

HOW DO WE GET THERE FROM HERE?

21.02–10.05.2020



MARTHA ROSLER

MARTHA ROSLER. HOW DO WE GET THERE FROM HERE?

Imma Prieto

The title of the exhibition makes us pause: a question in first-person plural that reaches beyond a time and a place. At the same time, it leads us to a thoroughly specific idea: that of a geopolitical and historical, permanent here and now. The paradox serves as the only way to put across the need to, once again, reconsider history. The work of Martha Rosler (New York), one of the most influential artists of the last sixty years, is built upon research and analysis of contemporary societies. Her practice relies on a multiplicity of artistic languages such as photography, photo-montage, performance art and video, and different ways of activating the social fabric through writing or teaching. Starting in the early nineteen-seventies, she has produced important work in different areas, doing so within the sphere of culture while addressing subjects associated with sociology or political theory. She has contributed to the redefinition of artistic categories, especially by considering its functions and its ties to the economy and the market. She writes:

“The art world has, also, after the 1960s, entered into this globalizing economy, and artists are often itinerant workers following the floating institutions and demands of capital. When we complain about the nightmare of the art world as driven by the market and its increasingly institutionalized and rigidified paths to “success,” we should remember we often participate in it, and its searingly alienating search for a competitive advantage, with hardly a thought

Martha Rosler, *Backyard Economy I-II*, 1974 (video still).
Video, single-channel, colour, silent, duration: 3' 26".
MACBA Collection. Ajuntament de Barcelona long-term loan.

on how that resonates on every level. It is time to say: “no more Mr. Nice Guy.”¹.

Rosler was a pioneer in the use of video as a tool for social and political analysis, employing the same communication codes as those used by audio-visual media and, then, subverting the discourse by introducing a new narrative in order to interrupt a conservative identification with the content (normally introduced on a subliminal level).

In a symbolic manner, her work deals with the quotidian semiotics contained in the domestic space; a space for reflection but also, for action and transformation. On this occasion, with her performances and videos, she leads us to consider a dissolution of myths, but also of rites, advocating for the need to deconstruct the place imposed on women by family and society.

Martha Rosler’s work proposes different methodologies for the consideration of how narratives are built. In some of the video works, especially those of the early period, she does the performance herself, the recording serving merely as a testimonial document, as it happens in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) in which, with large doses of irony and humour, the artist creates a parody version of a television cooking program, imitating a popular American chef and television presenter. In a static shot, she goes about illustrating different kitchen utensils, which she defines by substituting the habitual definitions with gestures and, thus, communicating with the viewer on a level of emotional intensity that approaches frustration and fury. In *A Budding Gourmet* (1974), on the other hand, she

1. ROSLER, Martha. *La dominación y lo cotidiano. Ensayos y guiones*. Bilbao: Consonni, 2019, p. 271. Translator’s note: the translation quotes the same passage from the original English found at <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/77/76185/why-are-people-being-so-nice/>.

creates a sort of audio-visual collage; that is to say, montage understood as a tool for the creation of new realities, constructed from diverse images to do with gastronomy or travel. The audio-visual narrative explores the relationship between cooking, the imposition of class structure and the production of gender. The text comes from one of Rosler’s postcard novels created in the same year. The artist presents *haute cuisine* as an element of cultural refinement and upward social mobility, not forgetting a certain allusion to the exoticism of other cultures. In some way, the underlying contradiction is that of associating everyday household cooking with women (in a private sphere) and that of the great chefs (in a public sphere) with men.

Filmed with a language associated with home movies, as the title indicates, *Backyard Economy I and II* takes us into the back yard of a house in which a woman does laundry or cuts the grass, along with other tasks. This leads us to reflect on home economics in relation to the redistribution of domestic needs. We are again interrogated about productive activity, not only with respect to the matter of finances, but also insofar as it gives rise to the enjoyment of leisure.

One of the most significant characteristics of Rosler’s work is the artist’s ability to ironically employ the very same mechanisms used by the object of her criticism. Rosler subverts the methodologies of communication by introducing a new discourse, be it oral or visual. Her political commitment and her feminist outlook give rise to a series of demands that are still fundamental in today’s world. An analysis of some of her videos from the end of the seventies and beginning of the eighties –*Losing: A conversation with The Parents* (1977), *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977) or *Vogue* (1982)– shows how the artist yet again leaps ahead of her time, revealing

certain sociological aspects that will, in our days, come to be considered as pathologies. Continuing to take aim at television formats and content addressed to women (reality shows, magazines, soap operas) yet going beyond mere criticism of television or advertising, with her characteristic subtlety, Rosler introduces subjects such as anorexia or anthropometrics (a tool of racial and sexual discrimination), and issues such as food as a political weapon, hunger, racism and, again, the objectification of women's bodies:

“Television, for example, is, in its most familiar form, one of the principal conduits de ideology, through its programs and commercials alike. One of the basic forms of mass culture, including television and movies, is the narrative. Narrative can be a homey, manageable form of address, but its very virtue, the suggestion of subjectivity and lived experience, it is also its danger.”²

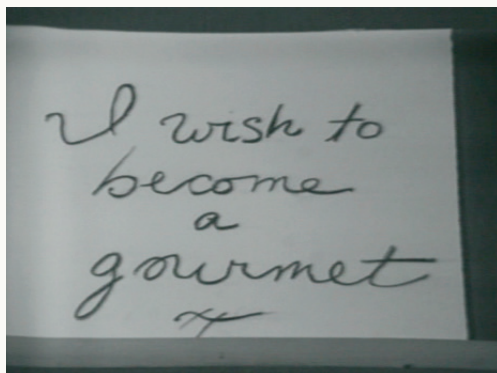
At the same time, Rosler was present in many of the conflicts of which she speaks, which allowed her to closely observe and return to us testimonial images of different realities, from Havana to New York, and including Mexico City or Barcelona; cities and contexts in times of flux and transition. Her work allows to analyse each socio-political context on the basis of geopolitical factors leading, in turn, to a reflection from which to

2. Martha Rosler statements in BUCHLOH, Benjamin: *Posiciones en el mundo real*, “Una conversación con Martha Rosler”, Barcelona: MACBA, 1999. Translator's note: the translation quotes from Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions. Selected Writings, 1975-2001*. The MIT Press, 2004.



Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975 (video still). Video, single-channel, black and white, sound. Duration: 6' 21". MACBA Collection. Fundació MACBA. Work of art acquired thanks to Família Rumeu.

Martha Rosler, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, 1977 (video still). Video, single-channel, colour, sound, duration: 39' 20". MACBA Collection. Ajuntament de Barcelona Long-term loan.



Martha Rosler, *A Budding Gourmet*, 1974 (video still). Video, single-channel, colour, sound, duration: 17' 45". MACBA Collection. Ajuntament de Barcelona.

Martha Rosler, *Martha Rosler Reads "Vogue" for Paper Tiger Television*, 1982 (video still). Video, single-channel, colour, sound, duration: 25' 45". MACBA Collection. Ajuntament de Barcelona long-term loan.

Martha Rosler, *Prototype (God Bless America)*, 2006 (video still). Video, single-channel, colour, sound. Duration: 3' 52". MACBA Collection. Ajuntament de Barcelona.

Martha Rosler, *Workshop* (from "Cuba", January, 1981), 1981. Digital C-print, 27,9 × 41,3 cm.



Martha Rosler, *Votarem! Barcelona 1 October 2017*, 2020
(video still). Video, single-channel, color, sound, duration: 10'.

extract methodologies and global strategies engendered at the heart of a neoliberal and patriarchal society. As the title of the exhibition suggests, there is an emphasis on the need to become aware of our present as a result of the sum of events that construct the past, the only path to understanding where we come from. Rosler puts a question mark on time and place. Her works are presented as testimonies of the past that, in many respects, is still with us. In turn, “How do we get here from here?” does a double-take on the multiplicity of meanings enclosed in her works. Rosler takes a spatiotemporal turn and poses the question: how is it possible to change geography and time period and yet, continue to generate images that seem to be part of the same location, past or present continuous?

“I was very interested in the idea of presentness, sharing an actual physical space with your audience, and how that smashes the modernist paradigm.”³

Martha Rosler’s radical move is to broach the public sphere based on the multitude of codes to which we are subject. In her photomontages and videos, she connects the life that we are sold on to the war waged abroad (in relation to the US and the Western world). She reflects on the canons that objectify women, but she also identifies the biased gaze of the West upon the bodies and the realities of other parts of the world. She immerses us in multiple contexts and brings home the mountains of inequalities and incongruences, activating our critical capacity in an attempt to set a new horizon from which to conceive the societies of the future. The objective is always to be able to identify the enemies of democracy with no

3. *Íbidem*, p. 54

inhibitions and address the principal problems affecting the common good.

“I get to pose the questions. But I think that for me, it would seem counterproductive to also give the answer. I may *have* an answer, but there are so many people in the world aside from me. Since it’s very likely that the answer you provide will be better than mine, why should I give you my answer?”⁴

Many of Rosler’s photographs turn into a direct testimony of a time and a place. Her gaze makes it possible to speak of photography as a narrative of realities, showing the life that sneaks through the camera lens: women looking at shop windows (observing the merchandise or their own reflection?); architectural structures that project ideas (thought or doctrine?); bodies, in the end, that return to us a halo of yesteryear with which we can identify, especially if we consider what was and what could have been. Or, in other words, bodies that await the utopia that never came. With her characteristic sharpness, Rosler puts the accent on the blocks and setbacks suffered by contemporary societies. One of the artist’s fortes is the peculiar talent of introducing doubt, making us question images that, in some cases, we have seen on many occasions. Reflecting on the photographs she took in Havana in 1981, the video *Prototype: God Bless America!* (2006), or the project *Votarem! Barcelona, 1 Octubre* (2020), we rethink the history of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and face the open void of the lack of an integral present-time ideology that gives consideration to the set of people who make up contemporary societies, with their real rights

4. *Íbidem*, p. 55. Translator’s note: the quotation in English was provided by Martha Rosler.

and needs. It is not looking, it is seeing. Not listening, hearing, not repeating, but thinking; and it is always better to do it together. Critical of capitalism, communism and neoliberalism, Rosler recovers the spirit of struggle, pointing to the danger that hides behind the euphoria of a promised land. We may need to hear feminist voices again and again. Martha Rosler lets us read between the lines and underscores that none of these movements have taken the whole community into account. Understanding that the comprehensive solution will be feminist (or will not be): feminism takes on the struggles of class, race, environment and, of course, gender.

Like a watchful eye, the artist’s camera portrays the signals of street energy and gives us back places that speak silently. Her iconographic pauses are voice and meaning. She also offers us a possible, perhaps yet to be written narrative of recent history. The engine of change resides within the people, as it always has. Rosler simply interpellates us, and that is no small feat. She points out the cracks in the system, without a doubt. She incites to disaffection. But, at the same time, she obliges us to steep ourselves in the present, which we occupy but do not inhabit. It is not only about being present, but about *presentness*. Do we share that *presentness*? ¿Are we everything we have shouted and claimed? While new paths for hope have opened up after the *Arab Spring*, *15-M* or the multiple feminist movements like *MeToo*, it has also been demonstrated that the intimate enemy of democracy is in a ceaseless race to dissipate and deactivate. That is why we must repeat to ourselves that it is not about believing, but about thinking and, above all, acting. The distrust of the mechanisms of the political and economic system is what will free us or, at least, allows us to know what we require to be free. The possibility of error must be accepted, errors make us learn, but let us hope that they will be errors we commit for the first time,

individually and as a group, while we do not cease to create the possibility for designing a future that respects and guarantees a wellbeing for all:

“Not every seedling nor every plant survives, but that is why it remains necessary to plant as many seeds as possible”⁵.

5. ROSLER, Martha. *Culture Class*, Berlin: Stenberg Press; e-flux, 2013, p. 252.

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