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List of Contents

Meena Alexander Post-Colonial Theatre of Sense: The Art of Chila Kumari Burman	4
Katrin Kivimaa Introducing Sexual Difference into Estonian Art Feminist Tendencies during the 1990s	14
Reviewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s: Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler College Art Association Conference panel papers, February 2001 (14, Feb 2001)	
Lisa Bloom (chair) Opening Remarks and CV's of contributors (14, Feb 2001)	30
Alison Rowley Exhibiting Martha Rosler? A Feminist Response to martha rosler: positions in the life world (14, Feb 2001)	35
Catherine Caesar Martha Rosler's Critical Position within Feminist Conceptual Practices (14, Feb 2001)	43
Ruth Wallen The Legacy of 1970s Feminist Artistic Practices on Contemporary Activist Art (14, Feb 2001)	52
Lucy Soutter Community vs. Context in the Reception of Eleanor Antin's Retrospective (14, Feb 2001)	61
Alexander Alberro Discussant's closing remarks (14, Feb 2001)	67
Diary of an Ageing Art Slut	74

Exhibiting “Martha Rosler”? A feminist response to martha rosler: positions in the life world.

Alison Rowley

Between December 5 1998 and January 30 1999, the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, England produced the first retrospective of the work of Martha Rosler in collaboration with the Generali Foundation, Vienna. I was surprised. At that moment I was teaching on the MA programme in Feminist Historical, Theoretical and Critical Studies in the Visual Arts at the University of Leeds, where we study Martha Rosler’s practice as a major contribution to the feminist critique of modernism. In the same pedagogical context Mary Kelly’s 1981 *Screen* article ‘Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism’ is an equally indispensable text. Taking the temporary exhibition system as the framework for an analysis of the ‘effects and limitations’ of modernist criticism, the article inevitably provokes questions about the function of the retrospective as a type of temporary exhibition.¹

Typically, the retrospective surveys a body of work by a single artist over a chosen period or an entire life. It looks back, constructing a developmental narrative of progress towards creative autonomy, serving bourgeois mythologies of self-realization and self-possession. Thematic and procedural change are keyed to biographical incident, customarily presented chronologically on information panels and in exhibition notes. Characteristically, the retrospective event corresponds with the monograph and the catalogue raisonné, discursive structures in which, ‘an artistic subject for works of art’ is realized in the field of at history, as Griselda Pollock has demonstrated.² From the standpoint of Kelly’s analysis the retrospective, typically organized at the most spectacular and prestigious of the culture industry’s

sites of public entertainment and instruction, conclusively secures modernist criticism's production of artistic authorship, 'in the fundamental form of the bourgeois subject; "creative, autonomous, proprietorial".'³

For 35 years the practice we associate with the name "Martha Rosler" has evaded and rigorously critiqued precisely the production of artistic authorship in this form. This paper is a response to the experience of visiting *martha rosler: positions in the life world* in Birmingham in December 1998 and in New York in August 2000. It aims to register various effects of re-circulating a practice firmly rooted in 1970s and 1980s feminist critique of modernism as modernism's exemplary statement in the exhibition system. It is offered as an approach to what I take to be the fundamental question we have been invited to address in this session: in what ways did this exhibition contribute to the historicization of feminist art?

Birmingham is a large industrial city situated in Britain's West Midlands. Though not situated in London at the centre of the British art scene, the Ikon Gallery is, nevertheless, one of Europe's leading venues for contemporary art. Awarded 3.7 million pounds from the lottery commission in 1995, the Ikon reopened in 1998 in its present location on three floors of a Victorian school building. A bookshop and cafe occupy the ground floor. The first and second floors have been refurbished as a series of white cube exhibition spaces. This is a trend characteristic of gallery refurbishment in Britain in the mid-1990s, representing a restatement of what Kelly identified as the "pictorial paradigm" of modernist criticism - the essentially expressive and non-discursive picture - at the level of the display of art practice.⁴

Each room on both floors of the Ikon was filled to capacity with examples of Martha Rosler's work from 1966 through to 1995, installed more or less chronologically with 1960s and 1970s work on the first floor, 1980s and 1990s on the second. In spaces packed with material, visual on walls, floor and hanging from the ceiling, in colour and black and white, image and text; acoustic through headphones and from video monitors it was not easy to determine where one piece ended and another began. Had the installation been planned as the latest manifestation of the Monumental Garage Sale? This is a serious idea supported by the fact that in New York Martha Rosler set up a garage sale in the public access space at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in which she mixed her own possessions with those of others. A sign in the garage sale installation reads, 'What if the garage sale is a metaphor for the mind?'

Martha Rosler's practice has played a crucial part in breaking the modernist myth that art was a domain apart from society and immune to politics and power. She has always made work for circulation in galleries and museums and recently confirmed that she 'has no intention of giving up on the museum and gallery audience.'⁵ At the same time, though, a commitment to reaching a wider public beyond the museum and gallery-going audience is fundamental to her practice. This has involved collaboration, with unknown participants in the mail works for instance, and in specific events involving groups of people, in particular places at particular times. The project *If you*

Lived Here is a significant example. The display of accumulated material associated with strategic collaboration and collective action in a retrospective whose title begins with the proper name martha rosler necessarily produces it as the metaphor of a single, an individual artist's mind.

Martha Rosler has said that the mode of distribution for the post card pieces was 'ineluctably the mail, and when they are shown in art world institutions, they are representing themselves as mail works.'⁶ Likewise, *Fascination with the (Game of the) Exploding (Historical) Hollow Leg*, represented itself at the Ikon Gallery as a site-specific piece. While *Unknown Secrets (The Secret of the Rosenbergs)* was made for gallery distribution, it was originally exhibited in a group show called *Unknown Secrets: Art and the Rosenberg Era*. In that particular context the material elements of the piece, the towel rack, stenciled towel and JELL-O box, the information sheet would surely have had a critical resonance lacking in the Ikon installation. Although it was fascinating to see the elements of such works in the flesh, discrete display disabled their critical capacity. Conversely their presence may have disabled the critical capacity of one group of visitors to the exhibition.

For a feminist visitor of my generation (not quite old enough to be of Martha Rosler's, but not young enough to be post what it stands for) displaying the material remains of activities that originally set out to reach beyond the gallery system carries a danger. It risks producing relics in the religious sense. Not the actual finger of St Martha, but holy material all the same. Imbued in these post feminist, post Marxist days with the mystique of its indexical relation to Martha Rosler's history of feminist/Marxist informed "guerrilla" strategies planned from positions once on the margins of the art world. Was this, perhaps an effect contributing to the critical silence surrounding the exhibition at the Ikon? For to give a direct answer to the question, how did martha rosler: positions in the life world reopen public debates about the generational shifts in "feminist art" and curatorial practices? In Britain it didn't. Feminists of my own generation involved in cultural politics failed to respond to the exhibition, with the exception of one notable review, to which I shall return.

Asked by Michael Rush in an interview in *The New York Times* about her position on re-presenting in the gallery work for which originally the gallery was not the primary mode of distribution, Martha Rosler answered:

'So much of my work involved the Vietnam War that it would have been obscene to show it in a gallery. But now, it's different; it's important to remember and to enable the young to discover what to some of us is still so present.'⁷

As one involved in precisely this task in relation to a history of the feminist problematic in the visual arts, I would be the last to deny the importance of preserving and re-circulating this dimension of Martha Rosler's practice. What I puzzle about is how to do it in a way that keeps the work open and productive of ongoing critical meanings.

Many more of Martha Rosler's non-gallery projects were documented in a Resource Area at the Ikon. Here I was engrossed in archives filled with detailed

research, records of planning, action and reception. Thinking forwards replaced looking back as I began to imagine new projects informed by, and engaging with the events documented there. The Ikon's gallery's advance publicity material announced that in association with positions in the life world. Martha Rosler would be involved in a project with the community in Birmingham. I waited to see what this would be, curious to know how it would inflect the central exhibition event. It never materialized. Regional art world rivalry defeated a proposed project in Manchester with *The Big Issue*, Britain's street magazine sold to provide for its homeless vendors. Such a project would have re-engaged with *If You Lived Here* in a different location, at a different historical moment. What if the project had gone ahead?

That was Birmingham in 1998. In New York in 2000, *martha rosler: positions in the life world* was presented in two venues, one uptown at the International Center of Photography on Fifth Avenue and 94th Street, one downtown, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in Soho. While determined more by practical than conceptual considerations, the spatio-temporal disposition of the exhibition nevertheless functioned as a challenge to the conventions of the retrospective, structurally inhibiting spatial and temporal continuity. How many people visited both parts of the show on the same day for instance - or only bothered to go to one? A desire for integrity was variously registered in the reviews. Howard Cotter wrote:

'Despite the split in venues and Ms Rosler's long standing habit of dividing her energies among several media at once, the show is of a piece. It is crowded, garrulous, agitated and funny - the subway ride uptown from the new Museum feels like an extension of it - and all but inseparable from the urban landscape that is Ms Rosler's native milieu.'⁹

The language is revealing. Cotter perceives the show as split rather than, say, shared between the two venues. The curatorial decision is characterized as an act of outright brutality in Martha Schwendener's review for *Time Out New York*: 'the show's literally been ripped in two', she writes, 'and it feels that way.'¹⁰ The capacity of the gallery as container and frame to rescue 'a semblance of propriety' (Kelly) for an artist with the disconcerting habit of "dividing her energies among several media at once", was indeed curtailed by installing the show in two sites. Delivering a backhanded compliment, Cotter remarked that *martha rosler: positions in the life world* looked 'less like a solo exhibition than a lively collaborative effort.'¹¹ The trip through town involved in visiting the show prompted him to assert that its contents were 'all but inseparable from the urban landscape that is Ms. Rosler's native milieu.'¹² Superficially the assertion could be taken as confirmation of the success of Rosler's intention that her practice engage with everyday life. Given a little more thought it is an interpretation that robs the work of its status as representation. It fails to recognize, or acknowledge a sophisticated signifying practice always in a critical relation to ideologies shaping the urban environment and dominating everyday life.

The most striking element of the New Museum installation was the sound. It

was loud. The volume of competing audio tracks of various pieces was so uncomfortable I actually worried for the health of the guards. The activities of looking at still and moving images, and concentrating to read a lot of text were difficult, exhausting, stressful even in the acoustic environment of the installation. Incredibly none of the reviewers, and no one I spoke with in New York who had visited the New Museum, mentioned the sound. Maybe New Yorkers are inured to high noise levels. Or was it an indicator of something else? Had the installation, in fact, brilliantly exposed the persistence of the ideology of modernist criticism – the pictorial paradigm – at the level of the reception of the exhibition even in the presence of such an insistent acoustic pull on the visitors attention. We expect to look at retrospectives not listen to them. In the realm of sound past pieces became elements in a new installation that worked to deconstruct the spectacle of looking back which defines the conventional retrospective as a nexus of sight, autonomy, mastery and commodification. In her use of sound at the New Museum Martha Rosler extended the analysis of sexuality in the field of vision fundamental to feminist practice, as a structural challenge to the retrospective's primary mode of reception. Moreover, photocopies of longer textual elements of pieces like *The Secret of the Rosenbergs* and *The Restoration of High Culture in Chile* were available for the visitor to take away and read in peace.

The International Center of Photography chose to focus on the ways in which Martha Rosler's work 'deliberately engages with the traditions of documentary photography.'¹³ Access to the video work at the ICP in an environment conducive to prolonged viewing, served to demonstrate an equally deliberate engagement with the traditions of "documentary" film-making. The work of Eisenstein, and filmmakers concerned with exploring and reconfiguring the Soviet tradition in response to the political and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s, crucially inform all aspects of Rosler's practice. Her work is part of the 1970s moment of feminism's affiliation with the other strand of modernism. Not Greenbergian formalism, but the avant-garde dis-identificatory practices of Brecht and filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet who, informed by Brecht, aimed at revealing the workings of bourgeois ideologies as a politics of vision and sound in cinema.

Martha Rosler admires *History Lessons*, made in 1972 by the Straub-Huillet team. For long stretches of the film the camera is situated inside a car that a man drives around the streets of modern Rome. We get a documentary view of the city and hear its sounds recorded directly. These sequences alternate with conversations about Julius Caesar the man seen driving the car has with a number of actors dressed as ancient Romans representing different positions in Roman society. The memory of the driving sequences reappears in an obvious way in Rosler's work in *Rights of Passage*. The fundamental lesson of *History Lessons* and all Straub/Huillet films is that we must attend to the means of our access to history. Accordingly their practice involves

materializing the transaction between image and reality particular to film making, and it made a startling return for me at the New Museum, not looking at *Rights of Passage*, but listening to *A Budding Gourmet*. There is a moment when a passage from Schubert's quartet 'Death and the Maiden' cuts in behind the sound of a woman's voice expressing the hope that learning gourmet cooking will make her a better person. We see the head of a woman, but in silhouette, so it is not clear if the words are coming from the mouth of the body on the screen. The piece takes as its starting point the representational conventions of public television, but it proceeds to combine different modes of address and lay bare the devices of construction so that we have to think about the conflicting ways the material is offered to us.

In her intelligent review of *martha rosler: positions in the life world* in Birmingham for *Afterimage*, Nancy Roth took up the question of history raised by exhibiting the work as a retrospective. For Roth the exhibition presented 'history, as careful description of specific conditions that many people have shared over time'. She understood the exhibition as, 'a way of doing history other than exclusively writing it', suggesting that Martha Rosler, 'used the gallery rather than pages of text to "publish" a scene, site or set of physical conditions.'¹⁴ It is true that even framed as a retrospective in the most pristine of white gallery spaces Martha Rosler's work still implies the social spaces and signifying systems of culture beyond that frame, and produces a critical presence for specific events invisible within, and constituencies silenced by dominant culture. For *The Guardian* newspaper's reviewer Adrian Searle, however, the histories presented in the exhibition have been more 'precisely and incisively' represented in books in works of fiction like Don De Lilo's *Underworld*.¹⁵ This is a pointless judgment in which Searle abdicates his critical responsibility to review the exhibition as exactly that, an exhibition, and 'precisely and incisively' address the ways in which Rosler's work reconfigured the kind of looking back conventionally associated with the retrospective. Searle's review can be read, though, as another effect of the limitations of an exhibition form, still so heavily invested with modernist expectations at the level of reception, for the ongoing capacity of Rosler's work to produce critical meanings.

When Godard complained that Straub and Huillet's film *The Chronical of Anna Magdalena Bach* did not have enough relevance to contemporary problems, Straub replied that the film was his contribution to the struggle of the North Vietnamese against the Americans.¹⁶ *Chronical* was made in 1968 at the time Martha Rosler was working on the *Bringing the War Home* series. Both are responses to the same historical event but provide different modes of artistic access to it. What if they were shown together as an exhibition event? The space of the retrospective cannot accommodate such a meeting. We must also attend to the ways in which the culture industry produces the history and meaning of aesthetic practices and their relation to the life world.

Surely the major legacy of feminist interventions in culture since the late 1960s is a radical reconceptualization of the function of artistic practice and its institutional sites. Women in positions of power in the curatorial field have made a

difference. Elizabeth MacGregor and Sabine Breitwieser are both committed to showing work made by women. I returned to the New Museum of Contemporary art in December to visit the Adrian Piper retrospective. On our MA in feminism, criticism and practice module at Leeds students often present the two bodies of work in the same session. Crucial and productive points of correspondences and difference arise in the encounter. The current re-circulation of art practices which engaged with feminist politics in the in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s as self contained retrospectives indicates to me that the historicization of the feminist problematic in art today is crucially 'the question of institutions, the conditions which determine the reading of artistic texts and the strategies which would be appropriate for interventions.'¹⁷

Rather than end this paper with a backward look I want to move forwards towards reading work Martha Rosler is making now. All I have time to do here is repeat Martha Rosler's own twice-repeated gesture in respect of it. At the last minute she decided to include *Adventures Underground*, an episode from an ongoing work called *Dreams and Transports*, in the installation at the International Centre of Photography. At the very end of her talk at the New Museum Rosler introduced *Dreams and Transports* without further comment.¹⁸ A sequence of slide images of underground stations, platforms with staff, and travellers in train carriages was projected on the wall whose reverse side formed part of the stairwell at the ICP in which the airport space images of *In the Place of the Public* were installed. I found the juxtaposition the most compelling moment in the whole exhibition - this work was going somewhere else. The text element of *Dream and Transports* is, in fact, about movement:

'Movement defines the era. Looking back on the century, we understand the linkage of information and transportation (and their inevitable dark double, mass death) - movement of people as well as of goods...The separate worlds of the 'underground' and of air travel mirror each other, for each requires a population controlled, surveilled, and kept from panic...The rapid movement through subway tunnels evokes flight (especially for child travelers) while the effort of airlines is to deny its reality.

Both forms of transport answer to the most rational need of capital but at the same time evoke a world of experience both conscious and unconscious. This maps out for us the world of the everyday, the common ground of both "reality" and metaphor.'¹⁹

Title and text evoke the work of the two great thinkers of the last century, Marx and Freud. What they thought about of course, in different ways, was history, our means of access to it.

Notes

1. Mary Kelly 'Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism' *Screen* vol.22, no. 3 (1981) p.41, also in M.Kelly *Imaging Desire* (MIT, 1999).

2. Griselda Pollock 'Artists, Mythologies and Media - Genius, Madness and Art History' *Screen*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1980), p.58. It should be noted that this essay prompted and informed the writing of 'Reviewing Modernist Criticism' and repays reading as a companion piece to it.
3. Mary Kelly, 'Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism' *Screen* vol.22, no. 3 (1981) p. 47.
4. *Ibid.* p. 43. The renovation of Site Gallery in Sheffield and the Serpentine Gallery in London also involved reinforcing the white cube model.
5. Martha Rosler during a panel discussion with Brian Wallis and Dan Cameron at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, 8th August 2000.
6. 'Benjamin Buchloh: A Conversation with Martha Rosler' in *martha rosler: positions in the life world*, edited by Catherine de Zegher (Ikon Gallery and Generali Foundation,1998), p. 45.
7. Michael Rush 'A Pure Artist is Embraced by the Art World' *The New York Times* 9 July 2000, pp.29-29.
8. Information provided by Martha Rosler in conversation with me in New York, August 2000.
9. Howard Cotter 'An Iconoclast to Whom the Personal Is Always Political' *The New York Times* 4 August 2000.
10. Martha Schwendener 'No Compromise' *Time Out* New York 17-24 August 2000, pp. 62-63.
11. Howard Cotter 'An Iconoclast to Whom the Personal Is Always Political' *The New York Times* 4 August 2000.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Brian Wallis, Chief Curator, ICP, on the introductory information panel and gallery notes.
14. Nancy Roth 'Decoys and Documents' *Afterimage* July/August 1999 p. 12.
15. Adrian Searle 'Dedicated follower of Convention', *The Guardian* 12 January 1999 pp.10-11.
16. Quoted by Richard Roud in his book, *Straub* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 71.
17. Mary Kelly 'Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism' p. 57.
18. Lisa Bloom generously provided me with an audio tape of Martha Rosler in a panel discussion with Brian Wallis and Dan Cameron in New York 8/8/00.
19. From my copy of the wall text at the International Center of photography.

This paper was presented at the 89th College Art Association conference in the panel 'Reviewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s: Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler' Chicago, February 28-March 3 2001.

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