

truth is, or is not

By Martha Rosler | May 31, 2024



Martha Rosler, *The Gray Drape*, from "House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series," 2008. Courtesy the artist.

Matters of truth permeate public discourse, yet what the word itself denotes remains unstable, and the connection of truth utterances to the real is always at issue. This is a truism, but the contours of our fascination with truth, fact, objectivity—and somewhat belatedly, authenticity—have evolved, in tandem with the social changes brought about by the growing consolidation of industrial capitalism and the corollary urbanization.

Newspapers and magazines, with greatly expanded reach and influence on a mass public, were pressed to develop a professionalized code of conduct in the face of government censorship. Their innovation was "objectivity," a new seal of truth on public narratives.

We still yearn to believe in the reliability of journalism's truth telling, presented as stories, literary or theatrical narratives enfolding truth claims. Tailing along was the demand for some form of truth telling and then evidentiary truthfulness in visual representation, abetted by late-nineteenth-century uses of photography to record sites, monuments, urban districts, and (proto-) anthropological observations of peoples. But aside from some slippage, the bifurcation of image work, especially moving images, into truth telling and fiction (even if allegory or parable) and nonfiction (a strange way to name something meant to convey truths), has remained of great concern. This is

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despite the fact that fiddling with images began right at the outset of camera work. But we've entered what some call late-stage capitalism, and some the Anthropocene, with a mighty degree of skepticism toward basic assertions, propositions, and truth claims, given real-world outcomes. The continued technicalization, rationalization, and quantification of human experience and its representations, and the concomitant development of sophisticated means of telling big, consequential lies with images—now at a new peak—has arrived as the promises of modernity to cure all ills through science and technology in an “information age” have been perceived as hollow.

The negative consequences of the heralded “conquest of nature” have led to a period of discontent marked by a pervasive sense of disconnection and a search for alternative explanations of what-is. People turn to dodgy alternative propositions, many of them proffered by bullies and snake-oil salesmen—a dodginess that was supposed to have been bested in the era of scientific rationality. But the inherent shakiness of truth claims—see under Postmodernism—has been widely accepted by nontechnical elites, underlining the proposition that belief and acceptance may rest as much on context, very much including group norms, as on evidence.

In the art world, that genteel space, the rule of thumb is that truth is best approached through inference, not direct statement, which would be deemed either infantile or propagandistic. Seeking to read a proposition from an artwork is seen as a philistine concern, for the relation between truth and reality in art is widely felt to be more properly located through the formalist aesthetics and transcendent universalism often associated with Modernism. This flatters those in the know, but the “democratization” of art institutions has changed the appeal: art as experience, not so much as revelation. And yet, the meaning of art is often interpreted through a perceived connection to the lived life of the artist or their identified social group—race, gender, and ethnicity are the reigning examples—re-envisioning objective claims for the truth of the work through a subjective or cultural lens, through a claim to personal authenticity. The artist remains the crucible, although different from the genius of High Modernism, where group affiliation was rarely a plus. Most certainly, the contentious *political* affiliations of the past 150 years or so were not greeted positively in the art world, and especially not during the Cold War. Truth was emphatically held to lie elsewhere (no matter what artists may have thought).



Martha Rosler, *Photo Op*, from “House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series,” 2004. Courtesy the artist.

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Speaking personally, the question of truth—and (social) justice, inevitably—has preoccupied me since childhood. But it was difficult to consider making a direct argument as an Abstract Expressionist painter. Turning to photography, one work of mine (*The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*) centered on questioning what might be involved in the construction of whatever truths documentary images might convey.

Earlier, I'd turned to a hybrid model of proposition-making, namely photomontage, drawing both from Pop's deadpan dis/connection to the "second nature" of industrial modernity and from the Surrealist invocation of the interior dream world. These were to me more science than magic, and more inclined toward propositions than simple expressions of feeling. I first turned my attention to magazine representations of women, putting ideas from two different realms—lingerie ads, say, and those for kitchen appliances— in the same space. I soon also addressed, far more publicly, the war in Vietnam and later, Iraq. By marrying magazine images of war with those depicting well-appointed homes (mostly interiors, some adorned with art), uniting widely separated physical spaces and disparate people within a single frame, I could collide two rigidly separated lines of discourse: about home and family on the one hand and about a war on foreign soil on the other. I could suggest arguments against war without the need for words—drawing on that substrate of meanings and interpretations that seemed to me inarguably true and perhaps widely shared. Idealized middle-class households do look like this and scenes of war, transposed to the home space, do rise to the level of human subjectivity. One wonders how today's reliance on memes and other linguistic scripts meaningfully conveys truth.

PS: I wrote this little essay on my computer, but as I picked up my phone, I saw there was a 'suggestion' from Siri, a proprietary digital appurtenance I never use, saying simply—and I quote—**Truth is.**