*

MR: At a symposium for the *Issue!* show those of us on stage were asked if we considered the personal to be political – a leading question of the day, as the “micropolitics” of everyday life was very much part of feminist analyses of that era. I scribbled a text on the back of an envelope and read it aloud. Its gist was that the personal is political when women are joined together in their resistance to oppressive conditions and do not push back solely on our own behalf. This to me is the agenda of the present and the future: that we regard feminism as a struggle not simply for the benefit of ourselves but only with full consideration of other oppressed groups. Self-empowerment, solidarity, and what has come to be called intersectionality are still the prevailing issues of the day; we need to cast a broad net over questions of economic and political and personal equality and the management and allocation of resources so as to stop the continuing degradation of the planetary environment.

Feminism is, by and large, a movement of young women, who have to reinvent for themselves what are its salient concerns. Among their greatest resources, aside from their own innate capabilities, networks, and alliances, are the wisdom and thinking of generations of foremothers. We all proceed together, from here.

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Martha Rosler is an artist who works in video, photography, text, installation, and performance. Her work focuses on the public sphere, exploring issues from everyday life and the media to architecture and the built environment, especially as they affect women. Rosler is a participating artist in TPG's Autumn 2016 exhibition *Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the Verbund Collection*. She was in conversation with TPG curator **Anna Dannemann**.