

LARGE PRINT

MARTHA ROSLER

IRRESPECTIVE

Please return to the exhibition
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INTRODUCTION

Martha Rosler: Irrespective presents more than five decades of artwork by the Brooklyn-based artist Martha Rosler, spanning the breadth of her creative output from installation, sculpture, and performance to video, photography, and photomontage. Born and raised in New York and a graduate of Brooklyn College (1965) and the University of California, San Diego (1974), Rosler has become one of the strongest and most resolute artistic voices of her generation, as well as a critical writer, international lecturer, longtime professor, and social advocate and activist. She skillfully employs diverse materials and various pedagogical platforms to address pressing matters of her time, including urban gentrification, labor, war, and gender roles. Over time her work has addressed social and political themes that remain as relevant and immediate as when they first emerged, even as the players and historical circumstances have dramatically changed.

Rosler began as an artist in the 1960s, the era of the civil-rights, antiwar, and women's movements and, more broadly, of the counterculture and great changes in artistic production. Like others of her milieu, she wanted to connect with the materials and technology of the everyday. Though Rosler started as an abstract painter, she turned to photography, montage, and soft sculpture, motivated by an

interest in representational forms and inspired by the strategies of Dada and Pop artists in the use of readily available mass imagery.

The earliest works in the exhibition, featured in this gallery, are based on collage techniques. Using a cut-and-paste method that bespeaks a predigital age, Rosler explores the topics of beauty, war, and domesticity, juxtaposing discordant imagery from newspapers, home magazines, soft-core pornography, and photojournalism. Such sources gave her an accessible visual language suited to address the contemporary moment. Her deep interest in feminism and the experiences of women emerged early, and the broader issues of authority and power they conjure are present throughout her work.

Rosler's art operates in many layers simultaneously, often using combinations of objects, images, text, and voiceover narration. In their multipart or serial configuration, her works resist immediate readings, often requiring viewers to consider and make sense of a variety of texts and materials. Drawing on linguistic theory, Rosler asserts both the importance and the contingency of language and narrative as the means of communication. In a satirical video from 1975, Semiotics of the Kitchen, for example, she stands in a bare-bones kitchen, using cooking utensils to act out the letters of the alphabet. Such performance videos, narrated by and

featuring the artist, embrace a consciously unpolished style consistent with many conceptual art practices of the time, and draw on historical precedents present in early pre-Hollywood film. It is frequently through the use of simple materials like video that Rosler's work operates at its most potent, channeling her searing critique, offbeat humor, and incisive social commentary with deadpan directness.

This exhibition is organized in an approximate chronological order, starting in this first gallery and moving counter-clockwise. The title—proposed by the artist and representing her characteristic skepticism about the institutionalization of her work—goes beyond the meaning of the word itself to suggest a clever play on terms that lie somewhere between the words “retrospective” and “irreverent.”

This survey represents but a slice of Rosler's expansive production, which continues to assert the vital role of art in shedding light on the complexities of everyday experience, and which spurs a deeper look into realities that lie just beneath the surface.

Darsie Alexander
Susan and Elihu Rose Chief Curator

Shira Backer
Leon Levy Assistant Curator

SURROUNDING THE DOORS

Wallpaper based on a detail from Motherhood Fantasy
From the series Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain,
c. 1966–72

Adhesive vinyl

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

ON THE WALL FACING THE DOORS

Cargo Cult

From the series Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain,
c. 1966–72

Adhesive vinyl

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE WALL

MOVING COUNTERCLOCKWISE

Selections from House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home,
c. 1967–72

Photomontages

Art Institute of Chicago, through prior gift of Adeline Yates

LEFT TO RIGHT

Playboy (On View)

Scatter

Honors (Striped Burial)

Rosler produced the photomontages in this series over a period of six years, distributing them as photocopies at demonstrations against the Vietnam War and publishing them in underground newspapers and magazines. They make use of war imagery from popular news magazines such as Life and pictures from home decor magazines such as House Beautiful. The juxtaposition of these images is an uncomfortable reminder that American prosperity and

American foreign policy are intertwined. The Vietnam War was called the first “living-room war,” broadcast daily on television. Rosler’s photomontages literalize this term, infiltrating tranquil domestic scenes with images of war to jar us into an awareness of our own role.

Selections from House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home,
c. 1967–72

Photomontages

Art Institute of Chicago

LEFT TO RIGHT

Cleaning the Drapes

Red Stripe Kitchen

Beauty Rest

Through prior gift of Adeline Yates

First Lady (Pat Nixon)

Claire and Gordon Prussian Fund for Contemporary Art

Balloons

Makeup/Hands Up

Through prior gift of Adeline Yates

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SECTION TEXT

War and domesticity are recurring subjects in Rosler's art, and ones that emerged early in a series focusing on the Vietnam War. This groundbreaking work, House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home (c. 1967–72), combines mass-media images from the first televised war with luxurious domestic interiors found in home-decorating magazines from the era. Domestic life serves for Rosler as a kind of microcosm of the world at large, a miniature stage on which gender roles and expectations are defined and tested; where labor is differently apportioned and differently valued; and where issues of economic access, equality, and disparity play out. When the United States launched wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003, she resumed the series (2003–8), once more juxtaposing images of war with serene pictures of lavish homes, lush gardens, and fashion models. Underpinning these themes is a commentary on masculine and feminine stereotypes. Simultaneously critiquing the wars and the superficiality of the contemporary American Dream, Rosler questions our shared cultural values on two fronts, foreign and domestic.

Selections from House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, New Series, 2003, 2004, 2008

Photomontages

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

LEFT TO RIGHT

Point and Shoot, 2008

Photo-Op, 2004

Back Garden, 2004

Amputee (Election II), 2004

Rosler returned to her antiwar House Beautiful montages in 2003, 2004, and again in 2008, during the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In the novelty-driven world of contemporary art, her decision to revisit an earlier body of work without significant modifications was conspicuous. She explained her choice to use visual strategies identical to those she had deployed to criticize the Vietnam War as a rejoinder to what she sees as the country's equally repetitive geopolitics—engaging in one ill-conceived discretionary war after another while seamlessly repurposing established policies and arguments.

THROUGH THE DOOR TO THE LEFT

OF THE INTRODUCTION

SECTION TEXT

Rosler began her work as an artist amid the political unrest and activism of the 1960s. Like others in her milieu, she wanted to rethink artistic and exhibition practices and to connect them with a larger critique of societal issues, including inequality and militarism.

Her work of the late 1960s and early 1970s weds social themes to a critique of representation and, in particular, explores how the seemingly objective medium of photography can be used to reinforce certain myths and stereotypes. Deeply cognizant of the capacity of photography to both illuminate reality and distort our perception of it, Rosler concentrates on problems hiding in plain sight, subtle messages, and overlooked realities in her photomontage and black-and-white work. Her projects resist the tendency of photography to aestheticize and depoliticize its subjects.

Images of women, predominantly drawn from advertisements, abound during this period, drawing

attention to the commodification of the body, domestic labor, and the cosmetics industry as urgent matters of concern. Through this work Rosler challenges deeply ingrained social and gender biases promulgated by the media, an interest that continues to this day.

MOVING COUNTERCLOCKWISE

The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems, 1974

Gelatin silver prints mounted on backing boards

International Center of Photography, New York, Purchase,
with funds provided by the ICP Acquisitions Committee

This work, composed of a grid of photographs with accompanying texts, pointedly avoids the conventions of social documentary photography. The photographs, taken in December 1974, are of the Bowery, then New York's Skid Row: hardware stores, shoe-repair shops, banks, and other commercial spaces, as well as the occasional artist's studio. Doorways are littered with the detritus of street life, particularly empty liquor bottles. The images are paired with clusters of typewritten words and phrases associated with drunkenness. Two different typewriter fonts are used, one for words denoting drunks, the other denoting words for states of intoxication.



THREE SILENT SUPER-8 FILMS

Total running time: 13 min., 35 sec.

Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

Backyard Economy I, c. 1974

Color Super 8mm film transferred to video, silent
3 min., 27 sec.

Backyard Economy II (Diane Germain Mowing), 1974

Color Super 8mm film transferred to video, silent
6 min., 33 sec

These two short films were shot in a southern California backyard, a site of domestic labor. The works are at once an exploration of the invisible labor that toils in the background and backyard and a reflection on nature in a domestic setting. Recorded in the style of home movies, whose medium par excellence was Super 8, they provide glimpses of the cycles of nature and their relation to time as viewed through a largely female domestic lens. A small child and a dog appear on-screen. The lawn sprinkler revolves, watering the grass, which is mowed by a woman who also hangs laundry to dry in the sun.

Flower Fields (Color Field Painting), 1974

Color Super 8mm film transferred to video, silent
3 min., 41 sec.

This film opens with a view from a moving car of brightly colored fields of flowers. The fields, planted in a spectrumlike array, abut Interstate Highway 5, which runs from Mexico to Canada. As the camera zooms in, field workers become visible, engaged in “stoop labor.” The camera then retreats, rendering them invisible once more and turning the fields into an aesthetic experience, an abstract painting at sixty miles per hour. The following montage of shots moves us farther up the highway toward Los Angeles; we see hitchhikers by the roadside, a portable Bank of America trailer, an immigration checkpoint, negotiated with ease, and finally a palm-lined beach at sunset, as recreational horseback riders drift by.

These three artworks have no audio component.

Selections from Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain,
c. 1966–72

Photomontages

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

LEFT TO RIGHT

Vacuuming Pop Art, or Woman with Vacuum

Bathroom Surveillance, or Vanity Eye

Escape Fantasy

Isn't It Nice . . . , or Baby Dolls

These photomontages, drawn from a series of thirty-one, extract depictions of women from popular-media sources and reassemble them so as to upend the messages of the originals. The images present various ways women are targeted and made use of in advertising: their bodies are used to sell things to men while they are invited to fashion themselves, through the things they buy, to maximize appeal to a desirous gaze. Rosler's scrambling of pornography, in which women's objectification is explicit, with advertisements soliciting women's participation in their own depersonalization, compels the viewer to confront the shared impetus at the core of these forms.

Some of the photomontages call attention to the absurd disproportionality of the ways women are required to perform according to contradictory gender expectations: advertisements for lingerie urge them to pique a potential lover's sexual fantasies, while those for wedding dresses, household appliances, and furniture enjoin purity, industriousness, and the tranquil fulfillment of domestic duties.

Unknown Secrets (The Secret of the Rosenbergs), 1988

Installation with screenprinted black-and-white photographs on canvas, wooden towel rack with stenciled towel and Jell-O box, and printed text handout

Collection of Nancy Delman Portnoy

Unknown Secrets addresses the fate of the young American Jewish couple Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, who were convicted of and executed for conspiring to aid the Soviet Union's development of atomic-bomb technology. They were executed in 1953, on their wedding anniversary.

A life-size photograph of Ethel Rosenberg, wearing a housedress and drying a dish in her tenement kitchen on Manhattan's Lower East Side, is framed by a sampling of images from period magazines. An alarm clock points to 8:16, the precise time when Ethel was executed. The Jell-O box perched atop the towel rack refers directly to a key bit of evidence provided by the couple's accuser. The towel is stenciled with the damning text of a letter written on June 16, 1953, three days before the Rosenbergs' execution, by President Eisenhower to his son John, who was serving in the Korean War. Together with a printed text, which visitors are invited to take away, these elements address the Rosenbergs' fate in the context of the Cold War

hysteria within which they were judged. It also suggests the ways in which Ethel's demonization, in particular, was abetted by misogyny.

Please take a copy of the handout.

Bowl of Fruit

From the series **Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain,**
c. 1966–72

Photomontage

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

ON THE MONITOR

Martha Rosler Reads Vogue: wishing, dreaming, winning, spending, 1982

Color video with sound, 25 min., 49 sec.

Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

As she reads from an issue of Vogue magazine, Rosler provides commentary in a continuous voiceover. Magazine text is interspersed with her critical perspectives on the ways the fashion industry objectifies women, creates narratives of wealth and power, and occludes the production of the garments it sells. This imbalance is underlined by a tabloid exposé about the making of First Lady Nancy Reagan's gowns and by footage of women working in a Chinatown sweatshop.

A transcript of the audio component of this work is provided.

Diaper Pattern, 1973

Ink on cloth diapers

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Diaper Pattern was created as the American war in Vietnam was winding down. Well-worn cloth diapers, formerly used by Rosler's infant son, are stitched together to form a curtain reminiscent of a patchwork quilt. Written on each are comments by American soldiers and civilians—some real, some imaginary—that point to the racism and xenophobia underpinning the war. By using a material typically associated with caring for babies and their hygiene, and then adding strongly worded text associated with violence and injustice, the artist once again weaves together the themes of war and domesticity, this time on its physical remnants. The verbal slurs on the diapers call to mind the human waste they have supplanted. The artist also suggests that there is a public political aspect to childcare and other domestic labor typically performed by women.

IN THE NEXT ROOM

Selections from Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain,
c. 1966–72

Photomontages

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Small Wonder

Cold Meat II, or Kitchen II

Kitchen I, or Hot Meat

These photomontages, drawn from a series of thirty-one, extract depictions of women from popular-media sources and reassemble them so as to upend the messages of the originals. The images present various ways women are targeted and made use of in advertising: their bodies are used to sell things to men while they are invited to fashion themselves, through the things they buy, to maximize appeal to a desirous gaze. Rosler's scrambling of pornography, in which women's objectification is explicit, with advertisements soliciting women's participation in

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PROJECTED ON THE WALL

Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained, 1977

Color video with sound, 37 min., 39 sec.

Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

This “opera in three acts” explores the relationship between societal scrutiny of the bodies of women and “others” and state surveillance and control. Both the central character and the unseen narrator are played by the artist herself.

The work’s prologue appears over a blank screen. In the first act, men in white coats systematically measure parts of the body of the unnamed citizen while the narration muses on the circumscribed ways women—but also boys—are taught to behave and to think about women’s lesser worth. White-coated female attendants use musical sounds to rank the subject’s measurements—above average, average, below average. Later they assist the woman in a cross-cut sequence as she dresses alternately in a black cocktail dress and a white wedding dress, checking herself anxiously in two mirrors. The voiceover, as foreshadowed in the prologue, offers Rosler’s commentary on racist pseudoscience, embedded in United States government policies through much of the twentieth century.

In the silent second act, Rosler, unclothed, crouches and breaks three brown and three white eggs into a bowl. The camera moves closer, revealing that the eggs, unshelled and unbroken, do not correlate with the color of their shells.

The third act is a montage of photographs from two U.S. government pamphlets with protocols for obtaining systematic measurements of (white) women and young boys and girls. In this act, the voiceover repeats a litany of types of violence inflicted on women, from foot-binding to forced abortion to illegal abortion to job discrimination, drawn primarily from a woman-led “tribunal of crimes against women,” which was held contemporaneously with the production of the work.

A transcript of the audio component of this work is provided.

IN THE NEXT ROOM

SECTION TEXT

Rosler has repeatedly explored the subject of food—its production and preparation, its consumption, and its powerful meanings in our social, domestic, economic, and political lives, particularly those of women. In works of the mid-1970s she often adopted the voice of an overburdened housewife, service worker, or hostess, and was adept at articulating the frustration and sometimes even self-deception of women forced to adopt roles they didn't necessarily want or skills they felt obliged to acquire, such as being a fancy cook. A Gourmet Experience taps that theme directly. This multipart—or multicourse—work combines video, audio, and slide shows on and around a table set for a banquet. In its original presentation it included a performance in which a cast of foreign or foreign-born readers read excerpts from cookbooks introducing Americans to their respective cuisines, replaced in later versions with a soundtrack of voices offering food-related reminiscences.

Semiotics of the Kitchen, Rosler's best-known early video, is a deceptively simple portrait of the artist as cook and

the cook as artist in which assumptions about both roles are questioned.

More recent photographic series use the lush tonalities of chromogenic color printing to both aestheticize and critique the material world in close detail, from the food we are served on airplanes to the ways the natural world appears within the human environment.

TO THE RIGHT OF THE SECTION TEXT

ON THE MONITOR

Semiotics of the Kitchen, 1975

Black-and-white video with sound, 6 min., 13 sec.

Jewish Museum, New York, Purchase: Gift of Frankel Estate, 2007-29

Adopting the familiar format of a television cooking show, Semiotics of the Kitchen opens with a woman in a kitchen, portrayed by the artist as a kind of anti-Julia Child. She begins to name pieces of kitchen equipment in alphabetical order, starting with the letter A. As she identifies each utensil, she mimes its use, replacing the cheerful ease with which food preparation is typically depicted with gestures of gradually intensifying, though suppressed, rage. The rigid format of the demonstration riffs on the deadpan look of Conceptual art, while commenting sardonically on the notion that women ought to find personal fulfillment in the kitchen.

In the audio component of this work the artist recites the names of each kitchen implement she demonstrates, from "Apron" through "Tenderizer," in alphabetical order, followed by the final six letters of the alphabet.

TO THE LEFT OF THE SECTION TEXT

MOVING COUNTERCLOCKWISE

Objects with No Titles, c. 1973/2018

Mixed media

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

In advertisements of the 1960s and 1970s, sampled nearby in Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain, diaphanous fabrics float airily about the lithe forms of lingerie models, just demure enough to titillate. In Rosler's soft sculptures, bags of batting, the material used to fill cushions, plush toys, and quilts, are squeezed and stuffed into women's undergarments—girdles, lacy camisoles, control-top panty hose, and underwire bras. Lumpy and bulging, they suggest the stubborn tendency of ordinary bodies to maintain their own shapes, eluding every attempt to bind, confine, or rein them in.

ON THE SCREEN

Selections from Air Fare, ongoing

Digital photographs

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Rosler's Air Fare, with its focus on a significant detail of commercial air travel, offers a pointed comment on the hierarchies of privilege in that system of mass movement. The differences between meals served in first-class and economy seats are immediately visible, from an artfully composed salmon mousse to an abject, lumpy pizza. A meal seen on an airplane's seat-back video screen seems as real (or fake) as the food resting on the tray tables. The workers who cook, wrap, label, and deliver these culinary delights are invisible and anonymous. Photographed in Rosler's typical palette of deep, vivid tones, often with dark backgrounds, these snacks and suppers make subtle reference to the history of still-life painting, with its emphasis on bounty and its sometimes moralizing allusions to the fleeting nature of earthly pleasures.

A Gourmet Experience, 1974

Installation with banquet table, chairs, video, slide projections, audio, books and bookshelf, cookbook readings, and blowups of the postcard novel A Budding gourmet

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York
Video component courtesy of Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

A Gourmet Experience was one of Rosler's earliest large-scale installation works, constituting her master of fine arts thesis exhibition in 1974. For the event, she recalls, "I sent out engraved invitations and had people read to the crowd from foreign-cuisine cookbooks in appropriate accents, among other things."

Rosler has since recreated the work in gallery and museum settings: a table is set for a grand feast. Projections of photographs from touristic cookbooks feature splendid dishes from around the world, printed in the then newly available color-printing technology, interspersed with pictures of newly fashionable "gourmet foods," a sequence of the artist in her kitchen mimicking heroic poses from Chinese Communist posters, a verbal dispute between two speakers on what food fetishism is about, and images of the people who produce foodstuffs. The soundtrack includes

reminiscences on food from various countries read by people from those countries. The tabletop video is centered on the postcard novel A Budding gourmet, displayed on the wall nearby. The meal, however, never takes place.

In the audio component of this work the artist reads aloud the text of the postcard novel A Budding gourmet.

North American Waitress, Coffee-Shop Variety
(Know Your Servant Series, No. 1), 1976

Suite of seven digital prints

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

This work skewers the patronizing treatment of women in the food-service industry of the seventies—and well beyond. Its title mimics the language of a field guide, while diagrams and lists of guidelines for presentation and comportment, aimed at waitresses themselves, amplify the quasi-scientific tone. Three photographs complete the piece. If two seem to show “ideal” waitresses, the third looks all too real: young, tired, slightly ragged, and evidently at odds with the inhuman standards set by her employer.

A Budding gourmet: food novel 1, 1974

Silver gelatin photographic enlargements of a postcard novel, mailed between January and April 1974

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

In the mid-1970s, Rosler created three “food novels,” each comprising a set of typewritten postcards sent to friends and others in weekly installments. The works shown here are enlarged versions of the postcards, created contemporaneously with the originals. All the novels are first-person narratives by women in which food and labor are central. Delivered by mail, the cards mediate between the private space of the home and the public network of circulation and delivery provided by the postal system. In A Budding gourmet, a housewife confides her desire to become a refined cook, to please her middle-manager husband and friends, revealing in the process her culturally ingrained condescension toward members of cultures and social classes other than her own.

IN THE NEXT ROOM

ON THE LEFT

SECTION TEXT

Four Videos

The four videos on view in this room, together with others in the exhibition, represent a sampling of Rosler's work in video across more than four decades. When consumer-oriented video equipment became widely available in the early 1970s, Rosler was among the first generation to turn the new medium to artistic ends. She made conscious use of its simplicity, implicitly celebrating its difference from the slickness of the movie industry. As the sophistication of the technology increased, Rosler adapted her material to its new capabilities, using montage, found footage, and superimposed texts, among other techniques.

Rosler appears in many of her video works: in Born to Be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby \$/M, she portrays a cast of characters ranging from a baby to a sperm to a blustering trial lawyer; in Secrets from the Street: No Disclosure and A Simple Case for Torture, or

How to Sleep at Night her voice provides narration and point of view. In The East Is Red, the West Is Bending she assumes the role of a TV cooking demonstrator, promoting an electric wok. This selection of videos incorporates an array of themes that animate Rosler's work in all mediums, including American imperialism (whether cultural, economic, or military) and the representation of women in mass culture.

FOUR VIDEOS

Total running time: 2 hours, 10 min., 8 sec.

Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

A transcript of the audio component of these works is provided.

The East Is Red, the West Is Bending, 1977

Color video with sound, 20 min., 26 sec.

The East Is Red, the West Is Bending offers a pastiche of the conventions of televised cooking demonstrations. Rosler bows to the camera and reads aloud from the user's manual for an electric wok, which offers condescending, if mostly complimentary, characterizations of "Orientals." Yet despite the merits of "traditional" culture, the manufacturer asserts, the wok is improved by twentieth-century American capitalist know-how. Made five years after President Richard Nixon's trip to China signaled the beginning of a Sino-American rapprochement, the piece suggests the persistent and inherently violent influence of colonialism and imperialism.

Secrets from the Street: No Disclosure, 1980

Color video with sound, 12 min., 30 sec.

Secrets from the Street was made for a show entitled Public Disclosure and simultaneously broadcast in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and City Hall. It examines the intersection of race, culture, and class in what the work refers to as a “Manhattanizing city.” The footage, made up of photographs and Super 8mm film shot by Rosler, captures street life, including political demonstrations, in the Mission District as seen from the window of a moving car. The soundtrack is a mix of mariachi, old rock ‘n’ roll hits favored by the Chicano Low Rider car subculture, street rallies, and a Spanish-language radio broadcast announcing the success of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua—all accompanied by an urgent narration spoken, and repeated, by the artist. Its repetition and sound distortions undermine the temptation to see reportage as impartial truth.

The work was shot during a period of war and ferment in Central America, leading to a greatly increased northward migration to a San Francisco undergoing strong gentrification pressures. Simultaneously there were police crackdowns on local Mission Low Riders while city boosters continued to promote the area as a site of “internal tourism.” The interlinked concerns of urbanism, immigration, and covert war are manifested in the urban landscape as graffiti, murals, and other, mostly readable signs. “You can’t know a culture by coming to visit,” the

artist says. “You can see its facts, but you cannot see its meaning.” That message is underscored by a trailing ending in which the local events of another city—Vancouver, in which the work was edited—are announced via a rolling text from cable television.

A Simple Case for Torture, or How to Sleep at Night, 1983
Color video with sound, 1 hour, 1 min., 53 sec.

The title A Simple Case for Torture is taken from a 1982 Newsweek opinion essay by the philosopher and New York-based professor Michael Levin, who argued that “there are situations in which torture is not merely permissible but morally mandatory.” Staged against a backdrop of Lower Manhattan, seen across the water from Brooklyn, and alternating with an indoor scene with a shelf of books and toys, the video follows Levin’s argument through to its totalitarian implications. With passages drawn from the philosophers Plato, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Max Horkheimer, and Theodor Adorno, Rosler couches her consideration of torture in a barrage of visual and aural clips from radio reports, newspaper and magazine articles, comic books, and television advertisements. This blizzard of data, constituting a form of torture by information overload, passes across the screen too quickly to be read or fully absorbed.

Born to Be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby \$/M, 1988

Color video with sound, 35 min., 19 sec.

With Paper Tiger Television

In the mid-1980s Mary Beth Whitehead, a surrogate-mother-for-hire, was sued by the prospective adoptive parents of her child when she refused to yield custody of the baby at birth. This story of contractual surrogacy gone wrong caused a media uproar. In Born to Be Sold Rosler dramatizes the ways in which Whitehead was disparaged and discredited through class and gender stereotypes; Rosler herself dresses as most of the characters in the media storm, including both the infant and a sperm, as well as the two women, a doctor, the judge, and the media-hungry lawyer for the adopting couple. At the same time, she draws connections between surrogacy and economic and gender-based subjugation that exposes women's bodies to financial exploitation and state control.

SECTION TEXT

Rosler's investigation of photography and its various traditions, histories, and complexities runs deep. She often makes photographs in extensive, ongoing series, which, as they grow over time, record throughlines, repetitions, and shifts in her perspective and in the culture she records.

In the Place of the Public, Rights of Passage, and Ventures Underground explore spaces of passage and movement, in-between environments that we encounter on the way to someplace else. The images, with a fleeting, spur-of-the-moment directness, capture our common, though widely ignored, experiences at the airport, on the subway, or in an automobile, which we perceive only in a state of distraction. These landscapes of everyday life—highways, terminals, and subway platforms, as well as sidewalks and other public spaces of transition—may seem banal but constitute the systematized blueprint of our world, mapping our relation to the earth, to fellow passersby, and to organized networks of movement and control.

TO THE LEFT OF THE SECTION TEXT

MOVING COUNTERCLOCKWISE

Global Taste: A Meal in Three Courses, 1985

Installation with kiosk, three videos with sound (28 min., 29 sec.; 40 min., 34 sec.; 57 min., 13 sec.), wood, paint, and text panels

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Global Taste centers on the global marketing of Western goods and on English as the language of power. The left monitor shows clips of television advertisements, mostly for food, often in lush close-up and featuring fresh-faced children, talking animals, and clownishly exuberant foreigners.

The center screen explores the economic and political underpinnings of globalization, connecting widening inequality and desperation around the world with growing dependency on goods and services from the West.

The third screen offers a loop of auditions for a U.S.-made soft-drink commercial from the late 1970s in which successive groups of men rise and sing, in take after take:

“It’s fantastic, it’s so different, it’s got orig-i-nal-i-tee!”
The token presence of exactly one nonwhite and one older man in each group compounds the irony of the slogan, suggesting that, for the purposes of advertising, “difference” is contained within strict parameters. Adjacent text panels reflect on the political and cultural implications of global capitalism. One, a New York Times advertisement for the powerful firm Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, puts forth a philosophy that underpins the unfolding strategies for creating global brands.

A transcript of the audio component of this work is provided.

Selections from In the Place of the Public: Airport Series,
1983–ongoing
Chromogenic prints with text

LEFT TO RIGHT

O'Hare (Chicago), 1986

Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Alfred and Ingrid Lenz
Harrison Purchase Fund, 2016.102.4

Untitled, Hamburg, 1993

Untitled, Frankfurt (Main), 2004

Untitled, Paris (Charles de Gaulle), 2001

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash,
New York

Minneapolis, 1991

Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Alfred and Ingrid Lenz
Harrison Purchase Fund, 2016.102.1

Untitled, to Minneapolis, 1984

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash,
New York

JFK TWA Terminal, 1990

O'Hare (Chicago), 1994

Minneapolis Institute of Arts, The Alfred and Ingrid Lenz
Harrison Purchase Fund, 2016.102.2, 2016.102.3

Rosler, for decades a frequent flyer, began this series of photographs in 1983 and continues to add to it. The series documents the ultimate postmodern space: the airport and air travel, with its showy "starchitect" terminal buildings, corporate waiting areas, brightly lit concessions, endless networks of passageways, and constricted tubes of actual passenger transport. These serve the increasingly regularized migration of mostly white-collar labor.

Representing the modern Anywhere, augmented by dashes of local color, airports provide a space situated nowhere; perhaps they are attempting to cover the unconscious fear of catastrophe and death with distraction and shopping. In the post-9/11 era, in the face of heightened state surveillance, the entire system of air travel has largely abandoned efforts at low-key corporate reassurance.

Selections from Ventures Underground, 1980–ongoing
Chromogenic prints
The artist and Galerie Nagel Draxler Berlin/Cologne

TOP ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

New York City, September 2001

Lexington Avenue Station, New York, June 2002

Lexington Avenue Station, New York, September 2003

BOTTOM ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT

Vienna, November 1981

Stockholm, September 2002

New York City, March 2004

As part of her ongoing investigation of streets, roads, and other sites of passage, Rosler's ongoing series of subway photographs chronicles forms of architecture and activity particular to underground transit systems throughout the world. These works, in contrast to her images of the impersonal and antiseptic spaces of air travel, represent the eminently local, everyday, and toooften ramshackle

nature of the subway. At the same time, they underscore the oddities of the subterranean realm, with its artificial light and murky shadows, as a zone of fleeting, up-close, and unpredictable human interactions.

ON THE SCREEN

Selections from Greenpoint New Fronts, 2015–ongoing
Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Selections from Rights of Passage, 1993–98

Color photographs

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

LEFT TO RIGHT

Donuts, New Jersey Turnpike, 1995

Pulaski Bridge, Queens-bound, 1994

Routes 1 & 9, New Jersey, 1995

Accident, New Jersey Turnpike, 1994

Williamsburg Bridge, 1995

The panoramic photograph format is commonly used for scenic vistas. Rosler's series Rights of Passage—taken with a fixed-focus toy camera with a plastic lens—captures the anonymous, unlovely spaces through which she passed while commuting between Brooklyn and New Jersey.

Bridges and overpasses, trucks and cars form landscapes and dreamscapes that, she notes, are unique to our era, like “nothing previously imagined.”

ON THE TABLE AT CENTER

Selections from Greenpoint Project, 2011

Color inkjet prints

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

LEFT TO RIGHT

Carmine, Sujit, Teresa

Daniel's Iyad, G&S

Pit Stop, Mr. Kang, Super Sound

Thai, Police, Greenpoint's Finest

EAT, Abdul, 3Decker

5 Leaves, Grumpy's, Lokal

Rosler, a Brooklyn native, has lived in the Greenpoint neighborhood since the mid-1980s. For thirty years she has documented its social and economic transformations; her current focus is on the impact of gentrification on small businesses near her home. She has produced several related projects about Greenpoint since 1992, using street photography, graphics, assemblage, books, video, and text. Together these elements build a portrait of a historically working-class area in transition, as older businesses, often

run by immigrants, give way to residential and commercial ventures—often run by other immigrants—aimed at upper-middle-class arrivals.

In this work, the texts and photographs derive from Rosler's conversations with shop and restaurant owners and other local workers, putting individual faces to the impersonal phenomenon of gentrification.

IN THE NEXT ROOM

SECTION TEXT

The art in this gallery is imbued with Rosler's longstanding interest in power structures. The large-scale installation occupying the center of the room is composed of excerpts drawn from the work of the philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt, who wrote extensively on totalitarianism, censorship, and the culture of fear in the post-World War II world.

In artworks that react to the current political climate in the United States, Rosler incorporates expressions of verbal aggression and dominance that she sees on the part of the President—and conversely, of submission and sycophancy that she sees emanating from the Vice President—into collage and video.

Text and argument have continued to play a major role in Rosler's work, from the alphabet in Semiotics of the Kitchen to the books in her own library, which became a traveling reading room in the mid-2000s. In the digital collages of Off the Shelf books of philosophy, history, analysis, photography, and literature are depicted as

disembodied spines and covers, in a silent nod to the ever-expanding, ever-mutating digital universe that increasingly shapes and channels our communications.

TO THE LEFT OF THE SECTION TEXT

MOVING COUNTERCLOCKWISE

Pencicle of Praise, 2018

Color video with sound, 10 min.

Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

In this video Martha Rosler focuses on the efforts of United States Vice President Mike Pence to express gratitude to President Donald Trump and elicit it from members of the Cabinet. When Pence accepted the vice-presidential nomination in 2016, he proclaimed, “I’m a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican—in that order.” Rosler suggests that this may be taken as an indicator of his statements and behavior. The video begins with moments from a 2017 press conference in the White House Rose Garden at which President Trump announced his intention to withdraw from the historic Paris climate accord. Both the Battle Hymn of the Republic and the U.S. national anthem were part of the broadcast.

A transcript of the audio component of this work is provided.

HANGING FROM THE CEILING

Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an Artist in the 21st Century), 2006

Installation with texts on mylar panels printed with quotations by Hannah Arendt in German and English
Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Selected passages from the writings of the German Jewish political theorist Hannah Arendt are printed in German and English on transparent panels that extend from floor to ceiling, arrayed like trees in a forest. The excerpts are taken from Arendt's 1951 book The Origins of Totalitarianism, which analyzes the roots and historical import of Nazism and Stalinism. As visitors move through the installation, they encounter the phrases from a distance, up close, or overlapping one another, suggesting the many ways Arendt may be read. Initially mounted in Berlin for the centenary of Arendt's birth, the installation attests to the enduring relevance of her writings on politics, censorship, power, ideology, and the culture of fear.

Point n Shoot, 2016

Digital print

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

This work draws its central text and image from a campaign rally held during the Republican presidential primaries in 2016. Speaking to a crowd at a small religious college in Iowa, the candidate Donald Trump emphasized his claims to high poll numbers and exceptionally loyal supporters. He said, "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters, OK? It's like incredible."

The names in the background are those of some of the unarmed Americans of color who have died in recent years at the hands of police or while in police custody, without conviction of the officers involved.

Selections from Off the Shelf, 2008, 2018

Chromogenic prints

Courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

LEFT TO RIGHT

Capitalism, Democracy, 2018

The Life of the City, 2018

Utopian Science Fiction, F, 2008

War and Empire, 2008

Colonialism, Slavery, Race, 2018

Art, Education, Activism, 2018

To create these digital photomontages, Rosler arranged books from her prodigious personal library thematically, allowing subtle visual and verbal dialogues to emerge through juxtaposition and repetition. The gradient backgrounds, a common device of digital design, remind us that books and texts increasingly circulate digitally, a technological manifestation of the ways in which they have always transcended their material existence as objects. These works are not reading lists but points of entry into certain areas of interest and concern.

IN THE NEXT ROOM

ON THE RIGHT

Prototype (God Bless America), 2006

Color video with sound, 3 min., 49 sec.

Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

This video stars a found object, a battery-operated toy soldier with a trumpet, swaying and playing the popular patriotic tune "God Bless America." The soldier's pants leg is rolled up, revealing a mechanism that looks mightily like a prosthetic leg. In contemporary warfare, traumatic leg amputation is one of the two "signature" injuries (the other, less visible one is traumatic brain injury). In this brief, simple work Rosler draws a connection between knee-jerk nationalism and the waging of war without due thought for the consequences to those who fight.

The audio component of this work comprises the tune "God Bless America" as heard through the speakers of the souvenir it depicts.

HANGING FROM THE CEILING

Prototype (Freedom Is Not Free), 2006

Resin, composite, metal, paint, and printed transfers

Courtesy of the artist, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York,
and Galerie Nagel Draxler Berlin/Cologne

Commanding in both color and scale, this oversize leg, moving back and forth in a flexing gesture, refers to the follow-up for soldiers who have suffered amputation resulting from roadside bombs—the homemade “improvised explosive devices,” or IEDs, commonly used by our opponents during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. By exaggerating the dimensions of the limb, the artist calls attention to the physical impact of war on the human body, notably— though not exclusively—sustained by veterans. The prosthesis itself is modeled on one designed for a female body, and images of stiletto heels appear on the upper portion of the object, linking the work to the artist’s other feminist concerns.

Please do not touch.

The companion volume to the exhibition is on sale in the Cooper Shop.