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Visual Art & Design

MARTHA ROSLER'S 'IRRESPECTIVE'

The iconic Brooklyn-based artist celebrates a new survey of her work at the Jewish Museum

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Martha Rosler's Xerox machine was in a drug store on Nostrand Avenue, a five minute walk from her house in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The machine was beloved by her father, a lawyer originally from Austria, because he could make copies of his papers without having to type them in triplicate. As far as Rosler knew, office work was all it could be used for, until, in the mid-1960s, she began printing antiwar photo collages and disseminating them at protests around Manhattan—a practice that evolved into a career in photography, photcollage, video, sculpture and other forms, spanning over five decades and appearing in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Guggenheim in New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, among others.

The title of her new exhibition, "Irrespective," now on view at the Jewish Museum in New York through March 3, 2019, combines the words "irreverent" and "retrospective" and draws on her skepticism about having her work in institutions in the first place. A survey of her work since 1965, it is her first exhibition in her native New York in more than 15 years. Today, Rosler occupies a brownstone in Greenpoint, where she has lived since 1987. Piled high with books and catalogs and magazines at every turn, from the staircase to the bathroom to the hallway, her home reads like a scrapbook of the last 30-odd years, dotted with odds and ends, like a 2005 visitor's badge for the BBC at 35 Marylebone High Street in London; a tiny red wicker chair; dried and crispy beige flower arrangements; a proliferation of unusual mugs and lamps; a corn wreath, and more. When I visited the artist there recently, she sat in front of me and flicked her short, blondish, graying hair from her forehead, adjusting her

rounded-frame glasses and sipping water from a glass pitcher. Her hand rested close to a tiny black Lumix digital camera that she occasionally pointed and shot at me. Rolled up next to my chair were materials for what would become *Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically for an Artist in the 21st Century)*, an installation of tall transparencies bearing translated works from the political theorist's text *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Some of Rosler's first works of social commentary came to her while sitting at the dining-room table with her mother reading newspaper coverage of the Vietnam War. "How are you supposed to eat dinner? Or worse, who can do this and still eat dinner? How are we so disconnected?" Rosler said. "It's that connection/disconnection that really fascinated me and has fascinated me about everything."

Rosler quickly saw how she could place newspaper images taken in Vietnam over elegant interiors from *Life* magazine as a form of protest. The flyers she had previously seen at demonstrations were entirely covered in text. Having been artistic minded from a young age, she found them utterly useless and visually abhorrent. "They were repulsive," she said now. "You keep thinking, someone bothered to do this obsessive, insane thing?" That Nostrand Avenue Xerox machine became a way of saying and sharing something new. Raised Orthodox, Rosler attended yeshiva until high school. She interacted with and regarded Judaism as rule-based and focused on justice. "It wasn't about punitiveness, it was about knowing, living a righteous, just life," she said. For Rosler, the goings-on in Vietnam did not equate to righteousness and justice and so she took to the streets, protesting around Washington Square, on Fifth and Sixth avenues in Manhattan. This was deeply against her parents' wishes. "They threatened to disown me," she said. "They said, 'This is completely unacceptable and you're gonna ruin your life.'" But Rosler went anyway.

Having been exposed to artmaking by an aunt whom she called a "Sunday painter," and who encouraged her to go to museums and immerse herself in culture, Rosler knew she wanted to make art regularly. At the time, though, she was interested in abstract expressionist painting and saw that studying the form only included producing more and more work. She wanted an education of another kind and attended Brooklyn College, first studying physics (her brother discouraged her from the field because "no one will have lunch with you") then English, all the while taking art classes at the Brooklyn Museum. She would also later attend UC San Diego as a master's student in the visual arts department.

By then, her son Josh (Neufeld, now an established cartoonist and graphic novelist) was a young child. "I needed a place where my kid wasn't going to be scribbling on my work," she laughed. This was a time in the late 1960s/early '70s when it was challenging to be taken seriously as a female artist, let alone one living outside of New York, which was then considered to be the center of the art world. The chair of Rosler's own visual arts department told her "If you're a woman and you have a child you're not a serious artist," she said. "This is just as feminism was being reinvented but also before when we were quite aware that women were second class, if you will, and to be discounted at all times."

Rosler and her fellow artists at UC San Diego, like Eleanor Antin and Ida Applebroog, felt perhaps they might be treated differently, but even when they weren't Rosler says she found the experience freeing. "I wasn't worried that much about my future as an artist. I was only interested in doing what I was doing," she said. "It was very liberating. I didn't have to care." She also found the New York art world off-puttingly competitive, something she didn't encounter in San Diego, which was "a much more cooperative, peer-oriented environment,"

she said. Rosler's own postcard novel projects—stories typed onto postcards she would then mail—were inspired, with permission, by Antin. “My exposure to art in New York before I left was through the avant-garde,” she said. “You had all kinds of people in various forms cooperating and collaborating with each other and not looking to the art world because the art world has such powerful gatekeepers that you knew you probably weren't gonna get in anyway, so you went on and made your own work.”

Rosler's postcard novels led to projects in video, and installation, among others, and her critique of social issues continued, ranging from a commentary on the 1970s trend of “gourmet” cooking and how it reflected a socio-economic and cultural imbalance, to critiques of war, economic subjugation, gentrification, surveillance, gender, and more. Her aesthetic was almost an anti-aesthetic, concerned with dismantling preconceived notions of what fine art can and should look like. She credits much of this with the strides made by women artists in the second wave of feminism who attacked the notion of genius as a socially constructed ideal related to male-ness. The idea, rather, was that anyone could make art.

“For me, it was a way of saying, ‘So, if this is something you're interested in doing, just do it.’ Of course that has now become a slogan that is associated with shoes, but I am interested in saying my work is thin and transparent and I'm not interested in impressing you with me but rather saying to you, if this excites you I think you should go ahead and do it yourself,” Rosler said. After all, the idea was always to change the world, not the art world. Because of this, she prefers to work with inexpensive and/or everyday materials, saying “my art comes out of everyday life and if you want to make art, this is a possibility.”

Rosler moved back to New York in the 1980s and, after a piece of hers ran in *Artforum* in 1993, galleries came knocking. She had been skeptical of art world institutions for a long time—the magazine included. “*Artforum* was a very powerful gatekeeper,” she said. “A way of trumpeting to everybody who's an important artist and who's not and I thought, ‘This is stupid!’”

By then, Rosler had been an art professor at Rutgers University for 12 years (she would remain there for another 18 years), among many other institutions, and it had never occurred to her to try and make a living through her work. “My art is too critical and, to paraphrase Brecht, ‘Don't expect to be rewarded by the system you criticize,’” she said. “I didn't have to be a market-oriented artist and I never have been.” Making work that was salable would have required self-censorship and adherence to a category of artwork, something Rosler never wanted. It remains to this day something she's never done. Instead, her own commentaries and processes have shifted as much as times have, making her work perennially relevant.