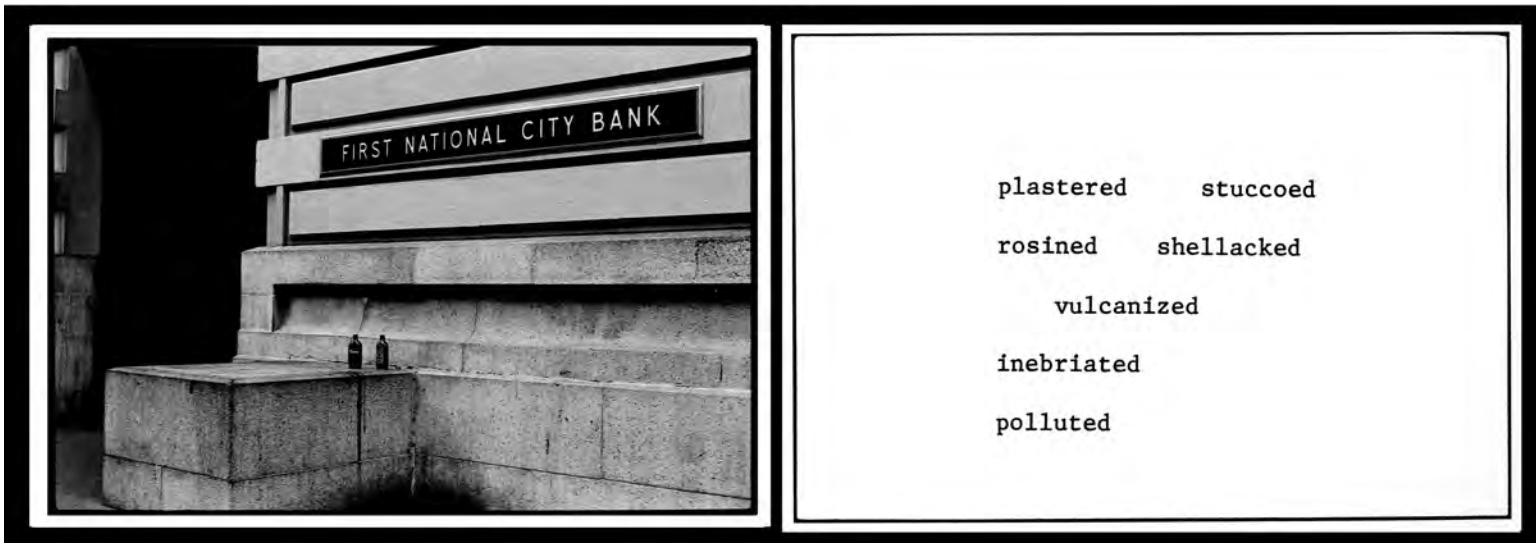
Visiting Artist: Martha Rosler

Thursday, October 12, 6:30p
Sleeper Auditorium

About the artist

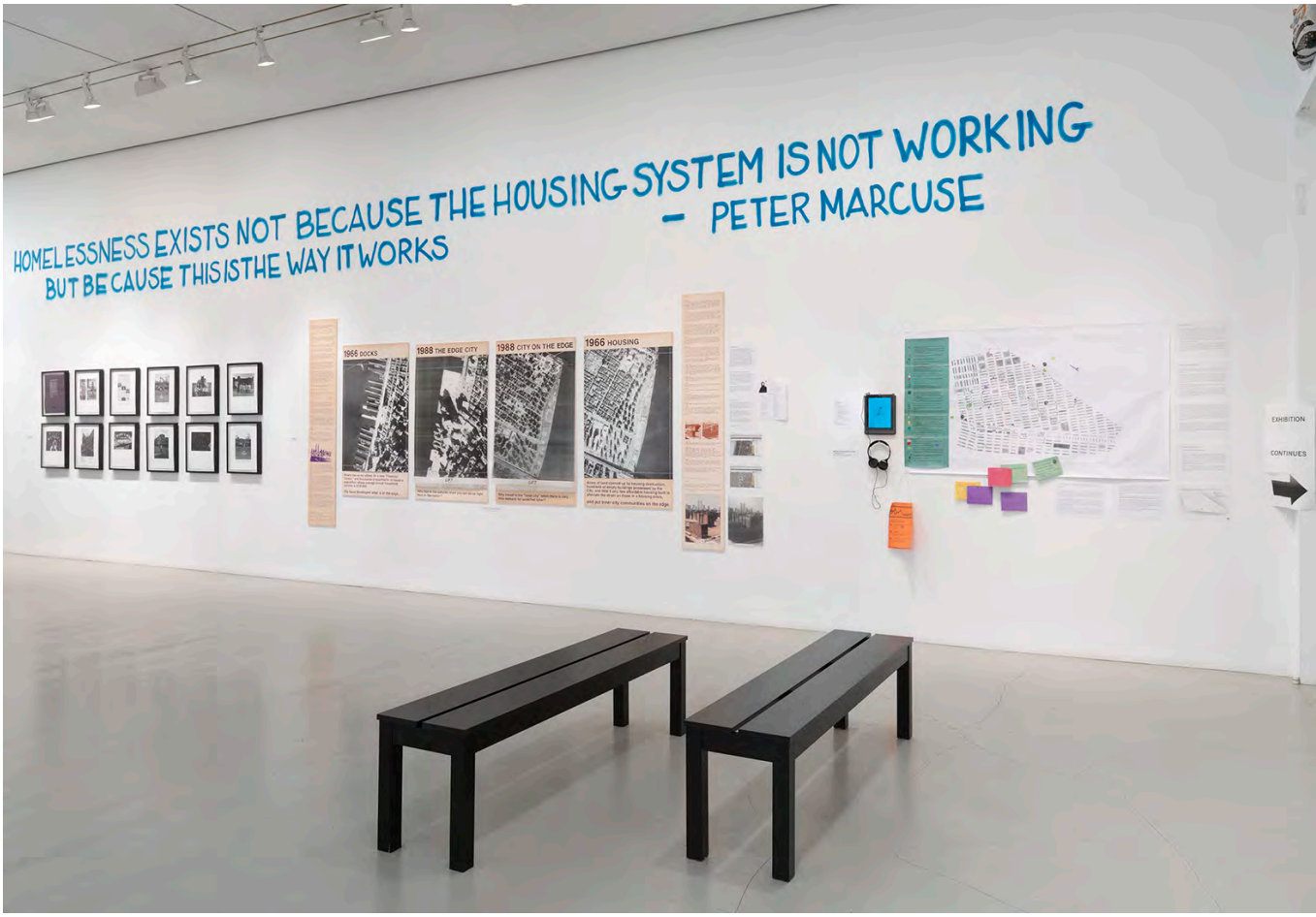
Martha Rosler is an artist, writer, and activist based in Brooklyn, New York. A pioneer of American conceptual photography, video art, performance, installation, and feminist art practice, she has had solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Dia Art Foundation, and the New Museum, to name just a few. Since the 1970s, her widely influential work has consistently tackled the most urgent social, aesthetic, and political issues of the day, from the US media's coverage of war, to the experiences and representations of women, to issues of housing and homelessness. She is also a noted writer, having published over fifteen books, including *Decoys and Disruptions, Culture Class,* and *Positions in the Life World.* She received her BA from Brooklyn College her MFA from University of California, San Diego.

Works



Excerpt from *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems,* 1975, framed photographs and text.

Stills from *Semiotics of the Kitchen,* 1975, single-channel video, 6 minutes.



Installation views of exhibition *If you can't afford to live here, mo-o-ove!!* at Mitchell Innes & Nash, 2016.

The Gray Drape, from *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home,* 2008, photomontage.

Writings & Interviews

Interview with Abbe Schriber
Brooklyn Rail, February 2014

Frustrating Desires: A Q&A with Martha Rosler
Art in America, January 2013

Occupy Response
October Magazine, Fall 2012

For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life
Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, 1999

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Art Books
INCONVERSATION

February 5th, 2014

MARTHA ROSLER with Abbe Schriber

For over 40 years, Martha Rosler has engaged the social imperatives of everyday life through photography, video, installation, and performance. Her work investigates the intersections of urbanization, public and private space, economic transaction, and gender construction. Revealing the ideological codes implicit in the networks and objects of visual representation, Rosler began to question art's institutional frameworks early on. She is also an active writer and critic; her most recent book *Culture Class* (Sternberg Press, 2012) compiles essays written between 2010 and 2012, including an eponymous three-part series originally published in the online journal *e-flux*.

Culture Class reflects on the commodified status of creativity in the geopolitical power formations and bureaucratic management of cities. Writing in direct response to Richard Florida's book *The Rise of the Creative Class*, Rosler problematizes Florida's definition of creative workers as driving urban economic success, exploring the notion that artistic labor "cannot be conflated with neoliberal urban political regimes," as sociologist Ann Markusen has put it. Yet artists and urban cultural centers are irrevocably intertwined, and part of Rosler's task in this series of essays is to tease out the complicity of artists in both the economic advancement and spatial reorganization of cities.

These questions have reverberated throughout Rosler's practice, but particularly in the three-part exhibition project *If You Lived Here…* (1989) at the Dia Art Foundation, in which Rosler examined homelessness and housing conditions in New York City and well beyond. The project presented a wide range of art video, film, visual data, and poster graphics, and it engaged activist groups and organizers in the exhibitions as well as in meetings and public programs. *If You Lived Here…* and other of Rosler's early works, such as *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974 – 75), take on urban environments and landscapes as indicators of the larger, increasingly corporatized forces that shape the lives of the people within them. Writer Abbe Schriber visited Martha Rosler in her Greenpoint studio and home to speak with her about *Culture Class* and its connections with her artistic practice more broadly.

Abbe Schriber (Rail): What are the links between your text *Culture Class* and your earlier project *If You Lived Here…*? *Culture Class* seems to deepen the interventions into homelessness and the politics of space you began in this earlier project.

Martha Rosler: When I first saw your question, I wondered if they are linked and then I realized that the whole subject came to my attention once questions of geography and urbanism floated into the view of

intellectuals and artists. I became interested in questions of housing and architecture in the late '70s even though those interests were less about structure and more about political process. But I did spend a lot of time thinking about food, and as a side question, the relationship between female identity and clothing—and I thought, oh that's funny, food, clothing, and now shelter. And I did the project *If You Lived Here…* when I was invited by the Dia Art Foundation to have a solo show. I was so shocked by the appearance of homeless people living on the street, which is quite different from the urban fixture of panhandlers, that I felt I should center my project on work about this apparently new condition. *If You Lived Here…* then broke into three sections because I didn't want to do a project that called upon people's feelings of charity and distance, which are mirror images of one another. At the time, women had a tendency to think about social process and not structure, and to see the earth artists and the Gordon Matta-Clarks as boys doing what boys do: paying attention to huge geographies or dead structures, not the living processes of life. However, with the increasingly visible conceptualization of cities as either planned, benignly unplanned, or gradually developing, it became very clear that for women this matter of habitation had always been an issue—just differently.

Rail: It seems that the distinction between process and structure that you outline in feminist practice is really key. Can you trace that in projects like *Monumental Garage Sale* (1973) and *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* (2012)? There is a way in which feminist thought and theory provided the entryway into a lot of how we see those works.

Rosler: It's not as though women's issues weren't highly visible in the mid-'60s, when I started anti-war work—they were. Before I did "House Beautiful; Bringing The War Home" (1967 – 72), I did the "Body Beautiful" (1966 – 72) montages, which were about women's bodies and their relationship to interiority and exteriority/externality. And although the anti-war work centered in many ways on women's experience, as female Vietnamese political prisoners on one hand, but also as ordinary householders on the other, the anti-war works were better described as placing the images of war directly in conjunction with idealized images of first-world, middle-class dwellings. A great deal if not all of my work is tied together by questions of representation. I explore power and the way one inhabits a space that either is or is not a space of narrative or of physicality that you construct. It is also about the pre-written narratives we inhabit (the air-conditioned nightmare, to grab an apocalyptic title of Henry Miller's). My approach was to focus on these broad questions from the point of view of women, how women see and respond to the mostly pre-existent systems of living.

The *Garage Sales* were initially conceived in reaction to the way communities respond to urgent material needs and issues of household economy, and the way that women, in recirculating commodities, step into a liminal space between private and public. In the soundtrack playing during *Garage Sale*, I did not evoke issues of gender. I wanted to address the *subject* of capitalist economy, the person who has to negotiate that liminal space, which for me implicitly would be the woman in question. I also wanted to stick with the more abstract flow of goods and money, commodity fetishism, identification with and negotiations within one's local community—in other words, the relationship between affective relations and commodity relations. But I specifically didn't want "feminist talk" because it was intended to reach across audiences and communities.

Rail: Did you see feminist rhetoric as potentially alienating your audiences?

Rosler: In 1973 there were a lot of shorthand buzzwords circulating in the media that foreclosed thought. But everyone understood that 99.9 percent of garage sales were run by women, and I felt that it would be more interesting to let that remain unspoken, while having the soundtrack playing throughout the show voiced by a woman, expressing women's concerns: "Will you judge me by the things I sell? Why not give it all away?" Almost all the goods were women's goods, there was lots of kids' stuff, not much men's stuff. And handwritten letters and notes. So the presence of the maternal and the feminine—women's underwear, shoes, hats, kids' toys—was the presiding phenomenological address. But then I wanted to talk about how you assign value to things. All the sales were at art spaces; if you notice where you are, it's impossible not to see the crossover questions of what determines value in each system. Is it sentimental or is it in relation to a market that is far outside the bounds of the household?

Rail: Can you elaborate on your claim in *Culture Class* that multiculturalism is a "bureaucratic tool for social control" that "attempt[s] to render difference cosmetic?" How can we reconcile this knowing that many of the communities that are most affected, and often most alienated, by the "creative class" are predominantly black and working-class?

Rosler: Multiculturalism is not a fact of life, it's a term applied to a narrative that societies use to capture and shape difference, often without allowing it to actually effect social change. It's more like "multiculturalism" in quotes: a doctrine. We might claim that multiculturalism describes a society with many cultures, but its deployment by municipal and state bureaucrats is a way of suggesting a melting pot without the melting. People objected to the idea of being "deracinated" in order to be assimilated, so multiculturalism has provided a route to the management of the appearance of difference. I wanted to problematize the term, to remind people that when it finally reaches the broader public's attention, it's generally in the mouth of someone who is trying to control its effects.

Rail: Getting back to *Culture Class*, you described cinema as "architecture's spectral double," which alludes to questions of discipline and control in bodily and behavioral regulation. Can you elaborate on that and what role you think media plays in this idea of urban bodily management?

Rosler: In population control—I don't mean here the regulation of the number of people in a population but the ability to control people's behavior in urban and suburban environments—you want to be able to control the formulation and flow of bodies. In the '80s I was interested in attempts to dematerialize space, seeing it more as a theatrical setting for movement. At the same time you see the development in movies of efforts to create environments that are simulated, where the model of spectacle that also applies to the rest of social relations is actually instantiated in a room where you're sitting. Going back to Debord, the society of the spectacle is not about images but all social relations and relations of production. It's inevitable that it manifests in many different forms, and its models are constantly being adapted, sold, and used to pattern museums, buildings, traffic flows, bike lanes, or media.

Rail: I was really struck by the section in Part III of *Culture Class* where you discuss the institutionalization of politically engaged art. If one is an artist who really cares about investigating social issues, what do we make of formalized, institutional arenas for these types of concerns? As a working artist, is it possible anymore to stay outside of them?

Rosler: I stayed outside of the whole commercial system for a long time, but then the art world and Reaganism and neoliberalism made a few moves that were intended to destroy alternative art spaces. Living in New York, I became invisible. Writers would never write about things not presented to them in commercial galleries, and museums were not interested either. Artists still gained exposure in art history classrooms, but once it came time to pay attention to them publicly, any recognition had to be strained through institutions. I had always been in favor of showing in museums. *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974 – 75)—which on the one hand is a work about the geopolitics of urban possession, but on the other constitutes a theoretical statement in visual form—was made for museums. I'm just tracing this back to say I've always been in favor of trying to be in places where art is and where art is seen, and also in places where art is not expected. I think artists are constantly inventing new ways to draw or construct publics outside the system, and these are often successful—mostly when they're group endeavors—thanks to the much more expansive place of cultural goods and spaces in our contemporary highly "culturalized" world, the multiple systems of direct communication, and the necessary willingness on the part of contemporary institutions to draw in the marginal, now even when some of those practices suggest themselves as resting on politico-social turf.

Rail: How do we negotiate institutions that purport to be newly committed to "political art"? For instance, masters' programs in social practice.

Rosler: Yeah, I have a problem with this—the fact that "social works" have been de-problematized. But it allows people who are interested in even addressing public issues to get together and spend some time working on it. But when you are a duly certified master of public practice, then what?

Rail: How do you think about the archive in terms of your art-making?

Rosler: In *If You Lived Here Still…* the archive for the Dia shows we discussed earlier was put on view. Having the archive of letters and such ephemera on view as a "show" in an art space occurred under the pressure of both Anton Vidokle and Maria Lind, who felt that *If You Lived Here…* was of continuing importance to curators and the history of exhibition planning. People, especially feminists, have been doing shows of archives for a long time, creating a certain thickness of history and presence based on documents. Rather than publishing a book, the gallery context gave archives a certain insurgent quality. I had previously done a project called *Martha Rosler Library*, also with *e-flux*, which put my books out into a more public space; that was in the mid–2000s, when we could definitively claim that books were on the way to becoming cultural objects of a different nature from what they had been.

Rail: That's an interesting point about visualizing archival material. Like you say, that's not necessarily a new idea, but as a feminist strategy or even as a conceptual strategy or institutional critique strategy it has been vital.

Rosler: You said the magic word that no one ever mentions anymore! Institutional critique, what's that?

Rail: It's a term that feels outdated or ended, but that is troubling in a way.

Rosler: Let me suggest that there is an institutional effort to envision social practice as ameliorative rather than critical. This fits into our discussion about multiculturalism, in which something that was the banner

of difference became the banner of management. A similar thing may occur when you institutionalize these things into masters programs and hyper-professionalize them. You wind up with things being normalized in a way that creates heterotopias of the imagination. That, in effect, is the critique of abstract painting under Abstract Expressionism in the ’50s: that it became confined to the realm of the aesthetic space and the imagination; that, rather than liberating the imagination, it contained and confined it. Or let’s say, as Rockefeller supposedly suggested about Rothko’s paintings, they provide refreshment for tired businessmen.

CONTRIBUTOR

Abbe Schriber

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES

DOCUMENTA 14

by Timothy Francis Barry

JUL-AUG 2017 | ARTSEEN

….the manicured lawns of Kassel, oddly unpeopled, trashless streets, taxis that arrive to pick you up at your hotel for your early train at 2:30 a.m.—not 2:31, 2, or 3—Prussian efficiency, Teutonic rigor, the burghers icily friendly, helpful….

Response to James Cooper

by Mark Van Proyen

JUNE 2017 | CRITICS PAGE

The rest is mere spectacle, almost always pre-packaged, its only salutary attribute being the way that it compels us to perpetually re-consider the relationships between truth and loyalty in a world governed by manipulative deceptions.

Unto each other, a new thing

by Colin Edgington

JUL-AUG 2017 | ARTSEEN

Visual Notes for an Upside-down World at P·P·O·W gallery aims to upend. The totality of the show offers understandings and explanations of the conditions we are in and reminds us that the guerrilla tactics of our forebears have resounding effects far beyond the historically determined periods of their respective disruptions and oppression.
INCONVERSATION

Art in America

INTERVIEWS (/NEWS-FEATURES/INTERVIEWS/) JAN. 14, 2013

Frustrating Desires: Q+A with Martha Rosler

by Courtney Fiske (/Search/Courtney+Fiske/)

Conceptual artist, political activist and cultural theorist Martha Rosler held her first garage sale in 1973 in the art gallery of the University of California at San Diego, where she was then a graduate student. Publicizing the event in local media as both a sale and an installation, Rosler arranged personal items alongside donations from friends and colleagues, and projected slides procured from an estate sale of exemplary white, middle-class American families. Indebted to Bertolt Brecht's learning plays, Jean-Luc Godard's counter-cinema and Hans Haacke's systems aesthetic, the work comes as part of Rosler's broader strategy, now over four decades in the making, of repositioning quotidian objects to launch trenchant critiques of the ideologies that structure our day-to-day lives.

Rosler's Garage Sale subsequently traveled to nearly a dozen nonprofit art spaces and museums in Vienna, Berlin, London, Stockholm and Dublin, among other cities. This November, for two weeks, Rosler's performance-installation came to MoMA, an institution which she assailed in a 1979 essay as "the Kremlin of modernism," at once hegemonic and conservative in its taste for object-bound, digestible art. Entering the museum's cathedral-like atrium, visitors could haggle with Rosler and sanctioned interlocutors over an eclectic inventory culled from the community and preserved from past sales. Copies of the *Garage Sale Standard,* a newspaper published by Rosler and featuring articles by sociologists, excerpts from Edith Wharton and a handful of the artist's writings were free for the taking. Thirty minutes spent in the space yielded an ersatz Jackson Pollock, a Buzz-and-Woody bicycle, and a beige, boxy Macintosh Classic.

Rosler spoke with *A.i.A.* at her home in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, about

the sale at MoMA, which she claims will be her last.

COURTNEY FISKE How did you arrive at the idea of holding a garage sale in an art gallery?

MARTHA ROSLER It stemmed from my shock that there was such a thing: that people would sell their stuff and that other people would buy it and not find the transaction strange. Garage sales didn't exist where I grew up, in Brooklyn. It was only in the late 1960s, when I moved across the country for graduate school, that I came across this phenomenon. Once I understood the garage sale as a social ritual, run primarily by women, my initial horror changed to sympathy. I realized that I needed to take garage sales seriously. "Why do people, why do women, do this?" I asked myself. At the time, the country was in the middle of an oil crisis. When Sabine Breitwieser [chief curator of media and performance art at MoMA] asked me to hold a garage sale during yet another crash, it felt opportune. The work also sets in train the question of value systems, and since I am an artist, the system I was most interested in contrasting it with at that point was the art system, so it had to be held in or in conjunction with an art gallery, a noncommercial one.

FISKE You've held a lot of them now: by my count, this is the twelfth.

ROSLER Yes, I'm always surprised by how many I've been conned into running [*laughs*]. But some were more labor-intensive than others.

FISKE How was the installation at MoMA unique?

ROSLER Well, it was at MoMA—that's the first thing—in the atrium, which is in some sense a void at the heart of the museum. It has a certain amorphous quality to it in terms of its dimensions and its atmosphere. I think that the architect considered it to be an almost sacred or magical space. And it goes without saying that if it's held at MoMA, it has to be bigger and better orchestrated than at a smaller venue. So it differs by virtue of its location and scale, both of which were foremost in my thinking.

FISKE Were visitors' reactions at MoMA different than in other iterations?

ROSLER The previous garage sale was sponsored by Art Basel and held at the Museum of Cultural History in Basel. There, everybody seemed to know how to look. But at MoMA, there were a surprising number of people who had no idea, even though it was at such a major museum. I think many of them were what one might call relatively naïve tourists. They assumed that it was a museum-run

holiday sale, despite the garage sale newspapers, despite the signs, despite anything. Some people seemed pretty grouchy about what was going on. Some demanded: "You have to sell that to me!" A couple asked for my name so they could complain about me. That was my favorite line [*laughs*]. But, part of what the work was intended to do was to frustrate desires and encourage people to think about the sale on a meta-level. On the one hand, I was all too happy to satisfy people's desires, and we sold so much stuff! But, on the other hand, there had to be a significant number of items that weren't priced as you wanted, or where I wasn't willing to negotiate very much, or which weren't actually for sale. I was surprised that more people didn't stop for a moment and laugh at themselves. In other versions of the sale, I advertised the show as a normal garage sale as well as an art event, so there would be a mixing of audiences. That was not possible at MoMA, and yet there were people who acted like ordinary shoppers.

FISKE Is there an importance to doing the Garage Sale in a series?

ROSLER No, I hate that idea. I hate repeating myself. I held garage sales in San Diego and San Francisco in the 1970s and then I thought that I was done, that I had exhausted the format. My interest at the time was in making new work for each new show. But when I had a retrospective ["Positions in the Life World"] in the late 1990s, I was quite surprised when a number of curators at the various venues wanted to hold a garage sale. It wasn't a work that I'd expected institutions to like because it was, to use Allan Kaprow's term, anti-art. Though perhaps it was more mischievously anti-art then actually anti-art because, as Kaprow explained, anti-art is art: it all winds up in the same temple.

After the retrospective, other curators asked me to hold garage sales in their institutions. At first, I was shocked. "I'm getting this request from *you*?" And then I realized that staging garage sales is a way for curators to address the question of value and its relationship to mass culture and the art world, through me. I have to admit, though, that each time I was disappointed that I'd have to think about this show again. It's a form of self-immolation, if I may use a ridiculously overblown metaphor, because I hate selling things. I hate haggling. I hate being the clerk. And yet, the work depends on me assuming that persona.

FISKE I'm curious about your use of signs—most notably, "Maybe the Garage Sale is a metaphor for the mind?,"written in chalk across a blackboard—and the audiotape, where you muse on the nature of commodities and desire. In many artworks, the political message is oblique and remains unarticulated. The Garage Sale, however, prompts its viewer to make complex political and theoretical

connections.

ROSLER I spent a lot of time thinking about art's relationship to critique when I first started making work in the late 1960s, primarily because of Pop. The message of Pop was "there is no message," and the critics were relentless in affirming this. Like the Minimalists who said, "what you see is what you see," Pop insisted on a certain kind of conceptual flatness or vacuousness. Yet it seemed clear to me that Pop instantiated a powerful critique of consumer society that was possibly invisible even to its most avid collectors, who didn't see the work as ironic. Certainly the general public saw it as a celebration of consumerism. So, what's the point of making art whose relationship to critique is inaccessible?

FISKE Right, that line between celebration and critique is often thin**.** Along with your work in video and photography, the Garage Sale provides an interesting model for how to achieve political activism in and through art. On the one hand, its politics are embedded in its form-for example, its de-hierarchized display, or its figuring of the viewer as an active participant-and its site. At the same time, they are pronounced rather explicitly in its content, whether in the handwritten signs, the taped monologue or the objects themselves: for example, a 2009 issue of the *New York Times* with the headline "Iraq War Ends." Where do you locate the politics of the piece?

ROSLER There are several political threads running through the sale. There's the clear-cut one that has to do with consumerism and commodity fetishism. There's another that concerns the assignment of value to objects produced by people of different classes, groups and locations. And there's an element of political activism as well: for example, in the two flags proclaiming "We the people SAY NO to The Bush Agenda." At first, I wasn't sure how explicit I wanted the show's politics to be. I worried that MoMA would be offended, or that the curator would be annoyed. Then I thought, maybe I've stumbled into the opposite, which is the display of politics as trophy. And then I thought, hell, I can't worry about this. It's a garage sale. There's all kinds of stuff on display.

FISKE In an earlier interview, you mentioned the sterility of art whose politics inhere solely in formal elements at the expense of an engagement with social imagery. The example that you gave was Robert Morris.

ROSLER He's more political than some of the other Minimalists. But, it's true. I remember the first time I saw one of Morris's objects. I was still a student, so I guess it was around 1965. I thought, it's a gesture of rejection, but it lands with a thud, and it doesn't take you much beyond that gesture. Of course, I could be wrong about that.

I'm still mulling over the lessons of Minimalism and other formalist efforts. But, in my own work, I do prefer that there be a multiplicity of cues so that ordinary people might understand where a work is going, even if they don't grasp all of its references, vectors, dimensions, and so on. There should be an element that suggests that the work is a step away from the "what is," that it operates on a meta or symbolic level.

FISKE What struck me about the items for sale was their worn, almost textural quality. Each encodes its own idiosyncratic history. This stands in contrast to an artist like Haim Steinbach, who displays shiny, unmodified objects on shelves.

ROSLER Well, I'm probably more Frankfurt School than Haim. I've been influenced, like so many others in my generation, by their way of talking about consumer society and culture. I read Walter Benjamin on the encoding of meaning in objects based on wear and use only after I held the first garage sale. His thinking resonated deeply with my own. It stems from Marx's idea of commodity fetishism, whereby the labor of production falls away and objects appear to gain autonomous lives. In the Garage Sale monologue, I quote the section in *Capital* on commodity fetishism to discuss how we give meaning to objects and what it means for me to sell personal effects, like my baby's shoes: all questions that come to mind when you move beyond an abstract analysis of the life of objects and people's relation to them.

FISKE You've included many items-film cassette ribbons, VHS tapes, outdated electric toothbrushes, a Macintosh from the 1980s-that are obsolete, broken or seemingly irrecuperable. The show's centerpiece is a 1981 Mercedes without an engine. What do you feel is achieved through presenting these cast-off, vaguely ridiculous objects?

ROSLER The Mercedes actually sold. It's a candidatefor biodiesel, and we had several bids on it. And, hey, I sold a used car in the atrium of MoMA! But obsolescence... Well, the editor of the newspaper, Sarah Resnick, published my essay on obsolescence from *October*. I wrote it in 2002, in the aftermath of September 11th. More so than recuperation, obsolescence is central to the economy, and obsolete electronics really are the major waste of our time. That's, in part, why there were so many old cameras, old computers, typewriters, turntables, records, and so forth. Their presence points to an important product of our society. We romanticize the just-past of commodity: it is haunted by the nostalgic memories of our childhoods, shorn of contradictions and conflict.

FISKE Much of your work, such as "Bringing the War Home" [1967-72], has been concerned with collapsing distinctions between

the private and the public. You've spoken of the inherently personal nature of garage sales: the way in which the items for sale offer a portrait of the seller, a definition of self through commodities. Some of the objects in the atrium were intensely private, such as the musty photo albums of weddings and anniversaries. At the same time, garage sales are of necessity public events.

ROSLER They enter a liminal realm between the public and the private. That in-between position is especially interesting now that we have trouble knowing where the line between public and private really falls. For example, I'm sure you heard the fuss over Instagram saying that it can sell your photos or put them near ads and so on. When you agree to a website's terms of service, you're agreeing that your personal data will be mined—and even if you don't agree, it will be. Facebook follows people even when they're not signed into Facebook—and it's not just social media that track you. On the one hand, people want to get on with it, but when confronted with the facts—"We can do this"—they're shocked. As private information increasingly becomes public, people no longer seem to know where to locate the two.

FISKE In the far left corner of the atrium, almost hidden by the piles and racks of other wares, was a table labeled "Porn and Underwear," where skin magazines from the 1990s were stacked near used lingerie. What was the importance of including racy, outré items?

ROSLER In the monologue, I ask: "Will you judge me by the things I sell?" Because, through my things, I am, in a sense, admitting to who I am. This "dirty" area offers another form of portraiture, another way of talking about what we may or may not wish to disclose. It's my gesture to pornography and to shame. But also, of course, the representation of women is encapsulated in this section in a very different way than it is at the front of the sale-and I do conceive of the sale as having a front and a back. I wanted to create a theatrical setting, such as [sociologist] Erving Goffman discussed, with things that are "backstage" being hidden from public view, but rarely successfully. The show's space is mapped like a stage set, with the most highly lit part at the front and the dimmer vistas toward the rear. But this is also where the map ("the Garage Sale as metaphor for the mind" idea) takes on the qualities of Freud's division of the mind into conscious, subconscious and unconscious—though in that map the sections are more likely vertical than horizontal, as the Garage Sale must be.

FISKE Throughout your career, you've refused to ground your practice in a specific, studio-based medium. What appeals to you about engaging with such a diversity of media?

ROSLER It's too limiting to stick with one medium! Different media demand different things from the viewer. One of the reasons that I've worked with some of the forms that I have is that they bypass the idea of an audience in favor of participants. Shades of Allan Kaprow! But, of course, it also comes out of Abstract Expressionism.

Photography has always fascinated me-on the one hand for its casualness and on the other for its ability to make infinite demands on form. Although it pretends to be a cut into life, a photograph is a boundedfield, like a canvas. At the same time as it purports to carry some intrinsic meaning about the world, photography has insisted, from its beginning, on revealing something beyond simply the optical "what is." In the late 1960s, once I realized that Michael Fried was right in his description of presentness versus presence but wrong in his choice, and that theatricality was actually where art was, I began to work with installation, which was just being invented at the time. As for other media, they step away from confrontation with these questions and engage instead with things like possession and desire.

FISKE As you discuss in the *Garage Sale Standard,* the garage sale is an event with a history unique to postwar America. At the same time, it engages with the present, assuming new meanings each time that it's staged. For example, in your published discussion with Sabine Breitwieser, you speak to the impact of Hurricane Sandy on the installation.

ROSLER Well, as I've said before, desire is always in the present. It has no future and no past. It always is now. And now is not just the now of wanting but also the now of being, of experience. The Garage Sale is built on desire, which is why I don't discuss where the money goes, because it's not a charity event, even though I don't keep the money. It's an event in which you want something, and I'm either the good person who lets you have it or the bad person who impedes your desire. Its transcendent dimension is present in the universe of discourse in which it resides, not in my selling you something or your wanting something. It goes back to what I said earlier about Pop. The garage sale admits to having another dimension, somewhere, whereas Pop could never admit it. "Who, us? We're just having fun!"

Related Articles

MARTHA ROSLER

Artists have been deeply engaged in occupations in the U.S., Europe, Canada, and Australia, as well as manifestations in Japan, Hong Kong, and Moscow. These occupations famously have drawn inspiration from the uprisings across the Arab world, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, driven by the frustration of the young educated middle classes—fairly new ones, confronting societies controlled by hugely rich ruling elites but with little hope of a secure future for themselves, despite their university educations. But that is not the whole story, only the one about thwarted expectations. Another story is about denied expectations, and yet another about none at all. In other words, it is about the rising middle class, modernizing elites, and the aspiring-to-middle-class members of the working class, and those who know they had no chance. (As is so often the case, it seems that food was the original spark, in Algeria.) I am talking about the ongoing and recent tuition revolts in Quebec, Chile, and the U.K.; about the movements in Spain and Greece, and the huge housing encampments spurred by an art student in Israel; about the working-class statehouse occupation and push-back in Madison, Wisconsin; and the earlier rebellion of the banlieues in France, and the teachers in Oaxaca. Obvious differences aside, Occupy protesters are aware of sharing conditions in this long-term global financial sinkhole that are functionally quite similar. To put it simply, they share an awareness that the future, which should be theirs, is manifestly in the hands of others, who have grabbed it with both fists.

Occupy seems to be in a direct line from the alt-globalization movement, including the World Social forums, but to have little connection to the antiwar movement of the past decade, for most of which it was difficult to get young people into the streets. I'm relieved not to have to explain the need to get out there en masse to people who were inclined to cynically dismiss mass protest as manifestly ineffective (hey, kids, that's what our elders told us back in the '60s, that it's the tactic of the past—it's over!), since the huge demonstrations in early 2003 didn't stop the war. It's exhilarating to see the mobilizations; but it's not so great to see the American ones refusing to also follow an electoral strategy just as we did back in the day. We also believed that (socialist) revolution was just around the corner, and refused to vote. I've changed my mind about voting (less painful than a dental visit, and takes less time too!), but why should they change theirs?

There hasn't been much of a vocal presence of the organized left in Occupy; the alt-globalization movement found its theoretical basis during the period when the end of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc had removed the underpinnings of most of the left, organized and unorganized, while political movements refounded themselves in anarchism(s) and ecologies. But earlier generations of protesters, from the '60s movements whose biggest component was organized, from the left, against war and racism, quickly fell in with Occupy, greeting it as more than simply critically

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necessary—as the biggest thing to happen in ages. (Feminist messages, however, still need to be relearned, it seems.) Labor, much straitened, supported Occupy as well. (Teachers and academics too.) Important differences between then and now account for the lower levels of animosity and rejection. In the Cold War 1960s and '70s a leading sector of organized labor, the Teamsters and building trades, as the representative of (white, male) patriotic manhood of real America—in Nixon's term, the silent majority—had prominently clashed with the mobilizations of the streets, identified as dirty fucking hippies and communists—and not without reason. This time around that doesn't play so well.

The movements of the 1960s were largely rejectionist: antinationalist and anticapitalist, and often antiurban, and some were insurrectionary. It was easy to organize opposition to them on the basis of appeals to traditional values: the same ones that engendered the political backlash driving Republican strategy to this day. But American flags are not burned but fly at Occupy camps as they have been at Tea Party rallies. Ex-soldiers have joined up, in uniform and not, as they did during and after Vietnam even though this time there was no draft: so much for the doctrine of the professional army.

In the '60s, the nation was fairly prosperous; wages were rising and many people were entering the middle class, defined economically for some and in terms of social position for others. Indeed, that was the last time all this could be said to be true, as wages have stagnated or dropped since then, and the economy is flat or cratering. People all over, including those unmotivated to become involved, recognize the issue as their own, and so far at least passersby clap and honk when Occupy mobilizes. The narrative is of saving the nation from the banksters: we are the 99%, both nationally and globally.

The summer of 2011 was a summer of rumbling discontent in the U.S., and there was already a New York encampment against budget cuts—Bloombergville, after the mayor, modeling itself on the Walkerville tent city in Wisconsin—and the convening of a group calling itself the New York General Assembly (NYGA). By the time *Adbusters,* that fancy artist/hipster magazine out of Canada, put out a call to occupy Wall Street, artists had already been meeting with theorists and activists nearby. Anarchist and anthropologist David Graeber, famously, is implicated in these events (well known in the alt-globalization mobilizations, he wrote articles in *Adbusters* before its call to occupy Wall Street, the epicenter of the financial crisis, asking, "If in Egypt, why not here?"), but not only he. Before the occupation proper, artists (including me) participated in late August of 2011 in a seminar on debt and the commons; presenters were Silvia Federici, George Caffentzis, and Graeber, who had just published his giant history of debt. Debt and theft were on everybody's minds. The seminar was held at 16 Beaver, the artist-run discursive space in the Wall Street district. In attendance were David Harvey and some Spanish *indignados/encampados,* as well as the Greek anarchist artist Georgia Sagri, who quickly formed a tactical alliance with Graeber, and they joined up with the NYGA on September 17, 2011, helping to introduce anarchist forms and procedures.

The artistic imagination continues to dream of historical agency. Artists, like other participants, wish to lend themselves to social transformation and utopian dreaming, but not necessarily within institutionalized frames. Unruly for quite a few centuries now, artists are perpetually chafing against the dead hand of society, the mechanistic juggernaut of mass destruction that Surrealists saw in modern industrial society, with its hypercapitalist alienation and exploitation. We can see the Occupation activists as setting up a new public sphere, demanding the reinstatement of politics by refusing to simply present demands to representative governments and instead enacting democracy, challenging institutions of exploitation, and making theater out of procedure. Artists have a reputation for being difficult to organize, but there is always a sector ready to organize itself around a cause, an activity, an action—perhaps not anarchistic but anarcho-syndicalist? This is a good time for that. It is not simply as image makers and symbol wranglers that artists have chosen their means of participation but also as organizers, occupiers, strategizers, publicizers, spokespeople, working-group members, and librarians.

Artists are also always disposed to point to the deceptions and shortcomings of those whom they appear to serve—the 1%, in present terms—and perhaps like all unruly servants, especially the ones who feel they could do a much better job of running things, they have plans for changing the world. I plan to be there.

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For an Art against the Mythology of Everyday Life

1. Where do ideas come from? All the myths of everyday life stitched together form a seamless envelope of ideology, the false account of the workings of the world. The interests served by ideology are not human interests properly defined; rather, ideology serves society by shoring up its particular form of social organization. Ideology in class society serves the interests of the class that dominates. In our society, that ideology is held up as the only possible set of attitudes and beliefs, and we are all more or less impelled to adopt them, and to identify ourselves as members of the "middle class," a mystified category based on vague and shifting criteria, including income levels, social status, and identification, that substitutes for an image of the dominant class and its real foundations of social power.

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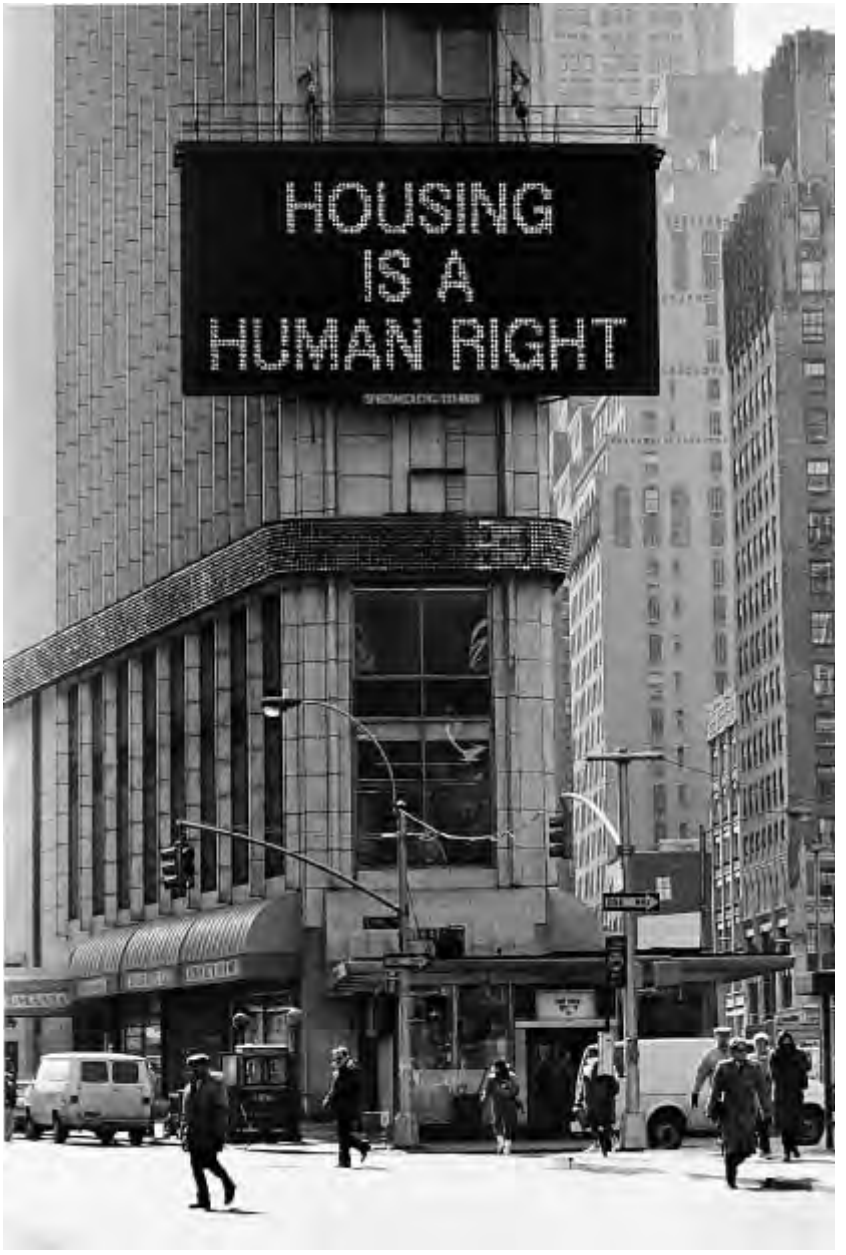

Martha Rosler, *Housing Is a Human Right,* 1989. Times Square, New York. Still from short Spectacolor animation sponsored by the Public Art Fund in its series *Messages to the Public.*

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 consumption 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.

Our mode of economic organization, in which people seem less important than the things they produce, prompts us to stand reality on its head by granting the aura of life to things and draining it from people: *We personify objects and objectify persons.* This fetishism of commodities, as Marx termed it, is not a universal mental habit; it has its origins in a productive system in which we are split off from our own productive capacities, our ability to make or to do things, which is transformed into a commodity itself, the abstract leveler "labor power," which is saleable to the boss for wages. We experience this condition as alienation from ourselves as well as from others. We best comprehend ourselves as social entities in looking at pictures of ourselves, assuming the voyeur's role with respect to our own images; we best know ourselves from within in looking through the viewfinder at other people and things.

Those who aspire to move upward socially are led to develop superfluous skills—gourmet cooking, small-boat navigation—whose real cultural significance is extravagant, well-rationalized consumerism and the cultivation of the self. These skills, in seeking legitimation, mimic skills once necessary to life; skills which, moreover, were tied to a form of social organization that we think of as less alienated and more familial than our own. Things—in this case, skills—that once were useful and productive are now reseen through the

haze of commodification, and we are sold back what we imagine as our ancestral heritage. People's legitimate desire for meaningful, creative work and for self-determination is thus forced into a conformingly reactionary mode of expression.

At the same time, women, trapped in an economically unproductive and often unsatisfying activity or relegated to low-paying, low-status jobs on top of home and family maintenance, see entrance into the job and skill marketplace as an emancipation from economic dependency and as a chance to gain a social identity now mostly denied us. Yet many of us can see that moving from slavery to indentured status, so to speak—to "wage slavery" or more privileged types of paying work—is only a partial advance. And arrayed against us now are not just an escalating right-wing reaction against our demands for equality with men and deceitful attacks on our bodily self-determination but also the marketing of new commodifications of our lives, resting on the language of liberation. While we achieve greater acceptance in the job market, we seem to slip back toward object status, accepting without complaint the new ways in which we remain defined by *how we look* and by the style in which we *perform* our lives. Meanwhile, merchandisers strive to extend an obligatory narcissism to men. New expressions of sexuality play upon pretend transferences of power from men to women and the symbolic acting out of rebellion and punishment. Again the desire for self-determination is drowned in a shower of substitutions and repressions.

2. How does one address these banally profound issues of everyday life, thereby revealing the public and political in the personal? It seems reasonable to me to use forms that suggest and refer to mass-cultural forms without simply mimicking them. Television, for example, is, in its most familiar form, one of the primary conduits of 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, is also its danger. The rootedness in an I, the most seductive encoding of *convincingness,* suggests an absolute inability to transcend the individual con-

sciousness. And consciousness is the domain of ideology, so that the logic of at least the first-person narrative is that there is no appeal from ideology, no *metacritical* level. Given the pervasive relativism of our society, according to which only the personal is truly knowable and in which all opinions are equally valid outside the realm of science, the first-person narrative suggests the unretrievability of objective human and social truth. At most, one or another version of the dominant ideology is reinforced.

Yet this inability to speak truth is the failure not so much of narrative as of the naturalism that is taken as narrative's central feature. Break the bonds of that naturalism and the problem vanishes. One can provide a critical dimension and invoke matters of truth by referring explicitly to the ideological confusions that naturalism can only falsify through omission. A character who speaks in contradictions or who fails to manage the socially necessary sequence of behaviors can eloquently index the unresolvable social contradictions—starvation in the midst of plenty, gourmetism as a form of imperialism, rampant inflation and impoverishment alongside bounding corporate profits—that underlie ideological confusion, and make them stand out clearly.

3. In dealing with issues of personal life in my own work, in particular how people's thoughts and interests can be related to their social positions, I use a variety of different forms, most of which are 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 provides an element of familiarity and also signals my interest in real-world concerns, as well as giving me the chance to take on those cultural forms, to interrogate them, so to speak, about their meaning within society. In video, for example, I see the opportunity to do work that falls into a natural dialectic with TV itself. A woman in a bare-bones kitchen demonstrating some hand tools and replacing their domesticated "meaning" with a lexicon of rage and frustration is an antipodean Julia Child. 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 or a low-budget appliance ad. An 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.

4. In choosing representational strategies, I have avoided the naturalism that I mentioned earlier as being that which locks narrative into an almost inevitably uncritical relation to culture. Rather, 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. In video I tend to seek this effect with a wrenched pacing and bent space; an immovable shot or, conversely, the obvious movement or the unexpected edit, pointing to the mediating agencies of photography and speech; long shots rather than close-ups, to deny psychological intensity; contradictory utterances; humor and burlesque; and, in acting, flattened affect, histrionics, theatricality, or staginess. In written texts I also use humor and satire, and I may move a character through impossible development or have her display contradictory thoughts and behavior or, conversely, an unlikely transcendent clarity. In photography I pass up single-image revelations and often join photos with text.

5. There is another critical issue to consider: the choosing or seeking of an audience. I feel that the art world does not suffice, and I try to make my work accessible to as many people outside the art audience as I can effectively reach. Cultural products can never bring about substantive changes in society, yet they are indispensable to any movement that is working to bring about such changes. The clarification of vision is a first step toward reasonably and humanely changing the world.