

# BOMBLOG

ART

**MARTHA ROSLER**

by James Eischen Nov 07, 2013

(Photography, Q&A, BOMBlog)

**Martha Rosler on the Garage Sale, plights of modern workers, and her college days in California.**



Martha Rosler. Heathrow, 1998. From *In the Place of the Public: Airport Series*, 1983-. All images courtesy of the artist.

Martha Rosler is known for her incisive social critique—her writing, mixed-media work, and photography have been widely esteemed since the 1970s. Rosler and I met at her alumni reception at the University of California at San Diego, where she gave an artists' talk as part of curator Michelle Hyun's discussion-based project *We'd Love Your Company*.

**MARTHA ROSLER** Population flows constitute one of the most significant issues of our time. For many years I have explored the seeming paradox of movement and migration—those in society's upper echelons travel the globe in freely accessible movements made universally visible through advertisement. Conversely, travel by the poor is demonized yet is structurally

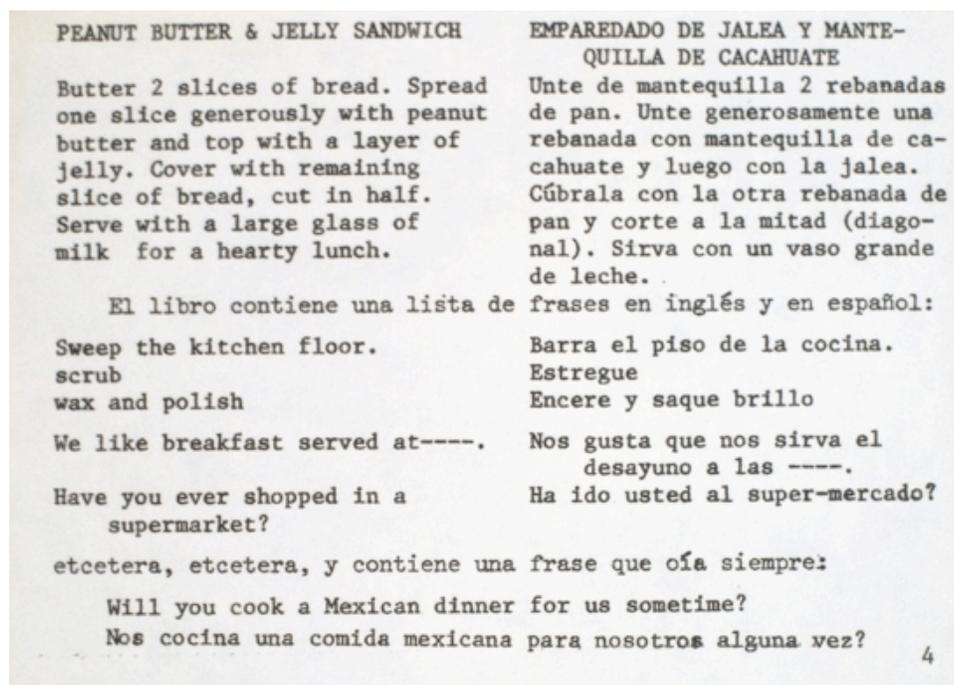
necessary, and is both regulated and, often, legally prohibited. The global economic system relies on migrants but this work force is prohibited more and more from safe transit.

**JAMES EISCHEN** How does this dichotomy play out in your current work?

**MR** It's not so much a dichotomy as the structural condition of the globalized economy. In fact, the rich and the poor do both travel; the conditions of labor produce a huge migratory flow. In 2010 I did a project about African migrants in Italy, most —but not all —of whom were teenage girls from Nigeria pressed into the sex trade. In conjunction with a show I'm having at Warsaw's Centre for Contemporary Art at Ujazdowski Castle this coming winter, I plan to organize series of encounters and presentations that center on how to survive and get ahead in the current era. Part of the project will address such provocative questions as how to be a woman in the new Poland, how to get a job, how to stay in your apartment, and so on. Western Europe depends on Eastern European migrants for labor. Along with several local artists and activists, I hope to set up a bureau to offer job advice. While women are first and foremost in my thoughts, these dialogues address residents and workers in general—from chefs to cleaners to artists to curators.

**JE** Was that kind of social critique an important part of your early work?

**MR** In San Diego, where I was living in the early 1970s, I produced a series of postcard novels on women and food. All these works are about the particular status of women in relation to food production. The third one, *Tijuana Maid*, took on the situation specifically of undocumented household help from Mexico, which was endemic in the area. Even earlier, in New York and then in California, I began making photomontages based on the magazine representations first of women and then of war.



Martha Rosler. *Tijuana Maid*, Postcard # 4, Serial postcard novel, 1975.

**JE** What drew you to living in Southern California all those years ago and why San Diego?

**MR** The promise of a great California adventure, of course! I moved out there with a partner but I had a small child and no thought of going to school. But it dawned on me that a scholarship to an MFA program entailed paid work and my own studio. The University of California at San Diego (UCSD) had just opened. It was recruiting actively, and I knew people on the faculty. So, I applied there.

**JE** Is it true that you entered as a painter?

**MR** It is true; at the time I was an abstract expressionist painter. I wouldn't have been accepted applying with anti-war photomontages—and in fact some of the faculty were pretty hostile to this work so I was advised to apply as a painter. In fact, once I enrolled at UCSD, I continued to paint but I simultaneously carried on with the photomontages, with photography and even performance and sculpture, and then video.

**JE** At any point did your work in these two modes, painting and photo-collaging, ever overlap?

**MR** During the day I painted in my studio at school, and at night I made photomontages in private—working on these at home was easy. Your answer, however, is no; I never had the impulse to paint something for which I could use photographic imagery.



Martha Rosler. *Transparent Box (Vanity Fair)*, photomontage, 1966-1972.

**JE** Why was that?

**MR** Good question. Scrutinizing representation in the media required exploitation of mediums through which social images were disseminated. We cannot always decipher ideological messages that lurk behind attempts to sell us either clothes or political ideas. My aim was to make these voices plain. I also wanted to convey that constructing photomontages was the easiest thing in the world. “You can do it too”—that was always an important part of my work.

**JE** As in the past, you use advertisements aimed at women to create your contemporary photomontages. Evolving gender roles in the media, the government, the military must have all had some effect on your work over time.

**MR** My anti-war stance is not up-ended by changes in the gender of those making war. The talents of women in war should not be sidelined, nor should those of men in child rearing, for instance. I am a gender constructionist, not an essentialist; variant constructions of women in our knowledge-based economy do not surprise me.

**JE** Since there was this lukewarm reception of anti-war photomontages in your graduate program, I wonder whether or not conversations amongst fellow students were influential. Did you participate in any group projects?

**MR** The group I hung around with was critical to my experience at school and to my work. But we never did a group project. My circle was a bit too ego driven; it was initially composed entirely of men, which was a bit ridiculous.

**JE** What concerns carried you from making photomontages to orchestrating your first garage sale?

**MR** I did a lot of work on different themes and in different media, as I suggested earlier. The first garage sale, called the *Monumental Garage Sale*, was prompted by my interest in commodity fetishism in the suburban world I was now inhabiting. Also, I saw the way neighborhood sales permitted women to step out of the domestic sphere to create and manage something of a localized commercial environment. The first show I held based on the garage sale model was as much about social transactions as about the exchange of money for goods.

**JE** That first garage sale was at your graduate school, UCSD. How did casual commercial exchanges of the university environment influence the project's first iteration?

**MR** I didn't live on campus during graduate school; I lived in the beach towns in North County San Diego, and for part of that time I lived in a garage on an avocado ranch. I hung around campus a lot but was not part of dorm life. In grad-student housing, everyone was in the same little box—I could not bear knowing where each and every person was at all times of the day. My observations stemmed from the North County towns.

I never considered the *Garage Sale* in the context of commercial frameworks between students or charities at a university. One of my main goals was to make people happy; not profit. All of the sales did make money—not a penny of which I ever kept, even as a penurious single mother. Never. It was art.

**JE** Why did you decide to give the *Garage Sale* so many lives and make it a series?

**MR** Four years after the first one, I was invited to work in San Francisco and thought, Why not bring the project there, to a real city, since San Diego was not one. The rest is history. I never thought of revisiting this project until I was working on a traveling retrospective, and most of the curators were interested in revisiting this project, to a greater or lesser degree.

**JE** Last year, the opening of the *Garage Sale* at MoMA in New York coincided with a real disaster, Hurricane Sandy. That must have been both challenging and meaningful for the legacy of the project.

**MR** The hurricane was a tremendous blow to the show preparation. MoMA did not return our calls for a week; we were unsure of what might happen. The museum remained open but, on an ideological level, was desperate that our event not appear as a feel-good event for the upper class. Its directors hoped to announce that proceeds were going to charity, which was, in fact, the case. But I refused to make that public. The garage sales are not charity events. Instead I made a public pledge to donate an hour's proceeds each day to Sandy relief. Then everyone was happy, and all the money went to charity anyway.



Martha Rosler. *Monumental Garage Sale*, 2000. The New Museum, New York.

**JE** A publication accompanied your *Sale* at MoMA. Its format was akin to an art magazine but filled with coupons, albeit with some substantive interviews. What was your say and objective in creating this pamphlet for the show?

**MR** I had full control of the newspaper, of which we produced two separate issues, but I hired highly capable people to produce it. The result was nothing like what I would have done on my own, but I OK'd it every step of the way. The coupons weren't real, by the way, which was, I should think, obvious from the retro style, the items offered, and the very low prices. In hindsight, I might have made that publication more like an actual newspaper. Its design made it appear somewhat frenetic; older people disliked it and younger people adored it, and that split applied to the museum staff's attitudes too. For the post-web generation it read very well, and I was tickled to death with it.

The garage sale is about social and economic relations. It is a performance with an accompanying "soundtrack". Most visitors don't look beyond the fun and the bargains. That is why we needed this publication to function as it did, to offer news, history, notes, and critique. The themes of the two issues were *The Social Lives of Objects* and *Work, Value, and Waste*. And by the way, MoMA was not too happy with it.



Martha Rosler. *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale*, 2012. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photograph © Werner Kaligofsky.

**JE** That surprises me—why wasn't MoMA happy with it?

**MR** *Garage Sale Standard* was its title. But the museum's discontent did not sprout from how it looked but from its quite serious analyses. I leave it to you to decipher the criticisms.

**JE** So, after holding a number of Garage Sales over the years, one thing you have learned is. .

**MR** Americans do not know how to haggle; young people especially have no idea. Situating the sale in a museum does not constitute a protected environment for playing theatrical roles and making insultingly low offers for merchandise—in case you don't know, that is not haggling. To purchase something at the garage sale is not a purely dramatic act; it is a real commercial exchange. Everyone has to get serious. Attendees were also sometimes perplexed and a few were unbelievably discourteous. A couple of people demanded my name to report me to management.

**JE** . . . So many objects involved. How was the process of selecting what to sell?

**MR** I spent years collecting objects. I always ask employees of museums hosting the project to donate things so that it becomes their project also. This time we also asked the public to donate. We stored everything we accumulated in Brooklyn at the Navy Yard. We sorted and organized and priced things for about a year in advance for this one.

**JE** What role do you play when you are at the sale?

**MR** For the MoMA sale, I was in effect the supervisor with a smile on my face—ironic, because I hate retail. I hired actors and performance artists for the MoMA event, because it was too big for me to work the floor on my own. I was there all day, every day, but the performers worked in two shifts. My dealers, both American and European, came to sell during the first weekend but were a bit bewildered by the theatrics of it all, and naturally they fixated on sales and were astonished that I did not quite share the aim of selling as much stuff as possible.

**JE** How has input from dealers impacted your work? Does money and success soften the message?

**MR** On the level of detail my photomontages, for example, first existed without titles but my dealers insisted that I assign some. It was too difficult to work with them otherwise. This is part of the regularization of the art, and art-historical item as a commodity form. More broadly, galleries and curators have joined in a concentrated effort to sell social critique. Thus, critique has in many cases become a gesture perhaps more than serious criticism. But social commentary in art feels quite tangible away from centers of the art world. As far as the general public is concerned, this kind of work may well grapple with social problems and social realities—whereas for the elite, elements of the art audience, social critique can be taken as merely form. But you always try to stay ahead of that interpretation of your work. The dollar nexus makes work legible as a commodity, but it clearly does not exhaust its message: witness the power of iconic works such as *Guernica*.

As the art market heated up during the 1990s, it got harder for artists to appear in their guise as citizens and social critics. Now we are back in a moment where artists can more effectively take on politics or commerce. Art should intervene to a greater degree at this point, and the growing attraction of the genre of “social projects” proves the point that the appeal of the social is far from exhausted. Such works have for many years taken place in the context of the art work, both nonprofit and commercial, so that situation is normalized.

**JE** On that note, you recently showed photographs from your trip to Cuba in 1981 in New York and Milan galleries. What other reasons make now the right time for releasing those pictures?

**MR** My longtime New York dealer has wanted me to show this work for many years. I have to say that none of my dealers has supported or failed to support my work based on its money making prospects. But why Cuba now? Who knows? It's when I got around to it; but Cuba is at present transforming itself into something else entirely.



Martha Rosler, *Sewing Workshop*, Cuba, January 1981.

**JE** From your perspective, what is this something else entirely?

**MR** The country is in the process of moving to a much more market-based economy. Besides North Korea, Cuba was one of the last holdouts against the market. Things there seem to be changing greatly.

**JE** As is the case with these photographs taken in Cuba, you often—for lack of a better term—sit on work for long periods of time. Why is that?

**MR** There are a few reasons. Sometimes a project will require the commitment of a lot of time, and I have trouble clearing my calendar. But perhaps more basically, documentary photography worries me immensely. Those photographed are represented in ways whose reception they can hardly be expected to anticipate. I am a rationalist; my projects are based on rational decision-making. But it does not mean that my feelings are not in play. So with years, images become more sociological—albeit with possible, though unwanted, nostalgic connotations. One way or another, over time a photograph departs from a stark ideological take into a more nuanced one. I have twenty-year-old footage of Russia and South Africa that I mean to finish but so far haven't gotten to. It took me over a decade to decide on why I had been so determinedly photographing airports during my many trips. And I ruminated over the

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Cuba series for so long because what it all amounted to as a body of work was elusive to me. After three decades I realized why I took the pictures.

**For more on Martha Rosler, visit her [website](#).**

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