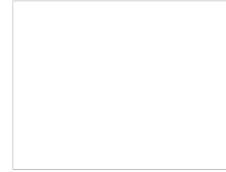


ART

DECEMBER 11TH, 2018

INCONVERSATION

MARTHA ROSLER with Greg Lindquist



Martha Rosler, *Irrespective*, installation view, 2018 – 2019, The Jewish Museum, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

In a working life spanning more than fifty years, Martha Rosler has made art that eschews medium-specificity, asks questions, offers propositions, and invites responses. While idea often appears to drive material expression for Rosler, she also considers, beyond a politics of representation, questions of visibility and aesthetics—a likely influence of her early training as a painter.



Portrait of Martha Rosler, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Entering Rosler's survey show, *Irrespective*, the vast, provocative, and deeply analytical ways in which she sees the world are immediately visible. What emerges is a singular ideological method of looking. Directing her critical analysis to oppressive political, economic, and social systems, she often uses these systems' common modes of communication (photography, video, billboards, banners, and kiosks) to convey her critique. Rosler's use of jarring, incongruent juxtapositions also signals their structural contradictions, revealing the underlying realities that are often obscured by their surface appearance.

Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an Artist in the 21st century) (2006), composed of excerpts, in English and German, on hanging transparent plastic sheets, is bookended by two newer works: the digital photomontage *Point n' Shoot* (2016), which links a lack of accountability for police shootings of unarmed people of color to Trump's political campaign rhetoric—saying he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue without electoral consequence—and the freshly completed video *Pencil of Praise* (2018), which focuses on the aggressive platitudes of loyalty that are pledged to Trump in meetings by his cabinet

members and led by Mike Pence. In the opening scene, Pence’s arrival in the Rose Garden is announced with an ominous electronic metal riff (in a recording taken from the government livestream of the event) while in the ticker display we see men tunneling desperately to escape an unrevealed fate. “Totalitarianism in power invariably replaces all first-rate talents . . . with those crackpots and fools whose lack of intelligence and creativity is still the best guarantee of their loyalty” reads an Arendt quotation from 1951 in the nearby work.

While these recent works wryly encapsulate our political moment, others address a variety of cultural issues: a statistical analysis of the social costs of student debt, the domestic and military uses of surveillance drones, and a chronicled impact of gentrification on small businesses in her neighborhood. While not all these recent works are represented in the exhibition, they are in the excellent accompanying monograph, which includes an essay by Rosler addressing problems of re-presenting performance work and analysis by art historian Rosalyn Deutsche of the “House Beautiful” series through readings of Sigmund Freud, Bertolt Brecht, and Virginia Woolf. Rosler took time off from preparing for her show to speak about her life and work with artist Greg Lindquist over a meal in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where they have both lived for many years.



Martha Rosler, *Pencil of Praise*, 2018. Color video, 10 minutes. Courtesy the artist. © Martha Rosler.

Rosler: My mother took the family photos, which was unusual, as it's commonly the man who does that, but it set a model for me. My aunt gave me a 35-mm camera when I was a teenager. Officially, I saw myself as an abstract painter like everybody, but New York was a photo city—in the cafes on Bleecker or MacDougal in the Village, in people's houses, in building lobbies—and people talked about the photos on the wall. And every house seemed to have *Life* magazine; as a child I was fascinated by its big pictures and what lenses could do—crazy, I know, but true. There was a photo of a crowd captured by a wide-angle lens that distorted the heads of people at the edges, and I wondered, “How could this kid's head look like that?” This was such an intriguing puzzle about photography: it's real, but it's not.

Rail: And you were painting during this period?

Rosler: Sure. I told myself that abstract painters took photos on their day off—everyone seeks narrativity! I was taking photos in the streets but also, in something of a romantic mode, the anomalies in the edges of the city, and old tar wagons in the street—but in an era of modernity, what is that? Still, these structures were similar to those that the Bechers documented but with a different, well-developed sensibility (I didn't know of them yet, of course), whereas I was driven by a fascination. What's remained with me is the notion of things people see but don't see, or don't grasp the significance of. At the same time as I was interested in the city, though, I was also taking pictures of mushrooms in the woods.

Rail: In a recent interview you identify as a “nature romantic.” Would you expand on this?

Rosler: I was intrigued by an unthought idea of quiet, and by largely self-directed natural processes, as an antidote to the driven world of the city's everyday. As a gardener, I am still responding to those longings. But the romanticism of Steichen's photos in his Pictorialist period, with their at-least-putatively painterly approach, attracted me—before I grew up, embraced modernism, and then largely rejected some of its most salient underpinnings as the 1960s were underway . . .

Rail: What did your paintings look like?

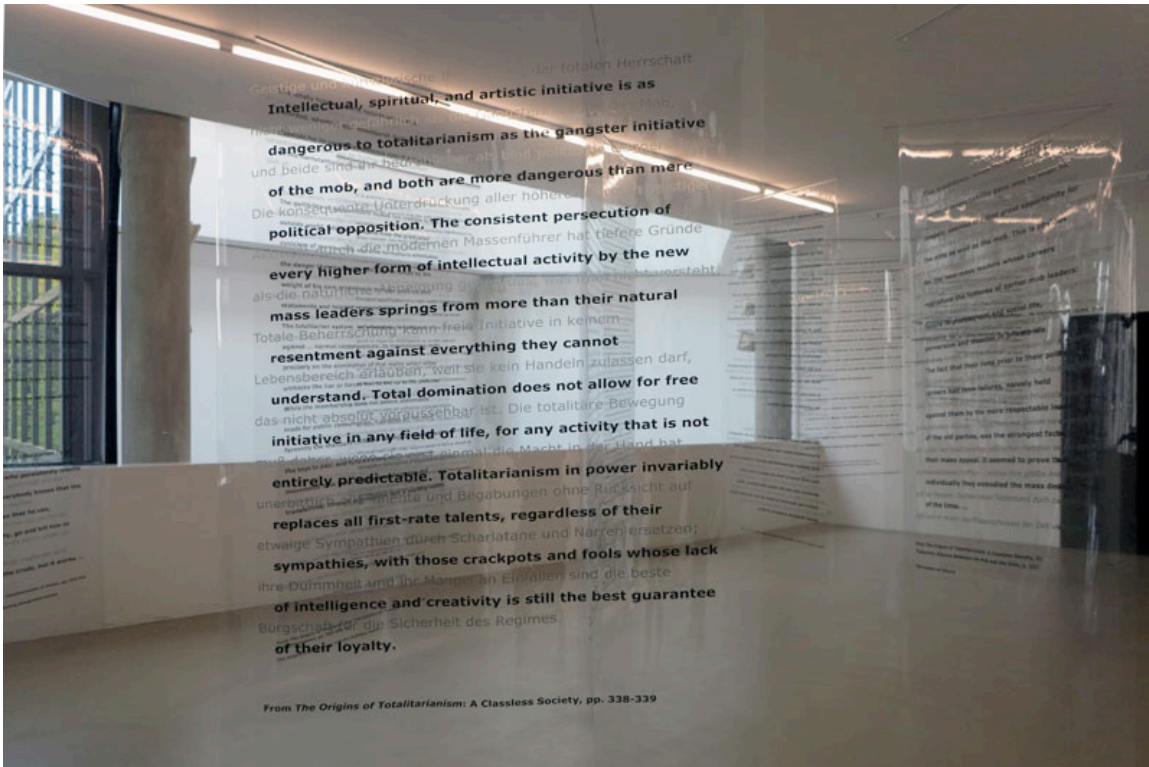
Rosler: Slightly Hans Hofmann-esque, even though I didn't know his work well. But I was captivated by Ad Reinhardt.

Rail: With Reinhardt, whose art history class you audited as an English major and member of the Scholar's Program, I've heard you discuss the aesthetic space of his paintings, but were you influenced by his political organizing?

Rosler: No, I didn't know a thing about it!

Rail: When did you become aware of his activism?

Rosler: Decades later. His political work is revelatory—and I still feel cheated. But people could, and did, get fired for their politics, as you know. He was teaching at Brooklyn College, for Christ's sake, where they brought in a president specifically to purge the school of its radicals.



Martha Rosler, *Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an Artist in the 21st Century)* (detail), 2006. Installation with excerpts from Hannah Arendt's writings, in English and German, on transparent vinyl panels. © Martha Rosler.

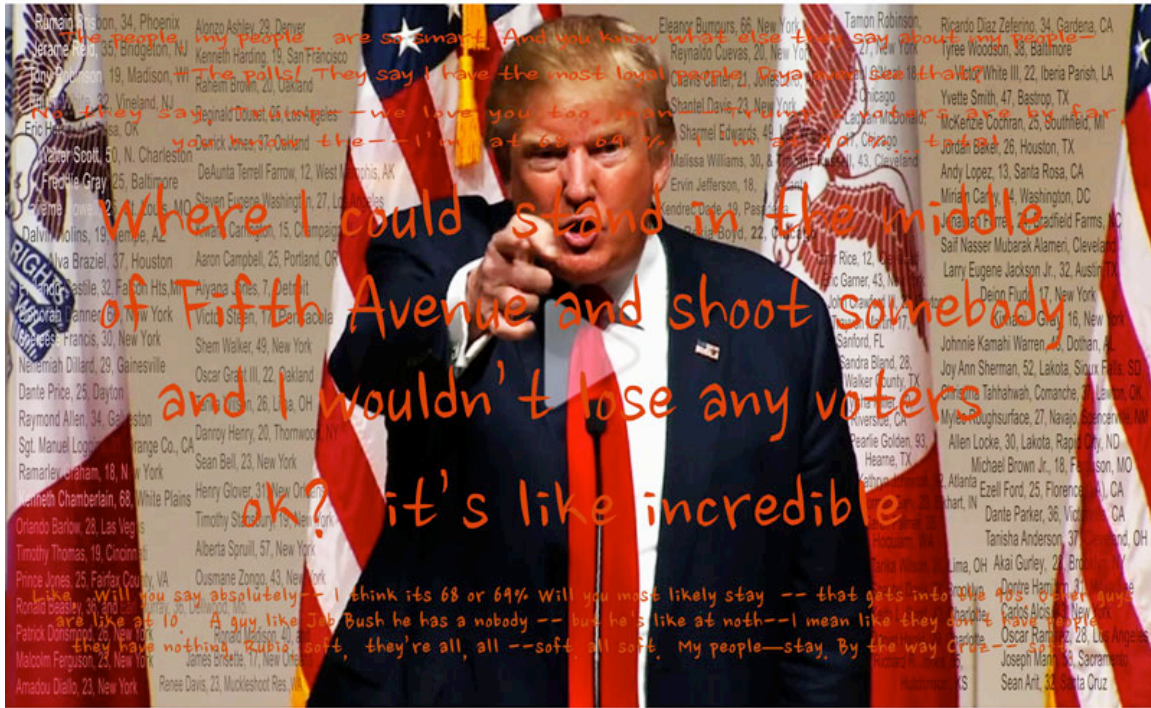
Rail: Did you start reading theory when you were at Brooklyn College?

Rosler: What's theory?—we'd never heard of it. It was still a New Critical, or worse Belle Lettrist, moment, and in the Cold War, any kind of nonformal interpretation was nervous-making for the establishment. Although one of my professors at Brooklyn College was chasing me into the quadrangle to read *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*—

Rail: Herbert Marcuse!

Rosler: Yeah, I said, “No way, man.” I was into anti-war and radical politics. I didn't need art theory or even social theory. I was minoring in Poli Sci, which was based on statistical modeling and I was taking sociology tutorials—structural-functionalism was the reigning paradigm there. Nobody needed social philosophy—the Frankfurt School hadn't even been translated yet. I graduated from Brooklyn College in January of 1965, began grad school at UC San Diego in 1971. A lot happened in those intervening years, including the importation of Continental theory. And Conceptual art. By this time I had decisively moved into the critique of photography and, soon after, its remaking.

But also, importantly, along with my UCSD working group, the idea that we *could* be in two places at once and that although we aimed to direct and circulate our work outside the art world, we shouldn't give up the art world. So, there we were, a bunch of assholes sitting in San Diego—an utterly provincial spot in art world terms—talking about changing the art world! But almost all our professors were from New York, and highly ambitious, and calling themselves theorists, so it seemed at least slightly plausible.



Martha Rosler, *Point n Shoot*, 2016. Digital Print. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Martha Rosler.

Rail: What influence did your professors Herbert Marcuse and Fredric Jameson have on your thinking at that time?

Rosler: A great deal, actually, in part because we knew and hung around with them. In some fundamental '60s way, they were our comrades rather than professors. I never took a class from either. Don't underestimate the radical horizontalism of that era—although within limits: they still were aware of their exalted positions, and were, furthermore, people with complicated lives.

Rail: What were you reading at that time?

Rosler: Aside from the Frankfurt School and Fred Jameson? Hot-off-the-press feminist pamphlets and periodicals. Art history, especially non-Western, political and labor history, Marx, including *The Grundrisse* and the writings of young Marx, both newly available in English. For feminists like me, Marxian anthropological speculations were gripping. I was reading Lukács and Barthes and the French structuralists, as well as Stuart Hall and the Birmingham school.

Rail: Wait, you were reading Stuart Hall when you were in San Diego in the 1970's? Wow!

Rosler: I can show you my Xeroxes from *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*. As I said, we were engaged in renovating photography, which meant closely scrutinizing the uses of photography in mass communication. I was—unlike most people I hung around with, who came out of photography, not literature (though I think we all read Terry Eagleton)—interested in their precursors, Paddy Whannel and other writers on ideological formations in England. I had a copy of a book, *The Popular Arts*, that Whannel co-edited with Stuart Hall in 1964. The visibility of class distinctions and the urgency of breaking them down produced a rich trove of theorizing by literary people and linguists and activists—including Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture*.

Rail: I recall in the 2016 Whitney conversation with Adam Weinberg that you used the term “interpellate.”

Rosler: Stop doing that [using the term interpellate]! [*Laughter*] So, I read Louis Althusser.

Rail: Was he influential for you?

Rosler: Yeah, it was hard to avoid Althusser, whose works are crucial for a serious understanding of Marxism. And don’t forget Balibar. But Althusser’s acolytes were mechanists—historical determinists in a ferocious but ultimately uninteresting way.

I’m a bit hard pressed to retrieve a reading list from back then—I was in art school, not attending a seminary—and I tend to bristle at the idea that my politics come from reading rather than activism. I was highly focused on feminist works and writers: Robin Morgan, Anne Koedt, Roxanne Dunbar (now Dunbar-Ortiz), Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Redstockings and Valerie Solanas, Sheila Rowbotham, Hilary Wainwright, Barbara Ehrenreich, and others.

Also, I was looking at other artists, photographers, and filmmakers: Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group; Cinema Novo in general; Cuban films including Sara Gómez’s *De cierta manera*, Chris Marker, Ozu, Straub-Huillet, Fassbinder, Alexander Kluge, Varda, Rossellini, Bertolucci, Michael Snow, Ken Jacobs, Yvonne Rainer.

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And for writings on film, off the top of my head: Krakauer, Eisenstein. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, Stephen Heath; on theater, Brecht and Piscator; also articles put together by other young activists, such as in *Jump Cut*, or Terry Dennett and Jo Spence's *Photography/Politics: One*; critical theory of the media, especially Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub'



Martha Rosler, *Photo-Op*, from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series*, 2004. Photomontage. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Martha Rosler.

Rail: You were doing performance and video work then?

Rosler: Performance before video.

Rail: At what point did you give up painting entirely?

Rosler: I remember exactly when I decided. I'd been admitted to grad school as a painter, and I was in my studio one day working on Rothko-inflected canvases stretched out on the floor. I had the thought that I really love doing this, but I

have to choose. In another life, I'll get back to painting. So, that was pretty much that. Performance was a form renegotiated and promulgated by West Coast feminists mostly in L.A.—I didn't realize that they'd all worked at CalArts with Allan Kaprow, whom I already knew from New York.

Rail: At this point, you were painting in your studio during the day and making collages at night?

Rosler: More or less. I had a small drawing table in my tiny Leucadia living room where I was cutting and pasting, just as in New York. In fact, my decision to go to graduate school crystallized when my little boy started drawing on some large masonite sheets of collages. It wasn't my idea, though—I was urged to apply. When I did, a faculty member asked me, "Marty, why do you want to do this to yourself?" I said, "A studio." But it turned out to be infinitely more important as I found a circle of peers. We sought no opinions on our work but our own. Grad school was about us, ourselves, and our fantastically active milieu.

Rail: At what point did you realize that you couldn't work in a singular medium?

Rosler: I don't know—I have trouble making up my mind? My baseline exercise for a long time was drawing. But my ideas come in packages with formats—when, for example, it becomes clear a project should be presented as a performance, video, or photograph. I was probably influenced by exactly what Michael Fried hated: the presentness and theatricality of work. Just as with the Judson group, this debate occurred at the beginning of my involvement as a junior hanger-on in the New York avant-garde.

Those artists were about ten years older, but it was riveting to get to know them and their work. I recall looking at a set of Bob Morris sculptures, two abstract forms with a break of light in the middle, and thinking, "This appears to be doing what painting should be doing, but isn't." It was about being in the same space, in a particular anti-modernist way, and with a certain flat-footed nihilism: "what you see is what you see." The importance of breaking the goal of attaining the transcendent and the sublime was very powerful. That kind of anti-Kantian or, if you will, anti-Hegelian push, is why I got into trouble with Herbert

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Marcuse. He wrote about preserving Modernism, to my mind unhelpfully in his last book on aesthetics—the defense of art as the negation of the negation, moving toward a higher stage of civilization, away from the negation of the human in its present stage.



Martha Rosler, *Makeup/Hands Up*, from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, c. 1967–72. Photomontage. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Martha Rosler.

Rail: In what way did you get into trouble with him?

Rosler: I staged a garage sale in the art gallery on campus. He wanted to know why would I be selling junk—objects of no aesthetic worth—in an art gallery, debasing the temple of art, or the radical space of free imagination.

Rail: You saw Judson Dance Theater, and Morris's work, before you went to California?

Rosler: Certainly. As a teenager, I went to The Living Theatre, and Cinema 16. And I discovered Godard, and other Europeans informally known as European Art Cinema. Although underage, I also went to the Five Spot to hear Thelonious Monk, and Nina Simone in several places, and many folk musicians like Mississippi John Hurt, the very young Bob Dylan, and Joan Baez. I also went to at least one Carolee Schneemann performance. And Pop, of course, changed everything by upending things: it had the cynicism of an apparent nihilism. But as I scribbled in an unpublished riposte to the critic Lawrence Alloway, it was nonsense to hold that that Pop Art embodied no critique.

Rail: One only has to read Warhol's contradictory statements.

Rosler: I gleefully read his book, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B & Back Again)*.

Rail: What did you take from Warhol?

Rosler: That he was himself a Gesamtkunstwerk. Everything from his early days when he claimed to want to be plastic, hired impersonators for his lectures, made fun of interviewers and was just camping around—*gotcha!* Rather than trying to impress the public with his work's profundity and inaccessibility, he was suggesting that there's nothing to figure out *Or* he was suggesting: "figure it out on your own;" *Or*, "I really like money;" *Or*, "I like cookie jars;" *Or*, "I like social interactions."

And also, his movies, mostly directed by Paul Morrissey, were brilliant! They took on a Cagean lesson, as in his movie *Sleep* or *Empire*. The idea of the aleatory, or, if you will, the random, which was very much part of the Black Mountain ethos that influenced my New York avant-garde mentors, was a brake on sentimentality and existentialist fog and coincided with the elevation of Duchamp above, say, the popular favorites van Gogh or Picasso.

I always used to wonder, how do I know what to paint? Okay, I'll get stoned. Now I'm stoned but I still don't know. I realized that's because you're waiting to

be inspired. But inspiration is not what drives the game here, and that's what Pop showed me, that style was a *choice*. Simple, but art-shattering in its way for me.

Rail: And that critique was a possibility. Do you consider the photomontages expressive in any way?

Rosler: They are undoubtedly theatrical but closer to *tableaux vivants*. The photomontages are possibly ironic but—and this is exactly my quarrel with what Pop artists claimed for their work—their critique is unmistakable, making them, in effect, propaganda, and also making some of the faculty painters at UCSD dismiss them. I thought, “To hell with those people, I don't care. I'm not signing or dating them, and if they're propaganda, then I'm doing propaganda.” But I saw myself at the start not as following John Heartfield, whose work we really didn't yet know, but Max Ernst and Surrealism. Initially, seeing the work of Jess, who was San Francisco-based, inspired me to do my earliest photomontages, even though now I am asked about Hannah Höch, or even Claude Cahun, because their work was strongly focused on representations of women. But that is, alas, simply anachronistic.

Rail: Were you aware of British Pop, like Richard Hamilton?

Rosler: I think everybody must've seen *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* But I didn't know much else. At that time, all I wanted to do was paint like Philip Guston! People hardly knew him.

Rail: Really! His early abstractions?

Rosler: As I was interested in the edges, or margins, of cities, I was also interested in the question of the edge of paintings. How do you know where a painting ends? Pollock did it by creating an overall pattern with dominant themes, and others like Kline with calligraphic or even architectural structures in the center. But Guston created a surrounding matrix, which was a plausible answer. I was also looking at Zhao Wou Ki, which may sound odd. Then Guston switched to the gross, wonderful, Hairy Who-type cartoons which were probably better than the early abstractions . . . And, as you know, I gave birth to a cartoonist.

Rail: Did you go to the Met often as a teenager?

Rosler: I went to the Cloisters far more than to the main building. And I went to the Modern (never when called MoMA) a lot. After an hour or so I'd have a headache and leave. How could I look at any more artwork after such intense concentration? When my son was a teenager, during a particularly bratty time, we were in the Louvre. He was wearing headphones, and when we came upon *The Raft of the Medusa*, he stopped dead. I took a picture of him during this aesthetic experience, as he clearly was thinking, "Holy shit, somebody could do that?" He talked about it a lot afterward. I had a few similar moments, but when we were growing up, we always laughed at people who said they had an "art experience." Well, don't knock it, baby! [*Laughter*]

Rail: I'm curious about your treatment of the human subject from the *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* photomontages and *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*.

Rosler: You see any people in those photos?

Rail: I understand why *The Bowery* does not have people, that language is a signifier of the people you don't wish to photograph—

Rosler: As is, in a sense, the street detritus and discards, the things that people leave behind. The language does represent them, but also the rest of us. Also, the photos are of the settings, not the putative subject. I was trying to grab documentary lovers by the ear to say, "Stop what you're doing, because it's not what you *think* you're doing!" I wanted to talk primarily about the ritualized, repetitive aestheticization of humanist social documentary within galleries and museums and its subordination under the name and oeuvre of its maker. My work before that was for circulation outside art institutions. But *this* work was meant to be right there on the wall, in a gallery or museum, with other documentary photos...

Rail: How did you think about depicting the Vietnamese woman carrying a baby in *Balloons*?

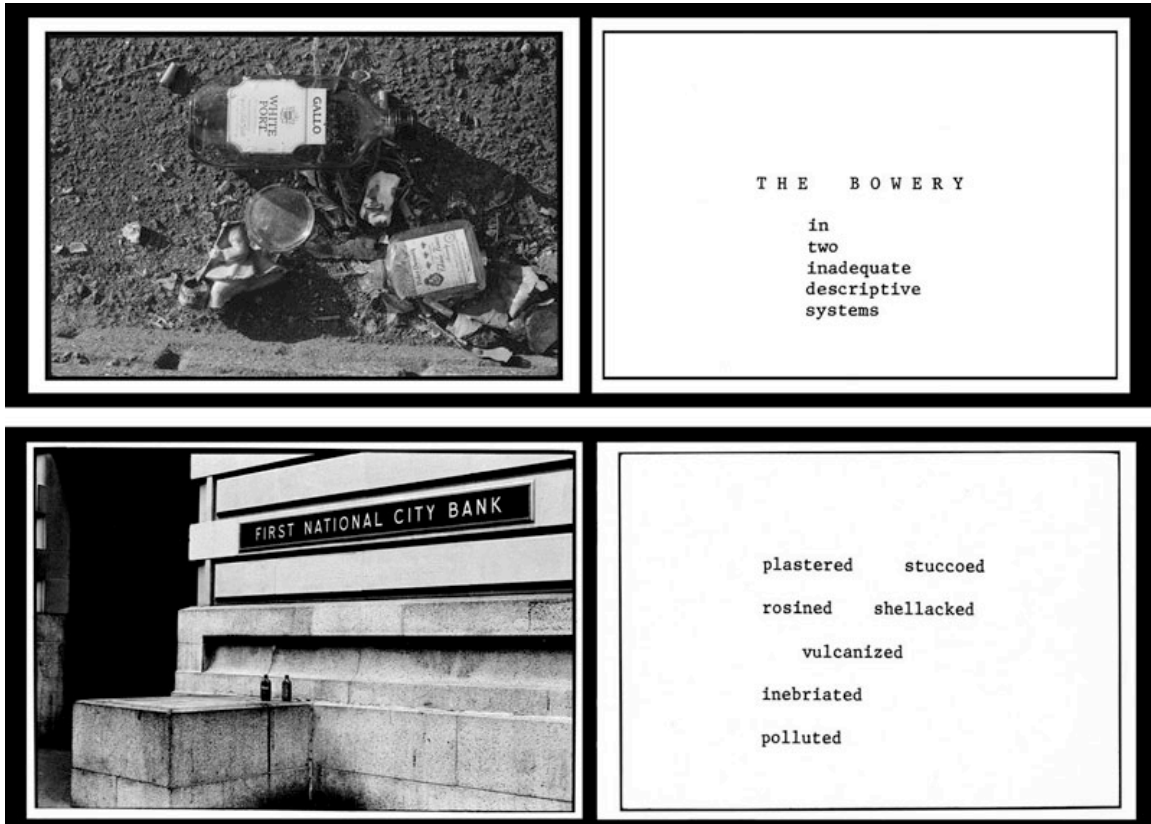
Rosler: I refused to show this, or the others in the series, in the art world.

Rail: An issue of context?

Rosler: Exactly, but you can't get too cute here. If you saw that woman on the street, you'd probably know her—it's still a picture of a person from *Life* magazine, which means it's been seen by a gazillion ordinary people. But I still wasn't going to show these montages in an art context—and didn't, until almost twenty years later, and with some apprehension. At the moment of making, these were seen as black-and-white xeroxes but also, almost simultaneously, they appeared in a thousand visiting-artist lectures: I gave a lot of talks!

Rail: Your own form of media distribution.

Rosler: Yes! That was part of the story, which also applied to video. Why did we choose this shitty format? A, it was cheap; B, expectations were so low; and C, you could take it anywhere: Put it in the mail. Show it in a church basement. Show it in small groups of feminists. But almost immediately, there were international video shows, primarily in other countries, such as Italy and Argentina. I remember Ellie Antin suggesting I should consider video over film, saying that Yvonne Rainer was making movies but distribution was very difficult.



Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (details), 1974. Gelatin silver prints. © Martha Rosler.

Rail: I'm curious if works with sorts of captioning, such as *The Bowery* and also the *Greenpoint Project* were at all inspired by Bertolt Brecht?

Rosler: *The Bowery's* title is by way of saying, "Ain't no caption here," whereas the narrative-style captioning with all the photos in *Greenpoint Project* was my nod to Lewis Hine—and let's note that the title of the show it was made for, *New American Photographs*, was a direct reference to Walker Evans. Hine would show a person at work and supply a brief bio. On the back of his photos he listed their names, their ages—

Rail: He'd collect notes of children's heights measured by the buttons on his coat while infiltrating the factories for reports on child labor.

Rosler: Taking the opportunity to do more than just fire off a shot and run.

Rail: When did you become involved with the Whitney Independent Study Program?

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Rosler: I was on a panel at the “Television/Society/Art” conference in 1980 at The Kitchen that Ron Clark organized, and he then invited me to be on faculty. At the Whitney Program during a studio visit in 1988, I serendipitously found Dan Wiley, my collaborator for the shows I organized around housing and homelessness at the Dia Art Foundation exhibition in 1989. I also became quite close with Yvonne Rainer.

Rail: Was that after you saw her performances decades before?

Rosler: Yeah, but I was too intimidated to say much to her when I saw her performance *This is the story of a woman who . . .* in 1972, when I was a grad student.



Martha Rosler, *Cleaning the Drapes*, from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, c. 1967-72. Photomontage. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Martha Rosler.

Rail: In a conversation with LaToya Ruby Frazier in the 2012 Whitney Biennial catalog, you warn of the instrumentalization of art to serve activism, while arguing that it should retain a degree of autonomy. You also acknowledge this autonomy could be seen as a “precious individualism,” which in regard to neoliberalism is surely problematic. Could you expand on this autonomy for art?

Rosler: It's a tightrope. To be clear, I think LaToya by no means falls into the instrumentalization trap. But as to the general trajectory of what we've come to call social practice art, I'm worried about its transformation—as we all have been. Doug Ashford—who was my student at Cooper Union in the early 1980s and soon after joined the collective Group Material—told me that when they'd get invited by various municipalities to give voice to local communities, the inviting agencies saw this as providing “managed diversity.” I recognized in that observation the idea of managed negativity, a late Frankfurt School theory. It's also straight repressive desublimation, which is the term Marcuse used for the process by which art, far from standing outside society to serve as critique, becomes incorporated and commodified and thus serves as a safety valve for social discontents. In researching one of my *Culture Class* essays in 2011, I read *The American Canvas*, published by the NEA, which argued that art in the 21st century had to become what was in effect a controlled conduit for community voices. This is how you will become the Facebook of the government, channeling dissent and making people feel part of a community.

Rail: You become a functionary of the neoliberal state.

Rosler: That's exactly the fear. And it's a central tactic of cities hoping to damp down community outrage over development. In the moment when I was reading *The American Canvas* and similar material, I thought “Really? Social practice, all that stuff that was spurned and scorned, is now the new favorite?” The section on Detroit in *Culture Class* was also meant to identify a city that's even an experimentation ground, and for example, for social practice programs in the Netherlands and at the University of Michigan, in nearby Ann Arbor. But we can't forget the obvious—that there are local people there who have their own ideas. I feel it is necessary as always to be the Cassandra who warns you that if you don't think about the downside, you will probably be unhappy with the outcome.

Rail: You also wrote about a shift in performance from feminist and LGBTQ liberation to a more simplified, institutionalized narrative of gender identity. Speaking to the same problems of commodifying social practice, what is this pacified and controlled version of activism or community involvement, when it's been wrung through an institutional framework?

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Rosler: I guess we'll see, won't we? [Laughter] As a friend of mine commented, a lot of artists discover social practice and want a merit badge just for showing up. When I was a student listening to David Antin's comments on political and artworld developments, I thought "You're so cynical!" Although he was in fact correct in his observations. Now the accusation is "You're so naïve!" But we surely can't dispense with the engagement that stems from the impulses behind social practice.



Martha Rosler, *First Lady (Pat Nixon)*, from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, c. 1967-72, Photomontage. Courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York. © Martha Rosler.

Rail: Is your notion of the “as if” proposition related to Brecht’s ideas of avoiding catharsis?

Rosler: Of course. I saw Brecht’s *Mother Courage and her Children* at The Living Theatre, and other plays, like *Marat/Sade* and *The Brig* subsequently. We were done with the Stanislavskian methods where the actor “becomes” the

character—a kind of intensity and authenticity. Then somebody is saying “Don’t be dumb.” So trivial. [Laughter] Absurdism was intriguing, like Ionesco’s plays, such as *Rhinoceros*, and the darker version with Beckett. But especially when I saw Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, where the actors came down into the audience—I’m fifteen or sixteen and I think, “Oh yeah, it’s a play. The curtain and the stage is there, and the audience is here, and here come the actors!” This was about the same time Kaprow’s “Happenings” were energizing artists.

I was a kid movie addict, but not without cost. Burned in my memory is a soldier bayoneted in a trench by a Japanese opponent, and a Western settler being shot full of arrows by Indians—the narratives of Cold War and Post-World War II America. When I was three or four, I went to a Marx Brothers movie with my older brother and father. When they started on the huge screen with the slapstick pretend violence, I ran to the back of the theater and said, “Take me home! I’m just a little girl.” It was a relief to finally know, later, “Wake up, fool—it’s a movie!”

Learning about narrative forms was empowering in studying literature, because at that time, narrative in visual art was taboo. I was overwhelmed by this giant image of cinema which has fascinated me ever since. Whereas in theater you worry that the people on stage will forget their lines or sing the wrong notes, in a movie you feel eaten by the film itself. These issues of scale and where you identify can lead a person down a pathway of despair and confusion. [Laughter]. It’s much more interesting to think of the work as a text where human beings aim for certain effects. And then you have to ask, what am I getting out of this besides pity and terror? And you end up with Brecht.

Rail: Eliminate catharsis, ask questions, and inspire people to action.

Rosler: That’s right. Then I realized that is essentially what The Living Theatre was, although I remember being struck by seeing their *Mother Courage* pulling the wagon across the stage. Years later, I read that their *Mother Courage* was too theatrical. I can’t judge because I was quite young, but I do remember what was so interesting was the bare stage and the character who is suffering, whose children have abandoned her, is pulling a cardboard cutout that is supposed to

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be a wagon. A framing or distancing device, so that as you feel empathy, you also see her as a figure.

In a scene in my video *Born to Be Sold*, about surrogate motherhood, a person is on camera reading the script—an approach I borrowed directly from Straub and Huillet, who also believed in treating the text as an important document *within the film* addressing the viewer about mimesis, production, and representation, engaging them in a kind of Lehrstück, in my view.

All of this was essential to learn how to make a shitty little video. Even if it meant rehearsing in a space where I would be kicked out in the middle or recording through the night when everybody was exhausted. But that is the “as if” part: So what, go do it better yourself, this is what I am thinking about. The work isn’t finished—it is a suggestion, a sketch towards a gesture.