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This Getty Show Reveals The Deep Roots Of The Media's Woes -- And How Artists Can Rescue The News



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At the height of the Vietnam War, an artist named Martha Rosler started clipping pictures of the conflict from the pages of *Life*. She also collected images from adjacent pages showcasing luxurious American interiors. With a touch of glue, she merged the two, making up scenes that collided realities that mainstream media tended to keep comfortably separated.



Donald R. Blumberg. American, born 1935. Untitled, from the series *Television Political Mosaics*, 1968-1969, 1968-1969. Gelatin silver print. Image: 50.8 X 61 cm. Courtesy of Donald R. and Grace Blumberg. © Donald Blumberg. L.2015.139.4

Circulated in alternative newspapers, the collages drove home the cognitive dissonance of the American public. Rosler's images were a powerful and timely political statement. [Exhibited at the Getty Center](#) five decades later,

they hold different implications. Instead of evoking current events, or commenting on the banality of *Life*, they call to mind the filter bubble that dominates media consumption today: the hidden algorithms that ensure that you see only the reality that conforms to your beliefs.

Rosler's collages are part of a larger exhibition showing how artists have critically responded to the media in the second half of the 20th century. Two themes dominate, both of which have only become more relevant even as the underlying platforms have changed. One is the phenomenon of repetition, the tendency of media to generate more media, all converging on the same story, often from the same perspective. Even where there's debate, it's reduced to a simple dichotomy represented by a couple recurring personalities.

At the Getty, this phenomenon is exemplified by Donald Blumberg's *Television Political Mosaics*, a series of photographs in which the televised faces of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and George Wallace are repeated *ad infinitum*. While Blumberg's idiom is network TV, his imagery could as easily be seen as a commentary on the small-screen onslaught of trending news stories.

The second major theme, cognitive dissonance, is not only explored by Rosler, but also by artists such as Catherine Opie and Alfredo Jaar. Like Rosler, both use the powerful tool of juxtaposition (though in hands less dexterous than Rosler's, it has a tendency to feel like a bludgeon).

Clearly these two themes are interrelated, and foreshadow the relationship between trending news and the filter bubble. Both are feedback loops, manifestations of the same underlying infrastructure, yet they are not entirely in sync. When stories trend, the filter bubble can break, and the filter bubble can put a brake on stories trending. What would be compelling, yet remains lacking, would be an attempt by artists to explore and exploit the linkages. Though commentary is useful, the greater power of artists is to act on the society they observe.

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Martha Rosler. Balloons, from the series House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home, c. 1967–1972. Inkjet print. Image: 60.2 X 47.9 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Committee on Photography and The Modern Women's Fund. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Artwork © Martha Rosler, courtesy of the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, NY. EX.2017.4.4.2