

HYPERALLERGIC

How Both Paris Hilton and Martha Rosler Satirize Domesticity

Hilton and Rosler's agendas are cleverly hidden through humor and blatant performativity.

Lydia Horne | October 18, 2021



Paris Hilton in *Cooking with Paris* (photo by Kit Karzen/Netflix © 2021)

“Tong,” says Paris Hilton, stretching her glossy lips around the unfamiliar sound. Hilton has just learned the word for the utensil from her sous chef, Kim Kardashian, and together they are peering over a skillet of bacon, confounded by how to flip the strips of meat, while the pink nonstick pan containing Frosted Flakes French toast cools off nearby. “Where is tongy?” Hilton repeats before spotting a long pair on the end of her gleaming marble kitchen island placed in the nick of time by someone on her film crew. Cut to a product shot of pink silicone tongs resting on a swatch of purple shimmering fabric arranged like an altar cloth and covered with glitter. Hilton’s nasally voice narrates as the camera pans across the device, “Cooking tip: These are tongs.”

In Hilton’s Netflix series, *Cooking with Paris*, released this past August, the heiress invites celebrity pals over to her mansion to haphazardly prepare atrocious looking meals while vaguely discussing their friendship and unforgettable nights out on the town. Hilton makes pink sparkly cannoli with Demi Lovato, Chanel logo-shaped cookies with Lele Pons, and truffle oil steak showered in edible gold flakes with her mother and sister, Kathy Hilton and Nicky Rothschild. Each episode is themed, determining Paris’s outfit, decor, and menu. Over the course of the season, assistants scurry about to transform the dining room into a “sultry steakhouse,” or a festive holiday table complete with a Christmas tree and life-size, light-up gingerbread men.

According to Hilton, the motivation for the show is to prepare her for having kids, which she plans to do next year through IVF. However, over the one season of *Cooking with Paris*, Hilton makes no evident progress towards proficiency in the kitchen — nor does the viewer, since the editing of the show doesn’t present Hilton’s cooking as something to be reproduced (if one would even want to). But that’s not the point. The appeal is her performance; the narrative is driven by Hilton’s mishaps.

As I watched the show, I was reminded of Martha Rosler’s six-minute video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), a staple of most college art history classes and a prominent feminist art piece. Rosler performs a cooking demonstration in which she identifies kitchen utensils before aggressively misusing them, a transgression of the signs and symbols associated

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with domesticity. There's no food present in the video emphasizing the ambient sounds of the kitchen, like the scratch of a grater, which the artist produces with the help of a fork. "Ladle," Rosler says, dipping the utensil in an imaginary pot of liquid before dramatically tossing the non-existent substance onto the floor. *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is considered a critical feminist and minimalist work. Rosler herself describes the video as "an anti-Julia Child replaces the domesticated 'meaning' of tools."



What Martha Rosler is to Julia Child, Paris Hilton is to Ina Garten. Cooking with Paris is the antithesis of the Food Network, replacing how-tos with how-not-tos. Paris chops vegetables wearing lacy fingerless gloves and takes frequent "perfume breaks" to spritz herself with fragrance. She gets faux rhinestones in Impossible Burger meat and leaves a trail of feathers in ranch dressing. Her bedazzled cookbook is covered with a photo of herself topless in an apron, and inside each step is written in a different primary color — "I only write in rainbow," Hilton explains.

Like Rosler, Hilton repeats the vernacular vocabulary of the kitchen with comedic stiffness, suggesting that the domestic space requires its own discrete language that can be mastered with enough practice, however neither seem particularly interested in learning. Hilton and Rosler subvert traditional kitchen etiquette to deliver a satire of domestic life. They chafe against the proscribed functions and behaviors of what a mother or wife "should" be, pointing out the confines these spaces and expectations place on women. Hilton and Rosler's agendas are cleverly hidden through humor and blatant performativity — like Paris's faux sexy baby voice which she occasionally slips out of during genuine moments of panic when on the brink of culinary disaster — or Rosler's hilarious deadpan when stabbing an icpick into her counter.

Of course, it's important to consider the political context and intention of each work. Rosler was a leading figure in the feminist art movement, a contemporary of Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy, and her work often addresses matters within the public sphere including the Vietnam war, climate change, and social injustice. Hilton, on the other hand, is no pioneer or activist. She's a product of her time, promoting a White, virtue signaling, girl-boss feminism in her unabashed pursuit of wealth through various entrepreneurial ventures. But, unlike many of her ilk, Hilton offers her followers a generous glimpse of her private life. It's a ticket to visit the world of the wealthy that is often hidden behind closed doors. In this way, Hilton packages herself for consumption while simultaneously controlling every angle of her image to maximize the buyer's delight and her profit.

In *Cooking with Paris*, Hilton capitalizes on her portrayal of being a "competent" woman, while highlighting its anachronism through the absurdity of her performance. Rosler manipulates the camera in the same way, transmuting her feelings of anger and frustration with the patriarchy into aggressive movements with kitchen equipment. They prove victorious through the discretion of their politics — who would ever suspect a woman wielding a spatula to be a catalyst for change?