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Martha Rosler's Critical Position within Feminist Conceptual Practices

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Martha Rosler was one of a few women artists who, in the late 1960s and 1970s, inflected conceptualism with a feminist agenda. She used conceptual techniques to critique beauty standards imposed on women by the media and to reveal the economic and sexual exploitation of women. Yet prior to her recent retrospective her work has been noticeably absent from the discourse of both conceptual art and early feminist art. [1] Nor has she been sufficiently analyzed in relation to her feminist conceptual peers such as Eleanor Antin and Adrian Piper. [2] In this paper, I attempt to reconstruct Rosler's placement within feminist conceptual practice and to explain her segregation from her artistic context. Despite the fact that Rosler employed conceptual techniques and created work committed to combating sexism, she deviated from certain aspects of some conceptual and feminist art. Specifically, Rosler opposed conceptual and feminist art when the artist's preoccupation with the self obscured the work's social relevance. To demonstrate this claim, I will show how Rosler's work fits into Rosalind Krauss's characterization of two strains of conceptualism: the first type of art stems from the private expressive self, while the second type of conceptual art, like Rosler's, rejects subjective expression and instead relies on the public to produce its meaning. This division is crucial to Rosler's work, for it makes clear her distinction from conceptual artists with no concern for the artwork's effect upon the viewer. She suggested that the prioritization of the private mental concept in an artwork could diminish concern for social change.

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Rosler perceived a similar solipsism in feminist art, describing the proliferation of autobiographical first person narratives as 'narcissistic'. When women artists focused exclusively on their personal lives, it hindered a critical relation to their surroundings necessary to the recognition of sexism. I will show how Rosler combats this narcissism by using fictional characters, or personae, rather than autobiography, transferring the focus of the work from Rosler herself to a social issue. Rosler's view stood in opposition to the sole definitions of feminist conceptual art delineated by critic Lucy Lippard in her 1973 all-women conceptual art exhibit entitled *c. 7500*. According to Lippard, women conceptualists inflected conceptual strategies with autobiographical content. Rosler's challenge to the unmediated use of autobiographical narratives distanced her from 1970s feminist art discourse such as Lippard's, which in turn contributed to her isolation from her feminist conceptualist peers: Antin and Piper, unlike Rosler, were included in Lippard's show. Ultimately, Rosler's exclusion from this original group of women conceptualists has resulted in a misunderstanding and a historical misplacement of Rosler's work: instead of being recognized as a first generation feminist artist inspired by women's liberation, she has often become associated with second generation feminist artists.

I will begin by discussing Rosler's position within conceptual art. In the mid-1960s, Rosler began producing artworks inspired by her activism, denouncing societal ills such as the violence of the Vietnam War. She employed a wide variety of media such as photomontage, postcards, installations and videos. Rosler chose easily-reproducible media and unconventional methods of transmission, such as the mail, to reach a wider audience. Rosler's association with conceptualists including Allan Sekula, Fred Lonidier, and Hans Haacke influenced her work.[3] Seeking new forums for display and employing inexpensive and mass-reproduced forms, these artists defied the uniqueness and preciousness traditionally associated with the fine art object. Like Rosler, Sekula, Lonidier and Haacke used non-valuable media to rebel against the art market, [4] while consistently featuring politically-charged subjects to rebel against contemporary societal injustices.

Like these conceptual artists, Rosler opposed the political apathy of some forms of conceptualism. I argue that Rosler would critique the first of the two types of conceptual practice that Rosalind Krauss outlined in her 1973 essay, 'Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post 1960s Sculpture'. According to Krauss, this first strain of conceptual art, embodied in the work of On Kawara, Douglas Huebler and Robert Barry, retains a privatized interior space. Krauss argues that the artist's idea or intent 'is understood as a prior mental event which we cannot see but for which the work now serves as testimony that it occurred.'[5] The artist's concept both forms and completes the work, and the concept remains private because the viewer cannot verify it. For example, Barry's interview for the *Prospect '69* exhibit serves as the entire work. Barry states in the interview: 'Some of my works consist of things in my unconscious. I also use things which are not communicable, unknowable.'[6] Barry's

work documents an experience to which only the artist can testify: the viewer takes no active part in its completion.

The second strain of conceptualism, according to Krauss, derives from minimalist art and is exemplified by the work of Sol Lewitt and Mel Bochner. These artists denied the object's ability to represent private experience; the viewer's interaction with the work comprises its meaning. Krauss argued that this strain of conceptual practice posits a notion of the self formed by experience, not a self that existed prior to contact with the world. I argue that Rosler's work is akin to this second body of conceptual work, because it is based on the conviction that the artist's idea only initiates the work, the work is not completed until the viewer translates their experience of it into a personal or social change. Moreover, Rosler's work and activism are predicated on the notion of the socially-constructed self. As she observed, 'I want to suggest the social stage on which events occur and people are formed... I'm interested in unfreezing the block of the current moment and suggesting some relationship to a social totality or larger entity than the single self.'[7]

To demonstrate Rosler's position within Krauss's mapping of conceptualism, I begin with her most recognized conceptual work *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* of 1974-75. In this project, she utilized two descriptive systems, photograph and text, placing them side by side in a grid formation. Yet Rosler considered these two methods of representation inadequate without a social context. She photographed images of New York City's Bowery, featuring decaying storefronts littered with empty liquor bottles. In the text accompanying the images, Rosler typed scattered words that refer to inebriation. Rosler's photography opposed a private authorial presence: 'Photography allowed me to generate an image and not to have it be a representation of my own interiority.'[8] Thus in the *Bowery* piece, she shifted the focus of the work away from herself as solitary expressive author and toward the social problem of homelessness.

In contrast to Rosler's *Bowery* work, Huebler's 1969 *Duration Piece #7*, which also juxtaposes text and image, refers solely to the artist's idea. In this work, Huebler snapped random photographs in Central Park at precise one-minute intervals and exhibited the photographs alongside a statement of his method. He emphasized the importance of his idea over the subject depicted and declared a complete lack of interest in the content of the photographs. Huebler stated 'the environment does not effect what I do and it is not affected by what I have done.'[9] Unlike Huebler, Rosler chose her subject purposefully: although she forefronts her method and construction of the artwork in the title, she also welcomed the reference to an actual environment. Her specification in the title of a site, the Bowery, declares Rosler's interest in the locale, in contrast to the text in *Duration Piece #7*, which documents only the artist's intent. Rosler's text, with its allusion to drunkenness and homelessness, refers to a human condition outside of her own experience and beyond her construction of the artwork.[10] Moreover, the ambiguity of the connection between

text and image in *The Bowery* requires the viewer to participate in discerning the meaning of the artwork. Ultimately, Rosler challenged conceptualism when it consisted of a private authorial statement with no concern for the experiencing audience or the artwork's social context.

If privatized authorial statements in conceptual art impeded the work's social reference, the uncritical use of autobiographical, private narratives had an even more deleterious effect on feminist art. Rosler, in her feminist artworks, used personae to counter feminist art that consists solely of autobiographical content. She wrote extensively on her use of the first person in her audio works, videos and postcard novels. In these works, she provided what appeared to be an autobiographical narrative, but in fact that narrative rarely referred to the specifics of Rosler's own life. [11] Instead, the "I" in her works represented a persona that distanced the viewer from Rosler herself and transferred the meaning of the work from the private to the public. Rosler's often humorous characters encouraged the viewer to recognize them as fictional personae. According to Rosler, if the viewer acknowledged the characters as constructions they were less likely to identify strictly on an emotional level with the characters. Instead, as Rosler asserted, the viewer's 'emotional recognition is coupled with a critical, intellectual understanding' of the work's meaning.[12] The audience could then apply this critical understanding to the social problems to which Rosler referred. In this way Rosler prevented interiority, or the expression of the artist's private experience which, untranslatable into public comprehension, lapses into solipsism rather than social awareness.

Rosler's use of personae in her feminist conceptual work counters conceptual art's reference to a private self. I demonstrate this distinction by comparing On Kawara's 1969 *'I got up'* postcard, an example of Krauss's first strain of conceptualism, to one of Rosler's postcard novels, *Tijuana Maid.* Rosler's postcard works, in contrast to Kawara's, featured a persona that shifted the attention away from herself. In each of her postcard novels of 1974-6, Rosler adopted a different persona who expressed herself in the first person. In *Tijuana Maid*, the narrator details her hardships as a Mexican maid working in San Diego, where her employers underpay, overwork, and even attempt to rape her. Rosler used the native language of the Mexican character: the *Tijuana Maid* postcards originally appeared in Spanish, and the recipient could send away for an English translation. [13] Like Kawara, Rosler transmitted the postcards through the mail. Both artists limited the work to text, using no images. Rosler's employment of conceptual techniques is evident-the work is language-based, mass-reproducible, and, at the time, non-valuable. Yet Rosler, unlike Kawara, adopted a persona rather than revealing autobiographical details. Kawara work's asserts his solitary action: the need to inform others through the mail of the time he wakes up each morning highlights his mental and physical isolation. Rosler countered this social detachment,

transferring the focus of the work from her private life to public issues such as the sexual and economic exploitation of female immigrant workers.

Rosler suggested that when a work includes feminist content, and the artist is female, it becomes increasingly important to avoid solipsistic, autobiographical narratives: 'I think that women are moved in the imperative toward narcissism...In my work there's a movement away from the sense of an individual life toward the idea that we're not so in control of how we get to live.'[14] Rosler's postcard novels countered private narcissistic accounts. The postcard medium itself translates a private tale into a public document, reinforcing the tension between the private and the social self expressed in the narrative. The postcards seemed to recount a personal narrative through a personal, or "me-to-you" means of communication, but in fact the narrative is fictional and the postcard is a public document because it is open, unsealed.[15] In these novels, Rosler appropriated conceptual techniques while challenging the self-referentiality of conceptual art indifferent to public issues. The danger of the conceptual notion of the privatized self is increased in art with a feminist content, if the use of autobiography impedes the broader social reference necessary to the struggle against sexism. Rosler suggests that recounting a woman's personal life is political, as the women's liberation adage testifies, yet the personal only becomes political if it can be recognized as a common experience that will catalyze social change.

Rosler did not attack specific feminist artists for their narcissistic use of autobiography. She instead critiqued patriarchal society, in which women were particularly prone to self-preoccupation. Beauty standards, for example, coerced women into narcissistic self-scrutiny. In her work, she strove to overcome and to reveal this societally-enforced narcissism. In her 1977 video *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, Rosler portrays the narcissistic female yet subverts that narcissism, using it to reveal how women are oppressed by society's stringent norms. Rosler appears as the nude woman whose body is measured and evaluated by a team of "experts" in white coats. Accompanying the visual images are overlapping voiceovers, which include Rosler's own voice, vacillating between the third and first person and quoting from various texts. Rosler, in character, comments on women's enforced self-scrutiny: 'this is a work about...how she learns to scrutinize herself, see herself as a map, a terrain, a product.'[16] Rosler here uses her own voice and her own body in the process of being inspected to refer to female narcissism. This narcissism results from the norms that medical standards, the media, and the cosmetic industry impose upon women: while the medical experts assess Rosler, the voiceovers quote from women's magazines' descriptions of glamorous makeovers, lists of do's and don't's, etc. Yet the imbricated voice-overs and the third person "she" question this solipsism, shifting the focus of the video from a portrait of Rosler to a collaboration of voices denouncing society's crimes against women.[17]

In this paper, I have suggested reasons for Rosler's isolation from her male

conceptualist peers. Although she is savvy in conceptual practice, she simultaneously rejects the lack of connection to social issues she perceived in some conceptual art. In her feminist art, she opposed women's enforced narcissism by refusing to create artworks centered around herself. She suggested that autobiographical narratives that do not refer to other women's stories and a larger social totality impede the viewer's participation and social action. These challenges to both conceptual and feminist art have contributed to her marginalization from the discourse of each practice. Rosler's work has also not been sufficiently discussed in relation to other contemporary women artists using personae and inflecting conceptual art with feminist goals. I propose that Rosler's isolation from other feminist conceptual artists including Antin and Piper evolved from her absence from Lucy Lippard's 1973 all women's conceptual exhibition, *c. 7500.* Lippard did not deliberately exclude Rosler from *c. 7500*; she was not aware of Rosler's work by 1973. Yet she did not include Rosler in an exhibition until 1980. I would suggest that Rosler's deviation from Lippard's definition of women's conceptual art, the only extant definition, isolated her from future inclusion in 1970s feminist exhibitions and critical reviews.

Lippard designed *c. 7500* to 'reply to those who say "there are no women making conceptual art".'[18] All of the artists in the show created their works on both sides of an index card: even Lippard's catalogue essay appears on the index cards. She divided the work in the show into categories: 'work reframing...factual material into personal patterns; work dealing with biography, usually autobiography; and work dealing with transformation, primarily of the self.'[19] Lippard defines women's conceptualism only in terms of autobiographical content and references to the self. [20] Rosler's work, in which she refuses to allow the first person "I" to refer solely to her own life, therefore stands in opposition to Lippard's definition of women's conceptualism. To demonstrate Rosler's distinction from Lippard's definition and Rosler's challenge to the artist's exclusive focus on herself, I contrast a postcard from Rosler's *Tijuana Maid* with Patricia Lasch's work in the *c. 7500* exhibit. Both are composed solely of text, which appears on white cards, and both are first person narratives. Conceptualism's challenge to the unique, valuable artform that demonstrates the artist's manual skill is evident in each work; neither is even handwritten. In her work, Lasch lists her familial roles. She refers to herself as a social being, defined through her relations, yet the artwork remains at the level of self-description. In Rosler's work, the first person draws the viewer into the narrative, only to thwart her with the fictional persona of the nameless maid, encouraging her to look beyond the artist's presence and onto the broader issues of sexual and economic oppression. Rosler employed conceptual strategies to launch a social critique without dictating the viewer's response. She adapted feminist narratives to inflect her artwork with a human, historical content. Yet Rosler's personae obscured the artist's self in order to combat what she perceived as women's enforced narcissism and the consequent uncritical use of first person narratives that hinders social consciousness.

Recognizing the stories of other women encouraged a view of the world beyond one's immediate environment.

Fundamental to Rosler's artistic commitment to political action is her notion of the public nature of art and her challenge to privatized subjective expression. Although this method correlates with that of the conceptual artists who Krauss lauded, and though Rosler's artworks are dedicated to combating sexism, she has been absent from conceptual and feminist exhibitions, beginning with Lippard's 1973 show. Rosler's exclusion from this original group of female conceptual artists remains a factor in her continued segregation from her peers. Moreover, these exclusions have caused Rosler's oeuvre to become associated with a second phase of feminist art-work reacting to groundbreaking 1970s feminism rather than participating in it. This view mistakes the chronology and development of Rosler's work, depriving it of its pioneering place in the history of feminist art.

Notes

1. Rosler's work has only recently been reconsidered. Her first retrospective exhibition originated at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, England, in 1998 and traveled within Europe and to the States. See *martha rosler: positions in the life world* ed. Catherine de Zegher (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery and Vienna: Generali Foundation, 1998).

2. Rosler was one of a handful of artists inflecting conceptual practice with a feminist agenda in the late 1960s and 1970s. Eleanor Antin was one of Rosler's first mentors, both in New York and San Diego. Other women artists such as Adrian Piper were influenced by different groups of conceptualists; but, like Rosler, created videos, performances and installations. The work of these three artists often involved information systems, or an analysis of the way that knowledge is gathered and organized in our culture. The analysis of information systems in feminist conceptual art questioned the ways in which women's identities have been formed by systems of categorization: medical standards, psychology, the media, education, and so forth. The emphasis on text in this work also created a fruitful forum for examining the role of language in the construction of sexual identities, while simultaneously giving women artists a voice within this analysis of language. Yet scholars have not yet considered the common characteristics of the work of these artists and their shared conceptual influence. I contend that the failure of women's conceptual art to be appreciated as an important artistic endeavor with multiple participants stems from its lack of correspondence with contemporary categories of feminine creativity.

3. See Benjamin Buchloh's interview with Rosler, in martha rosler: positions in the life world, p. 32 and p. 39. Rosler acknowledged her alliance with Allan Sekula and Fred Lonidier in California, and her association in New York with Hans Haacke and members of Art & Language then residing in New York, such as Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden.

4. Rosler, unpublished lecture at the New School, New York, December 1, 2000.

5. Rosalind Krauss 'Sense and Sensibility: Reflection on Post 1960s Sculpture' *Artforum* 12: 3

(November 1973) p. 46.

6. Barry's Prospect '69 interview, reproduced in Lucy Lippard *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966-1972* (New York: Praeger, 1973) p.113.

7. Rosler, in interview with Craig Owens, *Profile* 5: 2 (1986) p. 3.

8. Rosler, in interview with Buchloh p. 39.

9. Huebler (1969), in Lippard *Six Years* p. 127.

10. Rosler refused to photograph the inhabitants of the Bowery to critique the tradition of documentary photography, which 'transmogrifes these victims into heroes.' See the Owens interview, p. 30. However, Rosler simultaneously pays homage to the 1930s documentary photography of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. See the Buchloh interview, pp. 37-39.

11. Rosler occasionally used her own name, as in the audiotape that accompanies the installation *She Sees in Herself a New Woman Everyday* (1976), where the mother character addresses the narrator as "Martha."

12. Rosler, 'For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life' *Journal of the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art* (June-July 1979) p.15.

13. Rosler used the Spanish text in *Tijuana Maid* because the Maid persona was most distinct from her own life. Whereas she felt she could adopt the personae of the upper-class housewife in *A Budding Gourmet* or the fast food worker in *McTowersMaid*, she did not want to presume to understand the experience of a Mexican woman. Thus Rosler used the distancing effect of the foreign language to separate herself from the Maid's character. Discussion with Martha Rosler, March 2001.

14. Rosler quoted in Owens' interview, p. 28. Rosler cites Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a source for her ideas on women's narcissism in a letter to the author, December 12, 2000. Recently, authors such as Amelia Jones have inverted the concept of female narcissism, arguing that artists including Hannah Wilke subverted the objectification of women's bodies by employing their own bodies in performances. See Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998). Rosler would not necessarily oppose this view. In works such as *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, Rosler subverts women's enforced narcissism, see below.

15. Rosler, in interview with Owens, p. 38.

16. Rosler's videotape script, *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* excerpted in Martha Gever, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," *Afterimage* 9: 3 (October 1981) p.13. See also Amy Taubin's analysis of the video in '"And what is a fact anyway?" (On a tape by Martha Rosler)' *Millennium Film Journal* 4/5 (Summer/Fall, 1979) pp.59-63.

17. Rosler's video is a complicated and dense project. In addition to implicating patriarchal society for creating women's narcissistic self-scrutiny, it comments on the inherent racism of beauty and medical standards. Moreover, the layering of images and sound in the video and the coarseness of the videography highlights Rosler's construction of the artwork, and like *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, forefronts her methods of representation.

18. Lucy Lippard *c. 7500* (Valencia: California Institute of the Arts, 1973), n. p.

19. Ibid. I focus here on only three of Lippard's four categories of women's conceptualism, since

the artists included in Lippard's first category, 'work dealing with perception of exterior phenomena,' Nancy Holt, Alice Aycock and Doree Dunlap, did not represent feminist content in their c. 7500 work.

20. Lippard 'Escape Attempts' in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art and Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995) p. 23. Women's conceptualism was rarely discussed after the 1973 exhibition. I contend that this omission in part stems from Lippard's subsequent dismissal of the political efficacy of conceptual art in her 1977 essay 'The Pink Glass Swan.' The fact that she renounced the ability of conceptual art to elicit social change in 1977, the heyday of second wave feminist art, may explain the subsequent absence of dialogue on women's conceptualism. See Lippard, 'The Pink Glass Swan: Upward and Downward Mobility in the Art World' in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995) pp.117-127.

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