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ART/ARCHITECTURE; A Pure Artist Is Embraced by the Art World

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I KNEW I was going to be either an artist or a criminal," says Martha Rosler, the multimedia artist, critic, theorist, teacher and art-world provocateur. In a career spanning 35 years, Ms. Rosler, whose disdain for the normal rites of passage from galleries to collectors to museums struck many as indeed criminal, has clung tenaciously to a very personal art that refuses to separate aesthetics from politics.

Declining to be represented by a gallery until 1993, Ms. Rosler relented when Simon Watson, who then owned a gallery in SoHo, approached her with an offer to preserve her work for history. "He made sense," she says, holding fast to a glass of cold water at the Housing Works Used Books Cafe not far from Mr. Watson's old gallery. "So much of my work involved the Vietnam War that it would have been obscene to show it in a gallery. But now, it's different; it's important to remember and to enable the young to discover what to some of us is still so present."

In a remarkable affirmation from a museum world that she so often criticized, Ms. Rosler is now receiving a major retrospective organized by Elizabeth Ann Macgregor of the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England, and Sabine Breitwieser of the Generali Foundation in Vienna. After stops in England, France, Austria and Spain, "Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World" makes its only United States appearance in a joint presentation by the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo from Saturday through Oct. 8 and the International Center of Photography on Fifth Avenue from July 29 through Oct. 1. "Martha Rosler is one of the most important artists of the last 25 years," says Brian Wallis, chief curator at I.C.P., which will be focusing on Ms. Rosler's photography.

Lisa Phillips, director of the New Museum, where a broad survey of Ms. Rosler's large installations, photos, videos and sculptures can be seen, adds, "She is a pioneering artist whose influence is widely recognized."

While this burst of affection from institutions may seem at odds with her reputed iconoclasm, Ms. Rosler has actually been represented in about 10 nonprofit group and solo shows in Europe and America since the early 70's. "I was never against museum audiences," she says. "Only the nexus of cash that saw art principally as a commodity."

Coming of age in the late 50's and 60's (she graduated from Brooklyn College in 1965), she was immersed in a culture of protests from her early teens. "I was a beatnik in high school," she says, "always going to hear Allen Ginsberg and Thelonius Monk. I also went to a lot of theater from Broadway to the Living Theater, where I was exposed to Brecht, Pirandello and Beckett. They showed me how you could dispense with excessive amusement in favor of language and gesture."

Ms. Rosler's mother was a New York City school teacher and her father had "a one-man law office." She credits her yeshiva education (which she hated at the time) with her strong sensitivity to the "public and the political." If her broad range of work can be characterized briefly, it involves bringing a critical eye to public struggles, in unexpected ways.

In one of her most celebrated works, "The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems" from 1974, Ms. Rosler challenges the sentimentalism of postwar photography as represented by Robert Capa. Instead of photographing the familiar "Bowery bums," the alcoholics and drug addicts who could be found lying in doorways and on streets in lower Manhattan, Ms. Rosler took shots of shop windows and disintegrating storefronts, void of people but representing the life that is lived there by the neighborhood's many diverse inhabitants. She placed the photos in a grid along with texts containing synonyms for inebriation (loopy, groggy, potted, pickled, etc.). The combination of photos and texts, placed in a minimalist grid, forced a critique of assumptions about the Bowery without offering any concrete alternatives. "I wanted to strip away any ornament," she says, "and return power to the viewer," something she felt had been contaminated by the overt humanism of Capa and Walker Evans.

This spareness of approach, often joined with a biting sense of humor, was inspired partly by the films of Jean-Luc Godard, the Swiss experimentalist who came to prominence in the early 60's. Ms. Rosler met Mr. Godard a few times during her graduate studies at the University of California in San Diego, where she also met the filmmaker Roberto Rossellini and influential intellectuals like Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Fredric Jameson. In Mr. Godard, the young Ms. Rosler found a model artist who resisted the commercialization of ideas even as he dazzled with his command of striking images, sounds and texts.

Ms. Rosler spent a dozen years in southern California from the late 60's to the early 80's, a time she says was immensely important to her. "I lost my New York provinciality," she says, "and was let loose from the strictures of being a middle-class Brooklyn Jew." During this time she married, had a son, Joshua (now a 32-year-old comics artist and writer), and divorced after seven years. After graduate school she taught art and began her lifelong avocation of gardening. "But I started dreaming of sidewalks," she says, "so I knew it was time to go back East." She was offered a job at Rutgers, where she is a professor of art.

IT was during her time in California that Ms. Rosler created some of her most enduring work in performance, video and photography. "Bringing the War Home," 1967-1972, is a

series of 20 photomontages that places images of Vietnam War victims (girls with missing limbs, mothers holding their dead children, wounded soldiers) in the midst of tranquil suburban American interiors cut from the pages of Life magazine. As the art historian Alexander Alberro says of this series, "She was, in effect, making concrete 'the war abroad, the war at home,' produced by the mass media, which imported images of death from Vietnam into U.S. homes every evening."

Domesticity also played a role in "Semiotics of the Kitchen," a 1975 video, in which a deadpan Ms. Rosler, dressed in an apron, sends up culinary shows and the woman's place in the kitchen, performing mannered gestures with a variety of cooking utensils. Like so much of her early work, "Semiotics" is striking both for its innocence as well as its sophistication.

Ms. Rosler's photographs and videos were fully formed from the start, it seems, displaying a strong grasp of technique peppered with youthful exuberance. In her 1977 performance and, later, video "Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained," the artist submits to having every inch of her nude body measured and recorded by two white-coated men as a "chorus" of women stand to the side watching silently. "This is a work about how to think about yourself," Ms. Rosler says in a voice-over on the videotape.

In recent years, Ms. Rosler has taken her cameras (moving and still) to airports (producing stunning shots of architectural details in empty terminals) and housing projects (a video study of Corbusier's last development in Firminy, France), while maintaining her commitment to the plight of the homeless ("Housing Is a Human Right," a billboard display in Times Square) and politically oppressed ("Chile on the Road to Nafta," a video made in Chile 25 years after the coup that deposed Salvador Allende).

"My art is a communicative act," Ms. Rosler says, "a form of an utterance, a way to open a conversation." Completing a conversation with her, during which topics have flown from Aristotle to Marx, Nicaragua to Kosovo, is like coming to the end of a roller coaster ride. You're relieved, but you want to go at it again. Her enduring vision linking art and public purpose can be exhausting as well as exhilarating. As the New Museum's chief curator, Dan Cameron, says of Ms. Rosler: "She's the purest artist there is."

Michael Rush, author of "New Media in Late 20th-Century Art," is writing a book on video art for Thames and Hudson.