

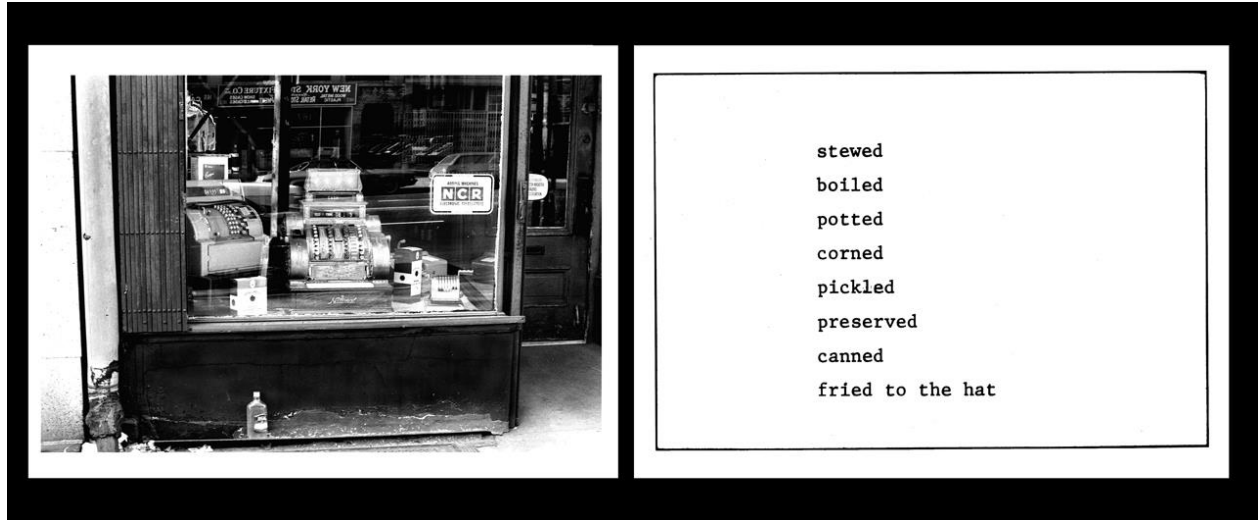
HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Martha Rosler Tackles the Problem of Representation

By Cassie Packard

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Detail of Martha Rosler's "The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems" (1974-75) (courtesy: the artist)

LONDON — Representation gets a bad rap. Its inadequacy is inbuilt; it's doomed to fail us; the thing it strives to capture and communicate endlessly eludes it. But it's what we have, so we use our crude visual and verbal tools to circumscribe, gibber, and gesture. Drooling a bit, we imagine a method of communication that would translate its subject perfectly and entirely. Prior to the age of #nofilter, photography was believed to contain this possibility. Sometimes the medium — particularly the documentary genre — still pretends.

In the '70s, photographer (and videographer, and rigorous cultural critic, and possible genius) Martha Rosler brought a critical eye, politically and philosophically, to the medium's seductive pretenses of objectivity. Her photo-text piece "The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems" (Dec. 1974–Jan. 1975), currently on display at the Lethaby Gallery in Central Saint Martins, wrestles with issues of representation and serves as a deadpan expression of her disappointment and frustration with mainstream humanist documentary.

Don't expect the exhibition to stir up any warm fuzzies regarding the human condition; this is a cool intellectual endeavor by a New Left heavyweight. The work consists of 24 text panels — in actuality pictures of text — paired with 21 black-and-white photographs and 3 blank panels. The subject is New York's Bowery. While the area is now über-gentrified, at the time when Rosler

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was photographing it was replete with hostels and low-rent lofts, an enclave for bums, alcoholics, and artists.

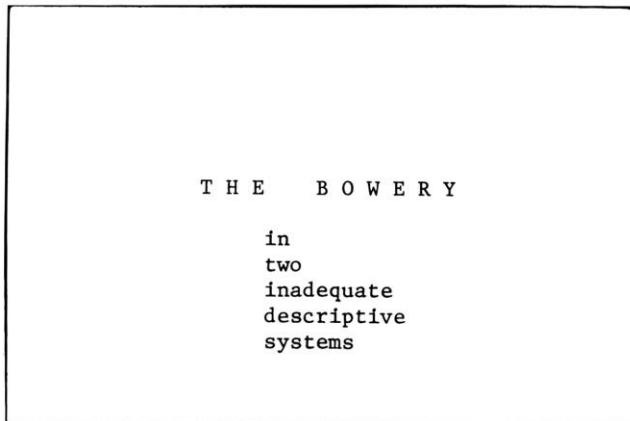
Rosler's carefully composed photographs are largely frontal shots of building facades, storefronts, and grates. Empty liquor bottles, trash, and the occasional shoe suggest homeless residents, while Artist-in-Residence (AIR) signage denotes the presence of artists. But there is a complete dearth of people in these images that Rosler selected to ideologically construct the Bowery. Her contact sheets for the work, also on view at the gallery in a fastidiously selected collection of archival material, are crowded with people. It's as if, after painstaking thought, she decided that one person shouldn't attempt to represent another person, or can't.



*Detail of Martha Rosler's "The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems" (1974-75)
(courtesy: the artist)*

As you proceed through the images, the bottles accumulate, culminating with the final picture of the series, a tight shot of discarded containers glinting in the sunlight. The paired photographs of typed text follow a similar trajectory, the words describing various states of drunkenness. Initially, the lexicon is as bubbly as champagne: "aglow," "illuminated," "rosy." But it becomes more sinister, and the form of the text, initially a stable horizontal, goes vertical and then topples. The cheery grand finale, paired with another image of littered bottles: "dead soldiers/dead marines."

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The two representational systems — visual and verbal — run on parallel tracks, sometimes crossing paths as the text adopts a visual form and signage crops up in several of the photos. Each system undermines the other's self-consciously feeble attempts at portraying the social reality of skid row. Bouncing between a general lexicon of alcoholism and a visual vernacular borrowed from the likes of Depression-era social reformist documentarian Walker Evans, Rosler pokes fun at the mannerism that

inevitably accompanies mediation. More darkly, she questions whether liberal documentary's attempt to mask anxiety about meaning, to soothe with an aesthetically pleasing humanism, is ethically questionable or even exploitative of oppressed populations. Alienated and stuck in Rosler's muck of representational techniques, you can't help but feel that the Bowery is many miles away.

Which it is, here in London. Yet in a sense, Rosler's political charge — several tics outside of mainstream American liberalism, tinged pink with Marx and Marcuse — seems more at home in the UK than in the US. Here, radical politics generally have a bit more room to breathe, and Rosler's wry portrayal of the ravages of representation, documentary, and even capitalism can more comfortably take center stage.

Martha Rosler: *The Bowery continues at the Lethaby Gallery (1 Granary Square, London) through October 25.*