



Martha Rosler on gender, gentrification and the wages of war

For the pioneering feminist artist Martha Rosler, the fight against the patriarchy never ends



Photograph: Hollis Johnson

By Paul Laster | Posted: Thursday November 15 2018

A multidisciplinary artist, writer and social activist, Martha Rosler has spent 50 years delivering biting feminist critiques on subjects ranging from gender to gentrification. But she is perhaps best known for her collages that juxtapose housekeeping ads with scenes from the U.S. wars in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Now the Jewish Museum is focusing on these works and others as part of its survey “Martha Rosler: Irrespective.” Recently, Rosler sat down with us at her home and studio in Greenpoint to discuss her work, her neighborhood and the real meaning of cooking shows.



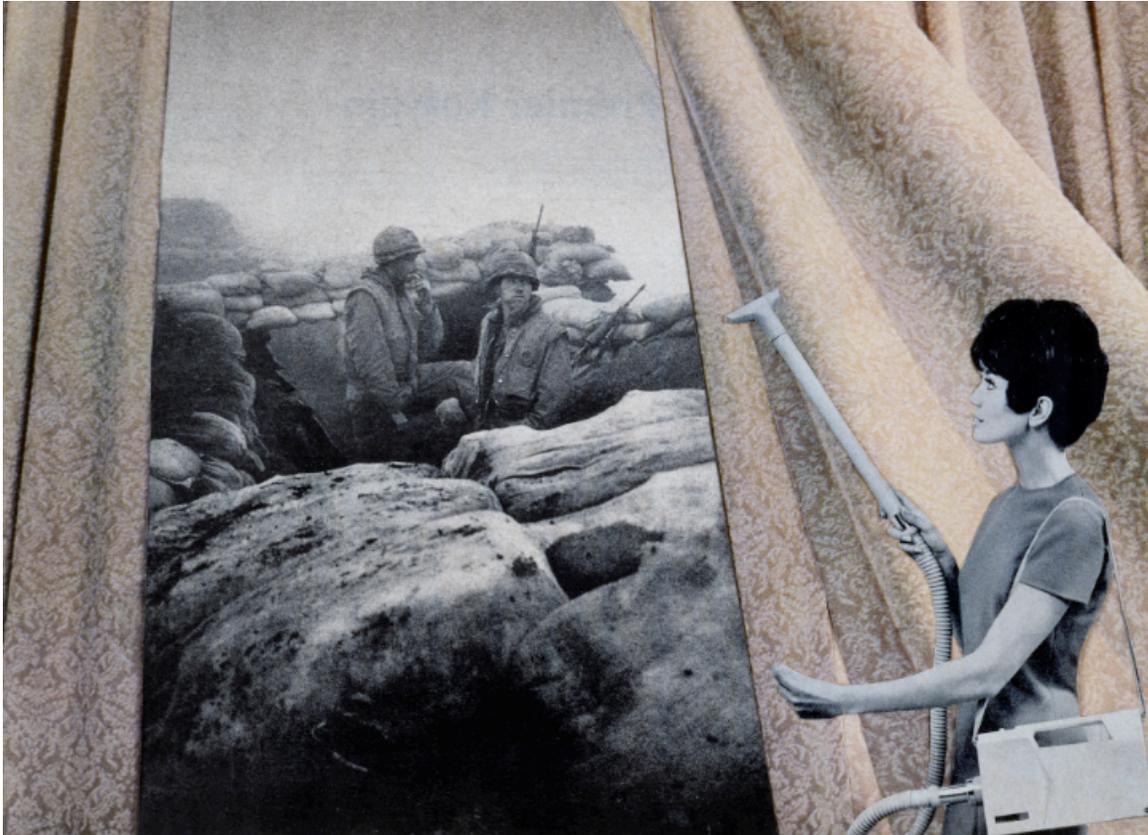
You work in a lot of different mediums—collage, video and installation. How would you summarize what you do?

I find it tiresome to list the different ways I work, so I really try to avoid getting into categories. Let's just say that I make art.



Then let's start with something from early in your career. During the mid-'60s and early '70s, you created a photomontage series where you mixed soft-core porn into appliance ads and shelter-magazine spreads. Were you saying something about how women were represented in the media back then?

Not just back then. Women are still being objectified, converted into signs for desire and seduction by being sliced and diced and fragmented. Whatever they may be doing, women are always posed for the male gaze. It's an old observation, but it remains true.



In another series from the same period, you shifted your focus to Vietnam, with scenes from the war inserted into images of suburban living rooms and kitchens. What were you doing with that project?

That series was called “House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home,” which I think says it all. I was reminding people that, with Vietnam, we no longer had the luxury of living in an over-here, over-there kind of situation where our comfortable existence was separated and protected from the people we were trying to kill.



You revived the project during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as if you were picking up where you left off.

Yeah. In 2004, I was invited to be in a show called “Election,” and it hit me that I should do exactly the same thing because, by that time, those old antiwar works were becoming aestheticized and depoliticized. People in the art world kept asking, “Are you stupid? You’ve already done this.” My answer was: “The United States is also doing the exact same thing again by getting involved in a quagmire, so who’s being stupid here?”



Your 1975 video send-up of cooking shows, “Semiotics of the Kitchen,” is probably your most famous piece. Did Julia Child inspire it?

Yes, but not just her. I was also thinking about those late-night TV ads for Veg-O-Matics. All those things depicted the kitchen as being the natural habitat of women, so I was pushing back on that.



You did a series of photos about your neighborhood of Greenpoint. Why are you bringing your work back home, to paraphrase your earlier title?

I think you mean “Greenpoint Project,” from 2011. Actually, I’ve been making work about the neighborhood since 1992, not long after I moved in. At the time, after white flight and industrial flight, the place was at a low point, and I became interested in the immigrants coming in to fill the vacuum. They opened businesses, and I starting talking to these shopkeepers about where they came from and why they were here, which resulted in those photos. Unfortunately, those same stores have been replaced by hipster-run places, so now I’m documenting those. But, the fact is, Greenpoint has been gentrifying almost since I got there. Does that make me a gentrifier? I don’t know. That’s a subject for another discussion.