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Martha Rosler: Irrespective At The Jewish Museum, New York



Clayton Press Contributor ⓘ

Arts

“So what I’m saying is, history’s a bitch.” Martha Rosler, June 20, 2017

Robert Hughes once described Francisco de Goya’s eye as “unflinching.” Goya “wanted to make images that compel a moral understanding of ordinary and terrible things.” Goya was a keen, honest observer of the world around him, and his art responded directly to the events of his day. His work was inventive and often politically engaged. He was a witness. On one plate of *Los Desastres de la Guerra* (The Disasters of War), a series of prints produced between 1810-1822, Goya wrote, *Yo lo vi* (I saw it.) The title of another etching in this series was *No se puede mirar* (You cannot look). Serious this is, yet Goya also had a biting sense of humor. *Los caprichos* (Whims), an earlier set of aqua tints produced between 1797-1798, mocked Spanish society, especially the pretension of its upper classes and the superstition and ignorance that cut across all social strata. *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters) is an iconic work that underscores the need for vigilance against stupidity and hypocrisy in social life.



Martha Rosler. *Red Stripe Kitchen*. from *Bringing the War Home*, c. 1967-72. COLLECTION OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, THROUGH PRIOR GIFT OF ADELINE YATES.

Different centuries, different contexts, different genders and different media apart, the eye of Martha Rosler has been and is equally direct and unflinching as her historic Spanish counterpart. Rosler is fearless in her social, cultural and political observations about the contemporary United States, beginning in the era of the Vietnam War. Her work—always brainy—courses through a variety of subject matter: war, gender, gentrification, domesticity, inequality, and labor, but—like Goya—it is not without humor. Rosler’s wit is sharp, penetrating and unsettling.

Tablet, a daily online Jewish magazine, published a short and insightful biography of Rosler, detailing her formative years in Brooklyn and her education in New York and San Diego. The profile provides a way to understand Rosler’s politics, which are decidedly left of center. Raised in an Orthodox household, Rosler attended yeshiva (an Orthodox Jewish elementary seminary) until high school. She regarded Judaism as rule-based and focused on justice, saying “It wasn’t about punitiveness, it was about knowing, living a righteous, just life.” In the late 1960s she

joined the anti-Vietnam War protests near New York University around Washington Square, against her parents' wishes.

Rosler attended the Brooklyn College of the City University of New York and the University of California, San Diego, where she received her BFA and MFA respectively. Early on, the challenge was to be taken seriously as a female artist. Even 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' . . . [but Rosler] wasn't worried that much about my future as an artist. I was only interested in doing what I was doing. It was very liberating. I didn't have to care." Plus, Rosler was in California, which she described as "a much more cooperative, peer-oriented environment," a sharp contrast to the off-putting, competitive New York art world.



Martha Rosler. Detail from *Unknown Secrets (The Secret of the Rosenbergs)*, 1988. COLLECTION OF NANCY DELMAN PORTNOY.

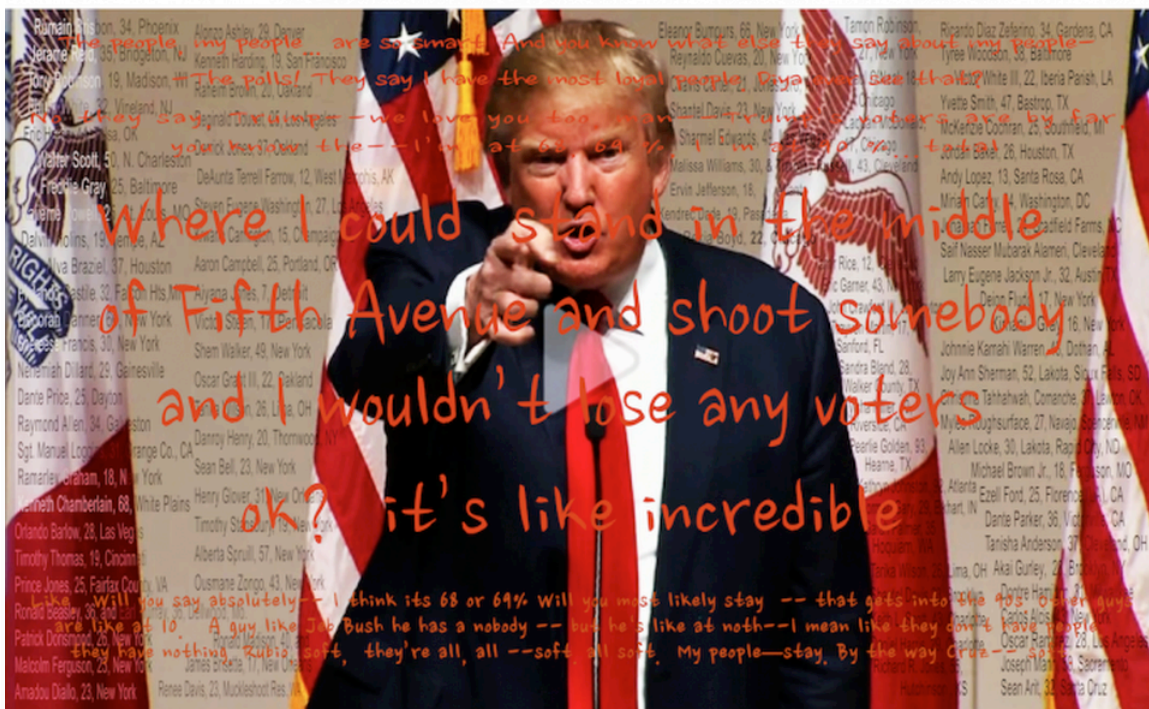
Martha Rosler: Irrespective, currently at The Jewish Museum, New York, is presented chronologically. In a sense, it would have to be since

Rosler's themes and variations have always been intertwined. Darsie Alexander, the exhibition's curator, concurs:

The art of Martha Rosler resists standard methods of presentation. Efforts to impose a thematic structure come to grief, as one category intersects with or flows into another. Whether video or film, photography or photomontage, performance or installation, billboard or critical text, her work requires to be read on multiple levels . . . Equally, any chronological ordering is stymied by the artist's practice of repeating and reinterpreting her projects, reactivating them for new local and temporal contexts.

Martha Rosler: Irrespective also demonstrates the artist's consistent use of difficult-to-market materials: collage, photomontage, video (a/k/a time-based media) and installation. Yes, she works with c-prints and color photographs. But this is about as commercially accessible as the work gets. So Rosler is faced with a trifecta of "issues" in the current market: socially and politically charged art, media not readily embraced by collectors, and the decades-long income inequalities that all women face. On the other hand, institutional support for her work has been consistently strong.

It would be easy to talk about specific, well-known and well-reviewed series like *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, an early series of photomontages that Rosler produced between 1967-1972 (and later reactivated), or *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Rosler's hallmark feminist video, a six-minute Julia Child parody that progresses through the alphabet, demonstrating a different cooking utensil for each letter. Rosler is prolific, adroit and remorseless in raising consciousness and exacting criticism. To not describe the enormous range of work in this exhibition in more detail is actually a good thing, allowing for both surprises and stuns.

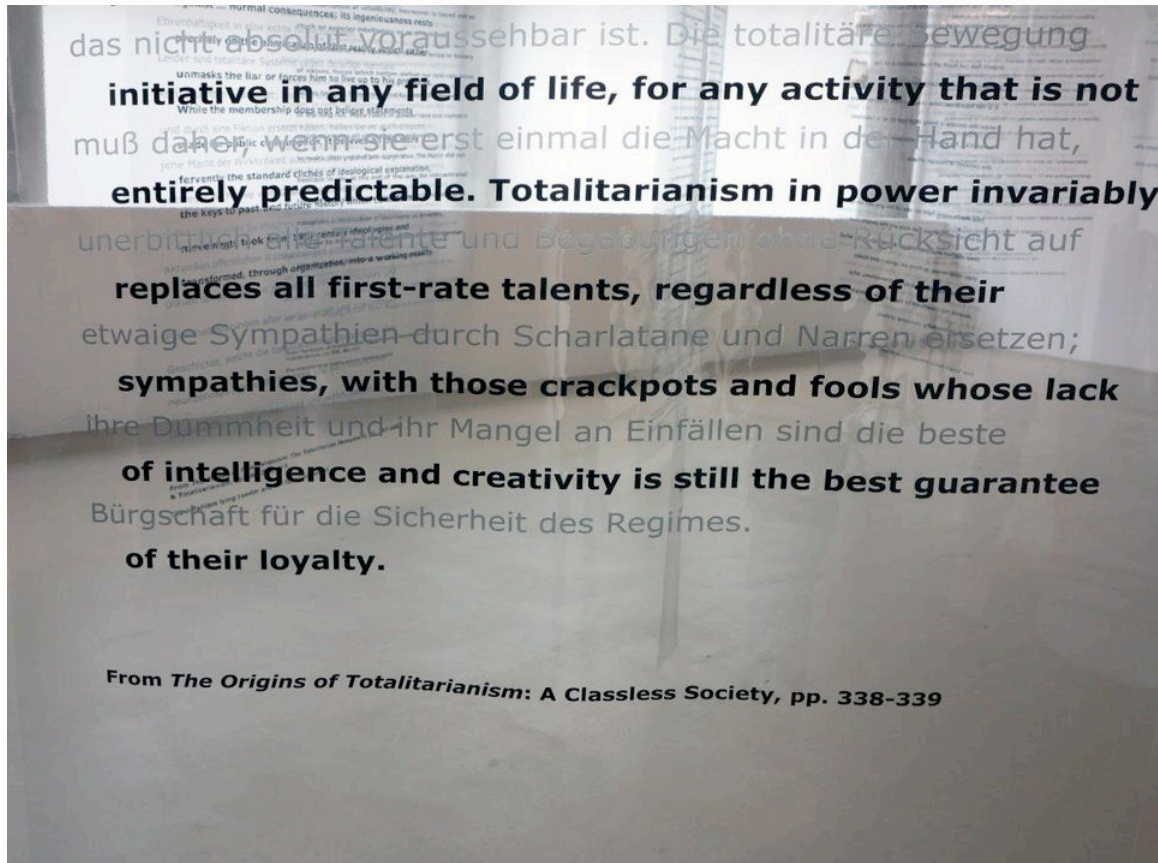


Martha Rosler. *Point n Shoot*, 2016. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK.

Nonetheless, one piece from 1988, *Unknown Secrets: Art and the Rosenberg Era*, neatly synthesizes many of Rosler's recurring thematic concerns in one piece: domesticity, gender roles, misogyny, hysteria, subterfuge and fear. It is visually haunting and emotionally complex. It epitomizes Goya's *No se puede mirar* (You cannot look); yet, you are compelled to do so. The work specifically addresses an earlier, dark episode in Post-War America, the 1951 federal trial and subsequent execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg for conspiracy to commit espionage as spies for the Soviet Union.

Each element in the installation plays off anti-Communist hysteria. A large framed canvas covered with silk-screened images taken from various conventional media dominates the installation. The central image on the canvas is of Ethel Rosenberg standing before a kitchen sink, drying a plate. 1950s icons of motherhood, the arms race, and media photos of the Rosenbergs, including a display of their open coffins, which appeared in Time magazine, surround her. A wooden pedestal holds a 14-page essay and analysis written by Rosler, who quotes Richard Nixon's comments on the Alger Hiss case: "In the case of Communist couples . . . the wife is often more extremist than the husband." Finally, there is a wooden rack holding a printed dishtowel and a box of Jell-O. The dishtowel requotes President Eisenhower who said, Ethel Rosenberg was "the strong and recalcitrant character."

Unless she received the death sentence “from here on in the Soviets would simply recruit their spies from among women.” As for the Jell-O box, David Greenglass, the primary prosecution witness, claimed Julius Rosenberg had given him a box of artificially flavored raspberry Jell-O as a spy handoff device. Art exactly imitates life in Rosler’s tableaux right down to the values and morals of the time.



Martha Rosler. Detail from *Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an Artist in the 21st Century)*, 2006. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK.

Fast forward to new work like *Point n Shoot* (2016), a digital print, that draws its central text and image from a campaign rally where Donald Trump asserted, “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters, OK? It’s like incredible.” The names in the background are some of those unarmed Americans of color who have died in recent years either at the “hands of police or while in police custody, without conviction of the officers involved.” It is a deeply disturbing portrait of arrogance and negligence. *Pencil of Praise* (2018) wins an award in the “super creepy video” category. Rosler combines Mike Pence’s efforts to extract gratitude and praise from Donald Trump’s cabinet members for Trump’s “leadership.” It

reads like a North Korean propaganda video. This is combined with moments from a 2017 press conference in the White House Rose Garden at which Trump announced his intention to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accord to a soundtrack of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” and “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Is this a joke? No, unfortunately. It is political realness reactivated by an unflinching eye.

Photography and video are the essential media for Rosler, who began her art career at the aesthetic interchange of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art. Her chosen media are, in many respects, the media of modernity and the media of Pop and conceptualism themselves. Her language is almost journalistic too. Slick current events, beauty, fashion and décor magazines were enabled by post-WWII technologies and buoyed by consumer demand. Collaging was a logical result. Material was inexpensive to obtain, easy to manipulate and fit well with modern art and craft sensibilities. *Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?* a 1956 collage by Richard Hamilton, made up of images from magazines including Ladies Home Journal, used mass-market imagery of the Post-War age. It is considered the starting point for Pop. The challenge was to collage it intelligently and meaningfully. Rosler prevailed.

Rosler was also an early adopter of video, which was both portable and increasingly inexpensive, replacing the 8 mm and Super 8 mm film home movie markets. Also, by using video, Rosler could reach a broad audience, “even though my work is critical of TV, audiences tend to accept it simply because it comes out of the set: it is TV, though strange TV.” But with Rosler, some of it is shtick, some is burlesque, some is performance. But all of it is to provoke a response. People are loath to laugh at or with art. “The liberal impulse not to laugh, even to scold others for laughing, is a natural extension of what the liberal mind feels to be an enlightened understanding of a welcoming social order,” as Philip Kennicott, *The Washington Post* critic wrote. Even Rosler admits, “Humor is deployed; spectators laugh and so do I.”

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH



Martha Rosler. *Capitalism, Democracy, 2018*. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NEW YORK.

Goya's art making occurred during one of the most tumultuous periods in Spain's history. Rosler's has too. It would be a mistake to consider Rosler's work a call to action. It may be best to refer to it as a call to consciousness, awakening for a broad audience. In fact, she has asserted it is "didactic and expository; it makes an argument [. . .] Yet oddly enough my work isn't hortatory. It doesn't insist on an avenue of action, or say, 'Do this!' Ultimately it's more contemplative, in that it does not answer the questions it poses."