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ARTS AND LETTERS

Martha Rosler Wants to Know Why We Still Aren’t Outraged

Since the 1960s, the artist has channeled her wit and her conscience into works that face American injustice head-on.

By Alice Newell-Hanson
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ON THE CRISP March afternoon of my first meeting with the artist Martha Rosler, details were emerging about the victims of the 19th school shooting in the United States in 2023. Equipped with three firearms, someone had killed six people at a Nashville elementary school, including three 9-year-old children. Walking through Chelsea to Rosler’s New York gallery, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, past a gaggle of kids’ scooters parked inside the glass-fronted foyer of a school, I wondered if continuing on with my day as if this calamity hadn’t just happened was a necessary form of self-preservation or an unforgivable failure of empathy. Among the questions I wanted to ask Rosler, who has spent the past six decades calling attention to exactly this schism in the American psyche, was how she keeps going when nothing seems to change.

Rosler, 80, has earned the strange distinction of being the institutionally celebrated godmother of American protest art. Using media ranging from performance and video to photography and sculpture, she has been mounting an unrelenting opposition to America’s various social injustices — and to many of its citizens’ willful ignorance of them. She’s made provocative work addressing the subjugation of women (take, for

example, her influential series of feminist photomontages “Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain,” circa 1966-72); the horrors of the wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan (as embodied in her late ’60s photomontage series “House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home,” reprised in 2004 and 2008); the country’s ongoing housing crisis (most famously touched upon in “If You Lived Here ...,” the exhibition series she organized in 1989); and the media’s role in perpetuating these ills, the critique of which lurks in the background of almost all her projects. Over the decades, as the political environment has moved left and then right, her early and midcareer works have resurfaced again and again, reminders that history is often cyclical. But if many of her peers from the late ’60s and ’70s have since softened their radical stances, Rosler remains a die-hard. In her persistence, though, there is also optimism. “I do feel that I’m looking for a way to convey something essential or true,” she said to me, almost with embarrassment, at one point. “Of course, in eras of deconstruction you can hardly refer to truth. But I still can’t get past this.”

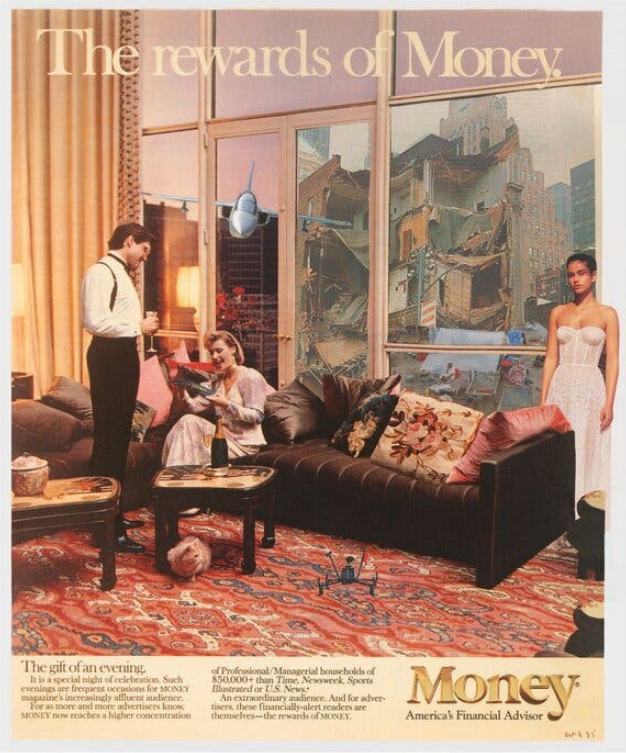
The artist Martha Rosler, photographed in a studio space in her Greenpoint, Brooklyn, home on May 30, 2023. Credit Sean Donnola

But, Rosler said later, “the problem with portraying me as an angry person is [that] it is to diminish me.” As we settled across from each other on a suite of black leather furniture in the gallery’s private viewing room, she brought to mind — with her shock of wheat-colored hair, deliberately unassuming black clothes and slightly slouchy black calf-high boots — a battle-weary but charismatic resistance leader in a “Star Wars” movie. (A fan of science fiction since childhood, she keeps a figurine of Jabba the Hutt, the bloated embodiment of criminal greed, in a bathroom at her home in Brooklyn’s Greenpoint neighborhood.) “A great deal depends on humor,” she clarified, pronouncing the last word with an old New York accent: “you-mor.” Indeed, wisecracking is almost as central to her practice as outrage; both are age-old responses to oppression, and the former helps humanize the latter in her work. Take her 25-minute-long 1982 video “Martha Rosler Reads Vogue: Wishing, Dreaming, Winning, Spending,” in which she sends up the magazine’s aspirational consumerism by paging through it in a parody of breathless wonder (“Clothes! Fur! Perfume! Liquor! Men! Expensive men, expensive perfumes!”). Rosler is also funny in person. She punctuated our conversation at the gallery with dry asides (“There’s only one type of genius that matters, and it always comes with a penis”), fretted about the possibility of an itchy nose becoming a nosebleed midinterview (“It’s a winter thing”) and skewered herself repeatedly for “nattering on.” What some people don’t realize, she said, “is that I’m like Fran Lebowitz. It’s all shtick.”

She was also perfectly attuned to the irony of being profiled by a publication that prints the kinds of glossy images she’s spent over half a century critiquing. Behind us on the wall were two dozen of the 31 photomontages that make up “Body Beautiful.” Like many of her projects, the series originated when the embers of what Rosler calls her “burning disquiet” about a social inequity were suddenly fanned into furious flames — sparked, in this instance, by the sight of lingerie advertisements depicting women in baby-doll dresses opposite stories about war and politics. She began collecting particularly egregious images from newsmagazines and men’s magazines, sometimes cutting and pasting lips, butts and crotches from one setting onto another. In one work, a pair of exposed breasts are awkwardly collaged above the cups of a bra in an advertisement with the vaguely threatening tagline “When you look after your figure this way, so will everybody else.” Mitchell-Innes & Nash included the photomontages in a show of Rosler’s feminist works from the 1960s, ’70s and present day that opened late last year, just months after the overturning of Roe v. Wade. “Body Beautiful” — which Rosler finished around the time of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1973 — has aged depressingly well. The fragmented bodies still suggest, with undimmed power, the violence and absurdity of treating women as less than human. Rosler, as it happens, found many of the ads for the series in The New York Times’s other weekend magazine — and she expressed, both jokingly and not, her discomfort with being profiled by this one several times. Neither of us, it seemed, was certain if I was a member of the resistance or a minion of the evil empire.

SEVERAL DAYS AFTER our first interview, which had been arranged via a director from Mitchell-Innes & Nash and a publicist, Rosler herself emailed me. Her message, in a way that I was coming to appreciate as pure Martha Rosler, was both direct and puzzling. She was friendly and apologetic (“Sorry for going on and on, which seems to be my M.O.”) but also seemed anxious: “What is [the story’s] focus supposed to be?” She was concerned that she’d spent too long talking about her early years (later, she

said to me, “It’s the work that matters, not the persona”). She has criticized in the past the typically male-centric narrative of “the artist as a romantic hero,” as she called the trope in a 1983 lecture published in her 2004 book, “Decoys and Disruptions.” But I *was* interested in her life — as well as her practice. If the second-wave feminism of the late 1960s and ’70s taught future generations anything, it’s that the personal is political. And perhaps no artist has made such a doggedly political body of work as Rosler or interrogated the politics of art making itself as astutely. What was it like to live with such unrelenting clarity?



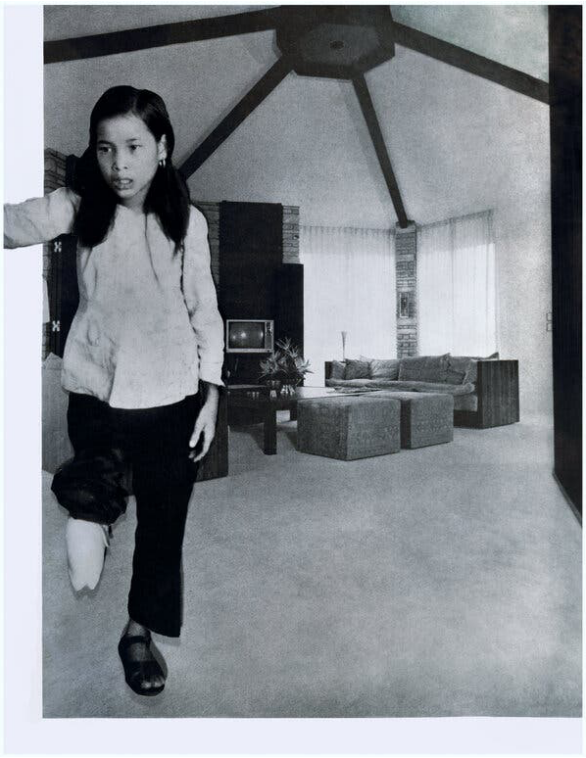
A photomontage titled “The Gift of an Evening” (2022), from the artist’s series “The Rewards of Money,” which originated in the late 1980s. Rosler has often used imagery from luxury magazines in her work to critique consumer society.Credit Martha Rosler, courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Rosler was born in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn in 1943 and has, by her account, been interested in art and notions of justice almost ever since. At the yeshiva she attended for grade school, she angered the rabbi by doodling during a lesson (in other classes, she recalls, she drew rocket ships inspired by her brother’s sci-fi magazines) but was recognized for her ethics: The yeshiva’s newspaper published a poem she wrote about racial integration. Her high school years coincided with the early civil rights movement. She handed out postcards for the Congress of Racial Equality and, though the general idea at the time, she told me, was that “only Communists demonstrated in New York” — this was the era of McCarthyism — she marched on City Hall with an antinuclear group, angering her parents. Avant-garde films were another formative influence (she was a member of Cinema 16, the New York society that screened experimental and documentary movies between 1947 and ’63). After seeing “The Virgin Spring,” Ingmar Bergman’s then-controversial and

censored 1960 film about the rape of a young girl, Rosler said, she came to define a worthwhile work as one that "leaves people with something they need to figure out on their own later. It can't be the Aristotelian catharsis where you go home, have a roast beef dinner and everything is good because you unburdened yourself." It was during that period, she said, "that I became a difficult person as a maker of, well ... anything."

Rosler's parents had encouraged her brother's academic pursuits, and he eventually became a nuclear physicist. They urged Rosler to become a legal stenographer. As a compromise, she enrolled at Brooklyn College and took classes in physics, then English literature, but she knew she wanted to be an artist. She audited a course taught by the abstract painter Ad Reinhardt and began taking photographs, mostly of what she calls "the invisible objects that help make modern life," like carts for tarring streets, in downtown Manhattan. She also got married to Leonard Neufeld, a poet. After Rosler graduated in 1965, the couple lived uptown, where she worked as an editor of medical texts and encyclopedias. Around this time, Rosler began "House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home." She had a revelation, she told me, while reading The New York Post, then a liberal newspaper, at her parents' dining table one day: "I saw this image of a woman swimming across a river with children and I was thinking, 'Why aren't people outraged?'" She decided to confront what she perceived as America's collective refusal to recognize the victims of the war as equally human. Rosler spliced pictures of soldiers and injured Vietnamese citizens from newsmagazines into images of idealized domestic interiors gathered from publications including House Beautiful — the overall effect is amateurish but urgent. In perhaps the best-known piece from the series, "Tron (Amputee)," Nguyen Thi Tron, a 12-year-old Vietnamese girl who was shot in the leg during a U.S. military attack and became a symbol of the war, appears to stand in a plushly carpeted upper-middle-class living room, where she looks both perfectly at home and aghast.

The images, several of which are currently on view in a retrospective of Rosler's work at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, illustrate with scorching clarity an idea at the heart of her practice that she expressed to me as: "If you think that by not thinking about these things that we are separate, you are wrong." If her contemporaries in 1967 were critiquing the country's consumer culture and military-industrial complex at all, they were mostly doing so subtly, with objects that collectors wanted to display on their walls; this was the year that Andy Warhol made his screen prints of Marilyn Monroe and a period in which Jasper Johns repeatedly and ambiguously painted the American flag. But Rosler was explicit. She refused to aestheticize suffering. It was also the year she gave birth to her son, Joshua. The works conjure the agonizingly heightened awareness of human interconnectedness that becoming a parent can produce: If I don't deal with this, no one else will.



"Tron (Amputee)," from the series "House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home" (circa 1967-72), combines an image from Life magazine of a Vietnamese citizen injured in the war with a print Rosler found at a used book store. Credit Martha Rosler, courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

ROSLER AND NEUFELD separated twice and, after the second and final time, she remained in California, where they had moved in 1968. She enrolled in graduate school at the University of California, San Diego after realizing that, as she put it to me, she could have a studio space where Joshua, then 4 years old, wouldn't scribble all over her work. She'd been accepted into the program as an abstract painter, "and I was doing abstract painting because I did everything: I drove a car! I fed a child!" she said with the verbal equivalent of an eye roll. "So yeah, I did too many things." But eventually she decided to prioritize. She recalled saying to herself, "You have to choose between standing in your damn studio with these big canvases and making these paintings you love to make and doing something that has more exigency in the world." At that time, she had also embraced the women's liberation movement, which by then had taken off. (In her early life, she had told me, she was "super-male identified because everybody knew that the only people with power in the world were men.") But recognizing her need for support, as a working de facto single parent, she sought community. As the focus of her art shifted toward photography, she began collaborating with several peers — who would together become known as the San Diego Group — approaching the medium with a critical eye and engaging with questions of social justice.

When Rosler briefly returned to New York in 1974 — she would move back permanently in 1980, when she accepted a teaching position at Rutgers University in New Jersey that she held until 2011 — she made two of the works that helped forge her reputation. After walking down the Bowery one day, she thought of a piece that

would address her dissatisfaction with the traditional mode of documentary photography, in which individual people often become stand-ins for larger societal problems. Rosler's resulting photo-text work, "The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems" (1974-75), is both a deconstruction of her medium and a rallying cry for a new form of documentary photography that isn't simply "assuag[ing] any stirrings of conscience in its viewers the way scratching relieves an itch," as she wrote in a later essay. Rather than capturing images of the many transient people who then congregated along the Bowery, Rosler photographed the street's storefronts and facades, often with discarded bottles in front of them, and presented the stark black-and-white images in 24 framed panels alongside terms used to describe drunkenness ("top-heavy, moon-eyed, owl-eyed, pie-eyed," reads one stream of words). The text relates to the images only glancingly, forcing the viewer to fill the gap between the two with their own suppositions. The work is humane, encouraging its audience to look beyond the individual for the cause of suffering. It is also haunting. Nothing in the images is ever quite resolved.

Rosler in the garden behind her studio. Credit Sean Donnola

Around the same time, Rosler began exploring video, which was then becoming popular among feminist artists as an affordable way to make and share work without the institutional support that was often denied them. This resulted in another of her best-known works, "Semiotics of the Kitchen" (1975). Just over six minutes long, shot in slightly fuzzy black-and-white, the video is a parody of late-night advertisements and the sort of culinary TV show marketed to housewives. Rosler, expressionless and standing in an unassuming kitchen, plays the role of hostess, demonstrating with seemingly building resentment the uses of various common cooking tools in alphabetical order, beginning with an apron, a bowl and a chopper. As her actions

become increasingly violent — Rosler uses a manual juicer like she's breaking a neck — the hostess's rage takes on broader significance. Even in the simple act of pressing a burger or beating an egg, she suggests, a woman's body is commandeered into the machinery of oppression.

"The fact that video sucked was part of what made it exciting," Rosler told me; it allowed her to make work that no one would judge on its aesthetic qualities. And a large part of her rebellion against the norms of the commercial art world has been her use of such nontraditional methods: Since making "Semiotics of the Kitchen," she has mailed out installments of novellas as postcards, given bus tours about the politics of land use and staged subversive performances of suburban garage sales. But video was also, for Rosler, another means of confronting the unbridled power of the mainstream media — a way of harnessing the immediacy of television in order to challenge its maintenance of the status quo. She has performed similar acts of artistic hijacking throughout her career by mimicking the look and voice of magazine journalism and advertising, demonstrating an acute understanding of their respective abilities to persuade. Rosler's mastery of these modes has been widely influential on other artists, too: It can be felt, for example, in the pointedly funny videos and installations of the Argentine Israeli artist Mika Rottenberg, who similarly interrogates questions of labor and gender. It's possible, even, to find echoes of Rosler in the amateur videography of TikTok, where every user is the head of their own surreal public access network.

If Rosler's work, like that of many pioneering feminist artists, can in retrospect seem prophetic, it is partly because of the slow pace of real cultural shifts. But it's also because, at times when progress feels illusory, there is a collective (arguably patronizing) tendency to reconsider female artists from earlier generations and cast them as Cassandras: "If only we'd listened!" This effort can be genuinely remedial, affording artists long-overdue recognition. Both the abstract painter Carmen Herrera and the assemblage artist Betye Saar only began to receive serious institutional consideration from the art world as nonagenarians. Hilma af Klint, who died in 1944 at the age of 81, rarely showed her futuristic paintings in her lifetime, but a 2019 exhibition of her work at the Guggenheim in New York became the most visited show in the museum's history. Yet there is almost always a note of self-congratulation tucked within this attention, too. "Rediscovering" unheralded voices can be a way for institutions to prove they are now on the right side of history, even if they waited until the work's message was less provocative before showing it — and even if they have little interest in heeding the artist's current warnings.

DURING BOTH OF my interviews with Rosler, she took my photograph matter-of-factly with her smartphone. Among her ongoing projects is a series of off-the-cuff portraits of the journalists and students who come to speak with her, most of whom are younger women. While she has lamented the fact that typically only women curate her work — suggesting that female artists, while they've secured admittance to the gallery and museum world, are often still siloed — she has written that "the interview business has, instead, made me happy. It suggests that young women continue to look to older women as still having something to say, something they want to hear." When I went to meet Rosler for the second time, at her home, a peeling Victorian house tucked behind a London plane tree on a busy street, the visit did indeed have a pilgrimage-like feel. Sitting in her long, dark living room beside four towering potted

trees — a mango, a grapefruit and two avocados — she observed that our interviews had centered on her early work, before acknowledging, with a mock growl, “But if you were to ask me what I’m working on now, I’d snarl and say ‘shows’!” Our conversation did keep returning, naturally, to the past. Rosler, whether she likes it or not, has become a memory keeper of sorts, a maternal conscience with which younger artists and citizens must reckon and attempt to measure up. The role is one demanded less often of older male artists, who tend to be characterized as ascetics rather than as public resources.

When I’d asked Rosler at our first meeting how she remains resilient when her work involves grappling with the bleakness of the news cycle, she’d replied, “Simple. I’m not a Christian, I don’t feel guilty; I feel engaged, which is different.” That, and she gardens. Lately, when she’s not trying to finish long-abandoned projects (“I guess I can’t pretend I’m young or even a midcareer artist anymore,” she said), she spends much of her time among her plants. “It’s an amazing way to stay in touch with what the world is about,” she said. In gardening, as in life, one’s tasks are “both in your control and basically not,” she continued.
We made our way downstairs, through her low-tin-ceilinged kitchen with its 1930s stove and out into the backyard and the bright April afternoon. Rosler had recently cut back an unruly forsythia bush near the wooden fence at the northern edge of a densely planted tangle of greenery. The daffodils had just wilted, and purple columbines had sprung up in their place. The work of gardening is maintenance, a constant wagering against the forces of chaos. This makes it difficult to measure progress, but it’s there, so long as you know where to look.

https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/10/t-magazine/martha-rosler.html