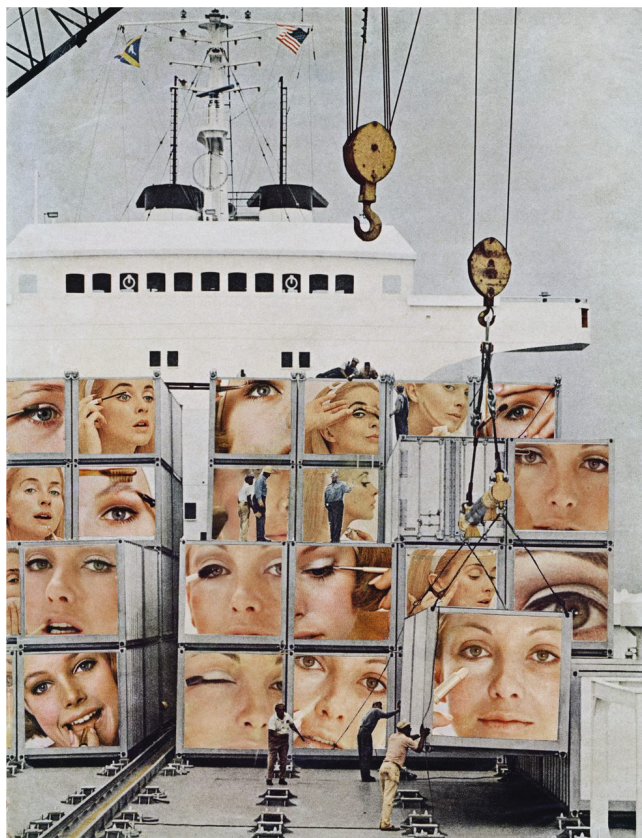


## MARTHA ROSLER

### Martha Rosler on the changing face of feminism

December 27, 2022 | As told to Blake Oetting



Martha Rosler, *Cargo Cult*, ca. 1966–72, photomontage.

*In the mid-1960s, Martha Rosler began creating photomontages exploring women's material and psychic subjugation, manipulating popular advertisements from news, fashion, and home magazines to unearth their nefarious ideological operations. Rosler made this body of work, "Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain," (1966–72) alongside painting, sculpture, photography, video, and performance, stitching together a variable array of Conceptual art practices attuned to feminist politics. This set of critical tools informs ["martha rosler: changing the subject...in the company of others."](#) a survey of the artist's work currently on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York through January 21, 2023.*

**WOMEN ARTISTS**, like actresses, are rediscovered when they are no longer just *women* but *old women*—for so many reasons, some worthy, some less so. This can make reaching back into the past especially fraught. In the case of this current exhibition, though, I find the current need to re-present the feminist critiques and demands of my earlier work to be valid and timely. Some themes persist over decades—and anyway, I'm one of those artists who is always trying to revisit things set aside. That applies to my work on housing and much else. In 2004, I decided, during the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, to restart the antiwar photomontages of about 1967 to 1972—above all to make emphatically clear that on our end, *nothing had changed*. We can apply the same argument to the representations of women, which have actually become even more degrading, if more complex, and with a new affirmation that "This is what women want, who they want to be." Let's listen to women, by all means. But beware of relying on what social subjects identify as what they want and why—what appears freely chosen is often impelled by underlying motives traceable to the context in which desire is produced.

# MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Collage seems to have been taken up by many women, in part because it's a tabletop form of production. I see my photomontages as descending from the collaged corkboards in school classrooms, and no doubt from earlier, prewar artists. Collages of past eras have been fetishized as developing a mode of aesthetic production rather than a method of de-aestheticization—the practice has in effect become smoothed over. I try to keep the tears and rips visible. In the upcoming show, a vitrine displays a few of the original paste-ups. I'm adamant that the pasted fragments are not the work. But it seemed, finally, rather stupid to mystify the process by not showing those paper constructs. As a maker myself, it has meant a lot to me to see John Heartfield's and Max Ernst's constructions in vitrines.



Martha Rosler, *Cosmic Kitchen I*, ca. 1969–72, photomontage.

I was making feminist sculpture at about the same time as the photomontages. *She Sees in Herself a New Woman Every Day*, 1976, which is in the show, is a grid of color photos, arranged on the floor, of mostly banal or outdated shoes, shot from above. Typically, when you see photos of shoes, they are facing you because the person wearing the shoes didn't take the picture. But mine are shot by the wearer. The photo grid is accompanied by audio with a pointed critique addressed to the speaker's mother, who had harped on about standing on your own two feet even while impeding that possibility. Women train their daughters not to be independent selves.

When I was making these works, I didn't dwell on whether they were sculptures, photographs, performances, videos, or something else, though I certainly was making format and formal choices. These are Conceptual works, even when the affective element is strong. Indeed, this current show centers on works all from a certain moment in time—alongside newer work as well—grounded in feminist insights and outlooks.

During the mid-1960s' feminist resurgence, I still identified as "one of the boys"—stemming from my interest in science and photography, and of course as a young Abstract Expressionist painter and avant-gardist, and someone active against the war. After I moved to California and ran into the Women's Liberation movement, I realized—especially as a single person with a baby!—the import of the phrase "Sisterhood is powerful." I saw the intertwining rather than the separation of the personal and the public worlds. Consciousness-raising sessions—where you sit around and talk with each other—were a powerful communal form of solidarity in deprogramming ourselves from the gaslighting and ideological imperatives cast at us. In the 1980s, competitive neoliberalism reinstated the mindset that any problem you have is *your* problem, and you struggle with it alone. Feminism entered my work when I understood the basic importance of a community of experience and of struggle. As with unions, when people can report the same experiences and the same outcomes, and the same responses from those who have power, you need to get together. You need a movement.