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Signal Disruptions: Gendered Tropes and the Feminist Burlesque of Martha Rosler

A Dissertation Presented

by

Jennifer Mary Kruglinski

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

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Doctor of Philosophy

in

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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My dissertation reveals the role of burlesque and humor in the feminist art of Martha Rosler. Rosler is acknowledged as a key figure in the feminist art movement, as well as a pioneer in video art, yet the fact that humor was integral to what I call her "feminist burlesque"—Rosler's parodic interpretation and re-presentation of the gendered imagery portrayed by the mass media—has been largely ignored in the literature surrounding her work. As such, this dissertation analyzes Rosler's feminist artwork from the 1970s that directly appropriated tropes of gender from the mass media and popular imagination in relation to both the extant body of literature, as well as the history of burlesque and the notion of a feminist aesthetic burlesque. I deliberately chose artworks that Rosler produced during the era in which the "second wave" of feminist activity crested, as these works not only reflect the role of the media in the construction of gendered identities, but also remain a poignant reminder of the media's continued dominance in representing tropes of femininity and masculinity, to this day. I selected artworks created by Rosler in which she directly engaged with the dominant tropes of gender portrayed within the media, as well. This dissertation asserts that Rosler's feminist burlesque of these tropes creates an aesthetic space for viewers to reconsider the role of the media, and the capitalist economy that supports and drives it, in constructing and confirming gendered identity, as well as the larger ideologies at play. I viewed Rosler's artwork through the lenses of carnivalesque laughter (Bakhtin), the history of burlesque, as well as Brechtian distanciation, and a feminist analytics of power (Scott). In doing so, this dissertation opened a new avenue for the analysis and discourse of feminist art and artists—that of the feminist burlesque.

Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to my family, without you this project would not have been possible. I have unending gratitude for my parents, John and Maryann Kruglinski, who have provided me with unflagging encouragement and expert guidance throughout my life and graduate career. My sister, Laura, remains a steadfastly positive presence and continues to help me as only a sister can. Extra special thanks to my Grandfather, Martin Heine, I love you, and I wish you were here to share this moment with me. My family has been a constant source of love and assistance throughout my life and this dissertation, for which I am incredibly thankful.

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Introduction: Feminist Burlesque and Martha Rosler's Artwork from the 1970s

> *Woman is thus granted very little validity even within her limited existence and second-rate biological equipment: were she to deliver an entire orphanage of progeny, they would only be so many dildoes.*
>
> Kate Millett[1]

Amidst the social unrest and cultural upheaval of the late 1960s, Martha Rosler created artworks that engaged in a feminist burlesque of the tropes of gender that she appropriated from mass culture and the popular imagination. While the fact that she created artworks that commented on gender was not unique within the context of the women's movement, the fact that she also focused on the satirical mode of burlesque to dissect and at least momentarily interrupt the circulation of images of femininity was a uniquely effective strategy among feminist artists whose careers began at the height of the feminist second wave. By highlighting everyday and familiar imagery and stereotypes and re-presenting them as strange within the parodic, clashing space of the artwork, Rosler successfully demonstrated the constructed nature of the prescribed gender roles and imagery within American society and culture. Although the existing literature about Rosler is fairly extensive, the vast majority of it focused on her critiques of contemporary culture, the roles she played within her art, or the mediums within which she works, among other themes, but overlooked the integral role of humor within her artistic burlesque. This dissertation disrupts that pattern by examining Rosler's "feminist burlesque." Burlesque is most often defined as a literary or dramatic form of parody, and set out by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: "that species of literary composition, or of dramatic representation, which aims at exciting laughter by caricature of the manner or spirit of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their

[1] Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 185.

subjects; a literary or dramatic work of this kind."[2] I intentionally surveyed Rosler's use of burlesque in her feminist artwork—specifically her dramatic and visual representations that aimed to excite laughter in their ludicrous treatment of serious mass media representations. As such, she carefully burlesqued the dominant gendered tropes that circulated in the media and utilized various mediums ranging from photography, performance, video, and installation to realize her vision.

Rosler worked in a variety of different modes, relying on static cameras or slow pacing in an odd edit in a video work, or an awkward arrangement of space in a photomontage or an installation, and theatricality in her performances, but regardless of the medium and the mode of address, she always infused her works with a dialectical address, intertwined political and didactic messages, viewed through a Brechtian Lehrstücke lens. Her use of the parodic mode, or burlesque, is key to her critique, as it softens the blow of her didacticism and makes her politically critical feminist works more appealing and approachable to a wider audience. She discussed her use of humor in an interview, specifically, how she "like[s] to use low forms, like comedy. The remark, 'If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh; otherwise they'll kill you,' is attributed to Oscar Wilde, and it's not a bad guide for unpopular opinions."[3] As philosopher Walter Benjamin noted, "there is no better start for thinking than laughter. And, in particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul."[4]

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[2] "Burlesque," in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press).

[3] Sabine Breitwieser, "In Conversation: Martha Rosler and Sabine Breitwieser: Part Ii: Stepping out from Behind the Proscenium Arch," *The Garage Sale Standard* 2012, 13.

[4] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 236.

In this dissertation, I address the work that Rosler produced concurrent with the "second wave" of feminism during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. Accordingly, I focused my research on the artworks in which Rosler directly addressed the role of women in society, as many of her works throughout her oeuvre indirectly touch on this theme, as well. Previous essays on Rosler, like Annette Michelson's 1998 catalogue essay, "Solving the Puzzle," both surveyed Rosler's video work and focused mainly on her feminist tactics as they related to her larger critique of everyday life within capitalism: "the intensity of an informing rage, heightened by the strength of her own presence as performer, was very quickly transformed into the analytic sharpness of attack, at thinking through of sources and the dynamics of domination;" yet Michelson's purview largely overlooked the transformative potential of the humor embedded within the burlesque inherent in Rosler's critiques.[5] Like Michelson, Alexander Alberro surveyed Rosler's entire oeuvre and focused on her use of Brechtian distanciation and feminist strategies, in his catalogue essay from the same year, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life," while he examined her use of a variety of media to examine the various subject positions available to her audience throughout her career.[6] A more recent examination of Rosler's work, Steve Edward's book *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, (2012) focused on the work named in the title, but situated that work within Rosler's larger oeuvre, and

[5] Annette Michelson, "Solving the Puzzle," in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachussets: The MIT Press, 1998), 184.

[6] Alberro's essay was incredibly informative as a general survey of Rosler's career, but it did not provide extensive depth about any single project. Alexander Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," ibid. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press).

did so by suggesting that the common interest throughout all of her work was in an "encounter or clash between distinct narratives that is the heart of Rosler's practice."[7]

Because I chose works in which Rosler's parody and burlesque of the representation of femininity in mass media was most apparent, the mediums I examined in this study paralleled those of the media during the late twentieth century; thus this dissertation focuses on Rosler's photomontage and video, as well as her performances connected to her videos. The first chapter outlines Rosler's life and education, and serves as a biographical background to the artistic analysis that follows in the remaining chapters. The second chapter addresses Rosler's first photomontage series, *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966-1972), and her burlesque of the role print media played in presenting images and tropes of femininity to Cold War Americans as merely one amidst myriad other consumable products in the booming economy after the Second World War.[8] In the third chapter, I examine the function of parody and burlesque in Rosler's second series of photomontages, *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967-1972), which brought together the American capitalist economy, western domestic interiors, and scenes from the Vietnamese war front in Rosler's examination of femininity as tied to the American construction and representation of home.[9] Finally, in the fourth chapter I analyze Rosler's videos, and the performances from which they were adapted, in relation to the context in which they were created. In her videos, Rosler directly quoted roles and stereotypes

[7] Steve Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (London: Afterall Books, 2012), 69.

[8] Rosler recently changed the title of this series and in earlier texts it was referred to as, *Beauty Knows No Pain, or Body Beautiful*.

[9] This series used to be separated into two sections, *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful*, and *Bringing the War Home: In Vietnam*, and older texts have those titles for these works, but now both parts of the series are titled, *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*.

from televised programming, which allows viewers to engage in her critique of the original appropriated media within its own visual language and context.

I argue that through her careful insertion of humor into fraught topics, Rosler opened a space in which viewers of her works could easily approach and digest the feminist message underlying her artworks and engage with their own critiques, developing their own questions about the hidden processes and ideologies that drive our society. Mikhail Bakhtin, who essentially equated parody with burlesque as both related to the grotesque and carnivalesque, described laughter as having "a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps no more) profoundly that when seen from the serious standpoint.… Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter."[10]

Feminist artists during the 1970s were not the first to utilize a wide range of media in their artwork in order to incite a dialogue about social, political, and cultural change. They inherited this multi-media precedent from earlier twentieth century avant-garde movements like the various Dada groups, the Bauhaus, and even De Stijl, as well as later movements like Fluxus and Pop Art. These earlier models utilized everything from historic artistic media like painting and sculpture, while looking to design, poetry, performance, installation, montage and a variety of other modes of production, to fully communicate their modernist, utopian goals. The notion that art could incite change was particularly strong in the early twentieth century, and tied to the avant garde modernist project that followed in the aftermath of World War I. The wholesale destruction of nearly an entire generation of young men by the technological innovations of the

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[10] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 66.

modern era caused many people, artists included, to seek another route for social and cultural transformation outside that provided by technology.

Art became a realm of protest and clamor for change at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, as well as in Gerrit Rietveld's architectural designs for worker's housing projects in De Hoek, Netherlands, as the aesthetic entered into social, cultural, and political criticism with a fervor largely unseen in artistic production prior to the twentieth century. The mobilization of the arts in the face of massive social and political unrest echoed forward to the future situation of the 1960s and 1970s, when artists again viewed their output as a mode of communication through which they could effectively reach a wider audience to create an affective message that could actually shift public opinion. I deliberately use the term echo, to call on Joan W. Scott's notions of the "fantasy echo" as a useful idea about the writing of history, which always takes place after the events have happened: "*Fantasy echo* has a wonderfully complex resonance. … the term signifies the repetition of something imagined or an imagined repetition. In either case the repetition of something is not exact since an echo is an imperfect return of sound. Fantasy, as noun or adjective, refers to plays of the mind that are creative and not always rational. … Retrospective identifications, after all, are imagined repetitions *and* repetitions of imagined resemblances. The echo is a fantasy, the fantasy an echo; the two are inextricably intertwined."[11] The archive of Martha Rosler's artwork that I constructed is my fantasy echo, or a feminist reverberation, of her feminist aesthetic burlesque of the gendered tropes present in the in mass media from the late 1960s through the 1970s.

As I traced the course of Martha Rosler's feminist burlesque throughout her early oeuvre, I drew upon many sources ranging from critical theory to art world criticism, yet the

[11] Joan Wallach Scott, "Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2: 287.

most influential of these were the words of the artist herself. Rosler has interviewed with many people, magazines, and other sources since the 1970s, but two of the most thorough and useful interviews have been the one conducted by Craig Owens for Video Data Bank's *Profile* series, in 1986, as well as the interview conducted by Benjamin H. D. Buchloch in 1998 for her retrospective exhibition catalogue, *Positions in the Life World.* Outside of these, and the other numerous interviews with Rosler from various sources over the years, she also wrote extensively alongside her artistic production. Writing has been part of her life from an early age—she was twelve when she won a writing prize at her school for a poem and two short stories, which apparently flustered her because, as she said, she considered herself an artist, but as she grew into a more nuanced artist she realized these two crafts were both part of the multifaceted artistic role that she defined for herself early on.[12]

Aside from the interviews with Rosler, her essays, like the early essay about the nascent medium of video, "To Argue for a Video of Representation. To Argue for a Video Against the Mythology of Everyday Life," discussed the aesthetic and radical potential of video, and were hugely influential for my construction of my feminist reverberation. As she noted in that essay: "It seems to me appropriate to use the medium of television, which in its most familiar form is one of the primary conduits of ideology—through both its ostensive subject matter and its overtly commercial messages. I am trying to enlist 'video,' or a different form of television, in the attempt to make explicit the connections between *ideas* and *institutions*, connections whose

[12] Rosler noted this fact in her interview with Molly Nesbit and Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Martha Rosler in Conversation with Molly Nesbit and Hans Ulrich Obrist," in *Passionate Signals*, ed. Inka Schube (Hannover: Sprengel Museum, 2005).

existence is never alluded to by corporate TV. Nevertheless, video is not a strategy, it is merely a mode of access."[13]

Rosler utilized these critical essays as only one of many modes of access amidst video, performance, photomontage, and others, to elaborate her vision of Cold War America, reaching out to audiences in whichever method of communication was most effective for her message. In a more recent essay, when asked to review the position of women artists at the turn of the millennium, she concluded:

> It is important to recall, ceaselessly, that feminism has represented, at its best, not women demanding simply a high place at the table. Women did not demand to be knighted or anointed as kings. I claim confidently that, as a body and as individuals, women artists were working, fighting, and theorizing to produce a significant art, an art of criticality, an art of open-ended questioning and a recognition of difference. … Through agitation of numerous kinds, women changed the art world decisively—at least for several decades—drawing on the vitality and inspiration of the social and political movements of the late 1960s and 1970s.[14]

In a later version of the "To Argue for a Video of Representation" essay (then titled "For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life"), Rosler noted how she relied on a variety of disruptive, or alienating strategies, and dealt with issues that related to: "social positions, [and used] a variety of different forms, most of which [were] borrowed from common culture, forms such as written postcards, letters, conversations, banquets, garage sales, and television programs of various forms, including human-interest interviews and cooking-demonstrations. Using these forms provide[d] [Rosler] with an element of familiarity and also signal[ed] [her] interest in real-

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[13] Martha Rosler, "To Argue for a Video of Representation. To Argue for a Video against the Mythology of Everyday Life," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge Massachusetts: the MIT Press, 1999), 367.

[14] "An Imaginary Talk on Women Artists at the End of the Millennium," in *Women Artists at the End of the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2006), 141-42.

world concerns, as well as [gave her] the chance to take on those cultural forms, to interrogate them, so to speak, about their meaning within society."[15]

As part of her interrogation into the meaning of forms, Rosler avidly quoted images, or representations, of gender roles from mass and popular culture and re-presented them in her artworks, effectively disrupting the controlling male gaze inherent in the visual language of the dominant patriarchal order as described by Laura Mulvey in her groundbreaking essay, first published in *Screen* in 1975, and in which she noted the complex, Lacanian structure of the look embedded in film, that can, subsequently, be applied to television, video, and even the still camera, as well: "The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment. There is no doubt this destroys the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the 'invisible guest,' and highlights the way film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms."[16]

Rosler exploited the dialectic of active and passive mechanisms that Mulvey discussed as built into the dynamics of filmic viewing (and by proxy the viewing actions embedded in looking at the products of the video and photographic camera), and then parodied the conventions that gender ascribed to masculine and feminine roles stereotyped in media representations. Although Mulvey's text was an early and formative feminist essay deconstructing the viewing process, very little has shifted in Western patriarchal mass culture to dislodge the primacy of the

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[15] "For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life," in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings 1975-2001* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004), 7.

[16] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 18.

determining male gaze from a position of pleasurable looking and thus controlling the sexual object on the screen, while also identifying with the image of the subject on the screen.

While Mulvey updated her essay in 1981 to reflect a position of female spectatorship and subjecthood, and acknowledge that there are alternative positions that exist outside the mainstream Hollywood patriarchal image-making machine, she recognized that, "in-built patterns of pleasure and identification impose masculinity as 'point of view,' a point of view which is also manifest in the general use of the masculine third person. … the emotions of those women accepting 'masculinization' while watching action movies with a male hero are illuminated by the emotions of a heroine of a melodrama whose resistance to a 'correct' feminine position is the crucial issue at stake. Her oscillation, her inability to achieve stable sexual identity, is echoed by the woman spectator's masculine 'point of view.'"[17] She situated gendered viewership amidst a field of signs inherent to the patriarchal order, as well as against the screen on which the gaze of the viewer mingles with the gaze of the camera's lens, and thus her ideas formed a basis for the burlesque parody of Rosler's critiques of the rigid gender hierarchy of American society during the Cold War.

Although Laura Mulvey was one of the first feminist theorists to address the position of the gendered spectator in relation to the filmic spectacle, she was not the last. Among the myriad authors that responded to, and built upon her concepts since her essay was first published in 1975, was Kaja Silverman in her 1996 book, *The Threshold of the Visible World*. While Mulvey held that her original article did not require any alterations or amendments, the dialogues initiated through identity politics and post-structuralism allowed Silverman to offer a new perspective on the processes of viewing and the subsequent kinds of idealization and

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[17] "Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), 69-70.

identification associated with those processes, as well as the productivity of the look and the potential for political change embedded within the cinema and its matrix of gazes. As Silverman noted when discussing her productive plan of action, one must proceed "from the ideal-ego to the active gift of love," and that, "the conclusion we are encouraged to draw is stunning in its simplicity: if it is through textual production, especially in its visual or imaginary forms, that the subject is encouraged to idealize certain bodily parameters, it can only be through the creation and circulation of alternative images and words that he or she can be given access to new identificatory coordinates."[18] Thus, the images that circulated through the cultural production of the 1990s still adhered to the same patriarchal definitions of idealization that were present when Rosler, as well as Mulvey, first produced their critiques, and these images merely reinforced older, patriarchal representations of bodily idealization, rather than present newer, alternative images of idealization.

Regardless of the lack of movement in the mainstream media's depiction of gender since the "second wave" of feminism, and how these representations affect identification, I am particularly indebted to Silverman's analysis of ego-ideal for my exploration of ideal images of feminine beauty in Rosler's photomontages: "I am not arguing against idealization—without which human existence would be unendurable, and which is the precondition for every loving access to the other, whether identificatory or erotic—but against the smooth meshing of that psychic operation with culturally defined norms. The colonization of idealization by the screen not only restricts ideality to certain subjects, while rendering others unworthy of love, but also naturalizes the former as essentially ideal."[19]

[18] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 81.

[19] Ibid., 37.

Silverman's later discussions of the screen and the gaze further influenced my exploration of Rosler's videos, particularly her discussion of the socially constituting gaze and camera, which she described by stating: "When we feel the social gaze focused upon us, we feel photographically 'framed.' However, the converse is also true: when a real camera is trained upon us, we feel ourselves subjectively constituted, as if the resulting photograph could somehow determine 'who' we are."[20] Rosler keenly highlighted the notion of the gaze, and the camera, as socially constituting an individual's identity, and thus utilized a variety of cameras, both video and photographic, private and public, as well as multiple gazes, within her artwork to both capitalize on and deconstruct this notion through her parodic feminist burlesque.

Silverman also addressed the political potential of film, in which she engaged with Bertolt Brecht's modernist ideal of alienation as interpreted through Walter Benjamin's discussion of the aura of the work of art as related to its decay from mass reproduction as seen in the mechanization inherent to modernization. Silverman noted that: "Distanciation offers little assistance in shifting unconscious desire, or reordering the terms of the bodily ego. However, it figures necessarily and centrally at that point at which the gift of love shifts from a passive to an active modality. Because distanciation aims precisely and above all else at the inculcation of conscious knowledge in the spectator, it is the preeminent epistemological tool within the aesthetic domain."[21] Rosler, in particular, cited Brechtian alienation, or distanciation, as one of the foundational strategies for her artwork, and her videos in particular, through which she entered into a critique of the social practices that visually constitute individuals, and stated: "I

[20] Ibid., 135.

[21] Ibid., 104.

was comfortable with Brecht's idea of Lehrstucke, that in a work of art one attempts to deal with an issue pedagogically or at least didactically."[22]

Despite Rosler's direct attribution of the influence a Brechtian technique in the previous quote, it is more than apparent that she allowed Brecht's words to guide her artwork during the 1970s: "People cannot conceive of contradiction and detachment as being part of artistic appreciation. Of course such appreciation normally includes a higher level, which appreciates critically, but the criticism here only applies to matters of technique; it is quite a different matter from being required to observe not a representation of the world but the world itself in a critical, contradictory, detached manner."[23] Rosler utilized different modes of Brechtian distanciation as the foundational strategies for her feminist aesthetic burlesque of the culture surrounding them.

Another tactic that Rosler utilized in tandem with Brechtian distanciation is that of humor, and while she directly referred to a, "New York–style Yiddish deadpan irony," that pervaded her artwork, I found Mikhail Bakhtin's text, *Rabelais and His World*, useful for his description of carnivalesque humor.[24] While Bakhtin outlined the fact that carnivalesque humor died off in the modern era—with the loss of regenerative and transformative power that accompanied the carnivalesque, or grotesque, laughter that occurred during the Romantic period—I claim that Martha Rosler's artworks still hold the true power of the carnivalesque, as outlined by Bakhtin here: "to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is

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[22] Craig Owens, "On Art and Artists: Martha Rosler," *Profile* 5, no. 2: 21.

[23] Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 146.

[24] Martha Rosler, interview by Author, July-August 2014.

humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things."[25] Given that Rosler created her feminist artworks to disrupt viewers' impressions of the world around them and transform the way they perceived and acted in American society, her works quite clearly inherited the kind of carnivalesque humor that Bakhtin described.

Another strategy utilized by Rosler was quotation, or appropriation, which both Walter Benjamin and Craig Owens discussed at different junctures. In the book *Understanding Brecht*, several of Benjamin's essays regarding Brecht's 'Epic Theatre' discussed the methods by which one can achieve distanciation, which included the notion of "interruption" and "the quotable gesture," the first of which makes conditions strange, or alienates them through the process of interruption.[26] As Benjamin further noted, "interruption is one of the fundamental methods of all form-giving. It reaches beyond the domain of art. It is, to mention just one of its aspects, the origin of the quotation."[27] Rosler fully embraced the notion of the interruption, or disruption, in her artwork and writing, eventually even titling her book, *Decoys and Disruptions*, and noted in an interview with Owens: "It's true that my work manifests fragmentation. I want to repeat the conditions under which we live, to say that fragmentary life can produce only fragmentary representations of life. Also, I suggest that the movement is out of the work of art, into a solution in 'real life.'"[28]

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[25] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 34.

[26] Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (New York, NY: Verso, 1998), 18-19.

[27] Ibid., 19.

[28] Owens, "On Art and Artists: Martha Rosler," 47.

Rosler's disruptive strategy aided her pursuit of producing artwork that intervened in "real life." Rosler adhered to the notion of the quotable gesture in her artworks, as she appropriated and quoted gendered tropes from mass media in order to create stereotypical characters that aided her deconstructive burlesque. The idea of reproducibility also intertwines with quotability and interruption, particularly when applied to film and video: "There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment."[29] Rosler seized upon the notion of the multiple reproducible fragments of everyday life and used that to her advantage in her artworks, appropriating a Playboy pin-up for a photomontage and borrowing a televised chef's stiff mannerisms for one of her early videos.

While Benjamin and Brecht introduced the notions of interruption and quotation (or appropriation) early on in the twentieth century, they were not the last to deal with those topics. In addition to interviewing Martha Rosler for the Video Data Bank in Chicago, Craig Owens also penned two hugely influential essays about feminism and appropriation, respectively, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," and "Representation, Appropriation, and Power." In the second of these essays, Owens noted how the disruptive nature of appropriation could serve to illuminate reality:

> Photography and film, based as they are on single-point perspective, are *transparent* mediums; their derivation from the Classical system of representation is obvious, yet remains to be investigated critically. Artists who deal with such

[29] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 234.

> images work to expose them as instruments of power. Not only do they investigate the ideological message encoded therein, but, more importantly, the strategies and tactics whereby such images secure their authoritative status in our culture. For if such images are to be effective tools of cultural persuasion, then their material and ideological supports must be erased so that, in them, reality itself appears to speak. Through appropriation, manipulation, and parody, these artists work to render visible the invisible mechanisms whereby these images secure their putative transparency—a transparency that stems, as in Classical representation, from the apparent absence of an author.[30]

Rosler worked to "render visible the invisible mechanisms" that provided the gendered images and stereotypes with their power and to reveal the basis of that power in everyday life. In "The Discourse of Others," Owens noted that feminism was one of, if not the most significant, developments of the 1970s and early 1980s, and even quoted from Martha Rosler's essay "Notes on Quotes," in which she stated: "Thus for feminists in the past decade, the resuscitation of a great variety of earlier works in all cultural fields was accompanied by energetic new production. The interpretation of the meaning and social origins and rootedness of those forms helped undermine the modernist tenet of the separateness of the aesthetic from the rest of human life, and an analysis of the oppressiveness of the seemingly unmotivated forms of high culture was companion to this work."[31] Owens noted that many feminist artists engaged in an art production that deconstructed notions of femininity, drawing from the extant "repertory of cultural imagery" to highlight, investigate, and disrupt the representations of women, which is precisely what both Rosler pursued in her artworks of the 1970s as she appropriated different tropes of femininity

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[30] Craig Owens, "Representation, Appropriation, and Power," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Stewart Bryson (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 1994), 111.

[31] Martha Rosler, "Notes on Quotes," in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004), 135.

from the popular imagination and mass media in order to satirize, interrupt, and deconstruct them.[32]

As Owens discussed the postmodernist tendencies of an appropriative feminist artistic practice, he outlined the various theoretical influences on feminist artists, which ranged from psychoanalysis couched in Freud and Lacan, to feminist philosophers like Luce Irigiray, and French post-structuralists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. I found Foucault's work on the archive in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," as well as his discussion of self-discipline in relation to society in *Discipline and Punish*, and of power in *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, of particular import to my investigation of Rosler's work, as he carefully negotiated the intertwined networks of power in our late industrial capitalist culture as well as the monitoring of individuals and knowledge, topics that are intimately embedded within the heart of the feminist deconstruction of the patriarchal order. Specifically, Rosler called the viewer's attention to the intertwined networks of power at play in the American military industrial complex, as well as the notion of panopticism in her work *Domination and the Everyday* (1978), as well as her 1981 collaboration with Paper Tiger Television, *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue*. Despite Rosler's overtly Foucauldian allusions to genealogies and systemic oppression as she appropriated and burlesqued different gendered tropes into her artwork in order to critique and deconstruct such representations as part of a historic system of representation that traced a genealogy of patriarchal subjugation, the influential philosopher's works had not yet been made widely available in the United States when Rosler made her works during the 1970s women's movement, and the parallels are merely serendipitous.

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[32] Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 71.

Kate Millett was directly involved with the feminist movement, as well as the arts, and her book, *Sexual Politics*, while couched in the 1970s "second wave" of feminism, was hugely influential for situating Rosler's work within the larger context of contemporary feminist theory. Among other early feminists, like Betty Friedan, Shulamith Firestone, and Simone de Beauvoir, Millett provided an immediate perspective on the landscape of feminism during the 1970s, allowing insight into the theoretical inner workings behind the women's groups that Rosler attended, as well as the dynamics among the various inner divisions of feminism itself. As Rosler noted about the feminist art movement: "The West Coast women tended more toward the formation of communities, creating their new discourse and working toward instituting their ideas within the context of those communities. In New York, with its larger network of people and the allure of the preeminent art institutions, activities were often directed outward. Consensus seemed to be based on political actions and statements rather than on collective adjustments of theory, study, and art making, although study groups were an important element."[33] Millett carefully outlined the social, cultural, ideological, economic, anthropological, and psychological basis for her theory of sexual politics, which she defined as, "power structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another," through an, "attempt to prove that sex is a status category with political implications."[34] She continued:

> the situation between the sexes now, and throughout history, is a case of that phenomenon Max Weber defined as *herrschaft*, a relationship of dominance and subordinance. What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females. Through this system a most ingenious form of 'interior colonization' has been achieved. It is one which tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more

[33] Martha Rosler, "The Figure of the Artist, the Figure of the Woman," in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004), 108.

[34] Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 24.

> uniform, certainly more enduring. However muted its present appearance may be, sexual domination obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power.[35]

While the climate of feminism has since shifted and become more nuanced, recognizing the multiple oppressions of gender, race, class, and sexuality, Millett's analysis of sexual politics in the 1970s laid the groundwork for feminist inquiries like the ones put forth by Rosler, as well as later work by critics like Frigga Haug, Sarah Ahmed, and Jackie Stacey. Millett herself acknowledged the cyclical nature of the feminist movement in her 1990 introduction to *Sexual Politics*, while her postscript presented an optimistic summary of the changes that transpired in American culture since the 1970s: "In America one may expect the new women's movement to ally itself on an equal basis with blacks and students in a growing radical coalition. It is also possible that women now represent a very crucial element capable of swinging the national mood, poised at this moment between the alternatives of progress or political repression, toward meaningful change. … It may be that a second wave of the sexual revolution might at least accomplish its aim of freeing half the race from its immemorial subordination—and in the process bring us all a great deal closer to humanity."[36]

Unfortunately, the promise Millett saw in the 1990s turned towards repression instead of freedom, as the political climate regressed towards an increasingly conservative backlash against any of the gains won since the 1970s women's movement, with the Equal Rights Amendment permanently stalled in Congress, rape institutionally ignored on college campuses and by police departments, and women's reproductive rights slowly eroded four decades after the initial victory of Roe v. Wade. Rosler highlighted this lack of feminist progress and the connection between today and the days of the "second wave" in her recent re-presentations of her work from

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[35] Ibid., 24-25.

[36] Ibid., 363.

the 1970s, as in *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series* (2004-2008), *The Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* (2012), and *Semiotics of the Kitchen: An Audition* (2011).

Another feminist theorist whose ideas were hugely influential to my thinking was the work of Joan W. Scott, who inherited the feminist legacy set out by trailblazers like Millett. Scott's ideas of the fantasy echo and feminist reverberations permeated my work, as she viewed the waves of feminist activism and thought through various lenses, allowing everything from post-structuralism to identity politics to influence her thought. She called upon a feminist analytics of power to deconstruct traditional history: "We need the feminist analysis of categories of identity not only to detect the differentials of power constructed by binary oppositions that are purported to be timeless, natural, and universal, but also to contextualize and historicize these categories. Feminist methodology has taught us to ask about variation, difference, and conflict whenever we are presented with neatly contained entities—and not only 'man' and 'woman.'"[37] Scott not only utilized feminist methods to question the way history was written, and the categories applied within it, but also embedded within her analysis the metaphor of the echo, or reverberation:

> Echo may be a better metaphor …for designating the mutability of words or concepts because it's more mobile, connoting not just a distorted repetition, but also movement in space and time-history (see Scott). Perhaps, in these days of cataclysmic transmission it would be better still to talk about reverberations, seismic shock waves moving out from dispersed epicenters, leaving shifted geological formations in their wake. The word reverberation carries with it a sense both of causes of infinite regression—reverberations are re-echoes, successions of echoes—and of effect—reverberations are also repercussions.[38]

The notion that history is flexible, and that the actions of the past can influence the future, as well as the idea that the historian in the future has great power over the past has pervaded my

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[37] Joan Wallach Scott, "Feminist Reverberations," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 3 (2002): 11.

[38] Ibid.

perception of Rosler's artwork, particularly regarding her engagement with her own work from the 1970s.

Although Kate Millett was a sculptor who fostered her interest in cultural criticism, and Joan Wallach Scott is a contemporary feminist theorist, Lucy Lippard provided a unique perspective on the feminist arts movement, from her position as an art critic. Lippard presented the unique perspective of an art world insider, and someone involved with the feminist art movement, but from someone outside of artistic production as she wrote art criticism. Although she began her career writing typical modernist art criticism, Lippard eventually joined the activist Art Worker's Coalition (A.W.C.), but initially resisted Women Artists in Revolution (W.A.R.) as she was, "decidedly not accustomed to identifying with female underdogs—with oppressed people and unknown artists, yes, but *women*—that was too close for comfort."[39] She noted that even five years after, "the birth of [her] feminist consciousness," she had to, "question every assumption, every reaction," as she was wary of the fact that the sexual politics Millett outlined truly pervaded every aspect of American culture and consciousness.[40] After rising to her feminist consciousness, Lippard became a germinal figure in the feminist realm, and not only sought out feminist artists for her formally published criticism and organized exhibitions of their art, but she also joined forces with W.A.R. and other feminist activist groups to protest the institutionalized discrimination against women in museums and galleries across the country—in doing so, she acknowledged that she felt needed within the art world and although she wanted to revolutionize culture, she was, "stuck with reform because of the context I work in. Right now art feminism is trapped within the system," and in order to prevent feminist art from being

[39] Lucy Lippard, "Changing since *Changing*," in *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), 3-4.

[40] Ibid., 4.

subsumed into ideology of "greatness" of the art world establishment, she resigned herself to her position of working within the system rather than attempting to overthrow it completely.[41] Lippard's cataloguing of the feminist art movement proved an invaluable resource for my analysis of the historic context in which Rosler produced her art.

Particularly striking in relation to the current feminist landscape was Lippard's discussion of reform, rather than revolution, and how this intertwined with a concept proposed by Herbert Marcuse—that of repressive tolerance. While Marcuse's critical theory expounded many influential ideas about America's late capitalist military industrial complex, I found his notion of repressive tolerance to be the most relevant to my investigation of Rosler's feminist media art burlesque of the 1970s, and to feminist art in general. As Marcuse noted in his essay "Repressive Tolerance:"

> The conditions under which tolerance can again become a liberating and humanizing force have still to be created. When tolerance mainly serves the protection and preservation of a repressive society, when it serves to neutralize opposition and to render men immune against other and better forms of life, then tolerance has been perverted. And when this perversion starts in the mind of the individual, in his consciousness, his needs, when heteronomous interests occupy him before he can experience his servitude, then the efforts to counteract his dehumanization must begin at the place of entrance, there where the false consciousness takes form (or rather: is systematically formed) -it must begin with stopping the words and images which feed this consciousness.[42]

As I already noted, the conditions which create and preserve a repressive society have not been alleviated, and the systemic tolerance of subversive movements like feminism effectively declaws them while bringing them into the establishment, thus rendering their potentially radical and revolutionary critiques relatively harmless as part of the larger military industrial complex of

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[41] Ibid., 10.

[42] Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *The Essential Marcuse: Selected Writings of Philosopher and Social Critic Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Andrew Feenberg and William Leiss (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2007), 51.

American society. Rosler even acknowledged the repressive tendencies of our society in her essay, “Notes on Quotes,” in which she referred readers to Marcuse’s essay.[43] Rosler created works that disrupted the images and words that fed the false consciousness at the root of our repressive society, yet nothing short of a cultural, social, and political revolution would affect the changes for which Marcuse called.

While that revolution has yet to occur, artists and activists continue to take aim at the inequities inherent in American culture, with Martha Rosler among them. She continues to produce artwork that dissects the mass produced stereotypes of gender through a parodic burlesque of popular cultural representations. Recently, Rosler delved back into her work from the 1970s, making the connections she found between that era and today all the more concrete. She not only re-presented her 1975 video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* as a performance at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2003, but she also reprised her 1967-1972 *Bringing the War Home* photomontage series, as well as her 1973 *Monumental Garage Sale*. Although many women of my generation denounced feminism in recent years, I identify with and espouse its views, which call for an equal society, culture, and politics for all men and women, and I also empathize with Rosler’s more radical social and political critiques that she presents in her artwork. As I argue in this dissertation, Rosler’s feminist burlesque of gendered tropes within the mass media creates a space in which the audience of, and participants in, her artworks can openly and easily reconsider the context in which images of gender are created, and how the way they are represented reveals deeper truths about the power structures of our society, as well as the forces that drive our cultural and political systems—all approached through the common language of humor that makes her work that much more accessible.

[43] Rosler, "Notes on Quotes," 137.

Chapter One: Writing Feminist Art History

The media have substituted themselves for the older world. Even if we should wish to recover that older world we can do it only by an intensive study of the ways in which the media have swallowed it.

Marshall McLuhan[1]

While the tumult that arose during the 1960s and carried through to the 1970s was momentous, and the artistic response to this cultural, social, and political upheaval was just as monumental, this was not the first time in the twentieth century that art responded to crises in the outside world. The artists' responses—Martha Rosler among them—to the turmoil of the 1960s are fantasy echoes, to again borrow Joan W. Scott's term, in which the aesthetic reverberations of earlier radicals carried forward through time, and were reimagined in the new context of the agitation against the Vietnam War, the fight for Civil Rights, the Gay Rights movement, and the Women's Rights Movement.[2] The momentum for change that arose after the end of the first World War was largely obfuscated by the rise of Fascism and Communism in Europe, both of which rejected avant-garde art in favor of a form of realism that could be put to work in both of their respective propaganda machines. A few voices, like those of John Heartfield, maintained their critical vision and used their artwork as a podium to speak out against Hitler and the horrors incited by the Nazis. Heartfield was a photomonteur progenitor of Rosler's practice, as he similarly created agitprop montages that critiqued the political and social climate around him only decades earlier between the World Wars. However, he was only one of a few, and much of the art produced immediately after World War II focused largely on formalist aesthetics, rather than any ideals of social or cultural change. The centers of power in the artistic world shifted from Paris and Berlin, as Europe was still reeling from the destruction of the war, to New York

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[1] Marshall McLuhan, "Education, Language, and Media," *Cycle 7* (1973): 232.

[2] See Scott, "Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity."

City in America. This shift in the artistic power structure followed many of the artists that were forced to, or chose to, expatriate to the United States. The atmosphere in New York and the rest of America after WWII was one of heightened productivity, consumption, and expectations for the potential of America's new role as the new leading nation—not only in the Western world, but across the entire globe.

In an accordingly modernist fashion, the new American avant-garde broke with earlier experiments in socially, culturally, or politically engaged art, and instead focused on formal aesthetics within the newly emerging "New York School." This is the art that Rosler was the most familiar with when she grew up in its midst in New York City during the 1940s and 1950s. With Clement Greenberg as the dominant critical voice for this newly formed art world, formalist aesthetics dominated the aesthetic production in America through 1950s, and only with the rise of "Neo-Dada" and Allan Kaprow's Happenings, at the end of the decade, did art's content reflect and consider the external world—particularly that of the booming consumer capitalist society that took hold of America after 1945. Throughout the 1960s, art took a variety of turns, at once reinforcing Greenbergian formalism through Minimalist painting, but also turning away from the strict modernist ideals in Conceptual works and Fluxus events. This oscillation in the art world ironically reflected the massive unrest that mounted throughout the U.S. during the 1960s. From the Civil Rights movement to the Anti-Vietnam War movement, and the various counter-culture and student groups that formed in their midst, citizens lashed out at the establishment that had, for decades, sold the populace a singular image of the "American Dream" centered around a white, nuclear family, and all the objects and consumer goods that accompanied that lifestyle image.

It was in this tumultuous context that Feminist art developed, and in this milieu that Rosler developed her first photomontages and critical aesthetic practices, as she noted: "by the late '60s, feminism began to inform my thoughts and my work. I was obsessed with the reduction of the female to the mythic and to the crudely concrete."[3] Built on the momentum from the various protests of the 1960s, women raised their voices, fists, paintbrushes, and cameras in protest against their limited roles in society. Artists joined the causes of the civil rights movement as well as the protests against the Vietnam War, particularly in the framework of groups like the Art Worker's Coalition (A.W.C.). However, as with many of these other 1960s counter-culture movements, women were often relegated to secretarial roles, at best, while men worked on the front lines. In "Black Power—Catalyst for Feminist," Sara Evans detailed the sexism inherent in the Student civil rights activist group, SNCC, which was outlined and presented in the 1964 "SNCC Position Paper (Women in the Movement)" at the staff retreat: "Evidence of sexual discrimination in SNCC filled first of three pages: eleven specific examples of the automatic relegation of women to clerical work, exclusion of women from decisionmaking [sic] groups and leading positions, the tendency to refer to men as people and women as 'girls;'" and although the women knew the list would not be well-received, they presented it anyway, in an attempt to combat the attitude the bred statements like, "Stokely Carmichael's rebuttal: 'The only position for women in SNCC is prone.'"[4] Evidence of sexism extended far into the art world as well, as Juliette Gordon noted in her article outlining the history of Women Artists in Revolution (W.A.R.):

> Although women made up half of the coalition, they rarely spoke up at the intense discussions held sometimes twice weekly, except for one women [sic] who held

[3] Owens, "On Art and Artists: Martha Rosler." 12.

[4] Sara Evans, "Black Power--Catalyst for Feminism," in *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 86-87.

> all the male artists in her power since she was an art critic who could build or destroy a reputation. After all, men were the artists and women came there to appreciate their intelligence, so why should a women [sic] expect more? After some of us openly expressed our displeasure over the existing situation men patted us in mascot fashion and even put women into the changing chairmanship roles occasionally, denying all the while that any 'real' problem existed. … an extra demand was added to encourage female artists towards greater equality, but even that had to be modified but the male who rewrote it since we really couldn't be serious about asking for 50% representation in all art shows even though we comprised 65% of the professional art schools.[5]

Frustrated with their exclusion from the active roles within the movements, feminist artists created their own organizations and movements, like W.A.R., which could finally reflect their views and ideas regarding the changes needed in American culture. Martha Rosler, herself an highly active member of the Women's Liberation Front in San Diego from the late 1960s on, acknowledged and commented on the strict classification that took place within the art world after the fact: "the art world reflexively seeks cover under the banner of one reigning idea. The rigid categorization that follows upon this has led to women artists' exclusion from shows devoted to historicizing the first generation of conceptual artists because these women were identified as feminists, which would place them in a different pigeonhole of a show."[6]

The basic outline of the rise of the women's movement during the late 1960s is well-known, and circulates widely through a variety of texts, ranging from general, "women and art" survey texts like Whitney Chadwick's, *Women, Art, and Society*, to more specifically feminist histories, like Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard's, *The Power of Feminist Art,* and more recent exhibition catalogues and texts, like Helena Reckitt and Peggy Phelan's, *Art and Feminism,* and Cornelia Butler's, *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, that re-presented the familiar feminist history through a broader, and more inclusive lens. Each of these texts

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[5] Women Artists in Revolution, "A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution," (Pittsburgh, PA: KNOW, INC., 1973), 2.

[6] Rosler, "An Imaginary Talk on Women Artists at the End of the Millennium," 139.

expanded and revealed more detail about the development and production of feminist art, building on the general introduction provided in Chadwick's survey, and created a growing archive of scholarship regarding feminist art.

As Peter Wollen discovered, "feminism thus acted as a crucial catalyst in breaking the hold of modernism. But at the same time feminism is resistant to absorption into any new institutional chapter in an epochal history of art that remains patriarchal in its foundations, whether modernist or postmodernist. Feminism demands more than a redistribution or realignment within a persistent Symbolic Order, a persistent culture."[7]

The women's movement, and the role of the feminist artists within it, was one of the most important social and cultural movements of the late twentieth century, as Craig Owens, among many others, noted, "among the most significant developments of the past decade—it may well turn out to have been *the* most significant—has been the emergence, in nearly every area of cultural activity, of a specifically feminist practice."[8] Feminist artists, like Rosler, mobilized and participated in a variety of protests, as well as created their own centers and sites for elaborating this discourse.

The Medium is the Message, or is it?

When she first moved to San Diego, Rosler worked with 'underground' feminist newspapers like *Goodbye to All That*, and through her connection to the local Women's Liberation Front, she engaged with protests in the area around San Diego, as well as lectured at schools and organizations in that locale. The use of multiple mediums by individual feminist

[7] Peter Wollen, "Counter-Cinema and Sexual Difference," in *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, ed. Kate Linker (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985), 39.

[8] Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," 61.

artists to most accurately communicate their message of gender equality—as in Rosler's case—was a particularly unique strategy, largely unseen elsewhere in the art world. Drawing upon the avant-garde modernist strategies from Dada to Pop, feminist artists produced a multi-media artistic affront to open up a dialogue about women's rights within the art world and well beyond. Each medium utilized by artists like Rosler carried with it its own history and context, which I will trace briefly, here.

Photography, and the related formats of photomontage and collage, appear throughout Martha Rosler's oeuvre, and provided many feminist artists with the means of creating and appropriating imagery that supported their search for equal rights. Women in the late twentieth century approached the camera, and its output, as a mode of image production that constructed the world as they saw it through the fixed gaze of the camera's lens. Photography erupted into the world in the mid-nineteenth century, amidst the cacophony of the steam age and Victorian ideals. While originally touted as an equal-opportunity medium, gender, class, geographic location, and ethnicity have always mediated access to photography. However, by the late twentieth century, women artists were able to utilize photography as a mode of resistance against their lack of a voice in cultural, social, and political realms.

As Susan Sontag noted that, "photographs furnish evidence."[9] Yet, as she continued, "photography is not, to begin with, an art form at all. Like language, it is a medium in which works of art (among other things) are made," and thus served as merely another creative tool, among several, in an artist's kit.[10] The dual function of photography, evidence and art, facilitated feminist artists', like Martha Rosler's, use and embrace of photography in the context of the women's movement of the 1970s. Photography and photomontage became yet another set of

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[9] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 5.

[10] Ibid., 148.

tools in the feminist artistic arsenal towards equality. In the role of document or evidence, the photograph served to preserve individual visions of a multitude of ephemeral performances, installations, protests and other actions, while its aesthetic merits were well established within the art world by the 1970s. Rosler's use of photomontage in her *Body Beautiful: Beauty Knows No Pain* series had a clear historic precedent, not only in medium but also style and purpose, in the Dada photomontages of Hannah Höch and John Heartfield, as well as the Pop collages of Richard Hamilton. Her appropriation of images cut from contemporary magazines and advertisements, which she cleverly re-presented in a new aesthetic environment, both made familiar photographs strange and proved an highly effective strategy for bringing those images, as well as the surrounding political, cultural, and social climate that produced them, into question. As Alexander Alberro noted about Rosler's montage practice:

> in Rosler's work, …that neo-avant-garde tradition is fused with the European Marxist tradition of montage as political critique practiced throughout the century by Sergei Eisenstein, John Heartfield, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Höch, and some of the surrealists in the 1920s and 1930s. In other words, whereas the juxtaposition of disparate images and contexts in this series seems related to works such as Hamilton's *Just What is It That Makes Today's Home So Different, So Appealing?* (1956) and Rosenquist's *F-111* (1965), for Rosler montage required a dialectical synthesis where new meaning would be produced—one imbued with a sharp political critique.[11]

Clearly Rosler's method was rooted in an earlier avant garde tradition that confronted politics through appropriation of a dominant visual language courtesy of photography's role of evidence, while also situating her critique in the aesthetic realm through its role as art.

Video is another area of particular interest as a realm of art production where women and men supposedly had equal access to this new technology since its inception. This notion of

[11] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," 80.

equal access is quite relevant, as the historic production of art and the artistic canon were topics seized upon during the 1970s by feminists like Linda Nochlin, who discussed women's access to different modes of aesthetic production.[12] As Nochlin discussed in her landmark essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" traditional art forms, like painting and sculpture, were preceded by millennia of primarily male participation, output, and instruction, and thus had a patriarchal power structure that could not be shaken: "By stressing the *institutional*—that is, the public—rather than the *individual*, or private, preconditions for achievement or the lack of it in the arts, I have tried to provide a paradigm for the investigation of other areas in the field. …I have suggested that it was indeed *institutionally* made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, no matter what the potency of their so-called talent or genius."[13] Video, as a new, twentieth-century technology for art-making, had no such precedent to determine its trajectory outside of the inherent patriarchal nature of the society in which video arose as an art form. The perceived equality of the availability of video was far more valid than any previous mode of art production.

Unlike film, videos did not require developing, processing, and the like, but were immediately available for review and editing. This instantaneous quality allowed artists to rapidly produce videos related to any subject matter and view them without any intermediaries, processing, or waiting, as with film. Critics, like Rosalind Krauss, argued that video's instant transfer of images could become the means by which a purely narcissistic aesthetic was

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[12] Photography, and its sister medium of film, would be the only other "new" mediums touted as having equal opportunity open to men and women, yet this new technology was created and developed by men in a society that was exceedingly paternal than patriarchal towards women. Thus the actuality of photography being "equally" available to men and women, in a society where women required a male escort to leave their homes and often did not have the opportunity to own property nor vote, was more of a myth than fact.

[13] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1988), 176.

produced, resulting in the medium of video equated with narcissism and, as Krauss mused, "with the subject of video, the ease of defining it in terms of its machinery does not seem to coincide with accuracy; and my own experience of video keeps urging me towards the psychological model."[14] However, while Krauss's notion of moving away from the machinery itself, and toward the artist's psyche, initiated a forward momentum; I argue that far from defining a purely narcissistic aesthetic, the feminist artists like Rosler, who utilized the new medium of video as a simulacrum of television broadcasting, created an activist strategy that served to interrupt the constant barrage of the images and roles provided to women, and the general audience, through the mass media. Similarly, Rosler noted that the narcissistic tendencies of video, and Krauss's call to define the medium in terms of a psychological model, merely embedded the new medium deeply within the already extant institutions of the art world: "Yet this emphasis on the experience and the sensibilities of the individual, and therefore upon expression as emblematic of personal freedom and thus as an end in itself, provided an opening for the assimilation of video—as 'video art'—into existing art world structures."[15]

Early video art involved a variety of explorations of the aesthetic and communicative potential of medium, and documentary video was one of the earliest ways in which video was put to work as an activist strategy. The feminist artists, many of them friends and colleagues of Rosler, who participated in the founding of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, California, utilized video to document every facet of activity there, from renovating the space to accommodate the various programs to capturing the different performances that took place there. Outside of direct documentation, a work like, *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977), by Suzanne Lacy

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[14] Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 52.

[15] Martha Rosler, "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment," in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writing, 1975-2001* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004), 55.

and Leslie Labowitz, took advantage of the role of video in relation to broadcast television. The artists created the performance and media event specifically for the local media in response to its coverage of the 'Hillside Strangler,' drawing directly upon the sensationalism of the mass media for their broadcast. Lacy stated, "we wanted to use media conventions to subvert media messages, and to introduce a more complicated feminist analysis into the coverage of the case."[16] They designed every aspect of the event to fit within a television screen and thus appropriated the media spectacle for the benefit of women's agency and defense.

Other early uses of video aligned with the exploration of surveillance and space, as in the early installation video works of Bruce Nauman or Vito Acconci's physically taxing videos. Joan Jonas created works that utilized the notion of surveillance, placing herself in front of the camera in works like *Vertical Roll*, forcing the viewer to face not only the objectification of the artist on the screen, but also the role of the technological apparatus and its interruption of that image. Other artists, like Martha Rosler, utilized video to reflect their own image, as well as the images put forth by society, parodying and burlesquing the dominant visual language that surrounded gender in the mass media to disrupt the circulation of the stereotypical roles which women were forced into through the cultural indoctrination inherent in our patriarchal society. For her first experience with video production, Rosler recalled:

> I started working in video when David Antin formed an alliance with a man named Charlie Cox, who ran the video studio for the medical school. He agreed to teach a small group of us, including David and a group of grad students, how to use the video studio, in 1972 or 73. Like most artists, we were interested in film, and video was an interesting hybrid: very cheap compared to film, and close to TV in its origins. Also, its 'degraded' image allowed one to be experimental. And

[16] Suzanne Lacy, from telephone interview by Moira Roth, July 20, 1993, quoted in Norma K. Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 149.

> it was speaking to other artists, of course, while circulating within but also (potentially at least) outside the 'art world.'[17]

Rosler's most widely known video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), appropriated its theme and presentation from the televised cooking show format, with a culinary expert host and, by proxy, a frustrated home chef attempting to "break out of the box" with each exaggerated gesture that expressed her exasperation at the role that society had carved out for her.

The role of performance and installation art within the trajectories of feminist art and art history are varied and interwoven with the other mediums discussed here. Often artists used video or photography to document the ephemeral nature of performances, providing future generations with evidence of the event, while installation could also serve as the site or setting for a performance. Feminist artists embraced performance as a realm in which they could enact their visions of how gender affected their lives and artistic output, with early feminist performances ranging from Yoko Ono's Fluxist *Cut Piece* (1965), which set a standard for audience participation and artist risk, to Yayoi Kusama's *Grand Orgy to Awaken the Dead* (1969), which pushed the boundaries of feminine embodiment and sexuality, and both works addressed the role of women's agency, or lack thereof, in relation to their gender. The use of autobiographical and everyday content in performance also became a way for women to enact gender in a meaningful way. The mantra of the women's movement, "the personal is political," became the ideal artistic subject matter for many feminist performances in various different permutations. Many of these performances later became videotapes, like Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977), which she originally performed in the context of a gallery in 1973, but she eventually translated the work into the widely known video of the same name. In the video format, Rosler expanded beyond the gallery performance of socially accepted

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[17] Rosler, "Email Interview."

body shape, size, and image to include quotations of photographs from historic documents that supported her deconstruction of a society obsessed with measurement and statistics, as well as supporting narration, and other videographic devices that were impossible in the live performance within a gallery. As Alexander Alberro noted of the performance of *Vital Statistics*, "the limitation of the live performance was that the presence of a naked woman in the room added another level of objectification and voyeurism.

This reality prompted Rosler to seek a higher level of mediation, which led to the reconception of the project for video in 1977. "As a performance *Vital Statistics* was a strip-tease in which, in a room full of spectators, a man directed a woman to remove her clothes," a fact which Rosler acknowledged in an interview with Martha Gever, noting that the men in the performance were guarantees of her safety, "it was not just a woman being undressed in front of a group of spectators, but a woman whose relationship to the audience is mediated by the men handling her. On a flat screen I needed another dimension, which was supplied by talk."[18] The physical embodiment of different feminist perspectives within performance allowed for an interactive questioning of gender roles between audience and performer, and initiated a dialogue through the performance itself.

Installation is yet another inherently intertwined medium—often combining painting, sculpture, photography, and other media into one environment, and at times, these elements would even coalesce into the site for a performance or video. With the rise of the women's movement in the late 1960s, what was initially merely a strategy to comment on and combat art's commodity status translated into a feminist critique that extended beyond the role of the commodity in the art world to the impact of capitalism and its sites, how people interacted with

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[18] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," 98.; Martha Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," *Afterimage* 9, no. 3: 12.

those objects and sites, as well as with each other, and the gender roles embodied in those interactions. Feminist artists utilized site-specific installations to further elaborate their views on gender roles in contemporary society. The landmark site-specific installation, *Womanhouse* (1972), created by the artists enrolled in and teaching at the inaugural Feminist Art program at The California Institute for the Arts, was an exceptional example of feminist installation art created for a specific location at a specific moment in time. Through their renovation of a house slated for demolition, the artists first rebuilt the house and then created rooms within it that further reflected the feminist rallying-cry, "the personal is political." From a nurturing kitchen with eggs that morphed into breasts, to the menstruation bathroom, and the bridal staircase, *Womanhouse* was a multivalent commentary on women's relations to the home. These rooms also became the sites for different performances, like Faith Wilding's, *Waiting*, which further elaborated the interrelation between installation and performance.

Similarly, Martha Rosler's performance and installation in the University of California, San Diego's (UCSD) art gallery, *Monumental Garage Sale* (1973), addressed the flow of goods into and out of the home, and how people interacted with these objects. Through the inherently culturally and socially prescribed relation of women to the home, the *Monumental Garage Sale* deftly commented on women's roles within this economic flow through the home. As Jo Anna Isaak noted in her study about feminist art and laughter, "in the contemporary critical concern about rabid consumerism we are dealing not just with consumption, but with consumption conceived as a threat, particularly the unlicensed appetites of women who are placed in the role of preeminent consumers."[19] She carefully acknowledged the primary role women hold with regard to consumption within the domestic realm. In her interview with Gretchen Herrmann in

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[19] Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 31.

the *Garage Sale Times*—the newspaper published in conjunction with Rosler's recent *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* (2012)—Rosler and Herrmann discussed how the garage sale rose to prominence and was aided by several factors, like the rise of prosperity in the middle class as well as planned obsolescence in consumer goods, but "finally, the liberalization of cultural values in the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s swept in a generalized ethos that it was perfectly OK, even cool, to buy used stuff. …It was abetted by numerous women's magazine articles and Sunday supplements that legitimized holding garage sales to proper suburban housewives for 'fun and profit.'"[20] In her earliest iterations of the *Garage Sales*, Rosler relied on the organization of the space, and the distribution of the goods and lighting within the gallery space—which she deliberately arranged to mimic a garage—in order to address the role of the commodity in the home, and women's relation to it.

All these mediums, from photography, to video, to performance, and installation, provided artists with a unique and innovative outlet with which to express their views. Feminist artists, like Rosler, embraced such a wide variety of mediums in their work during the 1970s because they needed to address so many different facets of American life—ranging from mass media to private life, from politics to culture. The inherent inequality between the genders in American culture in the 1970s required a multi-media assault in order to fully address the flaws present in the system. As Rosler noted in an interview that, "the question of medium per se isn't terribly interesting to me. Meaning is, and I use the appropriate medium. Often it's not a decision so much as it is a matter of the way the work presents itself to me."[21] As Rosler outlined in interviews and essays, and as feminist artists also working during the 1970s

[20] Martha Rosler, "In Coversation: Gretchen Herrmann with Martha Rosler," *The Garage Sale Standard*, November 2012, 3.

[21] Jane Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," *October* 17: 77.

illustrated, it was superfluous to define one's oeuvre and career in one medium; that was part of the modernist and formalist mode of thinking and working that belonged to earlier decades, and was a project which Rosler and her contemporaries actively avoided. As Alexander Alberro noted, "Rosler's body of work is not limited to any one medium or genre—a characteristic that is a direct consequence of her interest in eluding pre-existent art-world definitions—yet a consistent ideological core is distinctly evident."[22] Clearly the meaning of the dialogue the artist intended to initiate dictated the format of the artwork for Rosler, as well as for other feminist artists. Women in the 1970s had been constantly barraged by representations of women in the mass media for decades, from models in magazine advertisements to figures of ideal femininity like June Cleaver on *Leave it to Beaver*, women were told how to look, sound, dress, and act in every medium from television to newsprint. It was only fitting that the feminist artists of the 1970s, like Rosler, utilized all of the aforementioned mediums to critique the representations circulated by the media and most accurately communicate their goals for change.

A Feminist Herstory

In tracing the trajectories of Martha Rosler's feminist artwork from the late 1960s through the early 1980s, this feminist fantasy echo explores how she utilized the above mediums combined with the strategies of burlesque, parody, and appropriation as modes of disruption and feminist protest outside the purview of what is typically considered canonical feminist art. Yet, some general background on the feminist art movement is necessary. Within the realm of feminist art, forces subdivided and re-organized the category since the inception of the women's

[22] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy." 75.

movement in the late 1960s. As Rosler stated, in her essay, *An Imaginary Talk on Women Artists at the End of the Millennium*:

> The relationship between feminist insurgencies and the institutionalized art world had passed through a number of stages since the late 1960s, when the women's art movement took shape. There were periods of challenge and confrontation, offense and defense, acceptance and backlash. There were inevitable schisms in the visions of what the participation—the full participation—of women in the art world would mean. There was the inevitable disclaiming of the term "feminism" in the art world, where the word retained its good reception perhaps longer than in mainstream social discourse (in the United States, at any rate).[23]

In its earliest guises, feminist art paralleled the larger feminist movement, springing from other social movements into the women's rights movement with an initial focus on consciousness-raising and creating a space for women to work and create art for themselves and their community. Borne out of a climate of discontent, protest, and revolution, various student, left, and art groups set the tone for the possibility of change, following from the protests of the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and the student stand-off at Columbia University. The artist's group centered in New York City—the Art Worker's Coalition (A.W.C.)—continued its protests of the art world's support of the war in Vietnam as well as agitations for art workers' rights, hoping to shift the commodity-oriented art market to a more idealistic system. Also present in New York at the time were a variety of feminist non-art-oriented groups gathering fuel from the burgeoning women's movement, which also garnered strength from the atmosphere of protest present at the time. Groups like New York Radical Women and the Redstockings set the tone for revolutionary feminism, and greatly influenced the future of both feminism and feminist art as several members of these radical feminist groups crossing membership with feminist art groups.

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[23] Martha Rosler, "An Imaginary Talk on Women Artists at the End of the Millennium," in *Women Artists at the End of the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006): 129.

While Rosler was not a member, these and other early feminist groups are noteworthy because of their early activism and because they set a pattern for other women's groups. One of the earliest of the feminist art groups, Women Artists in Revolution (W.A.R.), developed from a sub-committee of the A.W.C.—the Ad Hoc Whitney Committee—in response to the outrage felt by women artists of the A.W.C. at the discrimination of the Whitney Annual against female artists.[24] Muriel Castanis asked the group if they would confront the museum and demand fifty percent representation of women artists in the next annual.[25] It was as Castanis described, "[that] while women could speak, men were heard;" and only once a man supported the motion, then was it put to a vote.[26] This example clearly illustrates the gender discrimination inherent in the art world facing the women of W.A.R., as well as all women artists—and a simple example of why Rosler avoided joining the gallery system until 1993. The women in W.A.R., as well as the myriad other feminist groups, fought against race, gender, and class discrimination in art schools and galleries, as well as developed alternative spaces for women artists and demanded funding for underrepresented artists from the government and other various institutions. Given the nationwide climate of turmoil and upheaval, W.A.R. was only one of several feminist art groups that developed during the "second wave" of feminism. In addition to the small, local conscious-raising groups that formed throughout the country, many formal feminist groups were founded in rapid succession: the Ad Hoc Women's Artists Committee (AHWAC) also developed out of the A.W.C. and the Ad Hoc Whitney Committee in 1970, and founded the Women's Art Registry

[24] Revolution, "A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution," iii.

[25] Ibid. and on page iv: The responses of the group only demonstrated just how deeply ingrained the discrimination against women was: one man asked for the demands to be less harsh (ten-percent representation instead of fifty-percent) and another asked if the women realized how many artists (meaning men) they would cut out with their fifty-percent representation demand.

[26] Ibid., iv.

the same year; the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists (LACWA) was also founded in 1970; Faith Ringgold and her daughter, Michele Wallace, founded Women, Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL), in 1970 as well; West-East Bag (W.E.B.) an international women artists' network, was established as a result of a visit by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro to Ellen Lanyon, Lucy Lippard, and Marcia Tucker in 1971; and out of informal meetings that were initiated as a result of Ce Roser attending AHWAC meetings, Women in the Arts (WIA) also formed in 1971.[27]

These groups engaged in consciousness-raising actions and protests of institutions, but also worked to form and develop arenas outside of the discriminatory institutions of the established art world where women could work, exhibit, and further develop a safe and welcoming professional community. In the midst of the formation of these various groups across the country, Judy Chicago began teaching separate women's studio art classes at Fresno State College in California in 1970, and the following year, she and Miriam Schapiro founded the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts. This radical program, although short-lived, built enough momentum for the creation of the Los Angeles Woman's Building in 1973, which housed many different, but connected, women's organizations ranging from galleries to studio workshops, to a bookstore and a travel agency. Rosler was good friends with many of the women involved with the Woman's Building and the feminist art movement in L.A., and even wrote an article, published in *Artforum* in 1977, "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California," about the work the women were doing there. She outlined this work as a kind

[27] The Feminist Art Project, "Timeline of Historic Events," http://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/about/?page=9. Accessed 10/28/09; Carrie Rickey, "Illustrated Time Line," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 305.

of cultural feminism, and in doing so, carefully distanced herself and her work from it, aligning herself and her work with political and socialist feminism:

> Where the latter sees race or nationality as the primary source of oppression, the former sees gender in that role. (In this the orientation is that of 'radical feminism,' delineated by such writers as Shulamith Firestone and, to some degree, Kate Millett.)… the value of the term 'cultural feminism' is that, on the whole, the Woman's Building shares the outlook of culturally oriented movements, which stress separatism and a voluntary change in material culture and in the organization of private life … rather than an active program of mass education and the seeking of political power.[28]

In an interview, Rosler further elaborated on her relation to the feminist art groups in L.A.:

> There was a very strong feminist community in Southern California, and as is well known, Cal Arts had a 'pioneering' feminist art program, begun by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, whom I had known earlier because she was a professor at UCSD. (She moved up north when her husband, Paul Brach, who founded the UCSD art department, went up to an administrative job at the newly founded Cal Arts). San Diego State had the first feminist art department, I believe, and while still a grad student I taught a course there, on the history of women artists. … I had really strong connections to the LA women artists, as did all the feminist artists in and around UCSD, including Elly Antin. I consider that from around that point, everything I was interested and involved in was crafted through the lens of feminism. Also I had a very large group of women, from downtown San Diego through La Jolla up to LA and a few points north, whom I regarded as friends and a social support system (when I had mononucleosis, the downtown women decided, un bidden, to come take my little boy to preschool every day and bring him home, and to make us food, for a month or more).[29]

In contrast to the singular centrifugal feminist force of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, New York City, already possessed many institutional forces that divided up its art world, and thus several small alternative galleries and organizations for women sprang up, rather than one central location. As Lucy Lippard noted, New York's, "art world is too large, too powerful, too competitive … [to] succeed in having a single-focused center…New York lends itself to many

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[28] Martha Rosler, "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California," *Artforum* 16. 67.

[29] "Email Interview."

separate institutions, often overlapping ones."[30] Several of these alternative spaces emerged out of feminist artist's group meetings, as did the Woman's Building in L.A., providing New York with similarly cultural feminist venues. These galleries and spaces originated to exist outside of the commodity-driven art world, and allowed women to create and show work as well as meet like-minded women without the fear of rejection or having to compete with established male artists.

The development of these alternative spaces, however, raised the question about the need to separate women's art from men's—would this practice only further ghettoize women artists into a separatist enclave, or would it succeed in developing a feminist art that could change the art world, and subsequently, society? From the late 1960s through the 1970s many more alternative spaces formed to provide artists, both male and female, with an opportunity to show their work outside of the confines of the institutional art world, and thus exclusively women's independent spaces were not as uncommon as they might seem today. Contemporary museum statistics demonstrated the lack of women's representation in exhibitions and collections, as did statistics for galleries and for art schools.[31] Thus, it was readily apparent that women did not get

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[30] Lippard, "The L.A. Woman's Building," 99. After the Women's Interart Center, which emerged out of W.A.R. meetings as New York's first women's alternative space and community center in 1969-70, and acquired a building on West 52nd Street in July of 1971, many other spaces opened, as Julie Ault, "A Chronology of Selected Alternative Structures, Spaces, Artists' Groups, and Organizations in New York City, 1965-1985," in *Alternative Art: New York 1965 - 1985: A Cultural Politics Book for the Social Text Collective* (New York: The Drawing Center, 2002), 33-34.: The Artists in Residence (A.I.R.) Gallery was founded in 1972 by Barbara Zucker, Dotty Attie, Nancy Spero, Susan Williams, Mary Grigoriadis, and Maude Boltz, who selected the other fourteen original members from the Women's Art Registry and was conceived of as a professional non-profit collectively structured gallery. SoHo 20 was founded the following year, as another space for women to exhibit their work, as well as a space for public and educational service activities for women artists.

[31] The W.A.R. *Herstory* contains a 1970 "Status of Women in Art Report" that outlined the systematic discrimination through a "Statistics of Women on Art Faculties," which demonstrated how approximately ten percent of the faculty of the art schools in the New York tri-state area consisted of women, while the majority were made up of men. See Revolution, "A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution," 11.

the work and support they needed from the established institutions and it was necessary for them to forge their own instead.[32]

The lack of interest in an all-woman exhibition shown by the New York institutions further demonstrated the patriarchal nature of the art world's system of representation and exhibition, and its utter lack of support for women and feminist artists. Women were forced to turn to outside of the epicenter of the modern art world in order to get a major museum to collectively show their work. In addition to gender discrimination, many feminist artists were steeped in the knowledge that the art world was solely driven by artworks as commodities, and wished to overthrow that system for one where art served more purpose than solely serving as an object for capitalist consumption.

While cultural feminist art practice initially seemed separatist, it aimed to maintain only enough distance to allow the artists room to create culturally relevant work in a safe space as well as educate other women artists and provide a space for them to exhibit their work; they made the move outside of the system in order to temporarily foster internal support for women, but it was never meant as a long-term solution to gender discrimination, only as a jumping-off point. The optimism inherent in this move outside of the institutions of the art world is apparent in Lucy Lippard's response to detractions that women-only alternative spaces would work against feminist goals: "Those who denounce such situations as 'separatist' should just get a

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[32] Lucy Lippard claimed to have organized the first women's exhibition held in conjunction with the activities of the "second-wave" activists, *Twenty-Six Contemporary Women Artists* at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, in Ridgefield, Connecticut. This exhibition is the first women's exhibition in a major museum contemporary during the "second wave" of feminism. In actuality, the first women's and feminist art exhibition was held in January and February of 1970, and was titled *X-12, The Pioneer Feminist Art Exhibition*. However, this exhibition was not held at a mainstream gallery or museum, but at Museum, an alternative art space in New York City where W.A.R. regularly held its early meetings.

glimpse of the sense of purpose and the relaxed exhilaration at the Woman's Building. There, everything seems possible–including a nonseparatist future."[33] Utopian goals were omnipresent in W.A.R.'s vision of the feminist future as well: "When more women are put in more powerful positions, equal to their male colleagues, that divisiveness will disappear along with the decadence in institutions that have perpetuated it."[34] Yet, due to the anti-feminist backlash of the conservative 1980s, feminists have yet to achieve the gender parity petitioned for by the women's groups of the 1970s.

Rosler avoided the problem of separatism by working both with a feminist activist group as well as with a mixed-gender, or mostly male, group of activist artists at UCSD. Rosler dodged falling into the cultural feminist trap of essentialism by actively participating in a socialist feminist activist group, which also allowed her to focus on more pressing social and political issues in her aesthetic critiques. Through the Women's Liberation Front in San Diego, Rosler participated in both campus- and community-based activities; in addition to antiwar activities, the Women's Liberation Front hosted lectures with local, as well as nationally recognized, speakers at schools and institutions in the community about feminism, politics, and women's health, and even founded the UCSD daycare center.[35] Additionally, as an expansion of her feminist actions, Rosler taught a course on the history of women artists at UCSD during her tenure as a graduate student there.[36] Her feminist art network extended well beyond San Diego, into Los Angeles, included the women at the Woman's Building, and even extended to feminists as far north as San Francisco, which facilitated her reimagining of her *Monumental Garage Sale*

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[33] Lippard, "The L.A. Woman's Building," 100.

[34] Revolution, "A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution," v.

[35] Rosler, "Email Interview."

[36] Ibid.

(1973) as the *Travelling Garage Sale* at La Mamelle Gallery in San Francisco in 1977. Rosler openly acknowledged, in many interviews, that at this time, everything that she was interested in or crafted was shot-through with feminism, which illustrated the paradigmatic shift feminist activism and thought created, both for Rosler and many other artists. Despite the prevalence of feminism in Rosler's life and art, she also worked outside of feminist art groups as she developed her aesthetic critiques.

While she studied at UCSD, Herbert Marcuse taught philosophy there—Angela Davis was among his students—Frederic Jameson taught literature, and visiting faculty included Jean-Luc Godard, Roberto Rossellini, Erwing Goffman, and Jean-François Lyotard.[37] These radical philosophers and thinkers all influenced Rosler's artistic process, and engaged her in a heady mix of New Left politics, the visual political ideals of the Dziga Vertov group, and the critical theory of the Frankfurt school. San Diego, as a prominent naval base and center of aerospace production, was central to student anti-war activism, and Rosler, as well as most of the contemporaries with whom she worked at UCSD, participated in anti-war agitation. While at UCSD, she worked with a group of photographers: Fred Lonidier, then Phil Steinmetz, Brian Connell, and Allan Sekula, with a few other figures joining later like Steve Buck, Adele Shaules and Marge Dean, but Rosler worked most closely with the first four.[38] Film critic Manny Farber, for whom Rosler was a teaching assistant, called them the '[Marxist] cabal down there' in the

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[37] Steve Edwards describes the intellectual atmosphere at UCSD in Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, 66.; as well as Benjamin Buchloh in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998).

[38] "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," 32.

darkroom.[39] In this working group, the young artists read political, art, and film theory and criticism, but they also discussed contemporary artwork, and met (as well as argued) with friends and faculty members on campus. As Rosler discussed, "we were interested in developing an aesthetics of photography that rejected formalist modernism while still believing in the power of formal elements. At the same time, we would still use photography at will, without necessarily valorizing it. We wanted to be documentarians in a way that documentarians hadn't been."[40] As Steve Edwards noted, Rosler and her contemporaries responded to the myriad of influences surrounding them, and allowed the wave of political unrest of revise and revitalize their aesthetic practices, incorporating their political and social critiques into their artwork as a additional mode of participation in the agitation that surrounded them.[41]

Rosler's earliest aesthetic strategies relied upon the appropriation of images or objects from daily life, placed within a new frame or context in order to allow the viewer to reconsider how they perceive reality. Rosler was well aware of the risks involved in quoting, as she stated in her essay, "Notes on Quotes:" "Quotes, like photos, float loose from their framing discourses, are absorbed into the embracing matrix of affirmative culture (see Marcuse on this and on repressive tolerance)."[42] The affirmative character of mass culture was and is well-attuned to the processes of repressive tolerance, and had Rosler's burlesque parody of mass culture's imagery not been so skillful and deft, the clash of images so subtle and yet so strangely unnerving, her work could easily have been subsumed back into the embracing matrix that Rosler described. Similarly, the

[39] Steve Edwards noted that although Buchloh only quoted "the cabal down there," in emails with Rosler she insisted on the current configuration of the quote. See Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*. 65; and Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," 32.

[40] "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," 33.

[41] Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, 65.

[42] Rosler, "Notes on Quotes," 137.

renewed interest in feminism over the past decade can belie a systematic suppression of the radical message at the heart of the artwork as it becomes incorporated and tolerated within the art world through the machinations of repressive tolerance. As Herbert Marcuse noted in his 1968 essay of the same title:

> Within the affluent democracy, the affluent discussion prevails, and within the established framework, it is tolerant to a large extent. All points of view can be heard … Moreover, in endlessly dragging debates over the media, the stupid opinion is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with education, truth with falsehood. This pure toleration of sense and nonsense is justified by the democratic argument that nobody, neither group nor individual, is in possession of the truth and capable of defining what is right and wrong, good and bad. Therefore, all contesting opinions must be submitted to "the people" for its deliberation and choice. … But with the concentration of economic and political power and the integration of opposites in a society which uses technology as an instrument of domination, effective dissent is blocked where it could freely emerge: in the formation of opinion, in information and communication, in speech and assembly. Under the rule of monopolistic media—themselves the mere instruments of economic and political power—a mentality is created for which right and wrong, true and false are predefined wherever they affect the vital interests of the society. This is, prior to all expression and communication, a matter of semantics: the blocking of effective dissent, of the recognition of that which is not of the Establishment which begins in the language that is publicized and administered. The meaning of words is rigidly stabilized. … Self-validating, the argument of the discussion repels the contradiction because the antithesis is redefined in terms of the thesis.[43]

There is little room for protest and dissent within a system that successfully incorporates all language under the aegis of democracy, as it actively dissuades the potential for change by tolerating anything and everything that transpires under the auspices of free democratic practice.

The opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum was a victory for feminist art—it is the only space within a major New York City museum that is solely dedicated to feminist art—yet, this venue exists in Brooklyn, outside of the central nexus of power for the museums and galleries, languishing in the periphery of an outer borough in this

[43] Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," 41-42.

crucial city, an example of the repressive tolerance in the art world for feminist art and its "blocking of effective dissent." Further, the most recent comprehensive retrospective feminist art exhibition, *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2008), in which Rosler's photomontages and videos featured prominently, took place not at the MoMA proper, in the center of Midtown Manhattan, but at its satellite venue—P.S.1, in Long Island City Queens, also in an outer borough, and also at a disconnect from the main artery of the art world. Clearly, even over forty years after the "second-wave" of feminism, and nearly three decades after the Guerilla Girls began their public service announcements, major art world institutions are still not ready to address feminism and its demands at the art world's institutional epicenter. Even as curatorial and instructional positions in the art world shift and continue to be filled by women, there are still discrepancies that groups like Rosler's Women's Liberation Front and W.A.R. fought against in the 1970s.

Feminist Burlesque Laughter

In this dissertation, I argue that Rosler's method for subverting the tendency towards repressive tolerance was her use of a feminist burlesque, which appropriated imagery, tropes, stereotypes, and roles from mass culture and not only satirically parodied them, but did so in such a way that her aesthetic commentary created a dialogue with her viewers, opening up a space for critique through laughter, which as Bakhtin noted, is one of the most revolutionary and transformative aspects of our world. He discussed how, in the nineteenth century, a particular form of satire, "directed against isolated, purely negative objects," diverted the power of carnivalesque laughter from its original, radical form, and that this persisted into the twentieth

century, even robbing laughter of its ability to laugh.[44] The feminist burlesque in Rosler's artwork cleverly recaptured the carnivalesque essence lost during the nineteenth century in the purely negative forms of satire that proliferated. Bakhtin, in particular, acknowledged that carnivalesque laughter persisted through this time in less-exalted genres, particularly non-canonical ones like burlesque; as such, Rosler's artwork avoided the frivolous pitfalls inherent to the bourgeois development of grotesque laughter by maintaining her commitment to her critical eye throughout her appropriations and quotations of consumer culture.[45] Although Bakhtin acknowledged burlesque in its literary form—its earliest possible definition—Rosler and many historians aside from Bakhtin considered burlesque through its dramatic and theatrical forms—burlesque's second definition according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. However, most contemporary audiences associate burlesque with a particular kind of erotic performance, which only evolved as late as the 1870s, primarily in conjunction with American theatrical burlesque performances. I will briefly trace the interrelation of these different historic forms of burlesque, as well as their influence on Rosler's feminist burlesque.

In his history of American theatrical burlesque, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, Robert Clyde Allen outlined how the forms of dramatic burlesque rapidly transformed over the course of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, moving from a generally accepted, open form of popular theatrical entertainment, to a seemingly morally bankrupt mode of sexual display of the female body; as burlesque increasingly streamlined performances around the "cooch dance" during the 1890s, the "shimmy" in the 1910s, and the striptease of succeeding

[44] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 45.

[45] Ibid., 102.

decades, it rapidly became ostracized from bourgeois cultural production in the process.[46] It is this theatrical striptease that is most often called to mind when anyone mentions the word burlesque today, yet, until the 1870s, the only form of dramatic burlesque that existed was the exaggerated, lampooning form of dramatic parody that mocked dignified, pathetic, or serious works and contemporary issues on the stage. This older form of burlesque, which existed in both Europe and America, is also the progenitor of the practice that Rosler inherited and made use of in what I dubbed her feminist burlesque that she created during the late 1960s and 1970s. While Rosler resuscitated a tradition steeped in hyperbole, histrionics, and conscious excesses in the late twentieth century, burlesque performances of the striptease variety had only recently died out a few years earlier.

As Allen acknowledged in his history of modern American burlesque, its relation to all theater in the nineteenth century created a fraught and contentious path for the acceptance of burlesque, as theater itself was on shaky moral ground: "Not all that long ago the theater had been at the center of debates and even riots about the role of leisure and play, about proper modes of representation and mimesis, and about gender relations. Although Thompsonian burlesque appeared at a time when most social groups accepted the theater as a part of mainstream American culture, it reawakened old fears about the power of the theater to undermine the social order."[47] The cross-pollination between theater and prostitution—rooted in the Puritanical wholesale rejection of theater as actresses were decried as selling their bodies on the stage and further extended by the prostitutes who brought or met clients in the galleries of theaters—all of which made for muddy moral waters surrounding the general public approval of

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[46] Robert Clyde Allen, Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). 74.

[47] Ibid., 103.

theater as acceptable popular entertainment for the middle class. As burlesque entered the dramatic scene and shifted from a parodic re-presentation of literary of popular themes to a striptease, it only further complicated the American preoccupation with theater as tied to prostitution. Allen traced the shift in American burlesque culture back to 1868, when a particular performing group, Lydia Thompson's troupe of "British Blondes," began performing in New York, and presented their audiences with more women on stage than ever before, or after; but did so in a way that contrasted all of the prevailing images of feminine beauty—they wore revealing outfits, played male roles, dyed their hair blonde, and participated in an outspoken spectacle that placed them all at the center of the action.[48]

The public contrast and rift between high art and popular entertainment—theater belonged to the latter until only recently—allowed for an infiltration of the more salacious elements into burlesque, while ballet and drama attempted to elevate themselves into the realm of high art. Before Lydia Thompson and her "British Blondes" invaded American stages, the term burlesque covered a variety of theatrical spectacles, ranging from travesties, to pantomimes, to extravaganzas, but burlesque proper typically parodied some kind of dramatic acting or theatrical entertainment, and became popular in America around 1840.[49] The earliest American burlesques were written and staged by men and lampooned both literature and the theater politics of the day, often mocking the fads that drove their own industry.[50] Allen described an early and relevant instance of burlesque, John Brougham's *Much Ado about a Merchant of Venice* (March

[48] Ibid., 137-38. In his text, Allen describes how the prevailing image of beauty, the sentimental feminine ideal of dark-haired, slender, demure womanhood, was diametrically opposed to the racy and voluptuous image portrayed by Thompson's "British Blondes."

[49] Ibid., 102.

[50] For a detailed description of early American burlesque see ibid., 102-04.

1869), in which Brougham used the framework of a Shakespearean play to dissect contemporary New York political, business, and judicial corruption—this is an early example of the open entertainment of burlesque providing an outlet for artists and their audiences to critique their contemporary political, social, and cultural environment, a model that Rosler followed, in a variety of mediums, a century later.[51] Contemporaneous to Brougham's production was the arrival of Lydia Thompson's "British Blondes" on American soil, and the move of feminine spectacle to center stage in burlesque. Women were actually instrumental in the rise of feminine spectacle, with American Laura Keene initiating the drive towards a new kind of burlesque that put women in the majority, if not all of, the roles on stage, while it also retained the humor and dance of earlier forms, but, at the same time, removed most of the plot from the drama, substituting spectacle and extravaganza for the storyline and satire of earlier burlesques.[52]

Although women like Keene and Thompson were instrumental in the rise of this new kind of burlesque-spectacle, it is precisely this feminine spectacle type of burlesque that eschewed and renounced the political commentary of thematic burlesque—effectively kicking in its critical teeth—and opened a path for the "cooch dances," "shimmy," and striptease that culturally defined burlesque for most modern audiences. Ironically, Rosler's work does not belong to the feminine spectacle tradition of burlesque, but inherited the earlier, masculine tradition of thematic burlesque, which intended to provoke laughter and critique in its audiences, rather than erotic longing for the next extravaganza. While Rosler's photomontages participate in a spectacular pastiche that often inverts roles or images, their burlesque still contains an inherent critique, the bite that the feminine spectacle of the late nineteenth century lacked.

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[51] Ibid., 104.

[52] Ibid., 105.

The radical potential of laughter is directly related to burlesque's provocation of laughter. I cited Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of carnivalesque and grotesque laughter as a source for this potential, but I must qualify my use of his analysis. Bakhtin discussed carnivalesque laughter and the grotesque in the realm of the medieval carnival and fair, a folk culture of inversion in which a carefully regulated social system, that of feudal society, let off steam, but ultimately reaffirmed the hierarchical structure of that rigidly-ordered society once the festivities ended. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White noted, "the low-Other is despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of dominant culture."[53]

While Stallybrass and White recovered grotesque realism as the governing dynamic for a vastly interconnected set of realms, I wish to reclaim carnivalesque laughter and parody for feminist art. The utopian aim of carnivalesque laughter and the grotesque was not individuals, but social structure and the higher authorities within it; which coincided perfectly with the way Rosler aims to disrupt viewers' perceptions of the economic underpinning of our contemporary social organization. As Bakhtin noted of the power of laugher: "Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality."[54] While medieval culture was not often openly hostile towards women, medieval Christianity tended toward misogyny, and accordingly, Bakhtin acknowledged that women were not ambivalent toward the popular comic tradition, wherein, her body was

[53] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 6.

[54] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 123.

essentially related to the lower bodily stratum that, "degrades and regenerates simultaneously." [55] As Jo Anna Isaak noted, Bakhtin went to great lengths in his history of laughter to outline how women aligned themselves with the comic tradition, as well as maintained a firm political stake in this mode of rebellion.[56] Thus, given the flexibility of the carnivalesque and its relation to women, the idea of carnivalesque laughter as elicited by a feminist burlesque is most productive for examining the artwork of Martha Rosler.

As Stuart Hall noted, when speaking about feminism's entry into Cultural Studies, "we know it was, but it's not known generally how and where feminism first broke in. I use the metaphor deliberately: As the thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies."[57] Hall's metaphor embodied feminism within a grotesque body, whose lower bodily strata churned up the entire field of Cultural Studies. I can only presume that Hall's embodiment of feminism was a woman. Although most feminist artists have not resorted to bodily functions of the like that Hall described, they did engage in both direct and indirect, protest tactics in order to disrupt the practices of the art world, and attempted to affect actual and lasting changes. Rosler recently re-engaged with her works from the 1970s and re-presented or re-created them in new contexts to draw connections between the contexts of the 1970s and today, as both eras suffer from economic stagnation, oil crises, and foreign military engagements that seem unending. The late capitalist military industrial complex that controls the media and culture in American society still determines the course of events in the everyday lives of individual citizens, inside and outside the art world. Rosler's works call

[55] Ibid., 240.

[56] Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, 19.

[57] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," in *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* ed. by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 269.

attention to this subtle, hegemonic domination through her appropriative burlesque, disrupting the boundaries drawn between prescribed gendered roles that have remained essentially the same from the 1970s through today.

Chapter Two: From Brooklyn, to San Diego, and Back Again

The clarification of vision is a first step toward reasonably and humanely changing the world.

Martha Rosler[1]

Martha Rosler was born in Brooklyn, New York in July of 1943, where she grew up in the new landscape of post-World War II America. She was raised in a fairly liberal family environment where she was exposed to literature, art, and foreign film. She attended a "modern orthodox" yeshiva school, and excelled in writing in her youth, during which she won prizes for her poetry and prose, as well as published her poetry in the school newspaper.[2] In 1965 she received her B.A. from Brooklyn College, where she majored in literature and took only a few art classes.[3] Although her initial focus was on the written word, she always considered herself an artist—she painted as well as created her first photomontages during her undergraduate career.[4] While she was still living in New York, Rosler also studied painting at the Brooklyn Museum Art School.[5] Her paintings from this period were large abstractions, following in the vein of the color field painters from the previous decade.[6] Although her artwork drastically shifted in

[1] Rosler, "For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life." 8.

[2] Obrist, "Martha Rosler in Conversation with Molly Nesbit and Hans Ulrich Obrist," 36. The "modern orthodox" yeshiva is important because it was not a conservative school, but rather a school from a more progressive movement in Judaism that aimed to better reconcile Jewish religious law and belief with the contemporary secular world, an environment that allowed Rosler to explore a greater variety of academic and creative outlets than a traditional, orthodox yeshiva.

[3] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 11.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 10.

[6] Ibid., 11.

representation and media during the late 1960s, Rosler still viewed herself as an abstract painter.[7] "But," she stated, "what the New York art scene, and conversations with the likes of the Antins and Rothenbergs, and my peers in undergrad school… helped me see was that this paradigm was already quite bankrupt by the end of the fifties, as indicated by the rise of Pop. I needed to identify a new practice, and preferably one that comported better with my politics!"[8] The shift in her art, from the aloof, introverted aesthetics of abstract expressionism to a profoundly critical and politically based art, marked the turning point in Rosler's artistic career where she moved from creating work that was fashionable but socially bankrupt, to creating artworks that conveyed her critique of a society that had its priorities out of order.

Although her parents shunned politics, Rosler gained political awareness by, "growing up during the highly ideological Cold War period, watching the Army-McCarthy hearings on TV, and so on. [Her] religious background gave [her] a strong belief in justice."[9] These formative beliefs became the basis for her politically-oriented artistic output from the late 1960s throughout the rest of her career. Despite the perceived post-war, "destruction of left culture in the United States," Rosler stated that, "left culture hadn't been totally destroyed – I grew up in New York, where there was a fairly active CP [Communist Party] left, and it included young people."[10] When she was in her mid-teens, and in high school, she participated in a protest against the nuclear arms race that took place during the Cold War by going to a City Hall protest, rather than

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[7] Ibid., 12.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid., 10.

[10] Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," 23.

into a fallout shelter during a city-wide defense drill.[11] This initiated her thinking, "about political choice and what it meant to make a political choice."[12] She began to examine the language and discourse of the Cold War, and started leaning towards the left, examining the discrepancies between "rhetoric and practice" that became increasingly more apparent.[13] During her undergraduate career in the 1960s, amidst the escalation of the Vietnam War and the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, Rosler became a firm leftist. She sought to examine the origins of war, and the logic of the societies inherent in the creation of such wars. Although she initially fought the "understanding that they [the war and riots] were consequences of the contradictions inherent in capitalist societies," yet, as a young woman, she revised this outlook and began to analyze contemporary events far more critically.[14] It was in this context and coming-to-political-consciousness that she began to create artworks that fit with her personal questioning of the role of the image within society and culture.

In the late 1960s, Rosler began working on her *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967-1972) and *Body Beautiful, Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966-1972) series of photomontages that directly engaged in a social critique of the contemporary media landscape surrounding Rosler, and the public. Compared to her earlier abstract expressionist paintings that were devoid of any political or social message, the photomontages enacted a critical dialogue between the clashing images in the montaged space and the viewer. This engagement was something that Rosler began in these early photomontages and pursued, in various mediums, throughout her career. In these early works, the medium of photomontage as a layered, multiple image

[11] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 10.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

facilitated Rosler's direct appropriation, or quotation, of the visual language of mass media and popular culture. Her re-contextualization and burlesque of popular imagery allowed Rosler to draw the viewer into the gaps between the actuality of contemporary life and the manner in which it was represented in the media. She brought this methodology to all of the media in which she worked throughout the 1970s, including her installations, performance pieces, videos, and essays. In her essay, "Place, Position, Power, Politics," Rosler explained that her:

> politicized practice began when [she] saw that things were left out of explanations of the world that were crucial to its understanding, that there are always things to be told that are obscured by the prevailing stories. (The defining moment was in coming to understand that reality differed for black and for white people. This realization came not from [her] own observation but from the black civil rights movement and from black people whom [she] knew as a child.) The 1960s meant the delegitimation of all sorts of institutional fictions, one after another. When [she] finally understood what it meant to say that the war in Vietnam was not 'an accident,' [she] virtually stopped painting and started doing agitational works. … the question was to what degree art was required to pose another space of understanding as opposed to exposing another, truer narrative of social-political reality.[15]

Although Abstract Expressionism had been rendered passé by Pop art, aspects of modernism's formal concerns were still relevant and popular to the art world, as seen in the success of the works of the Minimalists.

Rosler found Minimalism and its surrounding theory and criticism influential, in particular the writings of Michael Fried. When Fried argued that modernist beliefs in transcendence could only be replaced, "by presence (and temporality)—by what he called 'theatricality,'" Rosler saw truth in Fried's argument, but also found that he looked at the question from the wrong angle, as she "soon realized that what [she] wanted wasn't *physical* presence but an imaginary space in which different tales collided. Now [she] understood why

[15] Martha Rosler, "Place, Position, Power, Politics," in *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society, and Social Responsibility*, ed. Carol Becker (New York Routledge, 1994), 58. This essay has been republished with some edits in Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004). I quote from the older version as portions that were later removed still retain relevance for this work.

[she] had been making photomontages: It was the symbolic collision that had attracted [her]."[16] The symbolic collision of her photomontages formed the basis for the early format of Rosler's humorous interpretation of American life—by clashing images of the home and the war abroad or beauty for sale with the housewife, she created a space where viewers could laugh at and reconsider American values. She also stated that bringing time and the notion of narrative back into art, after abstract art had abolished time from the equation, was an important aspect in postmodernism as the notion of seriality, originating in Pop art, effectively reintroduced time to art.[17] Through the consistent repetition of the image, over time, like the mechanically reproduced images that Rosler utilized in her photomontages, and in her videos, the image acquires affective value and can also elicit a narrative. "The recognition of time as an underlying element in processes of mechanical reproduction was a central factor," and thus in order to accurately represent her critiques of, and engagement with, the contemporary cultural world Rosler needed to incorporate temporality to create a space in which her cultural collision could occur.[18]

Like many of her works from the late 1960s and 1970s, she never intended that the photomontages in *Bringing the War Home* be exhibited in a gallery, but rather conceived of them as agitational works originally disseminated to reach a general public. As Rosler mentioned, considering the idea of these works in a gallery exhibition, "to show antiwar, or feminist agitation in such a setting verged on the obscene, for its site seemed more properly 'the street,' or the underground press, where such material could help marshal the troops, and that is where they

[16] Ibid.

[17] Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," 18.

[18] Ibid.

appeared. If the choice was the art world setting or nothing, nothing seemed preferable."[19] Since Rosler wished to reach, and legitimately affect an audience, the original photomontages from the series appeared in various underground newspapers, like the feminist newspaper, *Goodbye to All That*, and as flyers, not in the exclusive environment of a white-walled gallery.[20] Her consistent avoidance of the art market and gallery system, until 1993, facilitated the problematization of how to quantify, categorize and represent Rosler in the "canon" of feminist art as it has developed thus far.

Given her experience at the University of California in San Diego (UCSD) of the inclusivity of both the university and the community in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Rosler's focus outside of the art world is not surprising:

> I never officially studied with either Marcuse or Jameson. … My interactions with all these people started before I was a student there. Back then, people hung around college campuses, and no one knew or cared who was or wasn't enrolled. The campus was the real center of intellectual life and I was attending lectures and films, I was part of the horde of anti-war activists whom Marcuse regularly dropped in on, gracing us with his presence and his benedictions and exhortations. Marcuse addressed us as political activists and citizens. We sat in on his teaching lectures, and he also welcomed us into his home, following the model of a distinguished professor in Germany. … A bit further on, I was among the two or three Visual Art graduate students who joined … the study group that Fred Jameson set up. Louis Marin and Jean-Francois Lyotard came also, while they were visiting professors there. … the bulk of my education was, and remained, informal … Whether through conversations or political meetings, through hashing out political and aesthetic strategies with a vast array of people, through the huge number of free lectures and retreats or through the many reading groups we formed and reformed, the possibilities for getting educated in that era were staggering.[21]

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[19] Rosler, "Place, Position, Power Politics": 59.

[20] As referenced by Jayne Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson," *Women's Art Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2001): 49.

[21] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 10-11.

In a climate like the one Rosler described, underground newspapers and flyers circulated fairly widely, and reached more than just the students enrolled within the university. In addition to attending lectures at UCSD, Rosler also gave lectures of her own and included slides of her photomontages in her different lectures, particularly those addressed to art students, but also those in which she spoke to high school and community groups about anti-war and feminist issues, which further disseminated images and art critically engaged with social commentary.[22] Rosler received her first fine arts degree, an M.F.A. in 1974 from UCSD. While studying at UCSD, Rosler continuously engaged with the leftist culture of protest, constantly questioning the dominant social structures, while struggling to support herself as a student and a single mother.[23]

As a result of her education, both formal and informal, in San Diego, Rosler associated with a variety of scholars, like the aforementioned Marcuse and Jameson, as well as filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard, and many other artists, like Eleanor and David Antin.[24] She participated in various reading groups, discussing the ideas of theorists like Henri Lefebvre, and other critical thinkers of influence to the counterculture protest movement, New Left politics, and the new political avant gardism. Rosler also published pamphlets for her women's group, which she described as a "socialist-feminist anti-war group based on campus but always reaching beyond."[25]

Regarding her art and her involvement in the feminist movement, she noted that "a further blow to my painterly life was dealt by the women's movement; I figured out what it

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[22] Rosler, "Place, Position, Power, Politics," 59.; and Jayne Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson," *Women's Art Journal* 22, no. 1: 49.

[23] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 10.

[24] The Antins were Rosler's friends from when she lived in New York.

[25] Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," 38.

meant to do works that were about my own life (read: identity)—that is, I came to understand the idea of 'about' differently," which pushed her to engage, through her art and other production, in a questioning of the dominant forces in society.[26] With the rise of the women's movement that began while Rosler lived in San Diego, her desire to engage society with her work took on new and varied levels of discontent. The different cultural critiques in which Rosler participated, and still participates, are perfectly expressed in the multi-layered images and collisions of the photomontage as well as the nuanced interactions in her performances and videos. The space of her artwork allows diverse narratives to intersect as expressed through the images, language, and modes of representation that she appropriates from the mass media all shot-through with the hint of irreverence provided by her feminist burlesque. The development and clarification of her critical position early on in her life and career facilitated, defined, and directed the way in which Rosler engaged the public in the critique that she presented in all of her works.

Since the 1970s, Rosler has continued her critical engagement with contemporary culture in her artwork. She drew upon a variety of media to realize her humorous critique and to communicate with the viewer in the most appropriate way, whatever the message. Rosler continued to pursue an activist art and intervened into the public's and art world's conscience with installations that addressed the situation of the homeless in New York City, as well as reincarnations of her photomontages, and a variety of performances commenting on contemporary events. Her critical engagement has not waned, while her presence within the art world has slowly waxed. As the grass-roots orientation for agitation and organizing of the 1970s shifted into a more commodity-driven market focus in the 1980s, the public forum for her artwork virtually disappeared. Rosler realized that in order for her artwork to be seen, she had to become a part of the system to some degree, and joined with a gallery in order to circulate her

[26] Rosler, "Place, Position, Power, Politics," 58.

artwork more widely in 1993. She participated in a variety of groups shows at prominent institutions, and had a retrospective in the U.S. at the International Center for Photography, but also maintained a smaller scale for her work, as she exhibited a reprisal of *If You Lived Here* at the e-flux gallery, as well as created her photomontaged responses to the war in Iraq also titled, *Bringing the War Home* from 2004-2008. In 2003 and 2011, she revisited *Semiotics of the Kitchen* with a performance, installation, and video work at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, *Semiotics of the Kitchen: An Audition*. She also reincarnated her *Monumental Garage Sale* (1973) at the Museum of Modern Art in 2012, which effectively drew further connections between the "then and now" of the 1970s and today. Although she has since joined the system of the art world, Rosler maintains her engagement with social and cultural issues, while also carefully controlling how, where, and when her work is seen.

Chapter Three: Martha Rosler's Burlesque of the American Body Beautiful

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence,' the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word 'impossible' and write is as 'the end.'

Helene Cixous[1]

A sea of flesh dominates the viewer's vision, built up by undulating wave upon wave of pink, peach, tan, yellow, and brown feminine curves. The appearance of the occasional lingerie bottom, bed linen, and bouffant hairstyle are the only visual interruptions amidst the veritably continuous ocean of flesh, with each of the subtle variations the only distinguishing features between the individual figures. The women that build up the cascade of bodies alternately lie on their sides, their backs, or their stomachs, with an occasional figure sitting, propped up on one arm. Their collectively supine forms, coy smiles, and seductive eyes, paired with their curvaceous bodies bearing naturally full and heavy breasts, situate these images as belonging to the soft-core pornographic tradition typical of the late twentieth century—particularly that of *Playboy* magazine. The hair and makeup of the women link them to the late-1960s, an era of cultural tumult when young people across America responded to the contemporary political, social, and cultural crises that developed in response to the Vietnam War. Artists joined the ranks of dissent, and among them, Martha Rosler utilized the medium of photomontage to criticize the contemporary context that allowed the war to happen and the conditions that fostered that context.

The montages that Rosler produced not only commented on the Vietnam War, but also presented a sharp, parodic criticism of the patriarchal, late-industrial capitalist society in which

[1] Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer, 1976): 886.

such a war happened. By appropriating images directly from the mass media, she rooted her critique within the context of mass culture and its dominant methods of social and cultural indoctrination and conditioning; effectively breaking down these forces within the constructed space of a montage based on wit and the Brechtian distanciation. She further broke down viewers' defenses with an innate sense of humor built into the photomontaged scenes—the clash of appropriated imagery was shocking, but satirical in its bite, with laughter lurking in every assembled visual space to disarm viewers and allow them to openly and easily approach and digest the radical feminist message of Rosler's work. The first of the two series of photomontages that she created within the context of the turmoil of the late 1960s, *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966-1972), clearly illustrated her keen, early use of an aesthetic burlesque of mass culture's vision of femininity through her appropriation of its imagery, while it also traced the reverberations of her practice within the framework of the art historical and the feminist canons.

In 1966, Rosler began work on the *Body Beautiful* series, culling images from magazines as diverse as *Playboy*, *Time*, *Life* and other popular "glossies." Jayne Wark described the series in her article "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson," and noted Rosler's techniques for creating the visually humorous collisions that drove her feminist burlesque: "lingerie advertisements are cut and pasted with body parts from *Playboy* magazine to reveal not only the objectification of female sexuality but its role as commodity sign as well."[2] Rosler gathered the magazines from various sources, often fishing

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[2] Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson," 44.

issues from the garbage room in her Brooklyn apartment building, and she then sat at her kitchen table to cut the images out from ads and photo-spreads alike.[3]

Glossy magazines were one of the most popular media outlets in America after World War II, only to be surpassed by television as the main media outlet in the early 1970s. The proliferation of full color photography on the gleaming pages of the magazines further increased their circulation, cementing the primary position of the magazine within mass media during the 1960s.[4] Rosler's appropriation and re-presentation of magazine imagery was a natural choice, as magazines held such a prominent position in mass media; as any attempt to present a, "new, positive image[s] of a revised femininity… would simply supply and thereby prolong the life of the existing representational apparatus."[5] As Craig Owens further explained: "Most of these artists, however, work with the existing repertory of cultural imagery—not because their subject, feminine sexuality is always constituted in and as it—but because their subject, feminine sexuality, is always constituted in and as representation, a representation of difference."[6] Rosler seized on the extant cultural imagery in order to critique the historic representation of feminine sexuality as object and difference.

In her feminist deconstruction of contemporary cultural imagery and representations of the feminine body, Rosler literally took apart the publications' imagery and resituated it within a new context in order to convey a new, critical interaction between the viewer and the pictures

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[3] In her talk at the Museum of Modern Art, "An Evening with Martha Rosler," (November 26, 2012) Rosler described how she got most of the magazines from the garbage, but did actually pay for the "girlie magazines," like Playboy and Hustler.

[4] Although many magazines published some ads or images in color prior to the 1960s, most magazines ran primarily black and white images because of cost and time constraints.

[5] Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," 71.

[6] Ibid.

they encountered on a daily basis. Through her quotation and recontextualization within the photomontages, she aimed to educate and engage the viewer in a dialogue regarding contemporary social mores. As she stated in her essay *Notes on Quotes*, “quoting allows for a separation between quoter and quotation that calls attention to expression as garment and invites judgment of its cut.”[7] She utilized the exact imagery of mass culture, culled directly from the magazines that circulated in its midst, in order to make, “the normal strange, the invisible an object of scrutiny, the trivial a measure of social life. In its seeming parasitism, quotation represents a refusal of socially integrated, therefore complicity, *creativity*.”[8]

Alexander Alberro noted that Rosler’s postmodern strategy of montage sutured Brechtian distanciation with pedagogy, creating a new visual context within her photomontages that conveyed a biting political, social, cultural, and economic critique.[9] He linked Rosler both to the earlier tradition of agitational photomontage, such as the work produced by John Heartfield and Hannah Höch during the Berlin Dada movement, as well as to more contemporary Pop art, as seen in that of James Rosenquist and Richard Hamilton.[10] While she inherited a lineage of a visual disruptive practice from these earlier modernist movements, which reframed mass-cultural imagery in a new context to create a humorous critique of contemporary culture, she rebranded that strategy of appropriation to express a feminist critique of the patriarchal indoctrination of mass cultural imagery of the late-industrial capitalist American milieu.

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[7] Rosler, "Notes on Quotes," 133.

[8] ibid., 134.

[9] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," 76 & 80.

[10] Ibid., 80.

Rosler acknowledged that not only her affinity for Pop art's appropriation of mass culture influenced her photomontages, but also recognized the similarities between her work and that of John Heartfield, while speaking at the Museum of Modern Art in conjunction with her first solo exhibition there. She noted that both she and Heartfield desired to create a viable, believable visual space into which the viewers could place themselves in order to engage with the humorous social and cultural critique proposed by each of the artists.[11] However, despite this acknowledged similarity, she also admitted that she was not familiar with his work at the time she began the photomontages, because, "anti-Fascist agit-prop," was not widely circulated in the United States during the 1960s.[12] However, Pop Art garnered much contemporaneous media attention, and was particularly familiar to an artist raised in New York City, where Pop's quotation of consumer culture provided a clear and relatively contemporary source of aesthetic dissent that informed Rosler's early montage practice.

In an interview with Craig Owens, Rosler acknowledged that, while she initially "hated Pop Art," her awareness of the role of high art, and the possibility of a critical distance within art, did not emerge until after she, "understood that Pop Art wasn't just the aestheticization of everything, as the critical discourse around it suggested."[13] She also noted that while David Antin alerted her to the paradigm shift initiated by Pop, which, "pointed [her] toward direct use of mass-culture imagery," but her immediate, "influences included Max Ernst's surrealist collage

[11] Martha Rosler from her talk, An Evening with Martha Rosler, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 26, 2012.

[12] Martha Rosler from her talk, An Evening with Martha Rosler, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 26, 2012.

[13] Owens, "On Art and Artists: Martha Rosler," 6.

novellas and other surrealist works, and even the quirky San Francisco artist Jess. But collage was obviously the medium of the twentieth century."[14]

Rosler's photomontages resonated through the similarities in medium and ideals with these earlier, modernist instances of appropriation from visual culture, particularly the beliefs that the works were not art and needed to create believable spaces that the viewers could inhabit to initiate a dialectical process. Rosler's works not only created a dialogue with past modernist movements, but also reverberate forward in history, to contemporary feminist and art historical critique, and garnered much-deserved attention within the past decade's resurrection of the second wave of feminism's original critique. A hallmark of effective agitational art is its continued affective value as contexts shift, and Rosler's montages still have the power to incite a contemporary viewer to question society and its values.

In a recent interview, Rosler discussed her shift towards the active critical engagement of her artwork during the 1960s and early 1970s and addressed the role of the photographic image: "The photograph is not mute, it speaks to people and people speak back to it, and all kinds of conversations can occur around it and the photomontage even more so because it speaks about a rupture or a displacement, and that is really interesting to me."[15] It is precisely her strategy of the disruption, or displacement, within photomontage, as well as other media, which facilitated and propelled the activism inherent within Rosler's artwork.

In *Body Beautiful,* Rosler's strategy of quoting and re-presenting mass culture emphasized the collisions of the contexts that disrupted their original intended meanings and aesthetically intervened in the circulation of that imagery; this effectively provided the viewer

[14] Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," 25.

[15] Felicia Herrschaft, "Interview with Martha Rosler," http://www.fehe.org/index.php?id=571.

with a realm in which they could effectively question the culture that produced the original images. As Craig Owens noted, artists working with the ‘transparent images’ of photography and film circulated by mass media, like Rosler, highlighted the transparency of those mediums—how these images erase their, “material and ideological supports…so that, in them, reality itself appears to speak,” in order to become culturally persuasive to the general public.[16] These artists worked to, “expose [the images] as instruments of power. Not only d[id] they investigate the ideological messages encoded therein, but, more importantly, the strategies and tactics whereby such images secure[d] their authoritative status in our culture. … Through appropriation, manipulation, and parody, these artists work[ed] to render visible the invisible mechanisms whereby these images secure[d] their putative transparency,” all three of which are strategies that Rosler utilized to disrupt the circulating and accumulating cultural capital of mass media representations of the sexualized female body.[17]

Rosler’s dissection of mass imagery began in the mid-1960s, when the second wave of feminism just began to crest the horizon of visibility for most Americans. The year Rosler began *Body Beautiful*, 1966, was the same year the Los Angeles Artists Protest Committee erected the *Peace Tower*, and when Betty Friedan, along with twenty-seven other women, formed the National Organization of Women (N.O.W.), as well as the same year when students protested the Vietnam War on campuses across America. Instead of joining east coast activist groups like Women Artists in Revolution (W.A.R.), Rosler sought out local, southern California feminist groups, like the Women’s Liberation Front at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD), as well as ties to the feminist projects and artists at the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles,

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[16] Owens, "Representation, Appropriation, and Power," 111.

[17] Ibid.

which, along with her conversations with like-minded left-leaning graduate students at UCSD, firmly grounded Rosler in a political activist, counter-cultural ideology.[18]

The photomontages in Rosler's *Body Beautiful* series present the viewer with clashing imagery that dissect the constantly reinforced and re-circulated image of the woman, in particular the feminine ties to the realm of domesticity and her presentation as an object for men's visual, and by proxy, sexual consumption, yet always maintain a sense of humor in the clash of imagery, which makes the critique inherent in the image that much more digestible for viewers. In her landmark 1974 essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,* Laura Mulvey highlighted the way the cinematic industry, as well as other image-based media like television and magazines, "pose questions about the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking," such that she identified the cinema as a key site where male subjects experienced scopophilic, erotic pleasure in looking at another person as an object.[19] Mulvey built upon the psychoanalytic works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the latter of whom noted, "images and symbols for women cannot be isolated from images and symbols *of* women. The representation… of female sexuality, whether it is repressed or not, conditions its implementation."[20]

John Berger, whose criticism was rooted in the 1970s, also built upon the role of the symbolism of women, as he succinctly outlined the Western history of the representation of women as available sexual objects for male visual consumption in his 1972 television series and

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[18] Rosler, "Email Interview."

[19] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 45-46.

[20] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 613.

book *Ways of Seeing*. He proposed that, over time, the conventions of European oil painting developed to support male dominance by presenting them with images of women as sexual objects. He traced the ways in which women, "born… into the keeping of men," are trained to, "watch themselves being looked at," and turn themselves into objects, or sights, as evidenced by the tradition of the nude in European oil painting.[21] Berger cited the origin of the nude in oil painting, particularly the representation of Adam and Eve, and their newfound awareness of their nakedness, as a cause for shame: "Nakedness was created in the mind of the beholder. The second fact is that the woman is blamed and punished by being made subservient to the man. In relation to the woman, the man becomes the agent of god."[22] The iconological preference for the masculine subject over the feminine object extended from Renaissance representations of Adam and Eve, through images of other themes, like Vanity and Susannah and the Elders, all the way through contemporary media—as seen in an advertisement for underwear that Berger provided, in which a blonde, nude woman stands, with her pubic area hidden by tall grasses, next to a muscular, robust man, clothed in Y-front white briefs—here, her presence merely serves to reinforce the commonly circulated ideal of the nude woman as sexual object available for male consumption while selling men's underwear.[23]

In her photomontage burlesque of this inherently Western and modern tradition, Rosler created a visual space in which the viewer can begin to question how mass-media images affect their daily lives and shape their identities. Each of the images Rosler used to create her

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[21] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York, NY: Penguin Books USA Inc., 1972), 46-47.

[22] Ibid., 48.

[23] Throughout the text, Berger included many reproductions of images, including both paintings and contemporary photographs. On p. 49, he juxtaposed a painting of Adam and Eve by Max Slevogt with an advertisement for underwear, creating a visual inheritance for the modern image in the iconography of the fine art of the past.

montaged work carried with it its own particular cultural capital, the value of which depended upon the myriad of feelings and emotions associated with each particular image in the context of late twentieth century American culture. As Alexander Alberro noted, "the series as a whole parodically fetishizes the female body and its parts while defetishizing the object quality of the art work or the Madison Avenue image."[24]

By appropriating these images from the mass media, Rosler acknowledged both the economic and cultural capital present within the image, but also the economic, social, and cultural capital tied to its source, represented by the magazine, the photographers, and other potentially famous or mundane individuals involved in the making of the mass imagery. The photomontages in the *Body Beautiful* series often appropriated images from advertisements or editorials in women's magazines, which carried cultural capital with them in the goods they depicted, the celebrities they highlighted, and the name of the magazine as well as the caché of its editors and authors.

Within the series of photomontages belonging to *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain*, the images can be divided roughly into three groups of tropes: the woman and domesticity, the woman outside of the home, and the woman as a sexual object. These divisions are not, by any means, mutually exclusive, and often images that I designated as belonging to one group intertwine with features of another set, but for the purposes of facilitating my analysis, I divided the montages into these three groups. Each group depicts similar subject matter reimagined and burlesqued from the appropriated mass media and contains a carefully rendered visual account of Rosler's perspective on each scenario if the viewer cares to engage with the dialectic and question the status quo.

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[24] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy." 79.

The Domestic Body Beautiful

The largest group deals with images of women in relation to the home, which is a common theme throughout all of Rosler's work, regardless of the medium. These particular montages from the *Body Beautiful* series typically depict a woman, or parts of a woman, in relation to a domestic space in order to initiate a dialogue between the viewer and the image that instigates any number of questions regarding the predominant patriarchal values in our culture. Clearly Rosler wished to incite viewers to consider why the trope of the woman in the home is so common, and why this might be detrimental to our society, as this theme recurs throughout this series, and in many of her works in other mediums.

The montages within the *Body Beautiful* series within this group are: *Bathroom Surveillance*, *Bowl of Fruit*, *Old Bride, or Bridal Party*, *Brides Romance Language, or Bianchi Bride*, *Family Portrait*, *Self Portrait I*, and *Woman with Vacuum, or Vacuuming Pop Art*. Through these works, Rosler successfully deconstructed the image and role of the woman as inherently tied to domesticity—a connection that the mass media in America reiterated since the soldiers returned home from World War II. By producing, and reproducing, images and stories of women within the home, the media participated in the project of conditioning many women to return to the home after holding jobs outside the domestic realm during the Second World War. To aid this cultural conditioning, the recurring image of the housewife became a ubiquitous feature in mid- to late-twentieth century American popular culture, from *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best*, to an Elizabeth Arden ad in a 1944 *New Yorker* that proclaimed: "The smart college girl majors in beauty… the college girl who applies herself to better looks as diligently as she applies herself to chemistry or athletics is going to have honors as long as she likes." Martha

Rosler burlesqued the circulation of these domestically oriented feminine tropes in the mass media in her *Body Beautiful* photomontages.

While *Old Bride* and *Bianchi Bride* do not explicitly depict women within the home, their reference to woman as wife—a role which has been historically tied to the domestic realm—provides a clear link to the home. By appropriating images of young, blushing brides from women's or bridal magazines, Rosler took aim at the growing industry centered around marriage and its reproduction of the dominant, patriarchal values that a woman should marry young and secure herself a place within a man's home. *Old Bride*, in particular, disrupts the ageism inherent in the wedding industry. In this work, Rosler placed the head of an older woman—replete with carefully coiffed gray hair, thick lensed, plastic-rimmed glasses, a wrinkled brow, and a double-chinned smile—on the svelte, young body of a bride wearing a full-length white gown with a lace, beaded bodice and lace-accented hemline. The "old bride," whose smooth arms hold a simple bouquet of white and pink flowers amidst of cloud of baby's breath in her gloved hands, poses next to an attractive, young couple on her right—the woman in a pink and white plaid floor-length sleeveless gown with a ruffled collar and pink belt, at which she holds a similar bouquet in her white-gloved hands, he in a black tuxedo complete with tails, bowtie, and pocket square. The contrast between the youthful beauty of the couple on the right and the beaming aged face on the left, as well as between the face and the body of the bride herself, further emphasized Rosler's critique of the wedding industry.

The baby boom in post-WWII America encouraged women to marry young and start families as part of their return to the domestic realm, and the trope of the young bride was inherently tied to the cultural preference for marrying young. Betty Friedan, in particular, traced the shift in the trajectory of mass culture through stories featuring the "New Woman," published

in magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* during World War II, through the return to the housewife as the protagonist by the end of the war. What Friedan labeled the "feminine mystique"—the spreading of propaganda urging women to leave the public realm for the home—purportedly began in 1942 when journalist Ferdinand Lundberg and psychologist Marynia Farnham published *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex*, "with its warning that careers and higher education were leading to the 'masculinization of women with enormously dangerous consequences to the home, the children dependent on it and to the ability of the woman, as well as her husband, to obtain sexual gratification.'"[25] While scholars like Joanne Meyerowitz deftly pointed out that many magazines did publish mixed messages, with stories that did actually illustrate the roles of women both inside and outside the home, they, "rarely presented direct challenges to the conventions of marriage and motherhood."[26] Speaking about her photomontages from the 1960s-1970s in an interview, Rosler stated that, "by the late '60s, feminism began to inform my thoughts and my work. I was obsessed with the reduction of the female to the mythic and to the crudely concrete."[27] Thus, Rosler acknowledged the idea of a mythic image of the young, sexually available wife that dominated Cold War mass culture when she was working, throughout the women's movement, and these representations even persist into the twenty-first century, as bridal magazines still continue to sell the image of marriage through photographs of young, beautiful women in virginal white gowns. By using an image of youthful beauty, the magazines and mass media went beyond supporting the nascent wedding industry and reinforced contemporary cultural standards of youthful feminine beauty, particularly the

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[25] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 37.

[26] Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 251.

[27] Owens, "On Art and Artists: Martha Rosler," 12.

message that a woman must be slender, have long luxurious hair, a gorgeous dress, and a prettily made-up face to win herself a husband—all while she is still young enough to do so, as well.

In *Bride's Romance Language, or Bianchi Bride*, Rosler disrupted the thinly veiled sexual undertones embedded in the growing wedding industry, in which gowns, accessories, shoes, floral arrangements, hair stylists, undergarments, and more were marketed at young hopeful women seeking the version of the American dream sold to them—a husband, a home behind a white picket fence, and two-point-five children. While nearly all images of brides, both then and now, show the bride wearing a 'virginal' white gown—symbolic of her purity—Rosler centralized the sublimated sexuality of the trope in her montaged interruption. By collaging images of a woman's nude breasts and her bare stomach and pubic triangle culled from a pornographic magazine over an ad for an elaborate lace, high necked wedding gown—that was both demure and revealing as the lace actually revealed the model's skin and undergarments to beneath the dress—Rosler referenced the constant objectification of the female body in contemporary culture; even when draped in pure white supposedly representing virginal virtue, sexuality remained of the utmost import. Through her montage, Rosler deftly reminded the viewer that the media, in order to further 'Other' women and keep them suppressed as mere objects dependent upon their husbands and present for male visual consumption, even sexualized images of supposedly chaste purity.

While Berger, among others, confirmed that Western media historically sexualized representations of women in order to affirm their subordinate status as sexual objects, the arena of mass imagery was not the only realm in which women were deemed 'Other.' Simone de Beauvoir extended the sequestering and sexualization of women throughout all aspects of society. She noted in the Introduction to her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex*, "she [the

woman] is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called 'the sex,' meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other."[28] Thus, de Beauvoir acknowledged the historic Othering of women from the 'essential' position of the masculine perspective, which hinged on the visible mark of women's sexual difference.

However, as Judith Butler discussed in her essay, "Variations on Sex and Gender," we make a partially conscious and unconscious choice to present ourselves as a certain gender, interpreting and reinterpreting gender norms and incorporating a cultural history into that embodied, enacted, gendered body; yet the representation of women, in every medium and even in language, obscured the vast diversity of women's experience.[29] Butler noted that by, "scrutinizing the mechanism of agency and appropriation, Beauvoir is attempting, … to infuse the analysis of women's oppression with emancipatory potential. Oppression is not a self-contained system that either confronts individuals as a theoretical object or generates them as its cultural pawns. It is a dialectical force that requires individual participation on a large scale in order to maintain its malignant life."[30] Rosler highlighted the cultural trope of woman as sexual other by also alluding to the act of sexual consummation inherent in the wedding night that shifted the bride from vestal virgin to the physical intimacy and carnal gratification embedded in the wedding contract; but she also effectively disrupted the fantasy portrayed by the media to

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[28] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, epub ed. (New York, NY: Vintage Books 2011), 40.

[29] Judith Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault," in *Feminism as Critique: On the Politics of Gender*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 131; 41.

[30] Ibid., 132.

remind the viewer of the basic facts of life and complex experience of embodying gender often omitted by mass media imagery.

While all of Rosler's *Body Beautiful* works dealt with images of domesticity, only three, *Bathroom Surveillance*, *Self-Portrait I*, and *Bowl of Fruit*, directly tackle the notion of the gaze within the home, as well as its role in the media and domestic life; two topics that were also not typically addressed in mass culture. *Bathroom Surveillance* portrays the interior of a spacious slate and beige bathroom, complete with matching his-and-hers sinks and a well-lit vanity area. Centrally located in the bathroom and photomontage, a woman's steely-blue eye peers out over the scene, located in the place of a second mirror, directly opposite the viewer. By montaging a close-up photograph of an eye in a dominant position within the composition, Rosler emphasized the role of the gaze, male and female, in the circulation of images within American mass culture. The central, staring eye is identifiably feminine, both from its size and shape as well as with its darkened lashes and eye shadow, both of which indicate the presence of makeup. The fact that the surveying eye belongs to a woman echoes John Berger's statement in *Ways of Seeing* that, "a woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself… From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman."[31] In this passage, Berger discussed how men survey women, in all realms of culture and society, while also maintaining a concrete idea of how they see themselves, fulfilling the role of the autonomous subject of the "surveyor." Women are continuously culturally indoctrinated to view themselves from within, but also as others, particularly men, see them, fulfilling the dual roles of the surveyor and

[31] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.

surveyed that Berger described as existing within women, constantly seeing and judging or comparing themselves with mass cultural images or ideals of beauty simultaneously as they conceive of their self-image. These dual roles of intertwined surveillance proposed by Berger are embedded within Michel Foucault's description of the panopticism of contemporary society: "Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies."[32]

Rosler adeptly addressed the dual functions of the surveyor and the surveyed embedded within the panopticism of contemporary mass culture in this single photomontage, as well as the construction of the woman as other intertwined within these processes. As de Beauvoir noted, "what singularly defines the situation of woman is that being, like all humans, an autonomous freedom, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men force her to assume herself as Other: an attempt is made to freeze her as an object and doom her to immanence, since her transcendence will be forever transcended by another essential and sovereign consciousness. Woman's drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential."[33]

[32] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1977), 217.

[33] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 57-58.

Rosler implicated mass culture in the reinforcement of women's position as Other and its indoctrination of women's self-surveillance of their own femininity and alterity. The large, unblinking gray eye of the otherwise unseen woman in the photomontage literally embodied the critical act of feminine self-surveillance, and its counterpart, the masculine gaze, yearning with a "primordial wish for pleasurable looking."[34] The critical gaze of the surveyor, in which the woman compares her appearance to the cultural ideals of femininity—which, in 1970s America were most likely fashion models, movie and television stars, and musicians—reinforced the culturally dominant, unattainable standards of beauty.

These impossible images of beauty that circulated through magazines, newspapers, movies, and television encouraged average women to try and replicate the culturally reinforced ideal of feminine beauty. The mass media's representation of such unreasonable ideals of feminine beauty supported and replicated the consumer culture industry through the circulation of imagery that emphasized clothes, makeup, and even fad diets; all selling an image and, by proxy, a product to the women that survey themselves in comparison to pop culture icons. By replacing a mirror with a disembodied feminine eye, Rosler succinctly illustrated the surveying gaze, both masculine and feminine, that always follows women. One typically associates surveillance with espionage, intrigue, nation-states, and other similarly large networks of power, which exert control over the individual in familiar ways, such as security cameras and other means of documenting the actions and movements of those individuals. However, in this photomontage, Rosler reminded the viewer that the panoptic network of power inherent in the late capitalist industrial consumer society was and is so pervasive that the processes of surveillance that sustain and propagate the culture, and goods, are present in the homes, and minds, of every woman in American culture.

[34] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 46.

Further extending in her deconstruction of the exchange of gazes within 1970s American mass culture, Rosler's montage, *Bowl of Fruit*, sutured dissonant images of femininity together within a common domestic space, the kitchen. A nude, blonde woman, stands at the right of the kitchen, just past the dark wood island and next to the stove, as she coyly glances over her shoulder, past a glass bowl of green pears, towards the viewer. Across the kitchen, seated with her ankles crossed on the counter next to the stove, a young girl from a black and white photograph peers over towards the nude woman. In between the small grisaille figure and the voluptuous blonde, a basket of pomegranates and a square clock occupy the counter space. While these are both objects that "belong" within a kitchen, their placement is telling. It is as if Rosler alludes to the child's future, as forecast by popular culture, in which the passing of time renders her into an object for men's visual pleasure—her future self embodied by the nude blonde. The nude, adult woman coyly glances over her right shoulder, not meeting the viewer's gaze directly, but still courting them with her slightly downcast eyes—a common feature in the depiction of the female nude from the Renaissance through the present day and an iconographic device that Berger noted emphasized the objectification rather than subjecthood of the nude.[35]

Describing the similarity of facial expression between an Ingres model and a photograph from "girlie magazine," Berger noted, "is not the expression remarkably similar in each case? It is the expression of a woman responding with the calculated charm to the man who she imagines looking at her—although she doesn't know him. She is offering up her femininity as the surveyed."[36] The photographed nude is merely another sight, or object, to be consumed, set amidst the basket of pomegranates—the food of the dead that tempted Persephone—and behind the bowl of green pears—a different sacred fruit also tied to fertility and fecundity, whose

[35] See Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 52-53.

[36] Ibid., 55.

physical shape formally echoed the curvilinear outline of the nude's body. Within the interior space of the kitchen, Rosler dissected the culturally pre-ordained roles for women, tracing a girl's path from demure childhood to adult sexual other, and in doing so, implicated the interplay between fecundity and consumption, gaze and objectification as a major component of the consumer capitalism of American society in the 1970s.

In *Self-Portrait I*, Rosler further addressed the interplay of the gaze and the idea of surveillance within the home. However, by including a photographic image of herself, Rosler both engaged and burlesqued the complexities of representation and self-representation in relation to the larger art historical canon, as well as to her contemporary consumer culture. Rosler montaged a photograph of herself, with her hand resting on the passenger window of a car, into the image of a flashy and sleek living room, in which the light bounces off crystal decanters set upon a gleaming white table in the foreground, and around a plethora of mirrors and art hung on the walls. The homage to modern design contained sleek grey couches and a graphic abstract black and white rug, as well as white Rococo-inspired chairs tucked under the side-table on the right wall, which further emphasized the gleaming luster of the room through the heightened contrasts. The wide angle of the image paired with the clean organization and display of the objects alerts viewers to the fact that this image is one of the sort printed in magazines that document interior design through the homes of the wealthy in Western contemporary culture, as in the magazine *House Beautiful*, whose scenes of interior opulence Rosler appropriated for her second series of photomontages, *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967-1972). By situating her photographic self-portrait on the far side of the room, Rosler's image faces the viewer, but her gaze is interrupted by the presence of sunglasses on her face. Rather than a coy, demurely downcast gaze as worn by the nude in *Bowl of Fruit*, Rosler

distinctly refused to participate in the exchange of glances that typically plays out across the composition of traditional portraiture.

Rosler's sunglasses serve to further disrupt the continuity of the room. At first glance, it appears as though Rosler claims ownership over the room—situated at the focus of the room, as she is—but upon looking closer, one notices that her hair and clothes belong to a completely different class than the objects in the living room. The snapshot quality of her photographic image further cements the discontinuity of her presence within the montaged image, as the owner of the room would not likely deign to appear in hastily taken photographs, next to a common car window, on the side of the road in sunny Southern California. By creating a subtle disconnect between the image of the artist and the room that she inhabits, Rosler interrupted the seamless viewing experience typical of mass media, and caused the audience to question the interaction suggested by the photomontage. Portraying herself amidst such shining objects and expensive furniture, Rosler incisively commented on the process of identification in contemporary American culture. The magazine image is one version of a portrait, representing the wealthy owners of the home, and their economic, cultural, and social capital, through the objects that they own; while Rosler's embodied, photographic image presents a different kind of portrait. Historic conventions of portraiture demanded an accurate representation of the sitter, as well as the status of the individual represented. Thus portraits of rulers demanded a visual evocation of the abstract ideals supported by that monarch in addition to the representation of their social status. Portraits of male kings, such as those of Philip IV of Spain by Velazquez—*Philip in Brown and Silver* (ca. 1632)—portrayed the ruler in an elaborately embroidered costume, gleaming with silver thread, almost gazing through the viewer, effectively communicating the power and stature befitting his station. Accordingly, even in a self-portrait painted by an accomplished artist, such

as Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-Portrait as a Lute Player* (ca.1616-18), the artist self-assuredly looks out from the canvas, but does not directly lock gazes with the viewer. By removing her gaze from the image, Rosler removed her photographic self from the dialogue amidst the objects altogether, disrupting the construction of a unified sense of a subject within the image as defined by the objects populating the room, and further emphasizing her critique of the late capitalist industrial culture in which the consumer created a self-portrait through their purchases. Rosler dissected the commodity fetishism that fueled the accumulation of economic capital and, by proxy, cultural capital, tied to the goods in the image, representative of wealth and luxury in the late-industrial capitalist society of 1970s America. Sarah K. Rich extended this argument to include a commentary on the art market—artists and their collectors—in which Rosler substituted herself, "(unconvincingly) as patron as well as artist, she confuses the power relationship between buyer and bought. And in the process, she questions the ways in which artists may, or may not, comment on their own potential complicity in producing visual signs of wealth."[37]

The last two images in the group that directly addressed the trope of the woman within the home, or domesticity, are *Family Portrait* and *Woman with Vacuum (or Vacuuming Pop Art)*. These two photomontages further reinforced Rosler's deconstruction of mass media images of women as inherently tied to the domestic realm through a visual commentary on families, women, and consumer goods. *Family Portrait* is a seemingly straightforward image of a family of three, with a car behind them. This image is aligned with the Pop art inheritance that Rosler mentioned in several interviews, as it montaged a black and white image of the small family in front of a full-color advertisement for a bright yellow American muscle car, a 1970 or 1971

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[37] Sarah K. Rich, "Through the Looking Glass: Women and Self-Representation in Contemporary Art," in *Through the Looking Glass: Women and Self-Representation in Contemporary Art*, ed. Joyce Robinson and Sarah K. Rich (University Park, Pennsylvania: Palmer Museum of Art, 2003), 10.

Chevelle. The disruption occurs between the two-door vehicle and the image of the smiling family. A two-door muscle car is not the ideal family automobile, as it is difficult for more than two people to comfortably, and easily, enter and exit the car. Muscle cars in particular, of all two-door automobiles, are typically associated with young, single men, not married couples with children in grammar school.

Yet again, the conventions of portraiture demand that the objects depicted in the image with the family are their property, however discontinuous it may appear. Rosler carefully burlesqued the popular conventions of familial portraiture in this montage. By placing a young, tripartite family in front of a car that any teenage boy would lust after, Rosler brought the advertising industry's practices under scrutiny through her parodic mimicry. In her juxtapositioning, Rosler further incited the viewer to question how the media constructs the identity of individuals through specific objects, and how these objects have been marketed to the public as specially suited for certain kinds of individuals, or families, and the accordingly gendered spaces that accompany those objects and individuals.

Rosler disrupted the typical photographic family portrait with the presence of a muscle car, and thus engaged the viewer's experience of consumer culture and initiated a process of questioning that experience in relation to larger themes of consumerism, economies, the family, and the home. In an interview with Craig Owens, Rosler stated, "the crudest points are often the most important ones, such as the idea that one provokes thought about the given and the ordinary by recontextualizing them. I mean alienation, making strange."[38] By reconfiguring the commonplace images of a car and a family, Rosler makes them strange, and engages the viewer in a dialectal process that initiates political and social action towards change.

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[38] Owens, "On Art and Artists: Martha Rosler," 14.

The last image in this set is *Woman with Vacuum*, in which Rosler, like many artists working in the late 1960s and early 1970s, aimed to disrupt the circulation of art objects as consumer goods. While she did not participate in traditional conceptual art exercises, in which the artist deconstructed, removed, and thwarted the actuality of an art object, such that it could not circulate within the art market as a desirable material good for economic consumption, instead, Rosler rephotographed mass media photographs, in this instance ones that depicted paintings, or posters adorned with reproductions of paintings, associated with the Pop Art movement from the early 1960s. These artworks hang not in the institutional white cube of a gallery, but in the narrow hallway of a home, displayed on walls with red and white striped wallpaper, bordered by a dark gray carpet and a red ceiling. In the center of the montage, Rosler inserted the image of a woman with a vacuum cleaner—available to the middle classes in the Post-war era that made housewifery more convenient through electronics—she burlesqued and appropriated the image from an advertisement for Eureka brand vacuum cleaners that boasted that "the gorgeous New 1955 Eureka Super Roto-Matic is now refined to make possible even faster, easier cleaning for you. And, because it is America's fastest growing favorite in vacuum cleaners, volume production permits its outstanding low price of $69.95 complete with deluxe tools."[39] The woman in the hallway smiles as she uses her shiny and affordable new vacuum, surrounded by the images created by Tom Wesselmann and Robert Indiana; Rosler visually connects the art on the walls with the commodity status of the vacuum—each is an object, shiny and new, and just as coveted. By the process of association, the body of the woman became just another object for consumption, as well.

[39] Text from 1955 Eureka Super Roto-matic vacuum cleaner advertisement. Although vacuum machines were manufactured at the turn of the century, they were still a luxury product, and only became widely available to the middle class after World War II.

Through her elision of art as an object for consumption and woman as object for consumption, both accorded the same commodity status of the vacuum, Rosler succinctly commented on the role of women in the art world. Rosler noted how she constructed the photomontages at night, while her son was sleeping, and that being a mother in the art world was a kiss-of-death of sorts, relegating one to the realm of "less-serious" art; by having a family, a woman artist took time away from her productivity in the studio to be a mother as well.[40] As Lucy Lippard noted when discussing the unequal conditions in the art world:

> Men are somehow "professional" artists even if they must teach a twenty-hour week, work forty hours as a carpenter, museum guard, designer, or any of the other temporary tasks with which most artists are forced to support themselves in an unsympathetic society. Women, on the other hand, especially if they are married and have children, are supposed to be wholly consumed by menial labors. If a single woman artist supports herself teaching, waitressing, working as a "gallery girl," she is often called a dilettante. If she is a mother, she may work full time in her studio and she will not be taken seriously by other artists until she has become so thoroughly paranoid about her position that she can be called 'an aggressive bitch' or an opportunist. It doesn't seem to occur to people that women who can manage all this and still be serious artists may be *more* serious than their male counterparts.[41]

Both Rosler's anecdote and Lippard's description of the 'state of the times' for women artists revealed that the patriarchal structure that dominated the social world also governed the seemingly liberal art world as well. Further illustrating the masculine-feminine power dynamics in the art world is this excerpt from a speech by Muriel Castanis, that describes the outrage male artists felt when women artists in the A.W. C. asked them to ask the Whitney Annual for equal representation of the genders: "another male artist said, 'But, do you realize how many artists you would be cutting out?' Other artists being male, meaning art is male, meaning the women included were not artists? … So only when another male artist made a motion to support the

[40] Martha Rosler, "An Evening with Martha Rosler" (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 26, 2012).

[41] Lippard, "Sexual Politics: Art Style," 31.

intelligence of the female action could a vote (out of embarrassment) be carried, and the Ad Hoc Whitney Committee was formed."[42] As an ironic aid to Rosler's burlesque parody of contemporary imagery, the image at the end of the hall presents the viewer with a poster, designed by Robert Indiana, for the modern opera, *The Mother of Us All*, by Virgil Thomson, with a libretto by Gertrude Stein, that chronicled the life of Susan B. Anthony—one of the suffragettes who initiated the first wave of feminism in the nineteenth century.

Rosler contrasted the opera poster with the other Pop images, as Indiana's poster presented a portrait of the feminist movement, Wesselmann's image presented a woman's face with her mouth provocatively parted—men created the images hung on the walls, for an audience deemed to be primarily made up of men. Ironically, even an opera about the rise of the "first wave" of feminism in the United States, with the libretto by Stein, was represented by an image created by a man in the late 1960s, as women, as Rosler parodically portrayed, were too busy cleaning their homes.

Bodies Beautiful in Nature

The next group of photomontages in this early series encompasses a variety of images of women outside, or moving outside, of the home. These include *Joan of Arc*, *Escape Fantasy*, *Hunting Fantasy*, *Motherhood Fantasy*, *Self Portrait II (Lost in the City)*, and *Nature Girls (Jumping Janes)*. *Joan of Arc* is a rare photomontage in which Rosler engaged directly with an art historical image. Here, she removed Jules Bastien-Lepage's saintly heroine from the naturalistically lush garden surroundings of the original painting and placed her in a new setting,

[42] Revolution, "A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution," iv.

a “garden” of delicate, “Tiffany art-glass, a robin and a tiny nineteenth-century tintype.”[43] The vases range from a decorative piece that resembles a tulip, to an opalescent swirling German vessel from the early twentieth century, and all but one tower over the figure of the saint. Rather than place the young Joan of Arc in an outdoor setting, Rosler situated her amidst a forest of luxury goods, removing her from her humble origins as depicted by Bastien-Lepage, and recontextualizing her amidst the domestic trappings of the bourgeoisie. By re-presenting Joan of Arc surrounded by the shiny, delicate vases associated with wealthy homes of an identifiably different era from her own, Rosler not only burlesqued the original painting, but also asked the viewer to reconsider the role of the female saint in American culture, how her context shaped her role, and the role of religion in shaping domestic and gendered roles in contemporary society. Joan of Arc was noted for her radical departure from the traditional life of a woman in fifteenth century France, by not only “speaking” directly with God, but eventually leading the French army against the British. However, decades of Catholic, and Christian, dogma successfully muted the gender subversion of the saint’s life. The clash between history, current perceptions, and Rosler’s image illustrated the necessity of a thorough feminist revision of culture and society as such imagery and rigid gender roles are deeply ingrained in all cultural and social institutions in the Western World.

The trio of *Fantasy* montages: *Escape Fantasy*, *Hunting Fantasy*, and *Motherhood Fantasy*, are from Rosler’s early exploration in photomontage and are heavily influenced by surrealism, which Rosler acknowledged herself, “my initial influences, though, included Max Ernst’s surrealist collage novellas and other surrealist works.”[44] Ernst’s legacy of appropriating

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[43] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," 7.

[44] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler," ibid., 25.

early-twentieth century mass media is readily apparent in *Motherhood Fantasy*, in which Rosler collaged a black-and-white image of a woman and her child into a seemingly naturalistic landscape setting, where the various media sources colluded to create a coherent, surreal image that dissects women's' roles.

Escape Fantasy, rendered entirely in black-and-white, also focused on a dreamlike world, but one in which the figure of a woman was drawn into the setting, whereas the other works used found images for all of the figures. In *Motherhood Fantasy*, Rosler created a border of morning glories, marigolds, daffodils, and other garden flowers, that frame the lower left edges of the montage highlighting a scene of a mother and her child. However, the scene is hardly an average portrait. In addition to the border, Rosler placed the mother and child not in an average suburban yard, but on a pathway through a tropical forest, with an almost indiscernible horizon that renders the setting strange and foreign. Common songbirds perch on branches, and watch the mother push her son on a swing, but Rosler replaced her head with a bright yellow buttercup and a morning glory, as if to say, "everything's coming up roses," or morning glories, as it were, despite the uncanny surroundings. As Juan Vicente Aliaga discussed in his catalogue essay, "Rosler also approaches the forms of exacerbated romanticism used to sell a certain idea of oversweet femininity or motherhood, presented, for example, in an idyllic wood where flowers are everywhere."[45]

Unlike the other montage *Fantasies*, *Escape Fantasy* portrayed a wisp of a female figure appearing and disappearing in the midst of a modern sunroom of a spacious ranch house. The wide angle of the photograph of the room and deck clearly identifies this image as belonging to

[45] Juan Vicente Aliaga, "Public and Private: Productive Intersections, Some Notes on the Work of Martha Rosler," in *Martha Rosler: La Casa, La Calle, La Cocina*, ed. J.V. Aliaga, et al. (Granada: Diputación de Granada, 2009), 84.

an interior design magazine, like *House Beautiful*, and maximized the amount of the interior and exterior that appeared, with the image framed and punctuated by the orthogonals of the roof and windows. Amidst the architectural lines, which are echoed in the hard lines of the furniture, an hand drawn outline of a female figure forms an undulating S-curve as she appears to drift upward out of the bindings of her domestic surroundings, while sketched images of a woman's mouth, eye, hand, and breast appear on the couch and through the skylight in the roof.

While fairly literal, the image is a clear demonstration of Rosler's freshly-defined relationship to feminism, as the theme of the woman's fantasy of escaping from the drudgery of housewifery was common in mainstream feminism, as outlined by Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, in particular, in 1962: "If a woman had a problem in the 1950's and 1960's, she knew that something must be wrong with her marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought. What kind of woman was she if she did not feel this mysterious fulfillment waxing the kitchen floor?"[46]

Self Portrait II, like *Escape Fantasy*, also executed entirely in black-and-white, presents a grainy image of a blonde woman with sunglasses perched atop her head, who looks up at the viewer from the lower left corner, as silhouetted figures hurry past her through rain puddles on a city street. Rosler montaged these two images together in order to emphasize a distance between the viewer and the scene, as well as between the blonde woman and the shadowy figures in the background. In that distance the viewer can begin to question what the artist is communicating in this "self-portrait." In particular, if one is familiar with Rosler's appearance, they are well aware that, unless she is one of the silhouettes in the background, her likeness is absent from the montage. It instead conveys her continued interest in the public spaces of movement, and the

[46] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 14. Although Rosler cites Simone de Beauvoir as a more direct influence on her feminism, she also read Friedan, and a copy of the *Feminine Mystique* resides in the *Martha Rosler Library* housed at e-flux.

roles enacted therein. As Rosler noted in an interview, “women are the locus of distinction between private and public, at least since the nineteenth century,” and discussed in several other interviews the way that space, “understood in terms of social relations,” was clearly a feminist issue for Rosler.

A further illustration of the social and cultural division between public and private, and by proxy, the push to keep women in the home, Betty Friedan quoted Adlai Stevenson’s 1955 commencement address at Smith College, in which he stated: “Modern woman’s participation in politics is through her role as wife and mother, said the spokesman of democratic liberalism: ‘Women, especially educated women, have a unique opportunity to influence us, man and boy.’ The only problem is woman’s failure to appreciate that her true part in the political crisis is as wife and mother.”[47] By effectively outlining the repercussions of women’s “failure to appreciate their true part,” through her mass media montage, Rosler used the visual vocabulary of mass culture to illustrate the underlying gendered logic with which the media indoctrinated the population.

Another early montage from 1966, *Nature Girls*, presented full-color images of women outside the home. Through a profusion of female figures strewn across a landscape, Rosler burlesqued the media’s representations of women’s appearance, and the lengths to which they must go to adhere to society’s norms of beauty. The same woman, bearing a pixie cut and wearing a red leotard with black tights, reappears, repeated across the landscape—stretching and posing across the ground, but also leaping through the sky, as her body contorted into a new position in each station across the montage.

The fitness craze of the 1980s did not yet exist—Jane Fonda was still an activist and an actress in the 1960s and 1970s, not an at-home aerobics exercise guru—but all women were well

[47] Ibid., 53.

aware of the pressure imposed by society to maintain a thin and attractive appearance. Images of thin, young women appearing on television and in magazines, both in advertisements and features, and that were held up as paragons of beauty, reinforced this pressure. As Rosler demonstrated in this photomontage, women went to take leaps and bounds in the attempt to mimic the ideal appearance in contemporary society. This interruption sparks the viewer to question the unattainable ideal of beauty and standards to which society holds women and why we are bombarded by impossibly perfect images of female beauty continually circulating in all media.

The Body Beautiful in Pieces

The last group of images in the *Body Beautiful* series consists of montages of the female body in pieces, an extreme form of representation and objectification that replaced images of the whole female body with merely fragments, rendering them an object, or several objects, rather than a unified subject. In speaking about the fragmented body's ability to destroy the illusionistic filmic narrative space, Laura Mulvey stated, "one part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth."[48] This form of mutilation as partial representation is typically modern, arising with the invention of photography and its cropped views of the world, and according to Mulvey, filtered through Freud and Lacan, is based in a fetishistic scopophilia, in which the "physical beauty of the object," the feminine body in pieces, is transformed into something satisfying and reassuring in itself.[49] Rosler used images from mass media, in particular soft-core pornographic magazines like *Playboy*, to create images like *Hot House, or Harem*; *Bicillin, or Medical Treatment*; *Centerfold, or Miss February*; *Cold Meat II*; *De Tomaso*

[48] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 48.

[49] Ibid., 49.

Pantera; *Kitchen I, or Hot Meat*; *Oil Slick*; *S, M, L, or Kayser Perma-Lift*; *To Compete with the Noonday Sun*; *Pop Art, or Wallpaper*; *Cargo Cult*; and *Transparent Box, or Vanity Fair*. By combining representations of only parts of women's bodies with conventional advertisements and photo-spreads from magazines of household objects, Rosler parodied the process of objectification of women's bodies that was central to the economy and media, and still persists to the present day, bringing it to viewers' attention. The persistence of similar imagery in current magazines and websites merely demonstrates the continued need for, and relevancy of, feminist art like Rosler's, as the same system of image circulation and object consumption still dominates our present economy and media.

The photomontages *Cold Meat II* and *Kitchen I, or Hot Meat* both share a similar strategy, in which Rosler collaged parts of women's bodies, specifically their breasts, onto color reproductions of kitchen appliances. In *Cold Meat II*, Rosler burlesqued an advertisement of a French Door-style refrigerator intended to showcase the appliance's spacious interior—the unit was photographed with its freezer door open to display the vast array of meat and other foodstuffs stored efficiently within.[50] However, rather than a beige exterior, the refrigerator is flesh-toned, with the right-hand door bearing a vertically-oriented pair of women's breasts that confront the viewer, cock-eyed. As the nipples on the front of the refrigerator door boldly address the viewer, one is forced to consider the metaphoric connection between a woman's body and the frozen ham hocks next to it. Rosler's montage succinctly equates the anonymous breasts with the ham, both flattened objects that serve as a substitute for an entire living creature that need not be present to be available for the viewer's consumption.

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[50] Most sources refer to the title as *Cold Meat II* but the WACK! Catalogue referred to the work's title as Cold *Meat I*.

Through her juxtapositioning of a woman's breasts and a ham within a refrigerator, Rosler illustrated that not only were women relegated to the domestic sphere through the gender roles propagated by mass culture, but that they were also treated as "pieces of meat" by the consumer electronics industry, among many others in the advanced capitalist society of the 1970s, used to sell utilitarian objects. As Rebecca Morse pointed out in her artist biography of Rosler for the *WACK!* Catalogue, "here the woman is stripped of her identity, reduced to a single body part and equated with a piece of meat."[51] While none of the advertisements used to sell refrigerators utilized images of nude women, nearly all from the mid-to late-twentieth century drew upon images of satisfied women with their appliances to sell more units.

The text from a 1950 Deepfreeze freezer ad stated: "This Modern Woman is a 'food banker' with her Deepfreeze Home Freezer food bank…. The modern woman keeps 'bankers hours' with her Deepfreeze Home Freezer because she spends so *little* time at kitchen tasks … she makes one deposit to cover many withdrawal." The advertisement bears an hand-drawn image of a woman in a coral dress, high heels, earrings and a bracelet, leaning over her freezer with her "food bank" book in hand, as a food delivery boy brings more bounty to her home. Here, Deepfreeze intended the image of the happy housewife to help sell their home freezer units.

A different advertisement for Hotpoint refrigerators from 1953 merely displayed a glamorous woman in a black evening gown, leaning against a well stocked, opened refrigerator as a means of selling their product. With countless advertisements utilizing women's images and bodies to sell refrigerators, primarily to housewives, it is unsurprising that Rosler caricatured and critiqued this practice in her photomontages. The objectification of women's bodies, as Rosler

[51] Rebecca Morse, "Martha Rosler," in *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Cornelia Butler (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007), 291.

highlighted, extends well beyond the realm of advertising, reaching into the home and shaping the gendered relations of interaction within the domestic sphere as well.

Similar to *Cold Meat II*, Rosler again burlesqued the mass media's use of women's bodies as a means to sell appliances, as well as gendered roles within the domestic sphere—here she used a stove and a woman's breast to create a disruption in the viewer's mind about domesticity, consumption, electronics, and women in *Kitchen I, or Hot Meat*. In this montage, a profile view of a woman's breast occupies the front of the stove, which incites the viewer to reconsider the prescribed relationship for women and stoves, while they also examine how portions of women's bodies are made to function as a substitution for a unified whole. The image of the singular breast contrasts with the socially reinforced image of the happy housewife, who happily slaves over a hot stove to feed her family, reminding viewers that the sexual objectification of mere parts of women's bodies often fuels consumption, both inside and outside the home.

Three images in this group also address larger aspects of American culture that extend beyond the home, specifically *Cargo Cult*, *Oil Slick*, and *Bicillin, or Medical Treatment*. *Bicillin* depicts a reclined nude woman, who wears the coy expression of Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, with her hands suggestively falling upon her mouth and just above her Venus mound, yet her lower legs are cut off in the montage. Rosler montaged the nude so that she lies not on a bed in a boudoir, but upon an examining table in a sterile medical office. In the immediate foreground, pair of male hands hold a tube of Bicillin L-A, an injectable penicillin-based antibiotic, used to treat rheumatic fever and sexually transmitted diseases, specifically syphilis. Rosler highlighted the link between the sale of the feminine sexualized nude, the medical industry, and the sex industry, through her parody of the *Playboy* nude by placing her within a doctor's office and

adding the photograph of the injectable antibiotic, the tip of which, ironically, directs the viewer's eye immediately to the woman's vagina. Through her careful juxtapositioning, Rosler nodded to what Mulvey described as a fundamental or foundational problem related to the bodies of women:

> She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the visually ascertainable absence of the penis, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organisation of entrance into the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus, the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men—the active controllers of the look—always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified.[52]

Rosler asked the viewer to examine how the sexual objectification of women played a role within industries not normally considered in an analysis of late-capitalism, such as the medical and pharmaceutical trades, and asked then to extend their analysis to include they, the viewer, were implicated through their observation of the circulating images of mass culture and erotica.

The montage *Oil Slick*, similarly implicates the objectification of female bodies in the advancement of another industry, here the petroleum and fuel industry. The torso and head of a nude blonde woman, draped in pale pink flower petals, lie upon an opalescent pool of oil—the hues of the petals and the woman's skin formally unite the composition through the iridescent shimmer of light across the oil. Although Richard Nixon signed a tough clean air act in 1970 and established the Environmental Protection Agency around the same time, he was far from an environmental extremist, and favored jobs and industry over nature lovers.[53] The 1970s were dominated by long gas lines and "stagflation"—the halting of the economy caused by the

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[52] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 49.

[53] Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2001), 30.

inflation of oil prices; yet the mass media never halted, and continued churning out images that reaffirmed traditional gender roles, particularly the objectification of women.

Through the swift conjunction of these two images, a female torso lying on an oil slick, Rosler lampooned both the oil industry and the "skin mags" in one fell swoop, while she asked the viewer to consider how these industries and modes of consumption may be intertwined. By taking two seemingly disparate photographic reproductions and reconfiguring them so that they created a unified composition, she incited the viewer to more deeply consider how the objectification of women, in erotica as well as other realms within the media, literally fueled the modern economy.

Similarly, in the montage *Cargo Cult,* Rosler burlesqued and commented on not only the industry of selling an ideal of feminine beauty to the public, the role of the make-up industry within the construction of such an ideal, but also on the networks of shipping and transportation that circulate the goods for sale within American consumer culture. Rosler collaged the photograph close-up faces, or portions of faces, of women who are in different stages of making-up their features, onto the outside of shipping containers on the deck of a cargo vessel.

The monumental size of the heads of these women mounted on the shipping containers dwarf the men working on the vessel, the stevedores, as they move the containers on deck. The striking difference in class and race between the dockworkers and the women, highlighted by the size differential, emphasized Rosler's satirized critique of mass culture in which the media images used to sell goods, which often portrayed the bodies of white women, obscured the actuality of the labor required to both produce and transport the goods to the consumer market. Not only did she invite the viewer to reconsider the issues of class and labor embedded in consumer culture, she also literally merged the women and the shipping containers, which

reiterated the role of the objectification of the woman-in-parts in contemporary media. Here, the decapitated women's heads become fetishistic objects for consumption, their erotic physicality encapsulated within the scopophilic spectator's look that renders them as such. As Inka Schube noted in her catalogue essay, "A Different Kind of War Reporting," "when, in *Beauty Knows No Pain, or Body Beautiful*, she collages touched-up pictures of women's bodies onto photographs of shipping containers, or fits them together to form panoramas of injured femininity, then she is reporting on that war against human consciousness that takes place day after day, often at a level of banality that makes it scarcely perceptible any longer."[54] Rosler portrayed these parts of women as pre-packaged goods available for sale and consumption as well as hinted-at other objects that might lie within the other containers, calling our attention to the war waged against human consciousness by the media and industry, alike.

As the viewer's eye traces the outlines of seemingly countless women's nude bodies, wandering amidst an ocean of flesh, their eye never meets a returned gaze from within the photomontage. In *Hot House, or Harem*, Rosler combined and rephotographed the images of numerous supine centerfolds and playmates from the pages of *Playboy* magazines, and other "girly" magazines, which she often fished from the garbage in her apartment building in Brooklyn. While none of the nude women are the same, the similarity in the conventionally passive poses and expressions that they wear on their faces emphasized Rosler's parody of the media's sexualization and Othering of women. The repetition ad infinitum of the nude female form across the space of the photomontage reinforced the anonymity of these women, confirming their status within society as objects. They became fetish objects, representative of the erotic object inherent in images of a nude woman. As Eleanor Heartney acknowledged, "the

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[54] Inka Schube, "A Different Kind of War Reporting," in *Martha Rosler: Passionate Signals*, ed. Inka Schube (Hannover: Sprengel Museum, 2005), 272.

nubile figures are spread out in an apparently endless perspectival arrangement, creating an absurdist fantasy of available female flesh that looks like a cross between Ingres's *Turkish Bath* and one of Spencer Tunick's fleshscape photos."[55] Through Rosler's nearly infinite repetition of the nude female body, she illustrated the ultimate accessibility of this erotic fetish object in mass culture—images of which were so readily available that she was able to come across enough nude female bodies to create her own nude harem.

In two further images, *Pop Art* and *Centerfold, or Miss February*, Rosler directly burlesqued the sexualized objectification of women that moved from erotica into other media. For *Centerfold*, the majority of a page from *Playboy* depicting the "playmate of the month," Miss February, remains largely intact. She collaged the centerfold onto a pale blue background with a barely perceptible brocade pattern, which she cut out with pinking shears. The light background highlights the flesh of the nude female torso, which is cut off just above the shoulders and at the thighs, so that Miss February is headless and limbless—a disembodied torso that becomes the ultimate passive, sexualized object for the male gaze, and uncomplicated by any subjectivity that could be present in a woman's face or hands—the ideal fetish object to escape castration anxiety. As Kate Millett noted, "the position of women in patriarchy is such that they are expected to be passive, to suffer, and to be sexual objects; it is unquestionable that they are, with varying degrees of success, socialized into such roles."[56] The circulation of images such as this centerfold merely served to reinforce the violent dismemberment conveyed by the images of parts of women's bodies, rather than their whole forms—a process Rosler aimed to disrupt with this photomontage.

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[55] Eleanor Heartney, "Documents of Dissent," *Art in America* 89, no. 3 (2001): 112.

[56] Millett 194 Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 194.

Similarly, in *Pop Art*, Rosler also portrayed the hyper-sexualized parts of a woman's body, this time literally in pieces, and strewn about a wood-grain background. By titling the work *Pop Art, or Wallpaper*, Rosler burlesqued both the consumption of objectified images of women-in-parts, as well as the role of fine art, in particular the recent Pop movement, in the expansion and replication of mass culture. Some Pop artists, such as Tom Wesselmann, created paintings that highlighted the sexualized parts of a woman's body, particularly in his *Great American Nude* series, and in doing so, created images of the woman-as-sexual-object par excellence. He obscured any hint of subjectivity possessed by the nude, reclining figures and presented them as merely another of the objects for consumption amidst many in the scenes he painted. Here, Rosler completely dismembered the figure of a centerfold from *Playboy*, so that her hair, nipple, eyes, and other features appeared separated and arranged out of order to completely eliminate any sense of the unified person, rendering each part another in the list of objects or products for consumption. The viewer visually consumes each body part hung on the wall indiscriminately as art, wallpaper, and erotic fetish object.

The last four images in the *Body Beautiful* directly burlesqued gendered representation within the marketing industry, making the objectification of women's bodies immediately apparent in the collages that collide within the space of an advertisement. In *Transparent Box, or Vanity Fair*, Rosler took an advert for women's undergarments, already sexual in nature due to the parts of the body slips and brassieres cover, and made the objectification explicit by placing a pair of naked breasts and a bare navel over the standing model's slip. Both women, the seated model in a bra and girdle-undergarment and the standing one in a slip, are posed so that their arms cover their eyes. By removing their own gazes from the image, the models eliminated any possibility for the expression of subjectivity or agency for either figure. Rosler parodied the

objecthood of the models through her placement of the bare breasts and navel on the standing model, and indicated that these women, although they appeared as a whole bodies, were still mere items for visual consumption, used to help sell women's undergarments, and thus implicated in the larger consumer economy in the processes of objectification.

Similar to *Transparent Box*, the montage *S, M, L, or Kayser Perma-Lift*, relied upon the marketing imagery of women's undergarments to parody the objectification of women. In this particular photomontage, Rosler left the descriptive text in the image, relying on its statement: "Everybody appreciates a girl that's well put together," to aid her burlesque deconstructive disruption. On top of the original image, Rosler added a single bare breast of varying size to each of the three models who wear different undergarments, and gave the woman in front a bare navel over her panty-girdle. In doing so, Rosler highlighted the body parts that make a "well put together" woman, according to the sexualized imagery of mass culture, to emphasize the subordinate role of sexual Other to which women were relegated to in the late twentieth century. Silvia Eiblmayr noted, in her catalogue essay, that the work is "characterized by a strong affinity to the genre, playing on the media-calculated naiveté and the alleged innocence of the persons involved, the concerned, well-meaning 'want-to-be gourmet' or the 'chaste' underwear model whose standardization Rosler underlines by means of the letters S, M, L."[57] Only one model, in the back, gazes toward the viewer, yet her heavily lidded eyes lend her gaze a sultry note of seduction, linking it to the downcast, feminine gaze that connotes the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the traditionally exhibitionist role applied to female nudes, coded for strong visual and erotic impact.[58] Yet, the semi-directness of her gaze stands in immediate contrast to that of the other

[57] Silvia Eiblymayr, "Martha Rosler's Characters," in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998), 158.

[58] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 44.

two models, who gaze upwards and off to left, implying an unspoken contract between the model gazing out at the presumed female viewer who desires to become the “well put together” woman the model illustrates, or the male viewer visually consuming her presumably “well put together” form.

Less overt in its imagery and dialectal engagement with the viewer, *De Tomaso Pantera*, subtly burlesqued the objectified role of women in advertising, and by inheritance, the public realm. At first glance, it appears that Rosler merely replicated a full-page ad for an imported car marketed by Ford. However, upon closer inspection, inconsistencies within the reproduced advertising image at the top of the page signal Rosler’s parody of the marketing machine. She replaced the Pantera’s hubcaps with almost illegible forms; closer inspection reveals that a woman’s foot in a high-heeled shoe occupies the rear wheel, while a woman’s pale, bare breast appears on the front wheel. Heightening the sense of sexuality embedded in the vehicle, Rosler collaged an image of a man embracing a nude woman in the vehicle, so that his hands on her bare hips fill the car’s windows. The text of the ad, below the image, speaks of passion and high-performance, clearly underlining Rosler’s incisive visual burlesque of the automobile industry’s typical practices through her subtle additions of a sexual encounter within the body of the vehicle, and fetishized women’s body parts on the wheels. All of the added photographs illustrate the idea that sex drives the automobile industry and the fetishization and objectification of women’s body parts are what keep it all rolling.

Lastly, in *To Compete with the Noonday Sun*, Rosler overlaid images of sexual body parts on top of a fashion magazine photo-spread that depicts the ideal beach-wear for fun in and out of the water, and vying for male attention, in the bright summer sun. The original text stated: “To compete with the noonday sun, nothing’s more smashing than *you* in strong, clear color with

touches of sea-going white," which clarified the title and why Rosler aimed to burlesque the objectification that was part and parcel of the fashion industry with this particular photomontage. By stating that women must compete for attention with the sun's rays, the hyperbolic, but typical, description emphasized the objectified role women played, both in fashion magazines that were marketed to women and in the public realm. Rosler disrupted the posing models by adding black and white images of nude breasts and a bare pubic area to the model whose body turns toward the viewer, at the top of the page. The startling appearance of the exact body parts that the two-piece bathing suit was constructed to conceal, created the dialectical space for the viewer to reconsider the function of such images in the larger cultural context. By making the sexuality of the image overt, Rosler confirmed that women play the role of objects, not only as models, but in real life, through the constant reinforcement of the mass circulation of photo-spreads in fashion magazines, advertisements, movies, television programs, and even billboards that serve to reaffirm this status and indoctrinate younger generations with the patriarchal conditioning inherent in American mass culture.

By utilizing images from the mass media, Rosler humorously lampooned the dominant visual language for the purpose of disrupting and subverting it, which allowed viewers to understand the world surrounding them in a new way. Clashing images of models and products with the nude body parts of *Playboy* bunnies in the visual space a singular photomontage, Rosler called for the viewer to re-examine the processes by which companies marketed their goods to the public, the repercussions of this method within the media, and its reach both inside and outside the home. While the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1967-1972) consists of highly varied images, the message throughout the series of photomontages aimed to not only parody, but interrupt the role of mass media images of women and incite the viewer to

question the role of the images, objects, and media maintained the objectified status of women and their repressive gendered roles in the patriarchal, late industrial capitalist society of America during the 1970s. While Rosler culled the images from media concurrent to the second wave of feminism, the photomontage burlesques still ring true in contemporary society, a fact that indicates the need for further feminist critique and continued social, cultural, and political change.

Chapter Four: When Martha Rosler Brought the War Home

> *The doubly exploited childbearer represents the exploited people in their most extreme oppression. If the mothers are revolutionized, there is nothing left to revolutionize.*
>
> Walter Benjamin[1]

The quiet calm of a spacious living room, appointed with the clean lines typical of mid-century design, is abruptly interrupted by the intrusion of a strange figure—an injured Vietnamese girl stands in the foreground of the room with her weight supported by a an unseen aid, as her amputated foot heavily affects her mobility and balance. This scene unfolds within Martha Rosler's photomontage, *Tron (Amputee)* (1967-72). Created as part of the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the war Home*, Rosler utilized the medium of photomontage in response to the American involvement in the conflict in Vietnam to examine the role of the media in the presentation of the war in South Asia alongside a dissection of American culture and gender roles. She created a believable space in which viewers could imagine themselves and engage with the burlesque critique summarized within the image. These works, unlike the more specifically feminist and localized message of the *Body Beautiful* series, related American mass culture to larger global policies and examined the circulation of ideas, images, and goods both a within America and in relation to the global power's role abroad. The mass media played a crucial role in the transmission, dissemination, and reinforcement of these ideas—undergirded by the images—specifically ones that shaped the prevailing view of Americans regarding domestic spaces, women's roles abroad and at home, and the reviled "other" or enemy of America in the South Asian conflict.

[1] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 34.

Rosler's photomontages highlight the contrast between the visual construction of self and other within the mass media of the late twentieth century through her juxtapositioning of American domestic spaces sliced from the gleaming pages of interior and architectural design journals that were the arbiters of good taste, like the magazine *House Beautiful*, with images from the war abroad appropriated from news outlets like *Time* and *Life* magazines. While some photomontages in *Bringing the War Home* relied upon subtle, almost imperceptible clashes of imagery, others illustrated the conflict between "us" and "them" through starkly contrasting images, as in *Tron (Amputee)*, described at the beginning of the chapter. Jayne Wark discussed how the varied content of *Bringing the War Home* served to call, "up direct associations with Conceptual art's use of photography to question notions of visuality, pictorialism, and depiction by subjecting it to a self-reflexive critique aimed both to distance and complicate its relationship to existing traditions of art and documentary photography."[2]

Rosler parodically, yet didactically, illustrated her arguments within her agit-prop montages, yet the role of the American mass media and Rosler's anti-war and feminist messages remained nuanced throughout the original series and relevant through today, such that she reprised the series from 2004-2008 in *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (*New Series)* in order to comment on the persistence of the conditions of the society that created the Vietnam War as well as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Laura Cottingham noted, the photomontages have the ability to make viewers question our most basic values, "Rosler's *Bringing the War Home* asks us to consider the real social and economic connections between our comfortable sofas and someone else's dead body. Rosler forefronts the false separation between 'us' and 'them,' between 'here' and 'there,' and suggests that this separation is an illusion that we, as a

[2] Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson," 44.

war-profit society and as immediately war-free individuals, are economically and emotionally invested in maintaining."[3] The media actively created and reinforced ideals of "American-ness" and "Other-ness," in addition to strictly limited gender roles, particularly through photo-essays within magazines, thus Rosler's appropriation of the visual language of mass culture within the humorous space of her feminist burlesque within the photomontages created an effective and affective engagement with war, the economy, images, and gender roles.

In *Tron (Amputee)*, from the original series, Rosler carefully selected two images that illustrated the emotionally laden visions of self and Other, each infused with both positive and negative cultural capital as they circulated through media networks. These distinct images conveyed specific ideas about home and abroad governed by the prevailing Cold War culture in America during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which Rosler burlesqued by combining the two within a singular space. She asked the viewer to pause and consider how the media constructs specific representations of "us" and "them" through her placement of a close-up image of an injured Vietnamese girl within a luxurious, modern, American, living room. By removing a photojournalistic image from its typical context and placing it within the realm of a slick photograph from a glossy interior design magazine, Rosler contested the domestic definition of news, consumption, design, as well as the cultural and economic capital that kept these categorizations in place.

Rosler deftly selected images that carried with them a sort of emotional capital—connotations of love, envy, hatred, and anger are attached to these mass media images as they are issued and circulate in the field of American culture. Sarah Ahmed described how, "emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an

[3] Laura Cottingham, "The Inadequacy of Seeing and Believing: The Art of Martha Rosler," in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art, in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. M. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 158.

outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others."[4] Although advertisers, photographers, and editors may initially create or publish an image with a specific emotion in mind—like the warm familiarity of the interior of an American bedroom—as those images are seen by the public, they acquire other emotions. Rosler picked up on the emotions attached to images, and utilized their power to create the affective value of her photomontages, particularly the anti-war images in *Bringing the War Home*.

In addition to the emotional connotations carried by the images Rosler selected, they also carried cultural capital in the form of the lifestyles, or habitus, depicted. As described by Pierre Bourdieu: "The habitus is this generative and unifying principle which retranslates the intrinsic and relational characteristics of a position into a unitary lifestyle, that is, a unitary set of choices of persons, goods, practices. Like the positions of which they are the product, habitus are differentiated, but they are also differentiating. Being distinct and distinguished, they are also distinction operators, implementing different principles of differentiation or using differently the common principles of differentiation."[5] Thus, a photograph of the interior of a luxuriously decorated living room of a mansion, situated within a renowned design magazine, imbued the image with the wealth of a very particular network of cultural, and even social, capital within the American social landscape. It accumulated this capital through associations with the name of the owners of the home in which the living room was located, the converted economic wealth shown

[4] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

[5] Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

within that room, as well as the weight of the name of the photographer who shot the image, and even the import of the periodical that published the photograph.

Through the interrelations of all of the metaphors of capital, one can trace the paths of the circulation of capital carried within a singular image. Through her choice of images, Rosler selected works that bore a significant cache of cultural, symbolic, and social capital on their own and then brought those disparate images together to create a jarring, new image that disrupted the accumulation of capital of the parts and directed the photomontage toward a new realm of circulation and different modes of accumulating capital. In his essay, "Living Room War," Brian Wallis discussed how, "Rosler's montages also directly convey the artist's anger at the political and economic system responsible for the Vietnam War."[6]

Symbolic capital continually intertwines with the other forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural) and is often esoterically embedded within each of the networks of value but can also function independently: "Symbolic capital is an ordinary property (physical strength, wealth, warlike valor, etc.) which, perceived by social agents endowed with the categories of perception and appreciation permitting them to perceive, know and recognize it, becomes symbolically efficient, like a veritable *magical power*: a property which, because it responds to socially constituted 'collective expectations' and beliefs, exercises a sort of action from a distance, without physical contact."[7]

The way the reconceived, combined images functioned in contemporary culture, and how they have circulated since then, illuminated the shifts and conversions in capital as the images moved through different cultural realms; from war protests, to art galleries, to museum collections. It is as Laura Cottingham discussed in her catalogue essay:

[6] Brian Wallis, "Living Room War," *Art in America*: 105.

[7] Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, 102.

> The images of Rosler's series—patio chairs overlooking tanks and shanties, a young Vietnamese carrying a nude bleeding baby up High Modernist stairs, a legless girl standing in the living room, Pat Nixon smiling before a gilt frame of violence, dismembered bodies outside the Giacometti living room—are another chronicle in Rosler's subversive realism. This is not cinematic, or time-and-space aligned realism: it is rational realism. Rosler made her war images "fit" into the frames of Amerikan domestic property. Their precise positioning, into rectangular windows and picture frames, is less a design than a visual clue to the cognitive connection Rosler is making; these images of war are not imposed or forced into these living room, they belong here.[8]

In *Tron*, Rosler relied upon the cultural, social, emotional, and symbolic capital associated with the image of a luxurious living room photographed for the interior design magazine, *House Beautiful*. By presenting the viewer with a photograph of the domestic space that belonged to the upper class, Rosler asked the viewer to place themselves within that space, and thus, she effectively highlighted the emotions of envy and desire, jealousy and even disgust, among possible others, while also alluding to the association of the household with the larger domestic site of the home country, or America. The viewer likely fluctuated between a desire to possess the space depicted and pride felt by the success of the nation embodied in such an image of wealth, or disgust at the economic hubris and excessive accumulation fueling the conflict overseas, despite the economic suffering and starvation at home and abroad. The various forms of capital embodied within the singular image of the well-appointed interior fueled this powerful cocktail of emotions, reiterating the association of wealth and success—symbolic, social, economic, and cultural capital—with the individual who claimed ownership of the space, whether that person is an individual or merely symbolic of a more generalized nationalism.

Through her insertion of a Vietnamese girl, a figure who was multiply Othered in American media through her female body, her recently acquired disability, as well as her Southeast Asian ethnicity—highlighted by the media's portrayal of the Vietnamese as enemies

[8] Laura Cottingham, "The War Is Always Home," (New York: Simon Watson Gallery, 1991), http://www.martharosler.net/reviews/cottingham.html.

because of the Communist threat—Rosler shifted the circulation and perception of the symbolic, cultural, and social capital associated with the original background image. This Other, marked as such by her physical appearance, was clearly injured—her foot was visibly amputated and bandaged, while her outstretched right arm clutched a prop located outside the space of the photomontage. The figure of the Vietnamese female amputee invaded the quiet envy of the lavish living room, and she left a flurry of mixed emotions in her wake. In the context of late twentieth century in America, the Cold War raged on and deeply affected the perceptions of different ethnicities and countries.

The American media painted the Vietnamese people as a not only a Communist threat, but a peril to the American way of life, in order to maintain the dominant status quo in which the democratic, capitalist American way of life was placed in firm opposition to eastern communism spreading outwards from Russia and China through southeast Asia and other developing regions and nations. Kenneth P. O'Brien cited the words of President Truman, who characterized the overwhelming sentiment of the self as opposed to the other, stating that, "the United States must 'support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities and by outside pressures,' as a choice between 'free institutions, representative government, free elections' and 'terror and oppression.'"[9] Meanwhile, in his essay describing the media's escalation of the propaganda against the Communist threat, Robert MacDougall outlined the mass cultural program against the cultural Others designated as enemies during the Cold War, "the bestial savagery and mindless obedience that had been associated with the Japanese, and the mad ambition and diabolical cunning assigned to the Nazis were now America's nightmare

[9] Kenneth P. O'Brien, "The United States, war and the twentieth century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture* ed. Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 248.

image of Soviet Communism."[10] MacDougall pointed out that popular culture imagery, reinforced by the investigations into communism in Hollywood conducted by the House Committee of Un-American Activities during the 1950s often portrayed communists in horrific terms.[11] Even in venues outside of the Hollywood machine, like popular novels and comic books, communists were portrayed in an extremely negative light, and MacDougall cited one character that described the situation in Russia, in which, "along with cannibals and baby-killers, 'there are more human slaves in Russia than ever existed anywhere in the world.'"[12] The communist threat in Russia was, by proxy, extended to the communist struggle, and newly perceived threat in Southeast Asia, where America held that if one state fell to communism, all would.

Although the mass media primarily portrayed the Vietnamese as the enemy, Rosler burlesqued that representation through her use of an image of a crippled Vietnamese girl. There are various tropes of femininity at play within this image, but the most prevalent is the notion of the recently developed "teenybopper," or girl culture, the opposite of which is embodied by the disabled Vietnamese girl, Tron. The post-war marketing machine inculcated young American girls with the broader capitalist and gender ideals of American culture, and in doing so, ensured an avid, life-long market full of consumers of images and goods tied to the domestic realm. The patriarchal society of late twentieth century America pre-destined girls to the roles of wives, mothers and homemakers; with occasional allowances made for a few working women, like nurses or secretaries. Part of the media's indoctrination of women into the feminine role, set out within the domestic realm, occurred within the realm of teenage culture, embodied by the female

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[10] Robert MacDougall, "Red, Brown and Yellow Perils," 68.

[11] Ibid, 69.

[12] Ibid.

bobbysoxer and her Beatlemania, her icon—the model, Twiggy, and various other pop culture figures that dominated the media during the late 1950s through the 1960s.[13]

While the affective work done by *Tron* depends on the contrast, or alienation, created by the clash between the two images, it is important to ask what drives that alienation effect. The figure of the disabled Vietnamese girl, Tron, was literally a world away from the prevailing American trope of the young, teenage girl who was solely concerned with pop culture, boys, clothes, her appearance, and her future role as wife and mother. The media developed the trope of the teenybopper during the post-WWII boom in consumer goods, as a previously non-existent market group sprang up with the rise of rock music during the 1950s. By creating an image of the ideal teen consumer, the mass media inculcated young American girls with the broader capitalist and gender ideals of American culture, and ensured an avid, life-long consumer of images and goods.

It was precisely the "Otherness" of the Vietnamese girl, Tron, which made the final montage so powerful and resonant—without the prominent image of American girlhood constructed by the mass media, the critical space within the photomontage would be far less effective. Tron, in her visibly marked disability and ethnic otherness, signified how the rampant consumerism of teenybopper culture supported the destruction of inherent in the consumerism of the American military-industrial complex. Rosler brought the viewer's attention directly to the tropes of femininity and the symbolic violence they rendered in their subtle machinations of daily life, highlighted in the contrast between the objective, physical violence of the images of the war next to images of American consumer culture. Rosler deliberately chose an image that

[13] In his essay, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," Erwin Panofsky described how the early film industry established stereotypical roles for the audience to aid the communicability of early Hollywood cinema, but these roles have carried over and pervaded many other areas of the mass media, See Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (London: Oxford, 1974).

aroused conflicted emotions within the viewer, and in doing so, prevented the viewer from taking a singular, narrow view of any of the features of the scene portrayed in the photomontage, *Tron*. With a single insertion into the original image, Rosler not only complicated the typical American perception of the Vietnamese Other, but also problematized the way Americans viewed themselves, girls, and women, as well as the domestic spaces they often inhabit.

Rosler consciously and carefully selected the image from which she removed the Vietnamese female—the original photograph was the cover of the November 8, 1968 issue of *Life* magazine. The issue bore the headline: "As the bombing stops—this girl Tron," and provided the original context that Rosler deftly eliminated from her photomontage. The photo described the scene depicted: "Nguyen Thi Tron, 12, caught in the war, watches her new wooden leg being made."[14]

Although the girl in the *Life* cover had the small frame of a child, her face bore the marks of someone who had aged far beyond her years, and Rosler keenly exploited this fact when she removed the figure from the original photographic surroundings and enlarged her—which made her appear ambiguously aged and ageless at the same time. Rosler relied upon the inherent ambiguity afforded by the medium of photomontage, particularly in the artist's ability to control and manipulate the images combined in the final work, in order to further the alienation, or estrangement, experienced by the viewer within the reconfigured space of the montage. According to Walter Benjamin's analysis of Bertolt Brecht's epic, or dialectical, theatre, "interruption is one of the fundamental methods of all form-giving. It reaches far beyond the domain of art. It is, to mention just one of its aspects, the origin of the quotation. Quoting a text

[14] *Life* magazine cover, November 8, 1968.

implies interrupting its context."[15] Although Brecht himself discussed the Verfremdungseffekt, or Alienation effect (A-effect), in the context of epic theatre, Rosler relied upon Brechtian principles in all of her artistic endeavors:

> The achievement of the A-effect constitutes something utterly ordinary, recurrent; it is just a widely practiced way of drawing one's own or someone else's attention to a thing, and it can be seen in education as also in business conferences of one sort or another. The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. What is obvious in a certain sense made incomprehensible, but this is only in order that it may then be made all the easier to comprehend. Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. However frequently recurrent, modest, vulgar it may be it well now be labeled as something unusual.[16]

In *Tron*, and the rest of *Bringing the War Home*, the specifics of the combined and previously ordinary images, clashed within the new context of the photomontage and cause the viewer take a step back to reconsider the visual language that they encountered on a daily basis. The mass-cultural bombardment of images, typical of the twentieth century, accelerated in the aftermath of World War II as glossy full-color magazines and television sets inundated American homes, in addition to the already commonplace daily newspaper. With a barrage of images constantly hounding American citizens, Rosler burlesqued a medium and a method that allowed for a pause and reconsideration of the context that created those scenes.

The Happy Homemaker

Rosler's *Balloons* (1966-1972) extended her critique of American mass culture to representations of motherhood, domesticity, and even photojournalism itself. The spacious

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[15] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 19.

[16] Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 143.

interior of an open-plan, multi-story American home was the stage-setting in which Rosler further burlesqued and deconstructed the American dream and its purview over women, as well as its role in funding the capitalist market that drove the war in Vietnam. The placid, stark image of the white-walled and expansive interior is punctuated by several bursts of color—most notably a pile of balloons in the far corner and a frantic Vietnamese woman clinging to a blood-soaked baby, running up the stairs in the foreground.

The disjuncture created by the presence of the Vietnamese woman within the bourgeois American home actively disrupted the typical image of the dutiful American wife and doting mother. Jayne Wark described how the montage's, "shattering intrusion of its belligerents and victims into the serene enclaves of suburban domesticity exposes the normally obscured, but irrevocable 'web of connections between distant wars of conquest and the more subtle and ongoing class war at home.'"[17] Rosler removed the figure of the Vietnamese woman from its original context within an article in *Life* magazine about the "reality" the Marines faced upon their deployment to Vietnam.[18] Displaced from the chaos of the battlefield, the Vietnamese woman was key to Rosler's parodic making strange of the suburban American home. The confrontation between the images emphasizes the processes of normalization that compartmentalize recreational readership as well as daily life. Although images of the War in Vietnam proliferated in American homes, viewers and readers were accustomed to their appearance solely within the context of news coverage.

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[17] Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson," 45.

[18] Michael Mok, "In They Go to the Reality of This War," *Life* 59, no. 22: 56. The author had previous served in two engagements with the Marines and photographer Paul Schutzer temporarily put themselves in harm's way to capture a story for the American public, a mode of photojournalistic war reportage that developed with the rise of portable cameras and film in the early twentieth century.

The same holds true for the visual language of interior decoration—idealized images of private interiors belonged on the glossy pages of *House Beautiful*, but not elsewhere. Rosler engaged in a guerilla-style attack, and utilized the visual language of the mass media to combine two separate realms of normalized and comfortable readership within the space of the photomontage. She revealed how the voracious consumption of imagery was, and is, so common in American culture that violent images no longer shocked the reader within their usual context of the news. By inserting a photograph of a frenzied Vietnamese woman clinging to her dying child within the pristine interior portrayed in *House Beautiful*, Rosler visually terrorized the viewer, locating violence in a space where it had no right to be present. She brought into question the basic processes of representation and transmission within the illusionistic space of the photomontage. Brian Wallis discussed how, "by focusing on the conspicuous consumption that characterizes the American middle-class home, Rosler presents this type of environment as symbolic of political isolationism."[19] Through her removal of the Vietnamese woman from a documentary photographic essay about the Vietnam war, she begged the viewer to consider how images re-present events and to examine the viability of the visual language used to describe both the atrocities of war as well as the covetability of mass-produced goods, and the tropes used to sell them. Although she addressed the inability of documentary photography to accurately and objectively portray reality in *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems,* as well as the essay, "in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," Rosler also engaged with the impossibility to "document" the suffering of others with the same visual language that

[19] Wallis, "Living Room War," 105.

appeared in between full-page ads for a Buick Riviera Gran Sport or an RCA Victor tape recorder within *Balloons.*[20]

The spacious, affluent interior space of the photomontage's background effectively reinforced the prevailing image of the upper-middle class towards which Americans strove as part of the "American Dream." Rosler emphasized the largesse of this sector of the American populace through her use of an image of a domestic interior that successfully captures two floors within the home, the exterior porch, and the yard beyond. The expanse of space captured within the photograph illustrated the avid consumption that, in part, drove the Cold War, and subsequently, the Vietnam War. The suburbs became the new seat of "Americanness" in the post-war years, as housing developments sprang up across the country and working- or middle-class people moved out of the city and into their split-level piece of the American dream, as Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen described how, in the post-war era, "new theories of a consumer-based economy made this market visible to private enterprise. Future homeowners were evaluated not only as potential purchasers of houses, but equally important, as consumers who bought cars and appliances with savings accumulated during the prosperous wartime economy. The money they spent on the new mass-produced goods of the machine age made it clear they could afford homes too. The new market…represented a cross section of the skilled working-class, white-collar professionals, and second-generation immigrants."[21] The first suburban community, Levittown, in Long Island, New York, garnered ample media attention, that extended well beyond advertising, with the community appearing in newsreels and

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[20] These were the ads that surrounded the original *Life* article.

[21] Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), 118.

magazines like: *Life, Time, Coronet, Harper's*, *Reader's Digest*, *Newsweek*, and *Look*.[22] While not all the media attention surrounding Levittown was positive, the extra publicity helped skyrocket the suburbs into a central position within the changing face of American society.

With the rise of the suburbs, the representation of the ideal American family and the ideal wife and mother within the home became ever more prevalent. Portrayals of the happy housewife abound throughout the 1950s and 1960s, typified by mass cultural icons like June Clever, Donna Stone, Harriet Nelson, Lucy Ricardo, and Betty Crocker. Although these figures were televised portrayals of the archetypal housewife, the ideals they embodied transcended that medium and dominated all media representations of the American housewife in the mid- to late-twentieth century. The role of the housewife became so ubiquitous within American culture that by 1962, when Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, she was able to diagnose the ennui suffered by housewives, when they became dissatisfied and stifled with their role as homemaker and their lack of careers or educations, as the "Problem That Has No Name." "Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity… truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights," and as the marriage age dropped and more young women sought a career as a housewife, media portrayals of the young, happy homemaker proliferated.[23]

With such a preponderance of popular culture depictions of the gendered role of the housewife, it is no wonder that Rosler sought to disrupt this icon of American womanhood with her photomontage burlesques of the very same culture that drove the conflict in Vietnam. By unseating the premier image of American femininity rooted in the culture of late capitalism,

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[22] Ibid., 138.

[23] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 11.

Rosler interrupted the accumulation of symbolic capital associated with that image. In their role as housewife, American women were in charge of the household, and the expenses of that realm. As such, women became the chief target of ad campaigns for goods ranging from washing machines to automobiles, with each advertisement reinforcing the image of the woman content in her role within the family and their home. As representations of the "domestic goddess" dominated television, print, and radio, they acquired significant amounts of symbolic, social, and cultural capital.

This happy homemaker appeared in print ads for Admiral's "Fashion Front" Refrigerator-Freezers, smiling out at the viewer in a color image, as she decorated the pink door panel with a peel-off decal that conveniently matched the background wallpaper, as the text in the ad described that, "there's a decorator kit of five different color panels optional with your new Dual Temp. They're shiny, washable—pre-cut to fit—adhesive backed so you can put them on and peel them off in a wink. Each change is as stimulating as a new hat!"[24] The domestic goddess also made an appearance in a 1959 General Electric advertisement for their electric stove, where she was still grinning, but here, leaned against her pink stove as she chatted away on her phone looking away from viewers and her cooking—the bold blue text above the electric cook-top and behind her back declared: "No 'pot-watching'!"[25] Below the image the smaller print outlined the convenience of an electric range: "Electric cooking is automatic! Bake, boil, roast and grill without watching… even cook meals while you're away!"[26]

[24] Text from advertisement for Admiral's "Fashion Front" Refrigerator-Freezer, 1956.

[25] Text from advertisement for General Electric's Model J-408 electric range, 1959.

[26] Ibid.

The domination of the image of the happy housewife was so complete, that, as Betty Friedan described, if a middle class woman dared to seek a life outside of the home, she was shunned as abnormal, neurotic, and most damningly, unfeminine.[27] Betty Friedan recounted an anecdote from a fellow woman in the magazine business, an editor of *Mademoiselle* who said: "The girls we bring in now as college guest editors seem almost to pity us. Because we are career women, I suppose. At a luncheon session with the last bunch, we asked them to go round the table, telling us their own career plans. Not one in twenty raised her hand."[28]

Retail Therapy

Building on the contrast presented within *Balloons*, *Cleaning the Drapes* addressed another aspect of the trope of the happy homemaker—the notion of "retail therapy" as rooted in the domestic, feminine realm. Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen discussed this cultural development:

> Representatives of the consumer industries, new forms of mass media, and a host of professional experts writing in the popular press…did their best to educate families about the importance of proper female domesticity. They all had a stake in the housewife—Mrs. Consumer—who would keep the economy prosperous.… Cut off from her immigrant roots and old neighborhoods and placed in a an unfamiliar setting, the suburban housewife was fair prey to the agencies of communication ready to inform her everyday existence, meet her every need, and fulfill her middle-class desire through the purchase of their products.[29]

As Alan Gilbert described in his catalogue essay, the montage portrays a woman vacuuming her drapes, oblivious to the scene occurring right outside her window—U.S. soldiers

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[27] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 11.

[28] Ibid., 50.

[29] Ewen, *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened*, 150.

in the trenches, "a war photo from Vietnam brought home."[30] With the exponential rise in the production of consumer goods after World War II, the housewife was targeted by advertisement agencies. The proportion of objects created for and marketed toward women rose as the post-war market boomed with a flood of mass-produced consumer goods. As technology evolved to keep pace with the growing consumer market, the availability of appliances and other goods multiplied exponentially in order to meet the growing demand for increased convenience in the home with new innovations like automatic washing machines, freezers, and vacuum cleaners, among other appliances.[31]

Advertisements aimed directly at the middle class housewife depicted docilely smiling young women, happily engaged in household chores aided by one or another new appliance that promised to make their lives perfect. A 1956 advertisement for a General Electric compact range oven portrayed a smiling blonde woman leaning over the open oven, tending to her ham, baked potatoes, stuffed peppers, and casserole, while the ad text emphasized the oven's efficiency as well as its cosmetic appeal, "start your color-lovely G-E kitchen with this beautiful Speed-Cooking range in a Mix-or-Match color: turquoise green (as shown) canary yellow, cadet blue, petal pink, woodtone brown, stain white. A can of special, matching paint is all you need to 'dress up' walls and cabinets."[32] The advancements in home appliances kept women up to speed

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[30] Alan Gilbert, "Captive Audiences," in *Martha Rosler's Virtual Minefield*, ed. Alan Gilbert (New York: Location One, 2012), 20.

[31] The first fully automated washing machine was introduced after WWII in 1947, the Bendix Deluxe, with General Electric following suit and releasing their own version that same year. Although electric refrigerators were widely available before WWII, they relied on unsafe materials until the discovery of Freon in the 1920s. Separate freezer units only became available in 1940 in the United States, and helped make frozen foods, previously a luxury item, and a common modern convenience. Vacuum cleaners were available prior to WWII, but were not mass-produced until after the war ended, moving them from the realm of luxury goods into the purchasing power of the middle class.

[32] Advertisement for General Electric Spacemaker Range, 1956.

with technological innovation, but did so within the safety of the home. A 1964 Christmas special television broadcast of "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer" featured a series of commercials for General Electric products, one of which was the MV1 portable cleaner. In the short advertisement, Rudolph's elf friends narrate the advantages of the portable cleaner, singing: "What weighs a little over four pounds and is packed with cleaning power? The new GE portable cleaner!"[33] As images of a smiling blonde housewife, utilizing the cleaning power of the MV1 to clean her drapes and her floors flash onscreen, the narrating elves tell viewers how this modern marvel can clean in all directions, and can even freshen-up bare floors, too! As the blonde housewife fades from the screen, an image of the MV1, perfectly gift-wrapped for Christmas, fills the screen, and the elves remind viewers that it is unsurpassed for Christmas giving—driving home the point that it is one of many General Electric appliances advertised during the Rudolph special that a modern housewife would love to receive.[34] The media effectively created and perpetuated an image of the domestic goddess in which women were encouraged to find solace for their daily woes through the accumulation of consumer goods. This model of marketing created the trope of "retail therapy" that originated in the context of the American post-war consumerism—in which women were encouraged to return to and remain in the home and to find solace for their daily woes through the purchasing of consumer goods.

Cleaning the Drapes directly mocked this particular facet of American Cold War culture through Rosler's use of an image of a woman using a General Electric MV1 model portable vacuum cleaner to expedite her housekeeping duties. However, the woman vacuums a set of drapes that frame a foxhole filled with soldiers on a battlefield in Vietnam, not a carefully

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[33] "General Electric Rankin Bass Rudolph Commercials" YouTube, accessed April 25, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6KJJq75YhE&feature=youtu.be

[34] Ibid.

manicured lawn. The lack of communication between the woman happily vacuuming away at her draperies and the soldiers just outside her picture window ironically parallels the media-fueled disconnect between images of the war zone and images of the domestic front. The contrast between the image of the woman happily vacuuming away at her draperies and the war raging just outside her picture window creates the disconnect, or A-effect, which Rosler sought in order to elicit a reconsideration of the cultural context that produced that image. Through the visual collision created within the montage, Rosler stressed the notion of Vietnam being the first "living room" war by tying her photomontage to the familiar scene of a family relaxing on a sofa and watching the evening news, before their nightly sit-com. The trope of retail therapy dovetailed perfectly into the distraction efforts of the mass media during the Cold War, as many facets in the industry worked to shift attention away from the cause of the violent images from the conflict toward images of domestic bliss.

Rosler re-visited the media's tactic of distraction in her photomontage from her recent reprisal of the *Bringing the War Home* series in *The Gray Drape* (2004-2008), which formally connected the Vietnam era with the contemporary conflict in Iraq. As a woman in an elegant pewter ball gown smiles over her shoulder, she whips a gray sheet of fabric through the air in a mid-century modern living room. Although windows surround her on every side, she is oblivious to the world beyond, in which soldiers patrol past burning wreckage in an Iraqi street. In the right corner, a woman in a black headscarf weeps just outside the window, barely able to extend a bandaged hand in an unanswered plea for help. The montage clearly communicated Rosler's burlesqued message: according to the images we encounter, women still belong within the home, as the media continues to wave a curtain in front of the reality behind the war raging abroad.

Also connected to the trope of retail therapy, the montage *Makeup/Hands Up* further implicated the feminine consumer of mass-produced goods as a contributor to the culture that drove the conflict in Vietnam. However, unlike in *Cleaning the Drapes*, the trope that Rosler interrupted in *Makeup/Hands Up* did not develop in the decades following WWII. Instead, *Makeup/Hands Up* cited a trope of femininity that could be traced throughout much of the history of western art after the Renaissance—that of the vain woman. Rosler selected an image from a photo-essay about the application of makeup to illustrate the loss of personal identity and the subject's implication in the war under late-industrial capitalism through her subtle replacement of the woman's eye with a black and white photograph depicting a Vietnamese woman shot in her back—executed at point-blank range. Through the collision between the feminine ideals, consumerism, and violence present, Rosler burlesqued the continuous bombardment of images in the late twentieth century, which relied on a visual language that enacted symbolic violence, as it held women to an unattainable ideal pursued through the purchase of goods, which in turn, fueled the larger capitalist system behind the war.

Typically, the Western iconographic tradition of the representation of the vain woman involved a mirror, but here the use of makeup to adorn a woman's face served as a reference to the vanity of women. As John Berger noted in his book and series *Ways of Seeing*, "the mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of woman. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical."[35] Although the background image in her photomontage lacked a mirror, Rosler alluded to the presence of a one through her use of a close-up photograph of a woman applying her makeup, or "painting" her face. The sale of makeup products to women as part of the post-war consumer culture went hand-in-hand with the Cold War state's active production of

[35] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 51.

gendered images that reinforced the stereotype of the domestic goddess and the male breadwinner.

Ironically, while many media images depicted women within the home and aimed to keep them there, statistics prove that women did work outside the home in increasing numbers during the 1950s and the 1960s, and paved the way for the counter-culture revolutions of the late 1960s and 1970s. Although many mainstream organizations re-presented the gendered identity of the happy housewife, certain organizations—like the National Manpower Council (NMC) and the Commission on the Education of Women (CEW)—promoted the entry of women into the workforce outside of the home.[36] As women garnered more earnings, and thus purchasing power, their dollars were spent on goods for themselves, as well as their families. These women actively sought out new clothing, makeup, and accessories to help them navigate the realm of the working world. While their increased economic capital signaled a shift in the ideal of women's work, that shift was minimal, especially before the full rise of the "second wave" of feminism during the 1970s. Despite the fact that they participated in markets and economies previously excluded to them, these women still bought into an image of women's femininity purveyed by nearly all of the corporations that mass-produced the goods that they bought. By selling an image of femininity, particularly in the realm of makeup, women were constantly reminded of the balancing game between economic independence and femininity.

The balancing act performed by women who are wives and mothers, but also work outside of the home, is a completely familiar theme in contemporary American culture, but this developed rapidly over the past sixty years. Although many scholars and authors follow from the

[36] Susan M. Hartmann, "Women's Employment and the Domestic Ideal in the Early Cold War Years," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 84.

observations that Betty Friedan recorded in the *Feminine Mystique*, in which she outlined how in, “the fifteen years after World War II, [the] mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture,” others attempted to complicate that picture with evidence of women’s presence outside of the home.[37] Joanne Meyerowitz cited evidence from widely-circulating magazines, in which the published non-fiction articles contained a mixture of pieces about women both inside and outside the home; yet she also noted how these articles were careful to emphasize the femininity of the women who worked outside the home through their manners, dress, comportment, and modes of working, in addition to the fact that they never challenged the status of the wife and mother within American society.[38]

The Woman on View

An image that directly addressed the trope of the vain woman is *Woman with Cannon (Dots)* (1967-1972), in which Rosler directly burlesqued the typically western iconography of woman and a mirror to help deconstruct this stereotype of femininity. Although gendered tropes circulated widely through the media, they were not unique to modern mass communication, but extended back into the Western art historical tradition, through the Renaissance and Classical eras. In *Woman with Cannon (Dots*), a mirror reflects a nude woman. Yet, the woman is not physically present in the room and exists only as a reflection in the mirror. The same wall on which the mirror hangs also holds a window and a painting, both of which present framed images of cannons or missiles aimed at the nude woman in the mirror. Silvia Eiblmayr described

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[37] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 14.

[38] See Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958."

in her catalogue essay, how the dots on the textiles in the bedroom, “appear as a clumsy Roy Lichtenstein quotation,” inserted into the montage to, “reveal the implicated relations between life style and the art world.”[39] The exchange of gazes distilled within the montage emphasizes how the nude woman is made to function as a sexual object for the viewer’s pleasure and visual consumption. Although the nude woman gazes out from the mirror, she does so over her shoulder and her eyes never meet the viewer’s, accentuating her status as an object lacking in sexual or other agency.

John Berger highlighted the hypocrisy of the moralizing tone of the iconography of the vain woman in connection with the European oil painting tradition of representing the nude female body, “you painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. The real function of the mirror was otherwise. It was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.”[40]

Also part of the feminist deconstruction of visual culture, Laura Mulvey examined the psychoanalytic function of the male gaze and cinematic pleasure. As she pointed out: “The scopophilic instinct… and, in contradistinction, ego libido… act as formations, mechanisms, which mould this cinema’s formal attributes. The actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the content and structure of representation, adding a further layer of ideological significance demanded by the

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[39] Sylvia Eiblmayr, "Martha Rosler’s Characters," in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), 158.

[40] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 51.

patriarchal order in its favorite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film."[41] Although she discussed the particular situation of film as unique, others like Berger, noted that the same model of passive feminine/active male gaze can apply to other modes of visual exchanges, like oil painting and photography. Rosler parodied the normative values applied to male and female roles within the confines of this culturally dominant dichotomy of activity and passivity through her photomontage practice, and *Woman with Cannon (Dots)* tied the role of the vain woman and the female nude to the larger Cold War mentality that fueled the photographic coverage of the war abroad as well as the consumer marketplace at home.

Rosler further ironically commented on the gendered representation of sexuality, and the tropes of femininity associated with it, in the montage, *Playboy (On View)*. In this photomontage, a female nude is placed up front and only slightly off-center, unlike the nearly hidden image of the nude woman in the mirror in *Woman with Cannon*. Rosler inserted the image of a nude woman in the center of the immediate foreground of the montage, against a blank white background—a visual no-man's land—and surrounded her with a crowd of Vietnamese men, women, and children, as well as American soldiers. The Playboy pin-up stands in the midst of this crowd, set apart by her nudity, but tied to it by her almond-shaped eyes and thick black hair that serve as signifiers of her Asian ethnicity. Through the collision of images, Rosler burlesques on the continual reinforcement of normative tropes of gendered activity. The Playboy pin-up adopts an exaggerated contrapposto pose, the s-curve of her spine emphasized by her hand coyly covering her pubic triangle—a gesture that hearkens back to the iconography of the Venus pudica seen in the Hellenistic sculpture, the *Aphrodite of Knidos*. The model embodied the contrapposto pose and subtle gestures of the "modest nude," in a natural

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[41] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 52.

movement that emphasized the normalization of the iconography of the Venus pudica within Western culture.

The model's pose, and the iconography from which it developed, further reiterate the analyses of Burger and Mulvey—that the modern female nude serves to reinforce the trope of the passive female sexual object inherited from sculpture and oil painting into contemporary mass media photography. Kaja Silverman analyzed posing, and the related exchange of looks and gazes that fall upon a screen or the camera's lens: "The pose needs to be more generally understood as the photographic imprinting of the body, and that imprinting is not always apparent to the subject in question. It may be the result of the projection of a particular image onto the body so repeatedly as to induce both a psychic and a corporeal identification with it. … Perhaps most problematically, the pose may testify to a blind aspiration to approximate an image which represents a cultural ideal, without any thought as to what that ideal implies."[42]

However, Rosler contrasted the myopic view of western art's iconography of the female nude through her addition of images of Vietnamese women immediately to her left, as well as with other Vietnamese women interspersed throughout the crowd of peasants that surrounds the soldiers. In direct opposition to the nude, these women are fully clothed and stand up straight, with the left-most woman carrying a white flag of surrender, while a Vietnamese man in the center of the crowd points directly at the nude pin-up, and the children on the far side of the crowd crane their necks to see her. Although the pin-up of Asian descent visually surrenders herself, her subjectivity, and her sexuality to the male gaze through her passive pose and look, the Vietnamese villagers, mostly women, surrender their agency to the American soldiers, under the white flag. Rosler discreetly played on the Western orientalist fantasy as she organized the images for the final photomontage—the nude woman, in the role of the sexual object,

[42] Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 205.

exemplified the demure, exotic image of Eastern femininity that preoccupied many western minds since the late nineteenth century, and only circulated and re-circulated within mass media representations of Asian women.

Rosler juxtaposed the Orientalized fantasy with the reality of the developing nations that make up the East—the Vietnamese peasant women lived a hard life, worn plainly on their faces, a fact only complicated further by the inescapable presence of war in their country. As Edward Said explained when he discussed Flaubert's description of an affair with an Egyptian courtesan, this was the creation of an influential archetype for the 'Oriental woman': "she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically, but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was 'typically Oriental.' [The] argument is that Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled."[43]

The Orientalist discourse Said described in his 1978 book, *Orientalism*, embedded itself into Western visual culture to such a degree that although America's relationship with the East lacked the imperial history of the European nations, the neo-imperialism of the Cold War effectively revived the myths of the fanatical, feminized, sexualized East to aid the late twentieth century conquests. Far from embodying a Western male fantasy of the docile, submissive, hypersexualized woman, the reality of life in Vietnam was less sensual than it was a struggle. Ironically, the American soldiers in the montage do not look at the nude pin-up; instead they are immersed in conversation with the Vietnamese people surrounding them, oblivious to the nude woman on their left. The only gaze to fall upon the nude pin-up is that of the surrounding

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[43] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 2003), 6.

Vietnamese people, the camera lens, and the viewer. The media, in its continued circulation of images of women as sexual objects, and the Orientalizing fantasies related to that objecthood, merely reinforced the trope of the woman as sexual object, and reified that image through its continued reappearance in movies, magazines, novels, and billboards.

The Domestic Goddess

In Rosler's photomontage *Runway*, she combined images that illustrated the trope of the happy housewife backgrounded by an image of an airstrip. This image presents the viewer with a burlesque not only of the trope of the domestic goddess, but also of another trope of femininity—that of the delicate "little lady." This trope intertwines with many of the aforementioned ones, relying upon the repeated construction and circulation of images of women as the vain, sexualized, and weaker gender. Rosler intersected the reproduction of this trope within the mass media by presenting the viewer with a montage in which she contrasted the domestic realm with the public, militarized, outside world, and, subsequently, the gender roles typically associated with each zone.

Runway immediately visually differentiated itself from the rest of the *Bringing the War Home* series in that it is an entirely black and white photomontage, which allowed the rephotographed elements to blend seamlessly, and created an aesthetically pleasing and believable scene, until one looks closer. After an initial glance, the viewer quickly notes that although the background and figures are all rendered in the same tones of grey, black, and white, the scene is uncanny and unfamiliar: an airstrip in Vietnam, is populated not by soldiers and airplanes, but rather by white housewives who happily scrub, vacuum, and mow the runway. Rosler confronted the public world of the military airstrip with the diametrically opposed inner sanctum of domesticity—visually linking the two realms that the media quite consciously kept

separate and distinct from each other. By bringing domestic activity into the public, military arena, Rosler concretely and visually tied both the U.S. and Vietnam, implicating both the public and the private in the conflict between the two nations.

The trope of the delicate woman is closely tied to the notions of women as sexual objects, women as housewives, girl culture, and the image of the wife and mother, because in each, the woman is presented as less than, or other than, the active, strong, bread-winning man of the household. As Simone de Beauvoir noted:

> No man would consent to being a woman, but all want there to be women. 'Thank God for creating woman.' 'Nature is good because it gave men woman.' In these and other similar phrases, man once more asserts arrogantly and naively that his presence in this world is an inevitable fact and a right, that of woman is a simple accident—but a fortunate one. Appearing as the Other, woman appears at the same time as a plenitude of being by opposition to the nothingness of existence that man experiences in itself; the Other, posited as object in the subject's eyes, is posited as in-itself, thus as being.[44]

All of the tropes of femininity set women in the position of Other in opposition to men, gendered their daily activity to reflect this, instilled a sense of, and desire for, femininity in these women, while they also reinforced and inculcated these ideals in every generation of women through the constant re-presentation of the same tropes and images. "But in any case, the more the traits and proportions of a woman seemed contrived, the more she delighted the heart of man because she seemed to escape the metamorphosis of natural things. The result is this strange paradox that by desiring to grasp nature, but transfigured, in woman, man destines her to artifice."[45] The ideal of the delicate woman followed this evolution away from nature, which emphasized feminine weakness, innocence, and sensitivity, and which also thoroughly infiltrated modern mass media

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[44] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 301.

[45] Ibid., 329.

to the extent that nearly every image of women in the media, whether it was of a housewife or a mayor, contained some granule of this trope. As Kate Millett noted:

> Sexual politics obtains consent through the 'socialization' of both sexes to basic patriarchal polities with regard to temperament, role, and status. As to status, a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in the male, inferior in the female. The first item, temperament, involves the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category ('masculine' and 'feminine'), based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, 'virtue,' and ineffectuality in the female.[46]

The trope of the delicate woman is so deeply ingrained within our society, and each of the other tropes and the subsequent depictions of women that, despite the advances of the women's movement, it is still present in many media images of women today.

The tropes of femininity that Rosler burlesqued in her photomontages are the visual equivalent of Brecht's quotable gestures, which as Benjamin discussed: "'Making gestures quotable' is one of the essential achievements of epic theatre. The actor must be able to space his gestures as the compositor produces spaced type."[47] She relied upon the familiarity of these frozen images of womanhood to create the distanciation so crucial to the parodic critique and interruption inherent in her photomontages. By utilizing the universal recognizability of these feminine roles that she borrowed from the commonly legible visual language of mass media, Rosler disrupted, even if momentarily, the circulation of the images through the mass culture by soliciting the viewer to look closer and reconsider the context that produced them. The gesture of the domestic goddess vacuuming the curtains, for example, was and is recognizable to audiences across America because of how deeply ingrained the roles of femininity were in American, and even more largely, Western culture and society. Through the strategy of the

[46] Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 26.

[47] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 19.

quotation of images, Rosler literally interrupted the flow of the viewer's observation of the image with her insertion of a fragment from a completely different photograph. The presence of this appropriated image within the context of a new background created a comic dissonance that affronts the viewer and calls for a pause and reflection upon the relation between the parts of the image and the whole. The dissonance created by the quoted photographs within the unfamiliar context of a different background allows for the distanciation between the viewer, the image, and the ideas expressed therein, such that the viewer can critically reconsider each aspect in relation to the whole, and the culture that produced the images.

The original photomontages were not exhibited in galleries or museums, nor published in the pages of the magazines from which Rosler removed the images, but were handed out as fliers or published in underground newspapers, most with a feminist focus, like *Goodbye to All That*; as she noted, "at the time it seemed imperative not to show these works—particularly the antiwar montages—in an art context. To show antiwar agitation in such a setting verged on the obscene, for its site seemed more properly 'the street' or the underground press, where such material could help marshal the troops, and that is where they appeared."[48] Thus, these interventions only momentarily interrupted the circulation of the tropes and gestures through the mass media on the receiving end of the viewer that encountered her photomontages. However, Rosler more recently acknowledged that, in the age of the internet, her original tactic of guerilla distribution and underground publication was no longer viable and that by exhibiting her photomontages within the context of a gallery or museum, her works could gain a much wider visibility through an expanded live audience, or viewership, in addition to the expanded circulation afforded by the

[48] Martha Rosler, "Place, Position, Power, Politics," in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2004* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004), 355.; Also see *Goodbye to All That—Newspaper for San Diego Women*, no. 3 (October 13, 1970) and no. 10 (March 9, 1970).

reproduction of her photomontages within magazines, newspapers, and online.[49] The sudden appearance of her striking photomontage commentary within the white cube of the institutionalized gallery space drew new attention to the original series, particularly in the context of the reprisal series that she created in response to the war in Iraq from 2004-2008.

While some critics, like Jerry Saltz, claimed that by revisiting her earlier work, Rosler, "undermines her older work while basically making pretty war porn," I strongly disagree.[50] The approachability of her methods, particularly the final appearance of the works—in which she holds fast to her ideal of thin construction—in which the means of the creation of the work of art remain apparent in the final product—alongside her choice of imagery, synthesizes a striking convergence that works to drive home Rosler's point that the cultural processes in place now are the same ones that led to the conflict in Vietnam, despite the intervening decades, and the overall contexts are actually not all that different.

The persistence of these traditional tropes of femininity today, four decades after the women's movement of the 1970s, which proliferate in magazines, as well as television shows like Millionaire Matchmaker, Mad Men, and the "Real Housewives" franchise, in addition to the larger contextual parallels, incited a looking-back at the 'second wave' of feminism and the Vietnam War for Rosler, as well as her audience. Although women possess many more freedoms now, factions within contemporary politics work to rescind those hard-earned rights under the guise of moral righteousness, and to uphold the ideal of the traditional, (usually white) heterosexual family unit that relegates women to a position of secondary status and reinforces the traditional tropes of femininity. Recent works like *The Gray Drape* and *Saddam's Palace* deftly illustrate the parallels between the aughts and the late 1960s/early 1970s. Despite the passage of

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[49] Carol Kino, "Glossy Idealism on the Front Lines," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2008.

[50] Jerry Saltz, "Welcome to the Sixties, yet Again," *New York*, October 13, 2008.

time, the media still depict gendered roles and spaces, even in the context of war, only serving to further reify the dominant cultural ideals and ensuring a cyclical reproduction of those ideals. This second series drives home the notion that, as Rosler stated, "with all the differences, this is exactly the same scenario. We haven't advanced at all in the way we go to war."[51]

The tropes of femininity in Rosler's photomontages are embodied through the quotable gestures of typical poses, clothing, and settings that she removed from the familiar contexts of news magazines and interior design journals. She relies upon the familiarity of these halted images of womanhood to facilitate the recognition and reconsideration of the means of production of the tropes and their role within the larger domestic and global cultures. Rosler capitalizes on the recognizability of these feminine roles circulated in the mass media. Through the strategy of the quotation of images, and their burlesque recombination, she abruptly interrupts the flow of the viewer's observation through her insertion of a quote, or fragment, from a wholly different image into a new context. The presence of the quoted image within the new setting creates a dissonance within the usually harmonic visual language that affronts the viewer and calls for pause and reflection upon the relation between the parts of the image and the whole. This pause incites a reconsideration of how the visual language of mass media relates to the larger capitalist culture producing the images. Through the momentary disruptions of her photomontages, Martha Rosler creates a more aware, educated viewer who actively and effectively combats the viewer's position as a passive consumer of images, through a critical engagement with the visual language of mass media. This awareness facilitates a move away from the continued consumption and reproduction of values and roles inherent to capitalism, and towards a society in which the public recognizes the means of production of the dominant images and ideals and can effectively work to change them.

[51] As quoted in: Kino, "Glossy Idealism on the Front Lines."

Chapter Five: Rosler's Performed Decoys and Video Disruption

> *To the degree to which all consciousness is determined by the exigencies and interests of the established society, it is "unfree"; to the degree to which the established society is irrational, the consciousness becomes free for the higher historical rationality only in the struggle* against *the established society.*
>
> Herbert Marcuse[1]

Martha Rosler's appropriation and deconstruction of tropes of femininity through the feminist burlesque in her art extended well beyond her work in the medium of photomontage. She worked to interrupt the circulation of gendered mass culture imagery by re-presenting women through the lens of feminist burlesque in her video and performance art, taking aim at the mode of mass communication that dominated the late twentieth century—television. Her works from the 1970s and early 1980s ranged from the grainy black and white examination of the femininity of the American housewife portrayed in *A budding gourmet* (1974), to the full color deconstruction of the media's representation of feminine beauty in *Martha Rosler Reads "Vogue"* (1982), yet all her videos subtly commented on the gendered roles and identities offered to women by the media in late twentieth century American culture through the lens of humor. The fact that Rosler's works still resonate so deeply with contemporary viewers indicates that despite the backlash of the conservative 1980s, and the work of feminists of the intervening decades, many of the issues regarding gendered identity raised by "second-wave" feminists, like Rosler, persist in today's supposedly "post-feminist" culture, which renders her critique ever more valid and prescient.

In her first video work, *A budding gourmet*, from 1974, Martha Rosler re-examined a common theme in her work from the 1970s—the trope of the 'happy housewife'—but this time

[1] Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1964), 222.

she viewed her through the cultural construction of women's connection to food. Throughout Western history, women's primary roles in society depended on housework or food preparation. Sometimes the historic and social conditions facilitated these connections—as Friedrich Engels noted, the shifting conditions of food production and labor as well as the increased reproduction it demanded necessitated a shift from a matrilineal line of descent to a patrilineal.

> According to the social custom of that time, the man was also the owner of the new source of existence, the cattle, and later on of the new labor power, the slaves. But according to the same custom, his children could not inherit his property, for the following reasons: By maternal law, i.e., while descent was traced only along the female line, and by the original custom of inheriting in the gens, the gentile relatives inherited the property of their deceased gentile relative. The wealth had to remain in the gens… The children of the dead man, however, did not belong to his gens, but to that of their mother. They inherited first together with the other consanguine relatives of the mother, later on perhaps in preference to the others. But they could not inherit from their father, because they did not belong to his gens, where his property had to remain.… In the measure of the increasing wealth man's position in the family became superior to that of woman, and the desire arose to use this fortified position for the purpose of overthrowing the traditional law of inheritance in favor of his children. But this was not feasible as long as maternal law was valid. This law had to be abolished, and it was.[2]

While Engels described the prehistoric shift from matriarchy to patriarchy, the pendulum of gendered dominance never shifted back, and mass culture in America during the Cold War worked to actively reinforce the image of the woman as merely another domestic accessory in the home. With the rise in the prevalence and viewership of television, the evolution of the broadcast television cooking show took off after World War II, and the American media deluge of images of the happy housewife in the kitchen served to reinforce the conservative values of televised role models like June Cleaver and Donna Reed, despite all the women that were join. As already noted, mid- to late-twentieth century print and broadcast advertisements for stove-tops, ovens, refrigerators, and other home appliances, typically portrayed a pretty, young, and

[2] Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, trans. Ernest Untermann, E-pub ed. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1908), 93-94.

white housewife, conveniently leaning against or using the latest and greatest appliance for whichever brand, while the caption, narration, or housewife herself exclaimed how she had no idea how she ever lived without said appliance before, because it so vastly improved her quality of life. A 1972 Frigidaire advertisement for a washer contained two photos, one of a mother and a daughter, the other of a grandmother, mother, and daughter. Above them, the text professed: "Any woman whose 1950 Frigidaire refrigerator is still going strong has a right to expect big things from her 1972 washer."[3] Carefully coiffed and made-up, the smiling mother and daughter of the first image presumably from 1950, now stand in the kitchen with the new daughter/granddaughter, a visual confirmation of the preservation and transmission of the feminine ideals of domesticity from one generation to another. Images of the happy housewife in the kitchen were the norm in mass media, (print, radio, or television), and despite some exceptions to the rule, the vast majority of the representations of women reflected their socially predetermined roles as wives and mothers. As Betty Friedan noted, "the image of woman in another era required increasing prudishness to keep denying sex. This new image seems to require increasing mindlessness, increasing emphasis on things: two cars, two TV's, two fireplaces.… Within the confines of what is now accepted as woman's world, an editor may no longer be able to think of anything big to do except blow up a baked potato, or describe a kitchen as if it were the Hall of Mirrors."[4] When discussing the context of Cold War America, Rosler noted in an 2012 interview that, "it was the wives and housewives who were meant to be both producers and consumers, with a classic induced schizophrenia in regard to household and family maintenance: Women were at the pivot point between amateurism and wifely duties; the

[3] Text from Frigidaire 1972 washer advertisement.

[4] Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 58.

adoption of gourmetism, an interest in improving one's culinary knowledge, both flattered and burdened the wife who was meant to be doing the cooking."[5]

In *A budding gourmet,* Rosler engaged in what Alexander Alberro described as, "a critique of the tyranny of the kitchen, of the baroque relationship between women and food." [6] As a young single mother, working hard to support herself and her son, while also build a career after finishing graduate school, Rosler clearly personally identified with the burlesque of feminine gender roles, that she put forth in her artwork during the 1970s, particularly those tied to domesticity.[7] The installation and performance, *A Gourmet Experience* (1974), a series of postcard novels, as well as other written and performed works from the early 1970s, all burlesqued the production and consumption of food and its central role in American public and private life, as well as the relationship between words and food. In the grainy black and white video, *A budding gourmet*, Rosler's first foray into the medium, she utilized the text from her postcard novel of the same title, which she later republished in the artist's book, *Service: A Trilogy on Colonization*.[8] Eleanor Heartney described the video as, "a first-person narrative about a housewife who aspires to lift herself into a higher social class by learning how to be a fancy cook," and noted its appearance in the postcard novel, as well as, *A Gourmet Experience* (1974)—which included a lavish banquet, with formal place settings and an audio track in which

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[5] Christopher Zimmerman, "'A Budding Gourmet' Martha Rosler in Conversation with Christopher Zimmerman."

[6] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," 74.

[7] Even though she presents a tough veneer in her activism, Rosler is also a mother and a teacher, two roles that are very clear in many interviews, especially in her email correspondence and conversation with the author.

[8] Rosler originally distributed the serial novel through the mail in twelve parts in 1973, an extended burlesque of the way an unassuming, typical American housewife could play a role in the discussion of cuisine, and how the construction of "the gourmet" intersected not only with gender, but with class and colonialism as well, two topics frequently left at a distance from the American Cold-War-era home.

Rosler read the *budding gourmet* narrative, accompanied by a slide show of various epicurean delights from culinary magazines juxtaposed with images of world hunger.[9] Annette Michelson described *A budding gourmet* as being the beginning of Rosler's "Food Chain" series: three works produced between 1974 and 1977—which also included *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) and *Losing, A Conversation with the Parents* (1977)—these works all addressed the consumption and production of food, "and the way in which it engages, metonymically and metaphorically, varied registers of feminist protest and claim."[10]

As the video begins, the screen reveals a silhouetted woman—Rosler, with her long hair tied back at the nape of her neck—seated behind a table with just her upper torso, neck, and head visible and her facial features largely obscured in shadow. Before her, the table is sparsely, but carefully, set with a silhouetted teapot on the right, a bowl sitting upon a plate in front of the woman, a glass next to the plate, and a covered ceramic Dutch oven on the left. As the woman in the shadows utters the words, and her voice makes Brooklyn origins quite clear, "I wish to become a gourmet. I feel it will enhance me as a human being," the screen fades from the tableau to a close-up of a card, on which handwritten, cursive letters reiterate the spoken words, "I wish to become a gourmet."[11] Throughout the rest of the video, the camera switches from images of projected slides, appropriated from magazines portraying all aspects of food—from its consumption and preparation, its abundance or complete lack—to the grey scene, in which the almost indistinguishable Rosler exaggeratedly blinks into the camera's gaze as the narration continues to trace a fictional housewife's ruminations on epicurism, culture, and refinement. Rosler skillfully intertwined her Brechtian feminist burlesque narration of a housewife who holds

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[9] Heartney, "Documents of Dissent," 112.

[10] Michelson 185 Michelson, "Solving the Puzzle," 185.

[11] Martha Rosler, "A Budding Gourmet," (1974).

gourmet aspirations with images culled directly from mass culture—many images clearly showed the crease where the magazine pages met, with a glossy sheen on either side of the binding—to provide the viewer with multiple sides of the familiar theme of food production in the home. As Bertolt Brecht noted when discussing epic theatre as opposed to the traditional illusionism of the arts, "the process of fusion extends to the spectator, who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art. Witchcraft of this sort must of course be fought against. Whatever is intended to produce hypnosis, is likely to induce sordid intoxication, or creates fog, has got to be given up."[12] Rosler seized on Brechtian distanciaton to aid her burlesque, she seamlessly contrasted her spoken word with clashing imager her voiceover stated: "There's food all around. The question is how to pick and choose—to know what's really good… I'd like to be refined, not just one cut above the animals," as images of starving adults and children flashed on the screen, interspersed with images of wealthy couples dining in posh restaurants.[13]

The mediation provided by the television monitor, the rough quality of the video recording, and the images copied from magazines onto slides, projected and recorded on video, provided enough of a remove for the viewer to consider all of the elements of Rosler's video re-presentation in relation to the whole, while the juxtapositioning of imagery highlighted the glaring discrepancies between what the upper middle class narrator-housewife stated and the realities of the global food economy. As Annette Michelson noted, "here, in this parable on colonialism as ingurgitation, the *bourgeoise* [sic] sees herself as the possessor of a truly international culture, as a citizen of the world. A discourse of cultural bulimia presented as a policy of 'creativity,' celebrates the manner in which 'in the USA we can take the best of all

[12] Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 38.

[13] Rosler, "A Budding Gourmet."

times and places and make them our own.'"[14] As in epic theatre, which "does not reproduce conditions, but, rather, reveals them," the video gradually reveals the reality surrounding food preparation and consumption that the media carefully conceals.[15]

Rosler's housewife uttered words that surely passed between the lips of many a woman in an upper-middle class suburb, yet the woman that appeared on the screen, before and after the projected images, presented a persona and façade in sharp contrast with that in the narration. Cottingham discovered that, "Rosler always keeps her voice at a mild variance with the words it is communicating, producing constant uncertainty about what is being said, why, and for whom; her voice is one of the most effective critical devices that any artist has yet used in video or film."[16] Although the middle-class housewife narrating the video recited recipes and extolled the virtues of travelling and providing her family with the "finer things in life," the woman that appeared on the screen remained silent, humbly blinking across the simply-set table before her. She did not wear ostentatious jewelry, nor the latest designer fashions, rather, she wore a simple puff-sleeved, button-down blouse with her hair simply styled head, and tied back.

Ann Sargent Wooster noted that, "although the character played by Rosler is sincere, Rosler's deadpan presentation is tinged with irony. She makes it clear that her character's relationship to food is intertwined with class privilege, especially that of the stay-at-home, upper-middle-class housewife."[17] The burlesqued disconnect between that of the woman speaking over the video and the ambivalent, blinking woman on the screen provided a space for the viewer to

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[14] Michelson, "Solving the Puzzle," 185.

[15] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 4.

[16]Cottingham, "The Inadequacy of Seeing and Believing: The Art of Martha Rosler," 161.

[17] Ann-Sargent Wooster, "The Way We Were," in *The First Generation: Women and Video, 1970-75*, ed. JoAnn Hanley (New York: Independent Curators Incorporated, 1993), 39.

consider how the words that they speak, and that are spoken by companies selling cookbooks, culinary travel, and home goods, deeply reflect ingrained views regarding gender roles, ethnicity, privilege, class, and globalization. While the woman on the screen blinked blankly at the viewer, the narrator prattled on, oblivious to the fact that she perpetuated the pre-existing socially gendered division where men earn wages and women toiled in the home to satisfy their husbands. Alberro acknowledged that the work could be read as a, "metacommentary on artistic production: from the gendering of the art world—true artistic geniuses are male, females are at best derivative—to the philosophical, formal, and stylistic practices surrounding the art object," but also noted that the, "strange, unpolished appearance," was a calculated choice that called attention to the constructed nature of the artwork, and extended her commentary from the images on the screen to the method used to create the work, and even to the medium itself, as video was still a nascent medium within the art world of the 1970s and intertwined heavily with its broadcast roots.[18]

The Second Link in the "Food Chain"

Martha Rosler's video from the following year, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), extended the burlesque deconstruction of *A budding gourmet*, and also addressed the trope of the happy homemaker and her connection to food through a character familiar to TV viewers in the 1970s, the cooking instructor or home chef. The second work in her "Food Chain" expounded on Americans' relation to food, as it examined women's intertwined connection to its production and consumption through the kitchen. In a later essay, Rosler discussed the cultural context in which the cooking show gained its popularity:

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[18] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," 73-74.

> Historically, the advance of industrial capitalism has eradicated craft skills among working people and *economically productive* activity within the family and thus lessened our chances to gain a sense of accomplishment and worth in our work. More and more we are directed to seek satisfaction instead in 'private life,' which has been redefined in terms of purchase and consumptions and which is supposed to represent, as the antithesis to the workaday world, all the things missing from work. As the opportunities for personal control diminish for all but a relative few, self-confidence, trust, and pleasure conceived in straightforward terms are poisoned. In their place, advertising, the handmaiden of industry, promises personal power and fulfillment through consumption, and we are increasingly beguiled by an accordion-like set of mediations, in the form of commodities, between ourselves and the natural and social world.[19]

Through her presentation of a Brooklyn woman-turned-cooking instructor, in which every movement of her body and intonation of her speech reminds the viewer of the unerringly constructed nature of the scene, coupled with the grainy medium of early video further breaking down any illusionary pretenses, Rosler actively subverted any of the warm and comforting feelings typically linked to the mass-media image of the woman in the kitchen; reminding viewers that, "the work of art is really to move consciousness forward, or to move people toward something, maybe not definable as the goals of agit-prop, but toward the idea of political action."[20] Every aspect of her work, even the medium itself was part of the Brechtian Lehrstücke parody that Rosler embedded within her art, which allowed viewers to engage with critique alongside aesthetics. Rosler also relied on her body language in order to disrupt, or problematize the seemingly neutral language of her violent recitation of an alphabetically organized list of kitchen tools. Ruth Askey described how, "the stern unsmiling demonstrator contrasts with the bourgeois housewife represented on American TV. Rosler removes the accepted meaning of the

[19] Rosler, "For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life," 5.

[20] Owens, "On Art and Artists: Martha Rosler," 22.

tools she identifies. Gestures associated with them take on a threatening tone as Rosler jabs, stabs and slashes."[21]

The fuzzy black and white video opens with a close-up woman holding a dual-sided chalkboard and corkboard, in what appears to be a kitchen, with "Semi-otics of the "Kitchen, c. '75 M. Rosler," boldly scrawled in chalk on the board, announcing the work's title; only the woman's eyes, nose, and hair are visible above the upper frame of the placard. As the woman, Rosler herself, lowers the chalkboard, the camera slowly pans back from the tight shot of the title board to reveal the setting, which is indeed a kitchen, populated by a refrigerator, a butcher's block, a stove, and a set of shelves containing cooking utensils and books. Several commonplace, but recently obsolete kitchen tools are neatly arranged on top of the butcher's block, presumably for the demonstration that will follow. Slowly, Rosler dons an apron over her street clothes, and once the garment is successfully tied behind her back, utters the first word heard in the video after more than a full minute of complete silence, "Apron."[22]

From there, Rosler picks up the various utensils laid before her and pantomimes its use, but each movement becomes more agitated and aggressive than the one that preceded it. She moves through the kitchen utensils in alphabetical order, tracing a verbal and visual system of language, representation, and gender inherently tied to what she sees as patriarchal repression and gender inequality. As Annette Michelson discussed, "Rosler presents a lexicon of cooking utensils, recited in alphabetical order and in frontal position in the manner of a store demonstration or television program. But this is a demonstration with a difference, that of

[21] Ruth Askey, "Martha Rosler's Video," *Artweek* 8, no. 22: 18.

[22] Martha Rosler, "Script for Semiotics of the Kitchen," in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998).

utensils as instruments of domestic servitude, each one converted by the force of the presenter's gesture and demeanor into an instrument of aggression."[23]

Semiotics of the Kitchen, shot in the New York City loft of fellow feminist artist Ida Applebroog in 1975, aimed to parody and disrupt the predominant media images of gender in relation to the domestic space. Helen Molesworth acknowledged that *Semiotics,* "humorously skewered both the mass-media image of the smiling, middle-class, white housewife and theories of semiotics, suggesting that neither was able to provide an adequate account of the role of wife/mother/maintenance provider."[24] While the setup in Applebroog's loft was a far cry from the demonstration areas of network television cooking shows, the bare-bones set further aided Rosler's interruption of the mass media model, and emphasized the mediation of her video through the lack of flashy, high-tech accessories and gadgets, as well as its overall stripped-down aesthetics. "In *Semiotics of the Kitchen* I refused to have any camera movement because I thought the best way to call attention to the camera's presence was not to have it move.… the use of the camera is designed to call attention to the fact that there is a camera being operated by a person, and there is a tape recorder being operated by a person. I go out of my way, to the point of quirkiness, to include noise... Everything cuts against the viewer's relaxing into the work as though it were not a work but rather an experience."[25]

The televised cooking show was a formula translated to TV from radio broadcasts in the mid twentieth century, with a well-trained chef, male or female, hosting the show. "A pedagogy of production is in place on television, on cooking shows. So I thought of the first two tapes in

[23] Michelson, "Solving the Puzzle," 184.

[24] Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," *October* 92 (2000): 79.

[25] Owens, "On Art and Artists: Martha Rosler," 33.

relation to cooking demonstration shows."[26] With the advent of radio in the 1920s, instructional cooking broadcasts were quick to follow, translating a previously local, oral, or, written knowledge base into a nationally distributed network of information, or a discursive practice, as Foucault noted: "I would like to show that discourse is not a slender surface of contact or confrontation, between a reality and a language *(langue),* the integration of a lexicon and an experience; I would like to show with precise examples that in analyzing discourses themselves, one sees the loosening of an embrace apparently so tight, of words and things, and the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practice. These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects."[27] Some of the first food-related radio-show hosts were fictional characters like Betty Crocker and Aunt Sammy, and broadcasters aimed their shows directly at homemakers during the 1920s.[28] These early broadcasts served to reinforce traditional gender roles while also satisfying advertisers that hoped to promote newly-available mass-produced home goods.[29] While many women, and men, sang the praises of the radio cooking show, the purpose of this new national network of knowledge remained unquestioned, and allowed for the profitable division of house and home into the feminine realm and industry and wage earning in the masculine.

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[26] Ibid., 40.

[27] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Harper & Row, Publisher, 1972), 49.

[28] Aunt Sammy, Uncle Sam's wife, was created by the USDA Bureau of Home Economics and Radio in 1926 for the "Housekeeper's Chat" and was played by a rotating cast of women through 1946.

[29] Initially, in the 1920s, the Betty Crocker broadcasts promoted Gold Medal Flour and their subsidiary products, but as the "Betty Crocker Cooking School of the Air" persisted through the Second World War and eventually Betty Crocker became a television personality. The name eventually expanded to include its own publications and brand of mass-produced, prepared foods. See the Betty Crocker website, visited May 6, 2014 url: http://www.bettycrocker.com/how-to/aboutthekitchens/history

Early transmissions often advised women to encourage their husbands if they showed an interest in the kitchen, and to be grateful for the helping hands. "In 1939, the New York Times's [sic] Kiley Taylor reported that the imagination and efforts of men interested in cooking as a hobby could potentially improve American cuisine. These men cook what they like, to please themselves and each other (not to feed the kids lunch), noted Taylor, and women should be patient and grateful that they get a partner in the kitchen."[30] In the domestic kitchen, men dallied, if at all, however, in the professional restaurant business, they ran the entire show—this division, while seemingly contradictory, was merely another example of the division of public and private spheres, with women relegated to the private, domestic realm. The early fictional radio hosts eventually ceded their posts to real characters as the concerns of wartime—like cooking with rationed goods—dominated the airwaves. Eventually, real-life figures like Ida Bailey Allen, a trained dietician and author of over fifty cookbooks, entered into the radio broadcast market. Bailey Allen even became television's first female host of a culinary show in 1932, on the short-lived, "Mrs. Allen and the Chef." Slowly, as television dominated American mass media over the post-WWII years, the popularity of radio cooking shows opened a path for a televised version. However, as the medium of transmission shifted from radio to television, the driving force behind it, advertising and mass produced goods, did not.

As television became the predominant form of mass-communication in America in the years following WWII, televised cooking shows proliferated, yet contrary to the predominance of women hosting the radio broadcast cooking shows, the majority of the hosts on television were men.[31] The earliest, prominent exception to this rule was Dione Lucas, whose television

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[30] Kathleen Collins, "Watching What We Eat," *New York Times*, May 29, 2009.

[31] The first nationally televised cooking show was *I Love to Eat*, hosted by James Beard and aired from 1946-1947, yet there were still very few televisions sets in private homes at this time.

series' *To the Queen's Taste* and *The Dione Lucas Cooking Show* ran through the 1950s—the decade when television sets began to invade more and more American homes. Lucas was the first female graduate of Le Cordon Bleu—the world's largest, and most prestigious, hospitality education institution—and the clear predecessor to he most iconic of televised culinary icons, Julia Child. The first of Child's cooking shows, *The French Chef*, debuted in 1963 and aired continuously for a decade; successfully introducing new gourmet aspirations to many American homes in the 1960s and 1970s.[32]

Unlike contemporary television culture, which an entire cable network dedicated to culinary broadcasts, in the 1960s and 1970s, there were three national networks, a public network, and local stations. The limited availability of airtime translated to fewer nationally visible cooking shows, and by proxy, fewer women hosting these shows. Compared to the contemporary media landscape, where the "Food Network" churns out one celebrity chef after another and shows like *Chopped* and *Top Chef* provide a competition-based route to fame through the kitchen, the chefs on televised cooking shows in the 1970s only achieved full-blown mass cultural fame after several years behind the counter and in front of the camera.[33] Despite today's massive proliferation of cooking shows, and the fact that many women have attained culinary fame, men still out-number the women in the media spotlight.[34] The gender imbalance

[32] *The French Chef* was merely the first of several cooking shows hosted by Child, and she followed its success with programs like *Julia Child & Company*, *Julia Child & More Company* and *Dinner at Julia's.*

[33] The recent media circus surrounding Paula Deen's fall from grace over racist comments—May 17, 2103—merely served to support the extensive coverage and saturation of the culinary arts and the celebrity status of these chefs in the contemporary media landscape.

[34] Out of an online Forbes list of the top ten highest earning celebrity chefs, from 2012, only two were women. See: http://www.forbes.com/pictures/mfl45kkmm/guy-fieri-2/. In another list, from 2013, of the top twenty earners (including several ties), eight were women. See: http://www.celebritynetworth.com/articles/entertainment-articles/richest-chefs-world/

of the TV-cooking show was even more obvious in the limited media landscape of the late twentieth century, when Julia Child was the sole woman at the helm of a nationally-broadcast cooking show.

Despite the preponderance of male chefs dominating the network cooking shows, these televised programs were always aimed at the home cook, who, in the 1970s, was almost always still a woman; be she wife, mother, or single gal trying to "catch" a man. Rosler noted that, "as the new emphasis on food emerged, men who cooked professionally were chefs; women who might consider doing so were freaks. Television shows addressed themselves to housewives, and there were no celebrity chefs as far as the popular imagination was concerned, unless they were French chefs of previous eras, like Escoffier. Otherwise, there was Julia Child."[35] Clearly, she was well aware of the target audience of such programming, and carefully worked to interrupt the gendered portrayal of commodified connoisseurship in videos like *A budding gourmet* and *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.

By utilizing the relatively new artistic medium of video, Rosler burlesqued the mass media format using similar technology, and criticized it within its own visual language. In a Q&A following a screening of her works at Electronic Arts Intermix in New York City in 2011, Rosler stated that she purposely tried to make *Semiotics* a boring video, and that she aimed to make it as soporific as a televised late-night cooking demonstration or a ginzu knife infomercial—replicating the tedium of mass media was essential to her strategy of disruption.[36] Benjamin noted epic theatre's task was, and, "is not so much to develop actions as to represent conditions. But 'represent' does not here signify 'reproduce' in the sense used by the

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[35] Zimmerman, "A Budding Gourmet".

[36] Martha Rosler, "Martha Rosler: Kitchen Theater Q&A" (Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, NY, 2011).

theoreticians of Naturalism. Rather, the first point at issue is to *uncover* those conditions. (One could just as well say: to *make them strange* [*ver fremden*].)"[37]

Rosler's cooking show host appeared innocuous at first, as she donned her apron in silence, standing at the counter in a kitchen where an harmless demonstration would shortly unfold. However, rather than instruct the viewer in the proper way to prepare Boeuf Bourguignon, the woman behind the counter proceeded to recite the name of each implement laid out before her, in alphabetical order. As she announced each utensil, she performed a gesture that emphasized an alternate, violent use for each tool. Rosler used the ice pick to aggressively stab the air, rather than separate chunks of ice, she used the seemingly harmless ladle to hostilely throw an imaginary liquid over her shoulder, and the handheld nutcracker clacked loudly as she fervently slammed the two arms together, cracking an invisible nut. Throughout her pantomime, she made the supposedly innocent and mundane utensils strange, obscuring their typical uses in food preparation through an hostility that usually went unspoken. As Helen Molesworth noted, "the work's humor and deliberate foiling of the maintenance labor of cooking (if the kitchen had any actual food in it the set would have resembled the aftermath of a food fight)," was present throughout Rosler's exaggerated parody of the "slightly maniacal home cook" aiding and abetting her violent feminist burlesque.[38] In doing so, Rosler disrupted the common trope of the happy housewife within the kitchen. By portraying the common, universal image of the woman within the home, or the domestic goddess, in a light of dissatisfaction as opposed to blissful submission, Rosler subverted the familiar meanings associated with that image through her specifically violent movements of common kitchen utensils.

[37] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 18.

[38] Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," 91.

Rosler was not only interested in deconstructing gender roles as conveyed through the images presented by mass media, but she also worked to disrupt the role played by language in the process of commodification and indoctrination. An oft-quoted statement by Rosler succinctly summarized her goal for the video, "I was concerned with something like the notion of 'language speaking the subject,' and with the transformation of the woman herself into a sign in a system of signs that represent a system of food production, a system of harnessed subjectivity… As she speaks, she names her own oppression."[39] Rosler extended her burlesque of the tropes of women in dominant culture into her exploration of phallocentric language as the system of signs of domesticity by which a woman remained oppressed in her secondary status. Rosler found the, "signs imposed on women [we]re extremely diminishing. This woman [wa]s implicated in a system of extreme reduction with respect to herself as a self."[40] With the bare bones of a patriarchal system of verbal and visual signs as the only means by which the woman behind the counter could express her subjectivity, it was no wonder women in the late twentieth century struggled to find a means through which they could express their anger against their social status as Other. "Hence woman makes no claim for herself as subject because she lacks the concrete means, because she senses the necessary link connecting her to man without positing its reciprocity, and because she often derives satisfaction from her role as Other."[41] The woman in Rosler's video, and in countless advertisements and television programs, had no identity beyond that which was defined by the alphabet of domesticity that she enacted. As Laura Cottingham noted, the, "glib performance suggests that any 'semiotics of the kitchen' is only a fetish unless it

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[39] Jane Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," ibid.17: 85-86.

[40] ibid., 85.

[41] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 46.

is useful in liberating women from the tyranny of domestic servitude;… Rosler adheres to an aesthetics of engagement that requires viewers to bring their lives with them to the art experience."[42] Rosler not only translated the lived experience of the woman in the kitchen to a set of symbols that carried an immense sense of frustration and rage, but, by virtue of her expressing this anger within the verbal and visual vocabulary of contemporary culture, she critiqued the entire system of language and representation, as well as the popular culture that relied upon that system.

Yet, despite the critiques of Rosler and many other feminists, the trope of the domestic goddess persists in contemporary mass culture. The housewives of today's media have many more career options available outside the home, the social and cultural expectation of the wife and mother as the primary caretaker of the family and home remains intact, particularly in the face of the current conservative backlash that actively works to limit the political and social gains hard-won by the feminists of the 1970s women's movement. This current regression is exactly what Rosler cites as her motivation for revisiting her works from the 1970s. *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, is a work that Rosler recently re-visited, in 2003 at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. She mentioned several times that she found the connections between "then" and "now" far too compelling to be ignored, and while "re-hashing" old works would be critical death for many artists, the similarities were too strong for her to do anything but illustrate the connections.[43] Further extending her connections between the "then" of the 1970s and now, her recent article in the *e-flux journal* expounds on her beliefs about the role of language in

[42] Cottingham, "The Inadequacy of Seeing and Believing: The Art of Martha Rosler," 158-59.

[43] While she most often mentions this in the context of her *Bringing the War Home* series, (See Kino, "Glossy Idealism on the Front Lines.") she discussed this in person with me at the *Historical Materialism NYC 2013* conference, stating that she actively draws a link between the social and cultural conditions of the 1970s and now by revisiting her older works.

contemporary culture: “the discursive codes of management and the pretentious patter of the hypereducated are robust. One is always trying to get ahead of them, and those subjected to them can mock them with a burlesque flourish or with the scathing mimicry of the outraged. Conversely, the working stiff who cannot make the grade is a perennial object of ridicule, gentle or otherwise; … In this they join those others outside the wage scale, that is women, old people, and children…. The universe of consumption provides a host of areas in which specialized language has great appeal.”[44] It is just this ability of language to subjugate people into the class of “Other” that Rosler sought to disrupt in her original, 1975 video. The fact that she wrote about the dominance of language, and its ability to single out individuals as insiders or outsiders in 2013 only further illustrates how her original video continues to resonate with current generations and viewers.

Rosler created the 2003 performance, and the subsequent video in 2011, for the Whitechapel Gallery’s exhibition *A Short History of Performance, II*, to explicitly remind viewers of the persistent features of her original burlesqued critique as it still continues to affect society. While Rosler specifically taped the original *Semiotics* in the then-new medium of video because of the similarity between video and television broadcasts, the 2003 work was a live performance-recreation translated through a live-feed broadcast of Rosler’s “germinal” work. Initially, Rosler was “annoyed and outraged” when the gallery asked her to stage a performance of her video work, and she noted that the mediation provided by the monitor and tapes of the original video were part of the tools she used to raise awareness in viewers.[45] Rosler actively sought to create a deadpan, “boring” video that called attention to the highly crafted nature of the

[44] Martha Rosler, "English and All That," article, *e-flux journal*, no. 45 (2013), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/english-and-all-that/.

[45] "Martha Rosler: Kitchen Theater Q&A."

television broadcasts that she critiqued through the video's lack of refinement, and worried that the live performance would ruin the rough aesthetic that rendered the original video so effective. However, the end result of a video created from the live feed of the performance from the original video provided a sufficiently meta-critique of the entire work that Rosler viewed it as successful in its own right.

The video opens with scenes of the gallery, and the sights and sounds of the preparation of the space for the performance. The camera eventually shifts its focus to a recoding of the first time Rosler met the twenty-six women involved in the re-performance of her video. As the video switches to show Rosler's original video screening on a monitor in the white walls of the gallery, and then back to Rosler, she told the women assembled around her the basic goals for the original were to, "interrupt the nice idea of a TV cooking demo," and the "throwing [has] to do with the idea of the box," and going beyond the constraints of the television set, and how the box of the TV relates to the subjective idea of the alphabet, "keeping you in the kitchen, a mental box."[46] The 2003 Whitechapel performance call for participation for a recreation of Rosler's 1975 video was met with such a large group of women that many were not included in the final performance. When Rosler released the video of *Semiotics of the Kitchen: An Audition* in 2011, its premiere screening at Electronic Art Intermix in New York was a sold out affair. The fact that both the re-performance and video were met with such overwhelming approval demonstrates how deeply Rosler's original video still resonates with today's audiences, to the degree that at least within the art world, she established her role as a pioneer of both feminist and video critiques that take aim at basic structural faults within society. Rosler's original S*emiotics* and the official re-performance, maintain their critical edge because the gendered rifts between men

[46] "Semiotics of the Kitchen: An Audition," (2011).

and women, public and private, still persist in socially sanctioned images circulated throughout mass media. Merely the fact that there are countless re-imaginings of and tributes to *Semiotics of the Kitchen* on "YouTube" or "Vimeo" illustrate the continued relevance and resonance of Rosler's original work. When asked about the role of food in the mass media today, Rosler noted that, "food fetishism has returned to the middle class as a status preoccupation (while the strains related to virtuous living, eco-friendliness, and health persist) and for the art world and others, a convenient substitute for aesthetic taste not related to literal consumption. It allows people who prefer not to think too deeply to become experts in creativity."[47] While there is definitely more variety in the way women and their lives are depicted in the media today, the patriarchal mainstay of the wife and mother within the home remains an antiquated norm, rendering Rosler's original critique all the more relevant.

Exoticized Electronics

Semiotics of the Kitchen and *A budding gourmet* were not the only videos in which Rosler took the media's representation of the "domestic goddess" to task. Rosler examined the commodified Orientalism and exoticism marketed to housewives as a form of capitalist imperialism in her video *The East is Red, the West is Bending* (1977). While her earlier videos were black and white, she executed this one in full color. Rosler strode in view of the camera, from the right of the screen, into the center of the well-appointed, but not cluttered or fussy, dining room of her home in San Diego, California; which she set up to resemble a stripped down version of a cooking show demonstration space.[48] Once in place, behind a countertop that held a

[47] "Email Interview."

[48] Most of Rosler's videos from the 1970s were shot at her California home, except Semiotics of the Kitchen, which was shot at Ida Applebroog's loft in New York, as noted earlier.

traditional wok, bottles of sake and soy sauce, dishtowels, and other kitchen implements, she began her soliloquy, taken from the words wisely set forth in West Bend's manual for their new Electric Wok. Behind her, on a set of shelves, sculptures and ceramics occupy the shelf-space, while the furniture frames a fabric wall-hanging and an apron languishes limply on a hook next to a door. In *this* videographic instance, Rosler donned not an apron, but a Chinese, blue silk jacket with a mandarin collar, red silk rope toggles, and a red turtleneck underneath; and wore her hair pulled back with a pair of large dark sunglasses covering her eyes. Her attire highlighted the way in which Chinese and Japanese food was marketed as an exotic, foreign cuisine—strange and different from typical American fare, and her garment only heightened the burlesque of the cultural clash presented in West Bend's words, which Rosler placed at the center of her video.

Even she, herself, acknowledged that, "Video itself is not 'innocent.' It too is a form of cultural commodity that often stands for a celebration of the self and its powers of invention. Yet video is useful in that it provides [Rosler] with the opportunity to construct 'decoys,' entities that engage in a natural dialectic with TV itself…. A woman in a red and blue Chinese coat, demonstrating a wok in a dining room and trying to speak with the absurd voice of the corporation, is a failed Mrs., Pat Boone."[49] Her voice lifted above the strains of Asian music floating through the background—the tonal structure signaled its origin as Other, "Orientals see a balance of all things in life," the imperialist tone of her borrowed words changed little as she continued through West Bend's booklet.[50] As she read aloud for the camera, she punctuated her narration with props and images, at one point even raising her foot to display the Chinese black-

[49] Martha Rosler, "To Argue for a Video of Representation. To Argue for a Video against the Mythology of Everyday Life," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999), 368.

[50] "The East Is Red, the West Is Bending," (1977).

cotton buckled slippers, then turning to the bookshelf to lift a photograph of a Chinese woman at another, and even lifting the lid from the conventional wok to pantomime an East Asian straw hat at yet another. These moments provided an added comedic release, for the viewer in which the words of the West Bend manual were highlighted as exceptionally strange and humorous in their culturally tone-deaf racism, rather than made to blend in as a socially accepted norm as in conventional media.

While Rosler read the booklet and cookbook that accompanied the wok in its packaging from the box, she deftly utilized Brechtian strategies and re-presented the new, and soon-to-be commonplace, object in a new light.

> In choosing representational strategies I aim for the distancing (*ostranenie,* the *Verfremdungseffekt*), the distantiation occasioned by a refusal of realism, by foiled expectations, by palpably flouted conventions. Tactically I tend to use a wretched pacing and a bent space the immovable shot or; conversely the unexpected edit, pointing to the mediating agencies of photography and speech; long shots rather than close ups, to deny psychological intent; contradictory utterances; and in acting, flattened affect, histrionics or staginess. Although video is simply one medium among several that are effective in confronting real issues of culture, video based on TV has this special virtue; it has little difficulty in lending itself to the kind of 'crude thinking,' as Brecht used this phrase, that seems necessary to penetrate the waking daydreams that hold us in thrall. The clarification of vision is a first step toward reasonably and humanely changing the world.[51]

She deftly examined the mass marketing of ideals and images to women in the domestic sphere through her analysis of the brand-new gadget, West Bend's Electric Wok. While Rosler already acknowledged the limiting, gendered role of the housewife and its central place in American mass culture, by presenting the viewer with one of the small appliances aimed at the domestic goddess she carried her burlesque disruption even further.

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[51] "To Argue for a Video of Representation. To Argue for a Video against the Mythology of Everyday Life," 369.

At the end of the video, after several segments where Rosler comically urges the viewer to throw away their old woks for various reasons prompted by the West Bend pamphlet, a voiceover states, “remember, Oriental tastes are refined but they are essentially primitive. They don’t have our technology. Primitive thinking has led the Chinese toward communism, but the more advanced Japanese are now turning to the West. We have improved on the clever idea of the wok and moved it out of stagnation.”[52] This is the kind of Orientalizing language Edward Said discussed in his text in the late 1970s, in which he analyzed how contemporary attitudes toward a different Other were firmly situated in the East, or Orient, and were inherently built on earlier, imperialist attitudes, divisions, and fictions. Said described the Orientalist attitudes of European scholars from the nineteenth through early-twentieth century by stating, “the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability; this is why every writer on the Orient,… saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption. The Orient existed as a place isolated from the mainstream of European progress in the sciences, arts, and commerce.”[53]

Yet, the Orientalizing language of the West Bend pamphlet was not written in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, but in the late 1970s, which demonstrated the extent and pervasiveness of the imperialist attitudes inherited from the colonial era by late industrial capitalism in America. Following on the heels of WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War, the release of West Bend’s Electric Wok in the 1970s conveyed an interesting convergence between nationalism, capitalism, and imperialism, as well as a shift in the purview of Orientalism from the near east to the far east. While Said initially described Orientalism within

[52] "The East Is Red, the West Is Bending."

[53] Said, *Orientalism*, 206.

the context of the Middle East, the purview of the western feminization, objectification, and Othering of Eastern cultures that he outlined shifted further east as the imperialism of the nineteenth century gave way to a new global market. The inhabitants and cultures of the near east fell out of the public's eye as the role of the Japanese in WWII and the communist threat in China presented the American public with a new Other that needed to be quantified and qualified, and then contained, within a series of generalized representations of cultures that were less developed than the west in terms of technology, but in their "primitive" state were more in touch with nature and spirituality. "If, at times, America's foes seemed interchangeable, it is at least partly because all, regardless of their differences, were cast in the same indispensible role: the enemy, 'the Other,' the opposite of all that the free world holds dear. The substitution of emotion for intellect is not unique to the postwar foreign policy of the United States."[54]

The language West Bend used in its pamphlet for the Electric Wok, quoted from Rosler's video, illustrated the orientalist Othering perfectly. By re-presenting, and burlesquing, the marketing machine built around the imperialist imagination and tropes of femininity based on decades of imposed divisions between self and other, Rosler asked the viewer to step back and re-examine the inner-workings of mass culture and how it affected gendered roles in the private realm. While she initially explored the cultural appropriation associated with food in *A budding gourmet,* Rosler was already well-aware of the way in which companies that had a vested interest in domestic food preparation utilized a neo-colonial appropriation to appeal to the Cold War American populace in order to sell cookbooks, spices, and novel home appliances and utensils that all focused on "exotic" cuisine from foreign countries like India, Brazil, and China. Yet, *The East Is Red and the West is Bending* (1977), further expounded on the intertwining of

[54] Robert MacDougall, "Red, Brown, and Yellow Perils: Images of the American Enemy in the 1940s and 1950s," *Journal of Popular Culture* 32, no. 4: 73.

commodities, gender, home and abroad, focusing on the domestic, feminine Other at home in contrast to the feminized Orientalized Other abroad.

The addition of West Bend's new Electric Wok to the marketplace during the 1970s illustrated the growing market that supported the trends toward cultural culinary appropriation. Through her appearance, her characteristically deadpan narration, and decidedly "homey" setting, Rosler aimed to disrupt the circulation of the corporate culture and imagery, while allowing a resolution to occur in the viewer who must connect the orientalism, gendered tropes, and patriarchal norms of society that perpetuate the objectification and subjection of women and "other" cultures in Cold War America. As Benjamin noted of the conventions of film in the early twentieth century, "reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art an is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise. The film with its shock effect meets this mode of reception halfway. The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one."[55] While Benjamin discussed the distracted viewing habits built into mass-produced film, he could just as easily be talking about television and corporate advertising campaigns, both of which Rosler skewered through her Brechtian alienation techniques coupled with her feminist and Orientalist burlesque in *The East is Red and the West is Bending.*

Ironically, despite several decades intervening between the 1970s and the 2010s, Orientalism and cultural appropriation are both still pervasive throughout contemporary mass culture, although the pendulum has swung back, and the lens is less focused on the far east of

[55] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 240-41.

China, Japan, and Southeast Asia, as in the 1970s, and more so on the Middle and Near East. In conjunction with the increased visibility of the Islamic Religion and the Middle Eastern nations with the recent "war on terror," the cultures of this region have crept into the representational machine of the mass media. The most recent example of this is Lady Gaga's unironic adoption of a "fashion burqa"—a garment, which in this culturally-appropriative instance, emphasized sexuality rather than obscured it, in direct contrast to its original intent. Meanwhile, the commodification of eastern cuisines, which Rosler originally explored in the 1970s, is so deeply ingrained in mainstream culture that ads for hookah bars, Indian tandoori naan, and mai-fun rice noodles are absorbed within the same televisual space as ones for tampons, hamburgers, and tablet computers. Rosler noted in an email interview, "the fetishization of exoticism will never quit, certainly not as long as it is capitalizable."[56] Yet, the incorporation of exotic cultures and cuisines within American mass culture merely signifies that while some perspectives shifted, cultural appropriation still fuels the repressive tolerance fostered by the contemporary military industrial complex.

Herbert Marcuse highlighted the incredible power of American society to incorporate any an all aspects into its fold in his essay about the repressive tolerance inherent in the American military-industrial complex in the late twentieth century: "The toleration of the systematic moronization of children and adults alike by publicity and propaganda,… the impotent and benevolent tolerance toward outright deception in merchandizing, waste, and planned obsolescence are not distortions and aberrations, they are the essence of a system which fosters tolerance as a means for perpetuating the struggle for existence and suppressing the

[56] Rosler, "Email Interview."

alternatives."[57] The commodification of a feminine image of women, and other cultures, as well as their place within the domestic realm—as opposed to the public—has not yet been eradicated, and thus Rosler's video feminist burlesque is as relevant to contemporary culture as it was in the 1970s.

The Home Economy

In her original performance the *Monumental Garage Sale* (1973), and the subsequent video created from a later performance, *Traveling Garage Sale* (1977), Martha Rosler further examined the intersections between the housewife, the home, and the economy. Executed as a series of performances during the 1970s, and beyond, Rosler brought an aspect from the suburbs into the white walls of the gallery by installing a garage sale within galleries in San Diego, San Francisco, and eventually Berlin, London, Stockholm, and most recently in New York City. Speaking about her *Traveling Garage Sale* series at the Museum of Modern Art, Rosler noted that she never saw a garage sale until she came to southern California, and she first thought of them as quite strange—in Brooklyn, people would give their used things away, not try to sell them.[58] As Alexander Alberro noted, "garage sales are a prototypical form of social relations in a suburban culture such as that of Southern California. Typically, every family tries to encapsulate itself into an economic unit and to reconvert its assets into cash, in order to be able to continue the cycle of consumption. Inevitably, the garage sale and its goods become a portrait, and even elements of a self are seen as commodities ultimately recuperable within the cash

[57] Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," 34.

[58] Rosler, "An Evening with Martha Rosler."

economy."[59] This intersection between the home and the economy, the personal and public, served as the motivation for Rosler's ongoing performance project, which originated during her graduate work in 1973 at the University of California at San Diego's (UCSD) art gallery as the *Monumental Garage Sale.* In 1977, the work morphed into the *Traveling Garage Sale,* and moved into the garage of La Mamelle Gallery in San Francisco, where Rosler created the video of the same title.

The grainy, black and white video opens with a bird's eye view of a room occupied by several makeshift tables—built from doors, or plywood, laid on cinderblocks—covered in books, housewares, and toys, and surrounded by clothing hung on racks or on the walls. As a few figures move about in the space, the camera zooms in on an individual perusing the contents of one of the tables closest to the camera. As the camera peers out over the garage sale, Rosler's audio tape-recorded meditation about garage sales and commodities serves as the narration to the scene, asking viewers to reconsider a seemingly mundane, suburban activity—the garage sale—within the context of the capitalist economy and the gender roles supported within that realm. On the recording, she cycles through statements such as: "If it's about divestiture, why not just give it away?" and: "She wonders, is it sacrilege to sell the shoes her baby wore?" interspersed with quotes from the section of Marx's *Capital* where he addresses commodity fetishism, as well as quotes from perceivably feminine voices, which intertwined the housewife's concerns with larger socio-political critiques centered around the lives and meanings given to the mass produced objects we acquire and then sell or give away.[60]

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[59] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," 83-84.

[60] Martha Rosler, *Travelling Garage Sale,* 1977. video and performance; Courtney Fiske, "Frustrating Desires: Q+a with Martha Rosler," *Art in America* (2013), http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/martha-rosler-moma/.

Rosler advertised both the first *Monumental Garage Sale*, in San Diego, and the *Traveling Garage Sale*, in San Francisco, through the galleries' networks and in the communities through local, free circulars, like the "penny-saver," that feature coupons for local businesses and classified ads, which further heightened the culture clash between the art world and suburbia in the gallery space. The *Monumental Garage Sale* and *Travelling Garage Sale* not only offered the typical, "gently" used garage sale items culled from Rosler's and her friends' homes—like clothing, appliances, and even artworks—but also featured more personal items, like used diaphragms and *Playboy* magazines, all available for sale within the gallery. The exchange of cash for goods within the white walls of the art gallery was, and is, a common fact of the art world, but this transfer typically occurs behind the scenes; with prices listed in a book at the front desk—if listed at all—under the watchful eye of the receptionist. Rosler brought the monetary transactions front and center of the gallery's processes, and thus reinforced the commodity status of all the objects within the gallery, including the art. She carefully controlled every aspect of the space to heighten the effect of her disruption. Rather than the sparse, and carefully arranged displays typical of the white cube, she organized the objects as in a conventional rummage sale, but with a hidden logic. Through the placement of the desirable objects such as paintings, as well as consumer objects in good condition, in the prime, well-lit locations near the front of the gallery, and the less desirable ones like used items, personal memorabilia, and even soft-core pornography, in the dimly-lit rear, Rosler directed the movement of the "audience" through the space, providing visitors' spatial locations with much deeper meanings than an ordinary garage sale. Henri Lefebvre, in his analysis of space noted, "*(social) space is a (social) product*.... the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control and hence of domination, of power."[61]

[61] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge Massachusetts:

Rosler further prompted the critical viewing and participation experience of the audience an inscription on a blackboard, clearly inspired by another passage by Lefebvre in which he stated: "Social space will be revealed in its particularity to the extent that it ceases to be indistinguishable from mental space… on the one hand, and physical space …on the other."[62] She placed the blackboard at the back of the gallery with the phrase: "What if the garage sale is a metaphor for the mind?" boldly written upon it, while nearby the repeated recorded mantra on commodities and sales mused: "What is the value of a thing? How do things become commodities? Why do we fetishize things so much? If it's about divestiture, why not give it away?"[63] Alexander Alberro described the audio aspect of the performance, installation, and video as a, "meditation in the first person about the suburbia-cash nexus. In its repeated use of the first-person pronoun 'I,' the monologue evoked the notion of the construction of the self as a social actor and spoke of a social process in which economic relations substitute for human relations."[64] Alberro further noted that the *Garage Sales* were an important move forward in Rosler's aesthetic development: "the Brechtian didactic or pedagogical strategy that will characterize much of Rosler's work," emerged in these works.[65] Through her examination of the role of the individual within the larger "suburbia-cash" nexus, situated within the contest of late industrial capitalism in the United States during the 1970s, Rosler highlighted a variety of issues that are inherently interrelated but rarely viewed as such. She placed the roles of gender,

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Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), 26.

[62] Ibid., 27.

[63] Rosler, *Travelling Garage Sale*.

[64] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," 85.

[65] Ibid.

location, class, and commodity status at the front and center of the performance, video, and installation by removing a garage sale from its usual confines in a suburban neighborhood to a gallery space, rendering the everyday domestic space, yet again, a topic for critical re-examination. In addition to the interaction of the "audience" and the artist in the perusing and touching, or buying and selling of objects, or even just the bodies moving through the space and observing the garage sale as she organized it, Rosler directly confronted the viewer with the overwhelming domination of the commodity status of all items, even in our private spaces, in our late industrial capitalist society.

Clearly the interrelation of the art world, suburbia, and gender maintains its relevancy through the intervening decades for Rosler as she most recently reprised the *Traveling Garage Sale* as the *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* for her first solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City in November of 2012. Part of a recent spate of re-performances within the art world, Rosler's *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* revisited the performance installation she originated in 1973, in what she claims will likely be its last incarnation.[66] Since its inception, Rosler's garage sales travelled across the globe, providing viewers across Europe and America with a first-hand glimpse of her critique. This most recent inception of the *Monumental/Traveling Garage Sale* was held in the illustrious atrium of the MoMA, a site that typically houses rotating exhibitions, as well as monumental sculptures like Barnett Newman's *Broken Obelisk* (1963). Rosler described the atrium in an interview, stating that it was, "in some sense a void at the heart of the museum. It has a certain amorphous quality to it in terms of its

[66] Rosler, "An Evening with Martha Rosler."

dimensions and its atmosphere. I think that the architect considered it to be an almost sacred or magical space."[67]

Like all of Rosler's recent re-explorations of earlier works, she rooted *the Meta-Monumental Garage Sale*, in the linkages between then and now—she conceived of the original sale during a period of economic recession and an oil crisis, and also held the 2012 sale during another period of economic instability and oil prices loomed in every discussion about the financial state of the United States and the world. Originally, Rosler conceived of the garage sale as taking place at a noncommercial, public gallery—like the setting at the art gallery at UCSD, or the actual, physical garage of the La Mamelle gallery. Rosler's various incarnations of the *Garage Sale* also appeared at European state-sponsored museums, non-profit galleries, and even large American institutions, like the New Museum, but its most recent home, the MoMA in New York City, was central to this latest burlesque meta-configuration of the performance/installation piece. Rosler once called the MoMA, "a project of the Rockefeller family and the Kremlin of modernism," as she critiqued its ideological and architectural domination, as well as the class and social divisions it fostered in one of her many theoretical and critical essays.[68] Yet, Rosler put aside her earlier critiques of the institution, in order to create the *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* in response to curator Sabine Breitwieser's request: "'What if you did the sale in the atrium of the museum?... '[She] thought it would be the epitome of a performance.' She added: 'Art is, after all, a kind of pinnacle of the idea of the value of objects.'"[69] Ironically, despite Rosler's consent to the project, she stated that not only does she

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[67] Fiske, "Frustrating Desires: Q+a with Martha Rosler".

[68] Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience," 30.

[69] As quoted in: Randy Kennedy, "No Picassos, but Plenty of Off-the-Wall Bargains: Martha Rosler's 'Meta-Monumental Garage Sale,' at Moma," *The New York Times*, no. November 17, 2012.

hate repetition, but she also hates playing the role of the clerk and selling things.[70] She actually originally thwarted this aversion by adopting an additional role in the original *Monumental Garage Sale*, that of the hippie, Southern Californian, earth-mother making ends meet through the community marketplace of the garage sale. By playing a role within a role, Rosler was able to divorce her identity of the artist and creator of the work from the woman working the sale's floor in the original performance.

While she played a role other than herself, she personalized the performance, imbuing it and the goods she sold with a distinctly feminine identity—there were letters addressed to Martha, photos of a mother and son, feminine clothes and shoes—all for sale. Rosler noted:

> I was trying to say a couple of things. First, it was very specifically about a woman. In the work, I was an exemplary woman and yet the work was not about me. I was attempting to make a movement from an exemplary self, just another example of a woman, to a woman whose social positioning was different from mine. That is, this hippie. I was not a hippie—but we had enough in common. Second, I wanted to make a point about the wholeness, the all-togetherness, of a woman in the world, in our culture, as opposed to a male self, which makes a separation between the activities of life—private life and public life. I wanted there to be no possibility of separating out a public role from a private role in this garage sale.[71]

Rosler adopted a character whose simple physical appearance problematized popular Cold War images of motherhood with her long, floral-printed skirt, plain white shirt, and smock, the lack of makeup and hair falling in loose cascades over her shoulders. The young, hippie mother that Rosler embodied for the earliest incarnations of the *Garage Sales* was a far cry from televised sitcom mothers, with their finely coiffed hair, delicately painted faces, and carefully matched outfits. Through the simple adoption of a character close to, but other than herself—the hippie earth mother holding a garage sale to help make ends meet—Rosler physically embodied a

[70] Fiske, "Frustrating Desires: Q+a with Martha Rosler".

[71] Owens, "On Art and Artists: Martha Rosler," 17.

critique of the mass-culture images of femininity, as well as the late-capitalist economy, in which she was embedded.

Despite her role-playing of the hippie in the 1970s *Garage Sales*, and her dismay at the required roles of cashier and manager that came with running the sales, Rosler once again assumed the role of clerk and sales-woman in order to bring her critiques to the large audience that MoMA accommodated over the 2012 Thanksgiving holiday season. Rosler noted that the logistics of this reincarnation of the *Garage Sale* presented many new problems for her, which never surfaced in prior iterations:

> The staging of the Garage sale at MoMa [sic] was highly professional, since [staging] is their main obsession. But it is a very bureaucratic institution and that imposes a set of obstacles to smooth functioning. The contract with the institution was 14 pages long. Many many people and departments had to sign off on everything, and work was rigidly apportioned across those departments. ...There was a lot more press attention as well, not to mention the need to produce two issues of a newspaper in lieu of a catalogue, which meant locating and hiring an editor and designer and settling on an array of topics, and writers and artists to tackle them. Scores of people were needed to make this whole project work. My own crew, plus some MoMA employees, spent about 9 months sorting and tagging the objects. The crowds during the peak Christmas season were huge, and not always aware of the fact that this was an art project … I was right to call this work "Meta-Monumental"—it was an apotheosis of the garage sale project.[72]

Many of visitors to the *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* were thoroughly confounded by the presence of used nightgowns, a Mercedes without an engine, and old maxi-pad boxes within the atrium of the MoMA and they often wondered if, and how, these assembled used goods constituted art—especially in the proximity of artworks with the considerable modernist caché, like Munch's *The Scream* (1895), Picasso's *Demoiselles D'Avignon* (1907), and Pollock's *Full-Fathom Five* (1947); as Rosler noted in our interview, she did not allow explanatory texts in the

[72] Rosler, "Email Interview."

exhibition.[73] Yet, despite visitors' initial affront at the type of objects offered up for sale, they all perused the tables and bins, and most posed for pictures with their purchases, shot by a professional wedding photographer for the online photostream, *Martha Rosler Made Me Buy,* on the exhibition's website.

While many people passed through the this last garage sale, limited to 200 entering at a time, significant changes in the structure of the installation itself shifted the reception or awareness of the critique inherent in the work. I observed over several visits to the sale that many visitors skimmed the *Garage Sale Standard* newspaper—published in conjunction with the exhibition, and which replaced a traditional catalogue—while waiting in a line that wrapped around the atrium, but discarded the paper once they were allowed to enter the sale itself. The partially enclosed space of the atrium housing the sale itself lacked the modulated lighting of the original *Monumental* and *Traveling Sales*, due to the physical constraints of the large, open floor-plan of the atrium itself as well as a security concern for the museum, and the slide show and tape recording were solely peripheral elements, and easily missed, if one did not know to look and listen for them amidst the sea of second-hand goods and bargain hunters. Despite the seemingly heightened potential for a lack of critical engagement, Rosler worked hard to avoid disengagement, with the publication of the two issues of the *Garage Sale Standard* available at the sale, the various events and talks associated with the exhibition, as well as the peripheral but still present, mediating elements of the audio-loop and slide show carried over from the original works. Given the variety of the audience of the original exhibitions, it is likely many viewers of the *Monumental* or *Traveling Garage Sales* were merely perplexed by the location of the sale, but engaged with the items and locations as if in regular garage sales, just as it seemed that many confused MoMA visitors did as well. While re-imaginings and re-performances serve many

[73] Ibid.

purposes, Rosler's *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale*, once again drew links between the domestic realm where the housewife delicately held sway throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries, the public realm of institutions and galleries, and the cultural logic connecting the various networks of power throughout.

The Statistical Self

Outside of the trope of the domestic goddess or happy housewife, Rosler also addressed the circulation of images of feminine ideals of beauty in many of her works, including her germinal video—which she often lovingly describes as a strip-tease and Eleanor Heartney described as, "a video opera of a naked woman being exhaustively measured by men in white medical coats"—*Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, from 1977.[74] While several of her earlier video and performance works involved the gendered trope of the housewife, Rosler directly engaged with the predominant attitudes in the United States, and western culture, towards bodies—gendered, Othered bodies in particular—in *Vital Statistics*. Rosler adapted the 1977 video work from a 1973 live performance, and utilized the medium of video to provide mediation between the spectacle of the bodies on the stage and the viewer that the original live performance lacked. The first instance of *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* took place at the gallery of UCSD and consisted of Rosler playing the role of a female "subject" who submitted to the commands of two male "scientists" in lab coats, who measured and categorized her body. By the end, Rosler appeared on the stage naked, with all of her body qualified and quantified, before shortly reappearing dressed in a little black dress. In this performance, the function of the medium was inherently linked to the form and execution of the critique. Rosler noted that she, "wanted the vulnerability of the performer without having any mediator other

[74] Heartney, "Documents of Dissent," 112.

than the men measuring. They were also the guarantees of safety for the performer, physically speaking: it was not just a woman being undressed in front of a group of spectators but a woman whose relationship to the audience is mediated by the men handling her."[75]

The men not only functioned as the mediation that kept the performance from becoming pornographic and voyeuristic, but in both the performance and video, were also there, "to imply a system. Actually, two men and three women form the system. A chain of command is implied."[76] Thus, the performance not only burlesqued the position and construction of female subjectivity and personhood, but also about the contemporary culture that valued science as truth and allowed science to dictate how one *should* construct their selfhood. Rosler aimed to, "attack the oppressive use of the institutions of 'science' in our society."[77] She utilized a multivalent video parodic critique to discuss, "dehumanization through testing and measurement and scientific 'truth' as a means of social control."[78] In the performance, the enacting of the measuring, codifying, and quantifying of the subject by the men in white coats, and the submission of the woman to their commands, which occurred within the same space occupied by the audience and created an embodied demonstration that allowed a visceral, and direct connection with the demonstration. This connection implicated the audience, as well as the performers, for their roles within the society that brought about testing and measurements. Rosler analyzed the way in which, "women enforce subordination in other women. I think that's true of any subject population—there's a sector that mediates between the rest of it and the

[75] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 12.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," 91.

[78] Micki McGee, "Narcissism, Feminism, and Video Art: Some Solutions to a Problem in Representation," *Heresies* 3, no. 4 (1981): 90.

bosses. In this case the women are the transmitters of male power."[79] A static, two-dimensional representation of a similar topic would merely commodify and objectify the action taking place, and also eliminate the critique initiated by the presence of the audience directly confronted by the act itself—this was the challenge that Rosler faced when she decided to translate the performance to video.

By removing the direct confrontation between the audience and the performers that was essential to the delivery of her cultural critique in the live performance of *Vital Statistics*, Rosler needed to provide a different form of confrontation, aided by a form of mediation, for the color video incarnation of the work to be successful. As Alexander Alberro discussed, the video and the performance iterations of *Vital Statistics*, "appeared at an opposite pole of presentation: physically close and conceptually removed."[80] Without the live presence of the actors on stage, she required something else to interrupt the voyeurism—the scopophilic pleasure inherent in the viewing of the naked body on the screen—that occurred when the live performance was transferred into the flickering lines of color that the images that play on the surface of the cathode ray tube screen that broadcast the final work.[81]

The video begins with a copyright screen, with the title in a white typeface on a black background, bearing Rosler's name and the date at the bottom of the screen, also in white. After the title fades to black, the voice of a female narrator, Rosler's, announces against the blank background: "This is an opera in three acts. This is a work about perception."[82] The narration continues against the flicker of the imageless monitor, as Rosler introduces and describes the

[79] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 12.

[80] Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," 99.

[81] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 12.

[82] Martha Rosler, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained,* 1977.

three acts of the following 'opera:' the first occurs in real time and ends in a montage, the second is symbolic, while the third is, "tragic, horrific, mythic," and about, "scrutiny on a mass level," and then elaborates on the work that follows. Two minutes into the video, the black screen finally changes, lightening to blue. As Rosler quotes Sartre, the blue screen displays the title again in a white typeface, in all capital letters.

The narration continues to expound on institutionalized tests and measurements and the implied risks or benefits of such statistics, as the first act of the opera commences and the real-time action proceeds before the camera with a seated man in a white lab coat calling out, "Next!" Rosler enters the stage, and answers questions about her sex, age, race and ethnic background as a second man in a lab coat hurriedly records her answers on a large swath of paper mounted on the wall behind the stage. After the initial questions, Rosler moves to the rear wall for more measurements. The contrast between Rosler's voice-over narration and the real-time performance on the screen provides the additional mediation and critique lost in the translation to the new medium, juxtaposing the on-stage peep show cum statistics accumulation with a meditation about bodies, self-perception, measurement, and judgment.

Rosler acknowledged the limits of the medium of video, "I felt it needed a voiceover because it *was* so diminished. I thought the intent was far less clear when there was no flesh and blood. I also decided to use a strategy of explicitness – to say what the issues were – which I hadn't considered earlier… On a flat screen I needed another dimension which was supplied by talk."[83] In addition to the voiceover, Rosler expanded the performance into three acts. The first act is a continuous, long scene, "happening in real time," and is a recreation of the 1973 performance with a stationary long-shot camera, or Kino-eye, ending with a, "measured series of

[83] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 12.

cuts through two parallel-edited sequences."[84] The second act, a silent metaphor, is described by the voiceover as, "symbolic: what is the same, what is different. What is outside, what is inside. Like Nana's chicken – only here we deal with eggs."[85] The third act presents still, projected black and white images of women's and children's bodies being measured, while the narrator recounts a, "litany of crimes against women," that, "have the effect of diminishing our capacity for self-control, independence, and confidence."[86]

Rosler photographed the black and white images from American government publications of measurements for "pattern design," taken during the late 1930s and culled from measurements of large segments of the population in which the majority of the women and children were presented as faceless objects, if not an assembly of separate body parts and their corresponding data, often with questions following the images regarding income and other central features to their economic class.[87] As Ruth Askey noted, the video, "follows the principles outlined in U.S. governmental publications on measuring large numbers of people for the purpose of computing body dimensions. It also refers to medical examinations further, it suggests the dehumanizing way people are processed in the armed forces and in concentration camps."[88]

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[84] Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," 95; Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 13.

[85] Rosler, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*.

[86] Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," 98.

[87] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 13.

[88] Askey, "Martha Rosler's Video," 15.; Ironically, Bob Keil, at *Artweek*, was unsure if Rosler's "concept of depersonalization [was] true-to-life." He argued that the middle- and educated classes were granted significant leeway in their freedom of choice, and the collision of social modes of oppression with our freedom was the source of "the bizarreness of living in this society;" yet Keil continued that when he watched the tape, he was reminded that even the most "beautiful women will always insist that they have physical flaws, or that they must lose weight, etc." and thus clearly was not quite aligned with the full

The video incarnation of *Vital Statistics* assaults the viewer with a barrage of visual and aural information: from the categorization and judgment of the woman in the first act, which is crowned with the subject's transformation into a both virgin and vamp, to the symbolic opening up of brown and white eggs by the naked Rosler in the second act, culminating in the list of "crimes" against women, which includes words like *femicide, cliterodectomy, childbirth torture*, and *wage slavery*. The barrage and layering of information burlesqued the way in which any knowledge reached a person in America in the 1970s, or even today, such that, "a lot of things are drowned out by what's actually happening to us at the time, but simultaneously there are insistent voices emanating from sources of power and authority."[89] The durational medium of video allowed Rosler to transmit multiple strata of information all at once to the viewer, which created a complex critique of the social constructs in which the audience and the artist are embroiled.

In the three acts of *Vital Statistics*, Rosler presented a variety of modes of representation of women to the viewer, all of which exist within the immediate context of the American contemporary society, and all of which are subject to her intertwined critiques of the economic, political, and social structures of that society. Yet, she wanted to, "point out that neither photography nor science nor data-gathering were the villains of the piece, that social practices determined how these elements of human knowledge would be deployed in the formation of the categories 'woman' and 'Other.'"[90] By presenting the woman as object, an assembly of measured parts at, above or below standard, Rosler interrupted the predominant ideals of

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critique of the depth of the institutionalization of standards of gender, beauty, and how those are measured and disseminated through our society. See Robert Keil, "Social Criticism as Art," ibid., no. 27: 16.

[89] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 13-14.

[90] Steve Edwards, "Secrets from the Street and Other Stories," *Ten.8 Magazine* 35: 42-43.

feminine beauty. “The relationship between objectification and pornography which underlies th[e] entire section becomes explicit when the doctor kneels in front of Rosler and measures her vaginal depth. The moment is marked by tense and self-conscious behavior in the viewing audience.… Rosler doesn’t hesitate to show herself naked, objectified, degraded. She realizes that the extent to which women have been objectified and have incorporated that objectification into their sense of self can only be understood by experiencing and observing it in a learning situation.” [91]

The objectified test subject of the first act is echoed in the brown and white eggs of the second act, as well as the faceless women in the “pattern book” images in the third. Despite the efforts of the men in lab coats, she refuses to be reduced to merely a number, or to, “accept the idea that there is something to be learned about the self from measurement.”[92] Tied to the notion of the statistical self is the image of the self as seen by others, the idea of which Rosler expounded on in the voiceover, “her mind learns to think of her body as something different from herself… She sees herself from the outside with the anxious eyes of the judged who has within her the critical standards of the ones who judge.”[93] Annette Michelson noted, that the fracturing of the individual body extended to the social body, and in, “*Vital Statistics*, we can indeed follow the working of a strategy of radical *dismemberment* of the female body through measurement that becomes increasingly prevalent in the dissemination by the print and electronic media.”[94]

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[91] Amy Taubin, "'And What Is a Fact Anyway?’ (on a Tape by Martha Rosler)," *Millennium Film Journal* , no. 4/5 (Summer/Fall 1979): 61.

[92] Rosler, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Michelson, "Solving the Puzzle," 188.

The discussion of women's self-judgment, particularly that of their self-image, rose to prominence in the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, buoyed by a psychoanalytic discussion of women's exploration of their own subject-hood within cold war culture and society—John Berger, Laura Mulvey, and Rosler, and later Kaja Silverman, all expounded on the woman who sees herself not as she appears, but as she is seen by others. While Silverman noted the constitution of the self through the photographic gaze in both men and women, gender parity is not yet a feature of representation, "although every subject depends upon the 'affirmation' of the camera/gaze, visibility is differentially distributed within the domain of representation. Woman is often obliged to 'live' hers much more fully than is her male counterpart, who is within many discourses and material practices aligned with camera/gaze. Consequently, within certain cultural contexts the female subject might be said to signify not only 'lack,' but 'spectacle.'"[95] Clearly, this topic has not yet been exhausted of all relevancy, particularly in the contemporary televisual landscape where women compete on reality shows like: *America's Next Top Model*, *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *Survivor*, where judges gather statistics about the contestants, measure them against each other, and an "above average" physical appearance often helps secure a win. Extending her critique of tropes of feminine beauty further, Rosler engaged with the difficult topic of anorexia and bulimia, a topic that just rose to social awareness in the 1970s, in her video work—the last in the "Food Chain"—*Losing, a Conversation with the Parents* (1977).[96]

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[95] Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, 146-47.

[96] In her paper, "Anorexia Nervosa in Adolescent Girls: A Culture-Bound Disorder of Western Society?" published in *Social Cosmos*, Elizabeth Hopton noted that body-mage disturbance and weight-phobia were not included as a motivation for continuous fasting until the late 1960s, and only in 1980 was the criterion of body image disturbance added to the DSM III. Anorexia nervosa, and other eating

The Last Link in the "Food Chain"

Like all of Rosler's other "Food Chain" works, the role of food is at the heart of this video, not only within America, but also globally. The video centers around an interview with two "parents" who recently lost their daughter to anorexia nervosa, but the "parents" interviewed in the video quickly shift from discussing their daughter's daily activities and eating habits, to speaking about starving children and the use of hunger strikes as political weapons, in nearly the same breath. As Ann-Sargent Wooster noted about the video, "Rosler sees a connection between anorexia, voluntary starvation by some teenage girls—partly to avoid developing a womanly figure and a woman's condition—and forced starvation in third world countries where food is a weapon of political subjugation."[97]

The color video begins with a title screen with the word: "Losing…" followed by another title screen with: "A conversation with the parents" displayed in black and white text. The conversation opens with an image of a middle-class heterosexual couple, played by two professional actors, the mother comfortably dressed in a navy blue, paisley dress and the father in a tan cardigan with a blue oxford shirt and tan slacks. The couple sits on a tan couch with flower-print pillows and framed pictures hung on the wall above them, the camera views them from an angle above and to the right of where they sit, creating a skewed perspective that immediately disrupts the façade of normalcy the scene would otherwise have evoked.

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disorders, only really came to public attention after the death of Karen Carpenter due to heart failure from complications due to her anorexia nervosa in 1983.

[97] Ann-Sargent Wooster, "Women's Work: A National Collection of Video by Women," *Woman's Art Journal* 3, no. 1: 25.

Rosler often noted that she formally constructed her videos in such a way that they disrupt the viewer's enjoyment of watching and remind them of the method by which the video was made while also fostering a deeper, critical viewing of the scenes unfolding on the screen.

> "Losing was related to soap opera and agony interviews. "Losing draws on what gets unfolded in soap opera, a serial account through a life with never quite a beginning or an ending, even though, with "Losing," eventually the viewer realizes there has been a death. The script of "Losing" is a series of discrete paragraphs in which causality shifts, though it appears as a seamless construction. Its relation to TV lay in soap opera and in the formulas for interviewing the bereaved, so videotape seemed a reasonable choice … "Losing" was like the other works in that its presentation denied the premise of the work itself—that the private world is disjunct from the public world. Video—as television—is a medium that does exactly that. In the world on television, the distance between public and private is most affirmed but also most abridged. And because "Losing" is a work structured around absence—that of the anorectic daughter, video made the absence present, or at least palpable.[98]

The impossibly young parents interacted with the camera as well as with each other throughout the course of the interview, the wife wrapped both of her hands around her husband's arm as she looked at him and then the camera, burlesquing quotable gestures borrowed from soap operas and bereavement interviews alike.

Rosler described how she confronted common cultural forms, like the televised interview, in her essay "For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life," and for *Losing*, in particular, she relied on "[a]n anachronistically young couple, sitting cramped and earnest in their well-appointed living room, attempting to present a coherent account of starvation, are any respectably middle-class couple visited by misfortune and subjected to an interview."[99] Rosler parodied subtly, nearly imperceptible movements, like the placement of the wife's hand, from everyday interactions, as well as televised interviews and dramas, which underlined her critique

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[98] Owens, "On Art and Artists: Martha Rosler," 40.

[99] Rosler, "For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life," 8.

of gender roles and the larger system in which they perpetuate. Through her embodied presence, the wife subliminally presented herself as dependent on her husband, or deferential to him, in her mere postures, while describing her daughter's, and the world's, problem with starvation. In mass media, these poses merely served to reinforce the gendered relations between dominant, bread-winning husband and subservient wife, but in *Losing* they extended the critique of the video beyond the function of food itself to its role in the extension of patriarchal society's gendered divisions.

Annette Michelson described how, "it does occur to the bereaved and mourning protagonists that feminine rage, unlike that of the adolescent boy, may be projected against the self, that the criteria of ideal femininity involving standards of weight and height as defined and propagated by the media might serve as conditions of possibility for the self-inclined deathly dialectic of bulimia and anorexia."[100] Rosler relied on the irony of the age of the parents and their true-to-life attitudes and actions within the video to initiate the satirical critique in the viewer. As the video progressed, the camera shifted between the parents and to a wide, panning shot that surveyed the living room, and from the parents to a photo album that portrayed a young woman closer in age to her 'parents' than most seventeen year olds, the disjunctures between what is said and what is implied forge the alienation, that allowed viewers to reconsider and question what the video portrayed, and its relation to society as a whole. Alan M. Brown described the parents as, "a cliché—liberal and upper-middle class. They are understanding and sympathetic, yet their nonverbal signals and environment clash with their words. They buy the lie that they criticize… Indeed, we can assume that the daughter was an extreme version of her parents; they, too, are victims of intense social pressure, and although we don't know how, we do

[100] Michelson, "Solving the Puzzle," 185.

know that they must pay for their conformity."[101] Rosler described her work as: "a series of decoys; a work briefly masquerades as one thing, following a given form, until you soon realize that something is amiss. I tried to do it internally in *Losing*. The seams of ideology are somewhat frazzled. The characters are, I hope, revealed as caught in their ideology of liberalism, shared, I suspect, by most viewers. I hope to propel the viewer toward a transcendence of which the characters are clearly incapable. I tried to use the camera in a gross way, in an overdramatic parody of camerawork."[102]

The Weak Face Covered Over by the Strong Face

Rosler directly intervened in the proliferation of mass media standards of beauty, and the industry supported by them, in her collaboration with Paper Tiger Television (PTTV) in the 1982 video *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue*. The simple title paralleled a straightforward format, as in her earlier photomontages, which reverberated throughout this video, Rosler relied upon a strategy of juxtapositioning and mediation to make the images and words that she culled from magazines and real life strange and different within the new context of her televised performance. As Laura Cottingham noted:

> her voice is the central carrier of meaning in a tape that literally enacts the title: the artist is visually and aurally presented, in real time and space, reading *Vogue* magazine. Her voice in this and other tapes is a curiously controlled instrument that speaks neither with heartfelt conviction nor with its opposite, adamant derision. An opening created from the tenor of her delivery excuses neither the narrator nor the viewer from the information; nor does it overly implicate her/us. Rather, the voice functions as a sign of distance and consideration, a Brechtian

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[101] Alan M. Brown, "Dislocated Women," *Artweek* 11, no. 27: 15.

[102] Weinstock, "Interview with Martha Rosler," 82.

device that coaxes us to reflect on information with critical intelligence rather than easy emotion.[103]

PTTV formed as a collective of artists, activists, and scholars in 1981, in order to critique mass media and provide an alternative to the mainstream media through their live television broadcasts. PTTV became the first nationally disseminated public access program, and provided a nation-wide outlet for artists to disseminate their message in the same visual language and signal of mass culture, on the same cathode ray tube that broadcast the nightly news.[104] PTTV and Rosler taped the episode at the New York studio used by the collective in December 1982, for broadcast on public access television. In it, Rosler blended performance and video art, as her live performance would be translated through the camera lens into a video program, that would eventually be transmitted to the TV sets of the viewers at home, nation-wide. Rather than the confrontation provided by a performance in front of a live audience, the technology of video and television mediated this work, and further alienated the viewer beyond the strangeness incited by the successful technique of montage familiar from work earlier in Rosler's oeuvre. The program has four visually distinct parts: the first, in which Rosler read directly from the December 1982 issue of *Vogue*; the second, in which she narrated a series of still images shown with a slide projector; the third reverted back to video with footage recorded in a sweatshop; while in the last segment, still images are combined with live action and a voiceover narration that echoes the first half of the program.

After the title scenes, the camera rapidly switched focus from a long shot that showed Rosler, her long hair half-pinned back behind her ears with the rest loose about her shoulders, a vision all in red, and seated in PTTV's tan studio with a glossy magazine—the current issue of

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[103] Cottingham, "The Inadequacy of Seeing and Believing: The Art of Martha Rosler," 159.

[104] According to PPTV's own history. Paper Tiger Television visited 10/4/13 http://papertiger.org/history

Vogue—held open on her lap, to a tight close-up of the pages from which she read, with her typical deadpan delivery punctuated by her blunt Brooklyn accent. In the close-up shots, the artist's hands became another device with which she contrasted the spoken word, published text, and photographed image. The viewer glimpses Rosler's hands as they turned the pages, moving backwards through the magazine, pausing on certain ads or editorials, and holding the magazine steady with her right hand while she traced a circle around a model's face with her left forefinger. Rosler carefully highlighted different images of desire as she read, cupping her left palm around a woman's chin, accentuating the curvature of the face with her hand. At times her hand would obscure and cover an image—as if to refuse its visual power—only to slowly drag her open palm down the page, eventually revealing the image it originally sought hide from view. As she read further from the current issue, Rosler alternated between content from the magazine, her own script about magazines and consumerism filled with facts and interspersed with segments from an account of an affair with the "cunt-crazy" media mogul and owner of *Vogue* magazine, Condé Nast, and repeated poetic meditations stemming from the question, "what is *Vogue*?" She often paused as she read content from a page—like a Visa ad that quoted Robert Louis Stevenson, "to be what we are, to become what we are capable of becoming is the only end of life," as she ran her left forefinger over the image of the toned body of the ballerina in the ad, emphasizing the objecthood of the feminine form used to sell credit. As she lifted the opposing page, about to flip it over, she intoned again: "What is *Vogue*? *Vogue* is dreams, wishes, *being anything you want to be*."[105] She utilized her strategy of burlesque to literally quote and reconfigure the words from the magazine within her meditative refrain, which, with each repetition and gesture of Rosler's digits across the images, became more absurd.

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[105] Martha Rosler, *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue,* 1982. 27 minutes, color video with sound. Paper Tiger Television.

The following segment only heightened the absurdity embedded in Rosler's reading of *Vogue*, when she switched from examining the current issue of the magazine to a slideshow assembled from a collection of images amassed and photographed from back issues of *Vogue*, as well as other media that appealed to the commodity market built around women's consumption of, and investment in, their image. The slideshow burlesqued the way the media typically reinforced the objectification of women, even in publications and products aimed at women, through a parade of headless leotard-wearing torsos, projected on the screen one after another highlights the repetition of the industry's strategic objectification. The juxtapositioning of the images with the continued narration furthered Rosler's critique, made the familiar representations of feminine beauty, hilariously foreign and strange. Like Brecht's epic theatre, Rosler, "sets out, not so much to fill the audience with feelings—albeit possibly feelings of revolt—as to alienate the audience in a lasting manner, through thought, from the conditions in which it lives."[106]

As the images of women in bathing suits flash on the screen, Rosler asks, "What is *Vogue*? It is photography, it is voyeurism, it is mystification, it is fascination, it is desire."[107] Rosler exploited the fact that, as she noted, in the representations of beauty presented in the mass media the, "figure of the woman was assimilated both to the desire attached to the publicized commodity form and to the figure of the home… In both locales she is the masquerade of faceless capital whose origin is in the boardroom but which is projected into the home, in a

[106] Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, 101.

[107] Rosler, *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue*.

maneuver that every modern man knows about but forgets in the moment of surrender—which itself is an assumption of the female role."[108]

Near the end of the narrated slideshow, a barrage of several different ads for a variety of brands of facial masks parodied the repetition of a kind of stock image, or a common sign, used to designate and sell this kind of commodity to women. The ubiquity of the visual "signs" of beauty allow for this rapid progression of many different images, all belonging to the same objectified type—a cropped, close-up of a model's face, slathered with the beneficial facial mask so that only her eyes and mouth are visible through the goop. Variations of the type do exist: the before-and-after—where half the image shows the model smiling with the mask on her face, the other half shows her face in the same scale, but happily made-up and glowing after washing off the mask; or the facial peel, where the close-up shot reveals the model peeling the facial treatment off her face, like a reptile shedding its skin to reveal the luxurious, nubile skin beneath. As these images flash on the screen, Rosler notes, "it is the new face under the old face. It is the weak face covered over by the strong face."[109]

By framing the series of images with a refrain that relates these representations directly to the beauty that reveals the desires, hopes, and dreams that this industry capitalizes on, Rosler further disrupts the mass media imagery and the aspirations that it relies upon. These dreams completely depend upon the tropes and ideals of beauty propagated by mass media and the capitalist system that drives the media, to perpetuate the cycle of consumption through the creation and fulfillment of desire through the circulation of images and the goods depicted in those images. Through her slideshow montage and voiceover narration, Rosler revealed how the

[108] "The Figure of the Artist, the Figure of the Woman," 100.

[109] *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue*.

images of feminine beauty circulated in the media are merely another wheel in the machinery of American capitalism in order to perpetuate its own success and reinforce its patriarchal ideals.

The next segment of the video presents sharp contrast to the preceding slideshow—after the monotonous click and whir of slides dropping as the carousel advances, and still images filling the screen, and the refrain of the repeated question, "what is *Vogue*?" the sudden shift to the action and sound of the video that follows abruptly jars the viewer to attention as lively moving images and sounds fill the screen. Rosler, no longer reads from the magazine live in the TV studio, nor proceeds through her slideshow of beauty industry imagery, but instead confronts the viewer with a montage of video footage that she recorded in a New York City garment factory, or, more accurately, a sweatshop, which fills the screen. As the viewer glimpses hands moving fabric rapidly through sewing machines in rapidly, precisely repeated motions and a group of women tightly packed into a line of crowded sewing workstations, an oddly upbeat song plays in the background. The lilting organ melody, syncopated drumming, and guitars strumming on the upbeat, complimented by the crooning sound of Debbie Harry's voice make up the ska-influenced Blondie song with deceptively dark lyrics—a love note to the fashion and beauty industry, "Die Young, Stay Pretty" (1979) provides the perfect counterbalance to the somber video footage. In this portion of the program, the camera moves between close-ups and wide, establishing shots—visually conveying the particular and general aspects of labor within a sweatshop.

After the Blondie song ends, a computer-generated text appears over the video images that describes the plight of garment workers and the exploitative system inherent in the American fashion industry: "Employees in the garment industry work for contractors who produce clothes for the 7th Avenue jobbers who sell to Bloomingdale's and advertise in Vogue Over 40% of

clothes sold in the US are made in the third world. Most of the rest are made in third world enclaves in NYC, Miami, Chicago, and L.A.," punctuated at the end by the image of a steam press clamping down and rising open in a cloud of steam.[110] Rosler effectively connects her visual and verbal burlesque of the marketing ideology built into fashion magazines like *Vogue* from the earlier segments with the hideously inhuman practices of the garment industry that supports the beauty and fashion industries. By revealing the absurdity of the signs and tropes of feminine beauty propagated by mass media and fashion, and contrasting those images of ideology with the actuality of the industry, Rosler pulled back the veil that typically obscures the reality behind the imagery, to reveal its bankrupt morals which relied upon the objectification of certain women, models and movie stars, as well as the exploitation of others, women from developing nations, as workers.

The last segment of the video presents a return to the still images of the slide projector swishing onto, and off of, the television screen, but Rosler extended her critique from the floor of the sweatshop back to the magazine, to expose the hypocrisy inherent in fashion, where, as the text that appears on the television screen explains: "In Haiti, workers making clothes for Sears and Roebuck make $2.60 for 12 hours work- models whose pictures are in *Vogue* make $150-$200 an hour."[111] The video progresses to show more still images of women portrayed as objects, a mere prop, as noted by Laura Mulvey: "woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease… she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire."[112] These props, paired with Rosler's narration, connect the preceding video with contemporary events—furor surrounding the revelation that some of Nancy Reagan's

[110] Ibid.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 48.

wardrobe was likely manufactured in a sweatshop. While the imagery on the screen shifts from the projected images from magazines back to live footage of Rosler within the studio, as she holds a scrap of newspaper with an article entitled, "Nancy's Clothes Chapter 18," and back again to the slide show, the critique initiated in the earlier portion of the program expands to incorporate the concrete examples that Rosler provides. As she expounds on the details of the scandal in which the First Lady's primary clothing designer was embroiled, provided by the article, she simultaneously conveys just how deeply-ingrained the improbable ideals of the fashion world are within American culture, as they extend all the way into the White House. In doing so, she demonstrates how far-reaching and deeply embedded the economic and social imbalances of the fashion and beauty industry are that require unattainable images of docile, objectified female beauty to sell goods made by women forced into cramped working conditions for long hours in the name of capitalist profit.

After Rosler's examination of the scandals of the First Lady and the garment industry, the camera shifted away from the projected slide images, to the live action within the studio, once again. The camera focused on Rosler as she looked at the mirror to her left and applied makeup to her face—as she moved the mascara wand across her left lashes, she held her eye open, comically wide, and stared, unblinking, at the camera in a confrontational moment, before she turned back to the mirror to continue painting her face. Rosler used the application of makeup to burlesque the absurd ideals of beauty portrayed in the magazines that she just dissected as well as the larger industry built around selling objectified beauty to women surrounding those magazines. Rosler only applied makeup to the left side of her face, but this fact remained unknown to the viewer until, at the end of the video, the artist turned to face the camera head-on. Her expressionless face, bearing a sense of deadpan humor on its absurdly half-made up veneer

was part of the arsenal of decoys Rosler deployed in her videos in order to remind the viewer to maintain a critical perspective as they watch, read, and look at the multitude of imagery that bombards them in daily life.

Charity and Motherhood

While *Losing: A Conversation with the Parents* and *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue* satirically addressed the representation of women by the mass media, Rosler critiqued the tropes that surround housewifery and motherhood even further, in her 1977 video, *From the PTA, the High School and the City of Del Mar*. As Ruth Askey described the video, it, "shows Rosler and her child being handed all kinds of canned and packaged goods, one at a time. Christmas goodies? Relief? We don't know. Rosler reads off the ingredients — and you guessed it. They're full of preservatives, coloring additives, from the PTA, the High School, etc."[113] The static, unblinking eye of the video camera fixed its gaze on Rosler and her small, tow-headed, bespectacled son Joshua, both seated on a blanket laid out on the grey linoleum floor in a nondescript space whose grey walls formed a blank backdrop for the subtle action that ensued.

As a disembodied male voice announced, "from the PTA, the High School, and the City of Del Mar, Merry Christmas," various canned goods were handed to the mother and son, who would then read the name of the product, and occasionally the ingredients as well from the products' labels. Rosler read the majority of the labels, but Joshua also added his voice to the work and announced several product names, after which his mother rapidly read the disconcertingly long list of remarkably hard to pronounce, unnatural ingredients. As the members of a single-parent household, Rosler and her son received a Christmas "gift basket" provided by the groups and institutions cited in the title of the video. Rather than play the docile,

[113] Askey, "Martha Rosler's Video," 15.

happy housewife who eagerly and uncritically accepted the “gift,” Rosler literally examined what she was given, thus questioning the bombastic voice of the announcer—a stand-in for male authority and the patriarchal organization of society and the narrowly defined gender roles within that society.

While some TV moms in the 1970s, like Carol Brady and Shirley Partridge, wore pantsuits and short hair—merely updated versions of June cleaver’s tea-length shirtdress & careful coiffure—they appeared in the same televisual context as Mrs. Cunningham, Olivia Walton, and Caroline Ingalls, all of whom romanticized the traditional values of past eras, ranging from the 1880s to the 1950s. Rosler straightforwardly refuted the idealized image of motherly beauty and the glorification of the past with a realistic image of how most American mothers looked every day—simple, unfussy clothing, with easy hairstyles and little or no makeup. Dressed in a no-nonsense button-down blouse, and grey-blue trousers, her long sandy-brown wavy locks flowing loose over her shoulders, Rosler flouted the feminized representations of motherhood that circulated in the media by simply wearing her regular, everyday clothes, with her typical hairstyle, and not a stitch of makeup on her face. Rosler presented the viewer with a reality that served to disrupt the tropes of feminine motherhood circulated in mass media.

Outside of her embodied refusal of the tropes of femininity, motherhood and housewifery, Rosler also utilized other strategies to disrupt the messages of mass culture. As she noted: “In choosing representational strategies… I aim for the distancing effect that breaks the emotional identification with character and situation that naturalism implies, substituting for it, when it is effective, an emotional recognition coupled with a critical, intellectual understanding of the *systematic meaning* of the work, its meaning in relation to common issues.”[114] The monotonous repetition of the action and dialogue within the video—as each object was placed on

[114] Rosler, "For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life," 8.

the blanket by Rosler and Joshua, the announcer repeated the same phrase every time—created the decoy or disconnect Rosler favored for her videos, such that the viewer is forced to wonder what kind of a "gift" the public schools and City of Del Mar bestowed on the individuals deemed to be 'in need' of assistance. Through her recounting of the army of artificial ingredients in each product, Rosler provided the space in which the viewer could begin to question the goods themselves, as well as the authority that provided them, and the society that shaped both the notion of charity and the roles it played within that society.

While many media representations provided images of mothers and housewives who would have happily accepted the gift without any hesitation, Rosler instead saw an opportunity to question the inner workings of American Cold War culture. Despite the stolid nature of the progression of the video's action, Rosler inserted a comedic turn at the end of the video. Her sardonic wit and humor are the most powerful tools in her arsenal of decoys and disruptions, and this is no exception. While the repetition that preceded it allowed for a space to grow between the viewer and the action onscreen, the last snippet of dialogue in the video presents the deadpan humor typical of Rosler's works. After the disembodied male voice tells the mother and son, "And a very merry Christmas," she responds, with a straight face and unquavering voice, "But we're Jewish," after which the credits and title fill the screen, while, at the end of the video, the word charity leaves viewers with the last meditative concept. [115]

Beyond the disruptions of the images and tropes of motherhood in mass media, Rosler critiqued the notions of class and charity tied to images of motherhood and housewives in this video. Through her recounting of the ingredients of the donated food items, she presented viewers with the reality of what the middle class charitably gave to the working class families—artificially flavored and synthetically produced food products that were bankrupt of nutritional

[115] *From the Pta, the High School and the City of Del Mar,* 1977.

value. The last lines of dialogue revealed a deeper dimension of the interaction between the classes through the guise of the charity—the upper classes effectively acquire more capital, a kind of cultural capital through their donations network. The blanket imposition of a Christian holiday on the recipients of the gift basket conveyed the true extent of the concern of the wealthy households donating the goods, the upper class, also embodied by the announcer, that ignored the actual reality of the lives and individuals who received the donations, while congratulating themselves and accumulating charitable capital for being good Samaritans.

A Woman Artist's "This is Your Life"

Rosler extended her critique of mass representations of motherhood even further in her 1978 video *Domination and the Everyday*. In *Domination*, Rosler utilized the strategy of montage, juxtaposing images with each other as well as with a crawling text to reveal deeper truths about the gendered roles in American society as well as how those roles related to the larger global political and economic realms. This black and white video is relatively unique in Rosler's oeuvre, in that the only live "action" that takes place happens in the audio track, while the images that appear on the screen consisted of a slideshow she assembled from various images appropriated from magazines, television, and movies, interwoven with a selection of personal photos and a slowly scrolling line of white text. Rosler taped the audio during the course of an evening in her home outside of San Diego, California, capturing the interactions between her and her son, Joshua, as they ate dinner and she readied him for bed, while they both "listened" to the radio.

The radio broadcast, also captured on the audio track, featured an interview with the art dealer Irving Blum who discussed late 1950s-1960s California art in relation to Pop and Abstract

Expressionism with the female interviewer, Clare Spark.[116] The two very distinct strains within the audio track occasionally overlapped, causing a dissonance and a barrage of unintelligible words and sounds, comingled with clear snippets of the radio, as well as Rosler and Joshua's conversation—which results in a fractured aural experience. Steve Edwards described the video as similar to Rosler's photomontages because, "channels of information smash into one another: there are found images and originated sequences, and recorded sound appropriated from radio and TV.… Advertising, abundance and domestic happiness are contrasted with the naked force of Augusto Pinochet—'a Chilean gorilla'… It is a replay of the photomontage series *House Beautiful*, where the comforts of the modern middle-class home smash up against the imperial violence dished out in Vietnam in the name of domestic haven."[117] The fracturing extended beyond the mere listening experience, as the video montage and crawling text only furthered the distracted experience, with each visual element vying for the viewer's attention alongside the layers of the audio tracks. Rosler noted in an interview, it, "is like television or film technology gone haywire. It's like a Frankenstein, that tape. There are two sound tracks, stills and a crawling text all at once. Lots of mike noise—a whole section is almost drowned out.… It's definitely about channels of information."[118]

The video began with the color bars familiar to TV viewers from emergency broadcasting system tests, but rather than a pre-recorded message and a siren wailing, the viewer hears several voices speaking, in an undisclosed location broadcast over the color bars. As the screen faded to black, a disembodied female voice asked: "So tell me how you think that came about?" she continued, but her words were obscured by something—a hand or an object—that brushed up

[116] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 14.

[117] Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, 73.

[118] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 14.

against the microphone. At this point in the video, it was unclear where the conversation occurred, as no other sounds or images served to clarify the relationship of the voices in the background to the video camera. As a male voice responded to the woman's question, we hear a different woman's voice, likely closer to the microphone or camera because of its volume, ask: "What do you want?" to an unknown audience. Shortly thereafter, the voice of a young boy wheedled: "Come heeeee-eeere," and thus revealed the audio dynamic that dominated the rest of the video: two distinctly adult voices—one male and one female—mingled, overlapped, and intertwined with those of an adult woman and young boy. These voices issued within a spatially ambiguous setting—were all four voices embodied in the same room, or were some entering the family's space through the television or radio, or were they recorded separately and then combined later in the studio?

It eventually became apparent that the two sets of voices did not bodily share the same physical space, the adult male and female voices in conversation entered the home of the woman and child as they were transmitted through the radio.[119] After the initial struggle of deciphering between the different conversations transpiring on the audio track, for almost forty seconds, over a blank screen, a black and white photograph of the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet, in sunglasses and surrounded by fellow members of the military junta, appeared on the screen. The multimedia confusion of the intermingling audio conversations and the image of the Chilean dictator progressed further when, shortly after a minute into the video, white text in all capital letters scrolled slowly across the bottom of the screen, and read: "This guy is a Chilean gorilla…You know, a thug."[120] The cacophony of sounds, images, and text confronted the viewer with the multivalent dialectic Rosler addressed throughout the rest of the video, and in the

[119] At the end of the video Rosler tells her son that she doesn't watch television.

[120] Martha Rosler, *Domination and the Everyday,* 1978.

majority of her work from this period, that of private and the public, the home and the marketplace, citizen and the state, domestic and industrial, national and foreign.

As the video progressed, the images shifted, first the camera zoomed in on the photo of Pinochet, and then followed a parade of completely different images assembled from magazines and Rosler's private family snap-shots. The crawling text describes the complex relationship between American interests and Pinochet, specifically the relationship of the bourgeois marketplace and the domination and force represented by Pinochet. As the image shifted from a television screen with a still of Salvador Allende, whom Pinochet overthrew in the Junta of 1973, the text alludes to the atrocities perpetrated by Pinochet against the Chilean people and then broadens the message: "All people, all individuals are 'expendable' when the issue is to preserve the domination of one economic class over all others, to retain its unbridled sway over society."[121] Above the horizontally scrolling text, an photograph that appears often in the mass media of an audience in a movie theater wearing 3-D glasses—the novel Cold War escapist entertainment—appeared on the screen accompanied by the text: "Here in the states we forget, in our world of the everyday, where there are many layers of illusion masquerading as fact, we forget—or are mystified about—the facts of domination."[122] Ironically, the image that immediately followed the rapt movie theater audience was a full-color image of a crowd of people at Disneyland, in front of the sign for the "It's a Small World" ride, with the sponsorship of Bank of America prominently displayed in the photograph. The satiric reminder of the extent of the domination of the everyday, even in the dystopian fantasy-land that Walt Disney built—as David Harvey noted, "to perpetuate the fetish of commodity culture rather than to critique it.…

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid.

The dialectic is repressed and stability and harmony are secured through intense surveillance and control. Internal spatial ordering coupled with hierarchical forms of authority precludes conflict or deviation from a social norm."[123]

The images complimented by the scrolling text proceeded to heighten the viewers' awareness, as images of different permutations of Rosler's family appeared among "before and after" or "do's and don'ts" articles from fashion magazines, images of Marilyn Monroe from *How to Marry A Millionaire*, and a print ad that described a black and white photograph of a large family captioned with the phrase: "We like to think of you as a corporation." Throughout the montaged images, the crawling white text continued to expound on the interconnectedness of there and here, us and them, human and object. She noted:

> I wanted the tape to be about privatized existence for a woman and a child, but that was going o be an "in" for talking about people's relation to information about what the world is about and what their own lives are about. For instance, what is the ideal family that's constantly suggested in advertisements? And what is the relationship between the corporation, the state, and the family? In one of the ads on the tape the caption reads, "We like to think of you as a corporation." The corporation, which in the past century has sucked the authority of the patriarchy out of the family, now lends its authority to this reduced, consumption-based family-unit. … Then a series of photographs of my child with different men in front of various houses. I don't care if it comes through; they can be seen as just father and son images. In one the child is with two men, though, which confuses things.[124]

Meanwhile, the audio fluctuated between the voices of Rosler and her son overpowering the art dealer interview and vice versa; after Joshua asked for his giraffe in a plaintive voice, the art dealer discussed the role of galleries and art dealers.

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[123] David Harvey, "The Spaces of Utopia," in *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 167.

[124] Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 14.

Rosler referred to this video as a woman artist's "This is Your Life," which at first might only describe the audio interactions, but is a clear explanation of its entire burlesque of the role. The images of the outside world, her family, mass-media marketing, and Hollywood or fashion industry ideals of beauty are all interrelated into the domination of the global capitalist economy, backed by the American government, whose policies extend across the hemispheres and into our private homes. As Annette Michelson noted: "The layering of sound and image tracks establishes, nonetheless, in its juxtaposition of the child's voice and the textual declaration, the complicity of the United States with an international bourgeoisie which sanctioned the repression through torture, starvation, and death. This attitude is crystallized by the statement, culled from a Chilean TV address: *Remember, you can be replaced*."[125] Alexander Alberro described how Rosler effectively utilized a variety of media, "that are not seamlessly sutured," such that the constructed nature of the artwork was readily apparent in the, "gaps where… politics can enter…. In *Domination*, the barrage of auditory, textual, and visual elements itself offers a concentrated chunk of the common experience of everyday life."[126] The variation in the dominant voices in the audio track served to illustrate the personal struggle experienced by Rosler, and the majority of other women artists in the 1970s—at times the art world is the primary focus, and others it is motherhood—two roles that were traditionally separated until feminist artists raised the issue of women's selfhood and subjectivity in opposition to their historic roles within art as the object of sexual interest or within the home as wife and mother.

It also highlighted, as Helen Molesworth pointed out, the overarching structure in our lives:

[125] Michelson, "Solving the Puzzle," 193.

[126] Alexander Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," ibid. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press), 95.

> by placing maintenance labor as one competing factor among many, one ingredient among many that blend together to form the everyday, she shows it to be as structuring of our lives as other, seemingly invisible structures—political domination, for instance. For Rosler the question is how to make the connection between the brutal regime of Pinochet and the ideology of first world bedtime stories; how to understand the relays between Irving Blum's blather about the genius of Jasper Johns and the laconic address of mother to child, as she slowly persuades the boy to get ready for bed. What do all these things have to do with one another? The tape insinuates that they are all related in our inability not only to recognize them… but further, to draw any meaningful connections *between* them. A sentence scrolls by: "We understand that we have no control over big events; we do not understand HOW and WHY the 'small' events that make up our own lives are controlled as well."[127]

The still image of Marilyn Monroe observing her reflection in a set of four mirrors that followed a still of her applying makeup with Betty Grable and Lauren Bacall at her sides, both from the Hollywood movie *How to Marry a Millionaire*, formed the background for the text as it described the lack of social awareness in America, where, "we are sleeping and dreaming with our eyes open," as Rosler read a bedtime story to her son while the art dealer spoke about horizontal lines and bands.[128]

The juxtapositioning of the images, particularly the movie stills followed immediately by images from magazines that showed everyday women in before and after makeover photographs, succeeded by the aforementioned ad in which a family is likened to a corporation provided a burlesqued message of the intertwining, layered dialectic of the gendered roles and representations of women. Not only are women regulated and bombarded by images of feminine beauty that are nearly impossible for the average woman attain, like the Hollywood studio beauty of Monroe, Bacall or Grable, but the fashion industry reinforced the need to present an acceptably beautiful, made up face with the recurring images of women before and after

[127] Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," 93.

[128] Rosler, *Domination and the Everyday*.

makeover with captions that extoll their increased confidence as a result. These mass media tropes of feminine beauty were and are a major part of the capitalist illusion, or dream, that we consume with our eyes open, but only wide enough to see as far as the government and corporations wish, clearly not wide enough to peer into the distance of Pinochet's Chile.

Immediately following the creation of *Domination*, a conservative backlash took hold of the art world. In an essay adapted from a 1983 speech, Rosler acknowledged the regressive tendencies that take hold of culture and society in the face of economic downturns, such as in the late 1970s and early 1980s (as well as the current recession or depression), "economic contractions send people rushing to the center," such that during ostensibly troubled times, culture and society return to the tried and true norms reinforced in patriarchal society, as tropes of femininity are recirculated and further cemented in culture's turn to "safe" art forms, such as painting or traditional sculpture media.[129] Now, like then, is just such an era, in which a conservative backlash is threatening the progressive momentum gained from the past decades of feminist activism.

In an interview, Rosler mentioned in greater detail the backlash against feminist art that took place during the 1980s: "Video was excluded from Documenta VII in 1982 because the director, Rudi Fuchs, had supposedly ruled that video was a women's form, and therefore not really art. There were no female artists in 'West Kunst', a huge survey exhibition in Cologne in 1981, and that was taken as a big statement: 'Feminism in the art world is passé, over.' This sentiment has a long pedigree, 'If women do it, it isn't art, and if men do it, it must be art'. 'Women cook, but men are the chefs'."[130]

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[129] "The Figure of the Artist, the Figure of the Woman," 111.

[130] Christy Lange, "Bringin' It All Back Home," *frieze*, no. 95 (2005).

Rosler's recent re-visitation of past works only heightens our awareness of the similarities between the dire crises of then and now, rendering her critiques all the more relevant for a new decade. Her video and performance works from the 1970s, as well as her recent re-presentations of those works, allow the viewer an humorous entry into the very serious topics that feminism presents. As Rosler discussed in an interview: "Humor helps guide people past any defenses they might have erected against the things I wish to convey or provoke. It is also less demanding in terms of an audience's willingness to engage, by reframing ordinary things and not getting people to "shut down" emotionally and mentally, out of an excess of feeling: neither shock nor awe."[131] It is the ability to allow the viewer to reframe the ordinary that makes Rosler's feminist burlesque such a radical strategy—her works are not mere criticisms, but actually work to affect changes in the minds of her audience, and have the potential to effect larger social and cultural repercussions than any mere satire ever could.

[131] Rosler, "Email Interview."

Conclusion: Martha Rosler's Feminist Media Burlesque

Humor is not resigned; it is rebellious.

Sigmund Freud[1]

Over the course of the decade and a half that transpired between the cultural unrest of the late 1960s through the turn of the 1980s, Martha Rosler successfully created an oeuvre of feminist artwork that burlesqued tropes of gendered imagery that she appropriated from popular culture and mass media. She relied on the subversive and disruptive potential of parody and satire in order to convey her feminist message, rather than participate in the culturally-oriented projects often associated with feminist art, such as a focus on central core imagery or the insertion of autobiography into art. She maintained a firm connection to the social and cultural feminist movements of the era, and her artwork benefitted from this expanded perspective and engagement with the outside world.

By adopting the Brechtian strategies of quotable gestures, alienation and distanciation, as well as parody and burlesque, Rosler was able to create and pursue personifications that avoided not only reproducing the stereotypes present within the media and popular imagination, but interrupted them through her feminist burlesque of the gendered representations encountered everywhere in American culture. As demonstrated in this dissertation, Rosler maintained a firm connection to her feminist orientation and her political goals, and allowed the viewer an insight into her ideology through her feminist burlesque. In addition to her aesthetic disruption of gendered imagery and her connection to social feminism, she maintained an allegiance to a variety of mediums—she carefully selected whichever material was best suited to the artwork she produced at the moment, with mediums ranging from video, to photomontage, to installation-

[1] Sigmund Freud, "Humor," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 163.

performances, and refused to allow one particular medium define her artwork or career. In doing so, Rosler fostered a dialogue between her art and the world around her, quoting from and interacting with the images and objects that circulated in the media and the market of the late capitalist military industrial complex of Cold War America.

As Rosler outlined her strategies, she noted that she, “avoided the naturalism that [she] mentioned earlier as being that which locks narrative into an almost inevitably uncritical relation to culture,” and through alienation effects like, “humor and burlesque,” or “flattened affect, histrionics, theatricality, or staginess,” initiated a fuller appreciation of the “critical, intellectual understanding of the systematic meaning of the work,” as it related to the larger issues in the social realm.[2] She parodied the identity of the repressed home chef as well as the surveilled citizen, but also burlesqued magazine advertisements and photo-essays, while she wrote numerous essays that situated her work and ideals within the realm of social feminism; each work in each medium elaborated her burlesque critique of the capitalist system that created and sustained the Vietnam War, oil shortage, economic crisis, as well as supported and drove the patriarchal military industrial complex. She exploited the alienating aspect of disruption through her burlesque appropriation and quotation, and adhered to the utopian notion that art possessed an ability to affect change in the viewer’s mind. She inherited the techniques of parodic distanciation and disruption, as well as the belief that art could affect change not only from earlier Modernist movements, but also from the context of the women’s movement in southern California in the early 1970s. San Diego and the larger Southern California arena created an environment in which art and activism intervened in the public realm through the individual actions of consciousness-raising groups, and community activism on college campuses, as well as larger organizations like the Woman’s Building that fostered outreach with the community.

[2] Rosler, "For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life," 8.

While straightforward biography did not dominate Rosler's work, it clearly influenced her output, as both her past and present affecting which stereotypical roles she pursued and what images she parodied in her artwork.

Because of Rosler's refusal to allow herself to be pigeonholed by a single medium or movement—be it video or performance art, feminist or post-conceptual art—her work was often excluded from the art historical canons as they were established over the intervening decades, until the recent interest in feminist and media art. Yet, with the resurgence of institutional attention to feminist art, the risk of repressive tolerance and a painless assumption into the larger late-capitalist system is too great. Both in the 1970s and today, feminist art experienced a certain amount of time in the spotlight of the art world, but, again, there is the risk of a similar conservative backlash occurring today, as it did in the 1980s. However, as Rosler actively exhibits and extends the dialogue between the feminist artists and activists of the 1970s women's movement and today, she attempts to prevent the repressive tolerance that works against feminism, and instead keeps her aesthetic disruptions of gendered identities actively circulating throughout the art world.

Her continued refutation of the repressive tolerance of feminism can be seen in her reprisals and re-presentations of works like *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967-1972) in *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home: New Series* (2004-2008), *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), in *Semiotics of the Kitchen: An Audition* (2011), and the *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* (2012), which recently engaged an enormous crowd at the MoMA during the Thanksgiving and pre-Christmas season. Rosler effectively established a precedent for a feminist practice of aesthetic burlesque through which her artwork maintains an engagement with the social and political realms, and extended those utopian ideals and cultural criticism in

new works and reiterations of older works, which both reverberated back to earlier modernist precedents. Her work also allows for echoes forward in history as well, as numerous admirers and aspiring young feminist artists across the internet, on sites like YouTube as well as on individual blogs and other social media, reconfigured Rosler's germinal works.

Due to Rosler's involvement in such a wide variety of media, and her aesthetic investigations into the politics of the gendered tropes in her artwork, she not only defied the quantification and classification of typical art historical canonization, but she also effectively straddled the second wave of feminism that originated in the 1960s and the emergence of identity politics during the dominance of postmodernism during the 1980s. Rosler's video *From the PTA, the High School, and the City of Del Mar* (1977) and the *Monumental Garage Sale* (1973), among others, carefully positioned her portrayed identities as a single, poor mother, or a single, hippie mother, in direct relation to the spectrum of gender and class in American society—burlesquing the media representations of motherhood as a polished and wedded, middle-class experience.

As this study demonstrated, Martha Rosler engaged in a feminist burlesque of popular tropes of gendered imagery that circulated in mass media and popular culture. Through her satiric appropriation of representations of feminine identity, she disrupted the circulation of these images and opened a space of critique and contemplation, even if albeit momentarily, in which the viewer could consider not only the historic transmission of iconography and imagery through Western patriarchal society, but also how these images supported and extended the purview of America's late-capitalist society. As Rosler discussed in an interview, by inserting humor into her artwork, she was able to alleviate the seriousness of the subject matter she dissected: "I like to use low forms, like comedy.… Laughter can often bypass people's defenses. Ridicule and

burlesque are often used to denigrate and to silence women, who are not permitted a response. Women comics used to collude in this by telling jokes about themselves and other women. It is when an edge is reintroduced into women-told jokes and burlesque that a revolutionary potential emerges.… I keep returning to the basic realization that I am a New York Jew, and a vaudevillian “shtick” comes naturally to us as raconteurs.”[3]

She readily acknowledged her inherited connection to humor. The laughter embedded within her works creates an in-road for viewers to digest the more theoretical and conceptual issues that Rosler addressed in her artwork, moving them through humor to the aesthetic realm, and back to the social and political realms, which viewers inhabit in their daily lives. By linking her social critiques with humor and burlesque, Rosler allowed feminism to move beyond the cultural essentialist projects explored by many of her contemporaries—the artists that now constitute most of the canon of feminist art—and instead successfully straddled the realms of political feminism, identity politics, and postmodernism. Her multivalent approach of dissecting and disrupting the project of representation in mass culture utilized humor and laughter as tools to disarm viewers, in order to approach the difficult themes of gender discrimination and indoctrination, the military industrial complex, the commodification of cultures other than our own, and the way these ideals intertwined within an interconnected network of power built into the American Dream.

[3] Breitwieser, "In Conversation: Martha Rosler and Sabine Breitwieser: Part Ii: Stepping out from Behind the Proscenium Arch," 13.

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