

ARTFORUM

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Martha Rosler

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One of the more striking aspects of “Cuba, January 1981,” Martha Rosler’s exhibition of photographs that were taken decades ago from behind the Caribbean iron curtain and are now on display for the first time, is how, to paraphrase Matthew McConaughey’s famous line in *Dazed and Confused*, while the rest of the world has aged, Cuba more or less remained frozen in a continuous revolutionary moment. Taken only two months after Reagan’s election as president and three months after the culmination of the six-month-long Mariel boatlift, these photographs regard Havana’s military uniform stores, Brutalist architecture, and portraits of Che dispassionately, as so much context for the staging of Cuban public life.

Only months before the publication of her essay “In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography),” Rosler shot the series while on a tour organized by Ana Mendieta and Lucy Lippard, and the collection reflects her desire to break from the “moral idealism” she associated with documentary photography in that work, as well as from the dense political propaganda that, for Americans, all but obscured the island entirely. In addition to images of public transport that recall her snapshots of California from a decade earlier—in *Il Congreso, Havana*, for instance, passengers hang off an overcrowded bus as it drags through the Cuban capital—Rosler’s subjects drive midcentury American cars and perch at lunch counters; they sit in doorways and play Ping-Pong in front of blocky Soviet-style buildings. Shot in both black-and-white and color, many of the pictures—of nail technicians and waitresses; of working-class women staring into shopwindows and mannequins in bridal gowns—evoke the consumer themes that Rosler aggressively deconstructs in her seminal feminist photomontages. Seen more than thirty years on, the Cuba that emerges is foreign, yet strangely familiar: a portrait of one bygone era set within another.



Martha Rosler, *Plaza de Revolucion, Havana*, 1981, black-and-white photograph, 11 x 16 1/4".

— Jessica Loudis