

How Two Pieces of Art 50 Years Apart Helped Me Hate Cooking a Little Bit Less

Rosalynn Tyo on Semiotics of the Kitchen and Lessons in Chemistry

By Rosalynn Tyo | March 23, 2023



Every day around five o'clock, my eldest daughter asks me a question. It's the same question every day, but I can't seem to answer it without first skulking into the kitchen, peering into the fridge, and berating myself for having forgotten to defrost that pound of ground beef.

The answer is eggs. Again. As I pull a bowl out of the cupboard and set it next to the stove, I hear Martha Rosler's voice in my head. "Bowl," she says. She pronounces the word firmly and clearly, without a trace of emotion; it's exactly the tone of voice I might use if I were trying to teach the word to a dog. She often speaks to me this way when I'm in the kitchen, and every time, it makes me smile.

Martha Rosler recorded *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, a six-minute performance art piece, in 1975. Several years ago, someone posted it on YouTube, without the artist's permission but much to her amusement and satisfaction. The film begins with a tight closeup on Rosler, who is in her early thirties but looks younger. She is wearing a black turtleneck and pants, her long, wavy hair parted in the middle.

As the camera pulls back, we see that she is standing behind a small wooden table covered in cooking implements, with a refrigerator and stove behind her. She gazes directly into the camera with a neutral expression, then proceeds to name contents of her kitchen while demonstrating their uses, in alphabetical order and with increasingly aggressive body movements. "Apron," she says, while tying it on. Moments later she stabs at the air with a fork, drives an ice pick into the table, and flings the invisible contents of a ladle over her shoulder. My personal favorite is the hamburger press, which she repeatedly opens and snaps shut, like an alligator's jaws.

The first time I watched it, I laughed out loud, with delight and recognition. I could see my own attitude toward cooking in her performance, of course, but also, she reminded me of a fictional character I had just met in Bonnie Garmus's 2022 novel *Lessons in Chemistry*. The novel is set in the early 1960s, and the protagonist, Elizabeth Zott, is a brilliant chemist who is forced out of her field by her openly sexist colleagues. To support herself and her young daughter, she accepts a job hosting a cooking show for a local television station, but much to the consternation of upper management, uses the platform to teach her audience of "average housewives" about chemistry.

There are many similarities between *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and Elizabeth Zott's show, *Supper at Six*. Both are filmed in black and white, and set in home kitchens, albeit with different aesthetic and production values. Rosler's film was shot with a single camera in a small, basic kitchen, while Zott's show is taped in a professional studio.

The set is carefully designed to mimic a contemporary middle-class suburban kitchen, crowded with signifiers of the owner's adherence to traditional values and domestic pursuits: an open sewing basket sits near a toaster covered in a

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knitted pink cozy, and a needlepoint on the wall asks us to “Bless this House.” The view from the window is fake, and the clock does not tell time. In the pilot episode, Zott describes the set as “revolting,” and later invites the studio audience to come and take any items they want. “I like having room to work,” she says. “It reinforces the idea that the work you and I are about to do is important.”

Like Rosler, Zott also refuses to use domestic implements “properly” while smiling for the camera and wearing a pretty, figure-flattering dress. Rather than acting like the “sexy-wife-loving-mother” that the cretin in charge is expecting, she takes her task, and her audience, seriously. “Cooking is chemistry,” she says, and her intention in teaching women the basic laws of chemistry, the “real rules that govern the physical world,” is to reveal the inherent equality of the sexes.

All humans are simply a bunch of atoms, in her view, as are all forms of life on Earth. This notion that men are superior to women, however widely accepted, has no basis in scientific fact, and therefore, her audience does not need to accept it as true. They can simply toss it out, along with all of its implications about what women can or should do with their lives. “Use the laws of chemistry,” she says, in the final episode of her show, “and change the status quo.”

In *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler relies on body language, rather than explicit dialogue, to convey a similar point of view. When she gets to “X” in the alphabet, she takes the fork and knife and crosses them in front of her body, as though she is refusing to continue playing her part, or rejecting everything she has just shown us. Then she flings her arms up and outward, tilts her head back, and says “Y.” Her tone is as flat and declarative as ever, yet the syllable rings with meaning for the individual viewer; I hear it as both a defiant question and an expression of despair.

Finally, she writes the letter Z in the air with her knife, a gesture made famous by Zorro, as though she is aligning herself with the vigilante and his commitment to defending the victims of political oppression. Unlike Zorro, however, Rosler does not need to mask her identity because she is not a member of the privileged class, fighting on behalf of the oppressed; she is one of the oppressed, boldly inciting rebellion—not with violence, but with art.

In an interview with Stephanie Murg for *Pin-Up*, Rosler explains her film as a reaction to the way “haute cuisine” had been transferred from hired professionals onto the women at the head of the household. The idea that “because we don’t have servants any more in the middle classes, women were supposed to be able to make something very special and also, of course, entertain and sit down and eat it with the guests... I thought that was pretty crazy—and also pretty un-thought-through.”

She laughs while delivering this line, as did I when I read it, though my amusement was tinged with more than a little bitterness. That “crazy” idea had some serious legs. They’re still kicking us now, almost 50 years after Rosler was inspired to make *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.

They just kick us more quietly, now, under the table, instead of out in the open. It is no longer considered acceptable to tell someone who identifies as a woman that she belongs in the kitchen. However, it is acceptable to pay her less in the workforce. To avoid subsidizing childcare, and to degrade it as an “unskilled” profession, resulting in precious few, pricey options.

It is justifiable to penalize her for taking time “off” for motherhood, to deny her advancement opportunities because her choice to bear or adopt a child is proof that she is not sufficiently committed to her profession. And if she insists on sticking around despite these barriers, to then erode what’s left of her commitment by demoralizing her, not with sexist remarks but in more subtle ways that pass under the radar of HR.

Bonnie Garmus wrote her novel in the hours left over from her day job. In conversation with Cindy Burnett on the *Thoughts from a Page* podcast, Garmus reveals that she wrote the first chapter while fuming about a particularly “bad day” at work. She had had “one of those meetings” in which she was the only woman in the room, presenting ideas for which no one expressed much enthusiasm—until a man essentially repeated everything she had said. It’s an experience “a lot of women” have had, she tells Burnett, with a little laugh, “but that day I was just so mad.” Rightly so.

As a woman, I feel seen and empowered while reading *Lessons in Chemistry* and watching *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. They validate all the frustration I felt, years ago, when I was a young mother who had given up her job after the birth of her second child. They tell me I was right to rage against the patriarchal systems that had me stuck in the kitchen, making and eating three meals a day with two small children while my husband went out for lunch and then to the pub after work.

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I had always planned on returning to work when our daughters were both enrolled full-time in school, at which point I would insist on a redivision of cooking responsibilities. He actually liked to cook, and I much preferred doing the dishes. Finally, I thought, the kitchen would become neutral territory, and not the battlefield I stormed across daily, grinding a trail of Cheerios into dust with a toddler wrapped around my waist.

That might have come to pass, in time. But we never really got the chance to find out.

My husband died when our youngest daughter was still in kindergarten. Suddenly, I was alone in the kitchen again, and would remain there for the foreseeable future—not because of the absurd gender norms that continue to pervade our society, but because I was the only one capable of using the stove. I no longer had the option to hang up my apron as planned, to walk off the job after years of resentfully dutiful, largely thankless service.

All I could do was tie it back on. The next four years passed in a blur of hastily prepared dinners: chicken nuggets, tacos, spaghetti, scrambled eggs. In that time, my daughters grew up, and grew aware of my hatred for cooking, without really understanding it. I made no attempt at hiding it, nor did I attempt to explain it, apart from pointing at my impatience and ineptitude for all the discrete tasks involved in making meals.

My oldest is twelve now, and nearly my height. She can reach over the stove and into the microwave with ease. My youngest is nine and a total pro at operating our cranky old toaster. It's well past time for me to stop thinking solely in terms of what they'll eat for dinner and instead about the ideas I'm feeding them, about the task of cooking at home.

Rosler and Garmus are thinking about the next generation of home cooks, too. I believe Rosler uses the alphabet not just because it's a fun structural device, but because it's the place we begin in teaching our children to read. It's never too early to begin teaching them about the cultural norms surrounding cooking so that they become capable of questioning ones that conflict with what they know to be true about their own abilities and interests. They must become aware of these norms in order to reject ones that do not fit with their own values.

Both of my daughters enjoy watching cooking and baking videos on YouTube, perhaps because the meals and baked goods I produce are so basic. I allow this because it feels like a reasonably harmless option considering what else they could be watching. However, in the years to come, I need them to become capable of noticing, for example, how many of these content creators identify as women. I want them to ponder the evolution of Rosler's "crazy" idea, that somehow, for some women, it no longer feels like enough to produce and serve a very special dish, to herself and her guests, in her own home; she must now document the process for the edification of total strangers who wish to do the same.

After that, she must place her creation within an artful tablescape, photograph it from all angles, and then post it on her socials, in hopes of attracting likes, subscribes, and comments. If she doesn't take all these extra steps, that special dish would just... feed her family. And they'd probably complain about it.

Of course, I'm not going to get through to them with this sort of talk; if there's one thing I know, from having been a kid and raising two of my own, is that the more stridently critical I am of things they enjoy, the more committed they become to those things. Maybe what I should do instead is infiltrate their YouTube accounts while they're at school and watch Semiotics of the Kitchen a dozen more times, so it pops up in between all the cake-decorating videos. It's worth a shot, right?

I'm kidding, of course. I'm going to take a page out of *Lessons in Chemistry* instead. Elizabeth Zott ends every episode of her cooking show by saying, "Children, set the table. Your mother needs a moment to herself." In giving children a role to play in the nightly meal, Zott is showing them that they can contribute, as all members of a household should, and that their role is not tied to their gender but to their individual capacity.

She is helping them to see their mother as a person, as opposed to a food-production machine. From there, it's only a hop, skip, and a jump to realizing that maybe she has other things to do or think about besides making their dinner—but that she did it anyway, which deserves a little appreciation.

Even if it's scrambled eggs. Again.