The Jewish Museum

Martha Rosler: Irrespective

An Acoustiguide Tour

Production #4214

STOP LIST

1. Introduction
2. *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*
3. *Unknown Secrets (The Secret of the Rosenbergs)*
4. *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*
5. *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*
6. *A Budding Gourmet; A Gourmet Experience*
7. *In the Place of the Public: Airport Series*
8. *Ventures Underground; Rights of Passage; Greenpoint Project*
9. *Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an Artist in the 21st Century)*
10. *Off the Shelf*
11. *Prototype (Freedom Is Not Free); Prototype (God Bless America)*

1. INTRODUCTION

CLAUDIA GOULD:
Welcome to *Irrespective*, a survey of the work of the artist Martha Rosler. I'm Claudia Gould, Helen Goldsmith Menschel Director of the Jewish Museum. For 50 years, Martha Rosler has been making art of uncompromising integrity, deep political engagement, and sharp wit. We are delighted that the Jewish Museum has the opportunity to offer the first New York museum survey of her work in more than 15 years.

Throughout its history, this Museum has championed artists that offer timely cultural critique. It is a credit to Rosler's vision that many of her works of the past four decades feel as trenchant and important today as they did when she debuted them. I suspect that the generation of young people—and particularly women—who have come of age since her last major American museum exhibition will discover its power and insight anew.

Your guides through this exhibition will be the artist herself, along with Darsie Alexander, Susan and Elihu Rose Chief Curator at the Jewish Museum, and Shira Backer, Leon Levy Assistant Curator at the museum.

Here's Darsie Alexander.

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
Hi, and welcome to the exhibition. I'm so happy you could join us here for this tour.

A show like this takes a long time to gestate, and in this case involved a very close collaboration with the artist, working with me, my co-curator Shira Backer and many others. Martha was a full partner with our team here at the Jewish Museum—talking through her work, shedding light on little-known facts, and helping us locate things that haven't been seen in years.

One of the first things you might notice walking into the galleries is the unusual orientation of the walls and the angular slant of the first gallery. For each exhibition, we completely redesign this space and here we wanted to make a bit of a metaphor of the idea of "against the grain," a principal that we felt was core to Martha's thinking as an artist. Though there is no hard-and-fast way to travel through the show, you might want to consider doing so in a counterclockwise fashion, which will allow you to follow the work in a loosely chronological progression.

Soon, you'll be hearing from the artist herself and you'll get a real feeling for her singular voice and perspective. Topics like feminism, war, and gentrification have been a mainstay of her career. Born and raised in Brooklyn, the daughter of a lawyer and a New York City schoolteacher, Rosler came of age during the Vietnam War and the rebirth of feminism. She continues to this day to make work that confronts injustice and challenges viewers to take responsibility. Yet, Rosler has a playful, humorous side, too, which comes out in a variety of ways, notably in her deadpan delivery and performance style in the video works.

We hope you'll enjoy the exhibition.

2. *HOUSE BEAUTIFUL: BRINGING THE WAR HOME*

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
The Vietnam War galvanized Martha Rosler, as it did many artists of her generation. Her desire to make easy to distribute and visually arresting fliers was the impetus for *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home.* Already using photomontage for her series *Body Beautiful,* which incorporated images from women's magazines as well as pornographic magazines, she now juxtaposed photographs from *Life* magazine with home decor journals like *House Beautiful.* Martha Rosler.

MARTHA ROSLER:
I was sitting at my mother's dining room table and there was a photograph of a young Vietnamese woman swimming across a creek with a number of children. And I thought: That's such an interesting image. Maybe I should make a photomontage, and put together the scene from the war with scenes from home. The scenes from home were a way that I had of trying to get people to make some identification with those people far away in another world.

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
In *Cleaning the Drapes*, a housewife pulls back a curtain, revealing a warzone outside, where guns held by soldiers echo the shape of a woman's vacuum cleaner.

MARTHA ROSLER:
***Cleaning the Drapes* was after I had made a few others, and I thought to go back to the imagery I was working with for the *Body Beautiful* set: vacuuming and cleaning. I chose a modern-looking woman, but black and white. And I cut out some fabric and made the drapes from actual cloth, à la Picasso and Braque. The war image that she's apparently looking out on, or maybe not noticing, was during the siege of Khe Sanh, where American soldiers were holed up for at least a month and catching a lot of incoming. People have tended to see this as a combat scenario out the window, but it's actually about men in sandbag trenches waiting. I prefer all these works to be tableaus rather than action scenes, and most certainly not bloody representations. I wanted people to be able to stop and look without having to cringe.**

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
Rosler would revive the *House Beautiful* series with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

MARTHA ROSLER:
I was invited to be in an exhibition called *Election* in 2004, and I thought: I should just go back and revive those old things that I did in the '70s. And this was part of my thinking: when people say, "Wait, you did that already," I would say: "That's right, I did that already, and so did we. And how is what we're doing now different from what we did then?" So I was pointing a finger back at political work from decades earlier. And also I had this idea I needed to re-politicize those works; rather than seeing them as nostalgic representations of bygone activism. I wanted people to realize what activism can look like in a visual context.

3. *UNKNOWN SECRETS (THE SECRET OF THE ROSENBERGS)*

SHIRA BACKER:
I'm Shira Backer, Leon Levy Assistant Curator. In 1951 Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were tried on charges of conspiracy to commit espionage. They were convicted on the basis of questionable witness testimony and eventually executed in 1953.

MARTHA ROSLER:
I had very vague memories from when I was a kid of the brouhaha about the Rosenbergs. But it turned out that in San Francisco I had worked on a publication with one of the Rosenberg boys, who was under the name Meeropol. I didn't know that then. I was invited to be in a touring show in 1988 about the Rosenbergs, and I thought: How can I turn this down? I actually know Robbie Meeropol. I started doing a lot of reading. And it seemed fairly clear that Ethel Rosenberg was a hostage that the government held in order to get her husband, Julius, to talk about possible, probable spying, who knew?

I was interested in the fact that both the president of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower, and the prosecutors said things like: In the case of these Communist families, the wife is worse than the husband. It just enraged me, and also that Ethel was depicted as a frumpy housewife in a very cramped, old-fashioned Lower East Side tenement kitchen. And I compared it to the representations of women in the *Life* magazines during the two years that they were on trial, and I got the idea to produce not only an image of the abject Ethel Rosenberg life-size, and say: This is the woman who was executed for conspiracy to commit espionage, and these are images both of war and our plans to bomb other countries, and of women in 1953.

SHIRA BACKER:
Included in this installation is a tea towel, similar to the one in Ethel Rosenberg's kitchen, on which Rosler has stenciled a letter from Eisenhower to his son, who was serving in Korea. There's also a Jell-O box, a significant piece of evidence in the case; and a handout summarizing the artist's research.

MARTHA ROSLER:
I describe all the times the United States threatened to use nuclear weapons on other countries, and also on what happens when you point the finger at somebody and try them in the media. And I encourage people to take the handout, take it home and look through it. There are footnotes and references to things you might not be aware of.

4. *THE BOWERY IN TWO INADEQUATE DESCRIPTIVE SYSTEMS*

MARTHA ROSLER:
The Bowery, at the time, which was the mid-1970s, when New York was in the grip of a terrible fiscal crisis, was the archetypal Skid Row, meaning the place where drunks found their home. During the day, if you were walking down the Bowery, you were passing many, many men who were transient.

And this is a walk down the Bowery, from one end to the other. There was a certain number of stops that I wanted to fill in in order to make a grid in which no image was privileged over any other.

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
One of the most well-known works in Rosler's oeuvre, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* rests on the interplay of words and images. Through their juxtaposition, Rosler reveals how hard it can be to understand other people's experiences.

MARTHA ROSLER:
It's called *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* because I feel fundamentally that there is no way to translate human experience into forms of representation, even though we have to try. So it was a discussion about how photography communicates and what it leaves out, but with full humility that there is no final resting point where you get the perfect image or the perfect quote.

Everybody knows words for being drunk. They're metaphors. That makes them a poetics. This is one way to represent people in this milieu, through the linguistic universe generated by this state of being a drunk or drinking, or getting blotto or three sheets to the wind.

I decided that I would leave out the people. I would just show the setting, and ask the viewer to imagine who was there, or to put it another way, to notice what isn't there.

5. *VITAL STATISTICS OF A CITIZEN, SIMPLY OBTAINED*

SHIRA BACKER:
While looking through government documents in the library at the University of California–San Diego, Rosler came across a curious booklet from the 1930s entitled *U.S. Government Pattern Measurements of Women and Children*. It was purportedly for the standardization of sizing for clothing manufacturers.

MARTHA ROSLER:
I was completely struck by the photographs of the measurements, which were very clinical-looking. It clearly was an anthropometric picture of the white race, because there were instructions on what to do if a Negro came into be measured; you would take the measurements and then discard them. And this I found hair-raising. Basically in the Nazi period, the idea of an anthropometric picture, which was so much part of what the United States itself was doing with its exclusionary immigration acts.

I very much thought about the construction of citizenship and also simultaneously I was thinking about the way that the measurements of women were rigidly controlled: what's too fat, what's too thin, what's too tall, what's too short. And I thought about the way that ideas of not measuring up were so much a part of the internalized dialogue within women which is instilled in them from an early age, often by their mothers, whose job it is to teach people how to be the ideal subject or citizen.

SHIRA BACKER:
The citizen is played by Rosler herself. In the third act of this three-part work, you'll see the actual images that inspired the piece.

MARTHA ROSLER:
The voiceover I used was taken primarily from a Tribunal of Crimes against Women, to suggest that there are ways of perpetrating things that are literally criminal, even when they appear as merely bureaucratic.

SHIRA BACKER:
The tribunal Rosler references was a public event organized by women's rights activists, which took place in Brussels in 1976. Organized by private citizens rather than government bodies, the tribunal was attended by over 2,000 women from 40 countries. It aimed to increase public awareness of crimes against women around the world.

6. *A BUDDING GOURMET; A GOURMET EXPERIENCE*

MARTHA ROSLER:
Who doesn't like food, especially if you're Jewish?

Our entire domestic life is centered on the question of reproduction and maintenance; maintenance involves, aside from cleaning the house and doing the laundry, making sure everyone is fed three times a day. And you're supposed to be good at it.

SHIRA BACKER:
For the bourgeois housewife in *The Budding Gourmet*, cooking becomes a marker of status.

MARTHA ROSLER:
Her husband is being promoted, and the joke there is he was a rising executive in an elevator company. So because of the increase in disposable income, she's supposed to be able to produce more gourmet-style food.

When I was coming up out of my teen years, the food industry decided to sell Mrs. Middle–class Housewife on the idea that they ought to develop extra-special skills and use spices, an unheard-of thing. And not just open a can of peas but actually consider using fresh food. And I was really struck by the heavy pressure on women, and I thought this is really interesting because I'm also interested in learning how to be a decent cook, and was attempting to do that.

SHIRA BACKER:
The largest work in this gallery, anchored by a table set for a formal dinner, is a multipart installation called *A Gourmet Experience*. You will also see *Know Your Servant Series #1,* in which waitresses are subjected to regulations reminiscent of those in Rosler's video *Vital Statistics*, and one of her best-known works, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.

Semiotics, to offer a very basic definition, is the study of signs, symbols, and the ways we communicate meaning. Rosler is playing, ironically, with this term, which was in vogue among artists and scholars at the time. In fact, there is no "semiotics" in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.

MARTHA ROSLER:
I was attempting to make it sound important in a way that undermined that effort; in other words, it is a joke. But it's a piece about language in which language appears not only as letters and words, but as the woman's body as a signal system or a semaphoric system, if you will, so that by the end, she forms the letters and then steps back from that gesture.

Food represents an absolute biological need that is completely culturalized, and we don't necessarily recognize how deeply it is culturalized and how much that controls what we do every day of our lives.

7. *IN THE PLACE OF THE PUBLIC: AIRPORT SERIES*

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
In the ’80s, with the rise of the international art scene, Rosler’s travel schedule increased dramatically. Having spent the previous decade raising a son on modest means, she’d done very little flying up to that point. She started taking pictures in airports.

MARTHA ROSLER:
For almost a decade I said: Why am I doing this? I don’t know. And I don’t just show pictures because I’ve taken them. I thought that it was a way of seeing, to have the camera tell me what I was experiencing, in a sense. Or what I wasn’t seeing in a more objectified way. But until I had a firm idea of what the point was, I wasn’t gonna turn it into a work.

And then I realized at a certain point that it was about what might be called the production of space, which is a sociological term, really, about the way places are created within societies to represent certain functions, and that the reason I was taking these photographs was that the airport presented itself as a world apart.

It was a kind of futuristic present in which ways of locating ourselves were very different from getting on a train, getting on the subway, getting on a bus, taking a walk. It was about disjunctive travel, sometimes to a hub, walking through tunnels. You didn’t know where you were. The schematics of the airport weren’t clear. It was fragmentary, but those fragments kind of made up a whole, and that network was a network very different from everyday life.

The work is about a different way of thinking about the organization of the world presented by the entire system of air travel, and also the feelings it engenders, both in the terminal and in the plane, where we are, in effect, prisoners, though hopefully pacified and semi-happy prisoners. But, as we all know, most of us are not very happy in the real estate afforded us.

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
As in *The Bowery*, Rosler incorporates text, in this case phrases evoking the emotions and the associations of air travel.

MARTHA ROSLER:
The line of text at the bottom represents non-aeronautic ways of talking about how space is organized: a tree, a rock, a brook—but also human forms like a beer garden; that is, ways that people congregate that don’t have to do with simple passage.

8. *VENTURES UNDERGROUND/RIGHTS OF PASSAGE/GREENPOINT PROJECT*

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
Photography has always been part of Rosler's practice.

MARTHA ROSLER:
I inherited a camera from my aunt, and I ran off to the woods and starting taking romantic pictures of mushrooms and dark woods because I was very influenced by pictorialist photography. And then I transitioned more toward modernist photography. And then I sort of settled into what interested me about the city.

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
In *Ventures Underground*, what interests Rosler is the subway.

MARTHA ROSLER:
When I wrote an essay about the airport photos, I likened the experience of flying to the feeling I had when I was a kid standing in the front window of the subway and flying through tunnels. If we can say that air travel is about the globalization of culture, there's nothing more local than subway travel. It's about getting on and off at every stop. The way people do or don't congregate on subways that is of course very different from the way they do or don't congregate at the airport, where you're focused on departure or arrival.

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
In *Rights of Passage*, Rosler documented her commute from Brooklyn through New Jersey.

MARTHA ROSLER:
When I was still a college student, I started taking pictures from moving cars, very concerned with what happens when you are in a moving vehicle and part of the scenery passes you, or you see things out of the corner of your eye.

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
Rosler conceived of her photographs of airport terminals, subway cars, and highway commutes as landscape photography, and for the latter, a panoramic camera seemed like the ideal way to photograph a landscape. Unfortunately, the lens in a panoramic camera rotates 135 degrees during an exposure, which requires that the photographer remain in one place.

MARTHA ROSLER:
You can't do that while you're driving. So I bought a toy plastic camera that had a fake panoramic aspect to it. And these photos were taken with a toy panoramic camera.

SHIRA BACKER:
In Rosler's *Greenpoint Project*, she turns her lens to local merchants and other workers in her own Brooklyn neighborhood, which, like most of the borough, has been hugely impacted by gentrification.

MARTHA ROSLER:
This is Greenpoint, Brooklyn. It's the oldest neighborhood in Brooklyn. It used to be deeply industrial and working-class, and the storefronts that you see on the main shopping street have begun to evolve from old-school 1950s-style storefronts serving a working-class population to hipster places. And I've been documenting the transformation.

My neighborhood is far more diverse than people think, and it has immigrants from various places who have set up businesses. I put them in their place of business because I wanted to present them as people who have a position. I decided to make composite photos; that is, two pictures of the same person and of the place where they worked, and something about them. And including talking about people who refused to be in front of the camera, and why that might be; often in relation to being undocumented.

9. *READING HANNAH ARENDT (POLITICALLY, FOR AN ARTIST IN THE 21ST CENTURY)*

MARTHA ROSLER:
Hannah Arendt was a well-known public intellectual when I was a student, and she was widely resented by those of us in the antiwar movement because she was anti-antiwar. She felt upset with, and even contemptuous of, the students, who she felt didn't understand what they were attacking.

SHIRA BACKER:
As a student, Rosler had read *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which the German-Jewish philosopher and political theorist traced the roots of Stalinism and Nazism to its origins in anti-Semitism and imperialism. She also examined the use of propaganda and terror in the consolidation of power. But Rosler had not considered making a work about Arendt until she was invited to participate in a show on the centenary of the philosopher's birth.

MARTHA ROSLER:
That meant I had to do a lot of reading in the mid-2000s. And what struck me most forcefully was how much her descriptions of totalitarianism fit the moment. What I wanted to do was to extract texts that I thought would be of interest to Americans in the 21st century. And what she's written about the manipulation of publics and the particular character of despotic leaders and of their regimes is even truer now than it was 10 years ago.

I chose to include texts in both English and German, because she translated her own works into German, and sometimes they were slightly different. You can move through the space as you wish. There are enough there that you could spend an hour reading, if you like. And read the gloss at the bottom, which tells you what I think this particular selection is about. I think that there's a lot to think about, and perhaps it would encourage a viewer to go read her books.

10. *OFF THE SHELF*

MARTHA ROSLER:
As a Jew, I am a person of the book and I had a Jewish education, and the book was at the center of it, the book being not just the Bible, but all the commentaries and ways of developing thought about a text. And about criticality in general, because that's what commentaries are. They are a way of developing complexity about thinking.

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
Rosler estimates she owns over 9,000 books.

MARTHA ROSLER:
I had a traveling library in the mid-2000s in which about 7,000 of my books went to a number of different places in New York and in other countries. And I decided to make some works that look like pictures of physical objects, as you might have made of a bookshelf; but in fact, they both are pictures of books and are a way of saying these things actually exist as digital objects.

The gradient background is to say this is not a picture from the real world of a shelf of books, and in fact, the way the spines overlap, it could not be. And it's not a reading list either. It's a series of suggestions of what is out there in the field, whether it's feminist science fiction or war and empire or art education or transportation.

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
In *Art Education/Activism*, for example, the configuration of jackets and spines covers a range of interpretations of the topic.

MARTHA ROSLER:
When you're talking about art and education, you need to also think not only about education in general and the education of artists but also what artists educate themselves and others about, which is about art and activism in the real world. So it takes on institutionalized training, but also the stepping-off of artists into more activist roles. And they all form a kind of building structure, which is meant to be suggestive of the structures that are created around questions of education and activism.

11. *PROTOTYPE (FREEDOM IS NOT FREE); PROTOTYPE (GOD BLESS AMERICA)*

MARTHA R OSLER:
It's hard for me to look at my own life as other than just keeping on with doing what I was doing, which was a tripartite thing: making work, writing about ways of thinking about the world and about the production of art, and teaching.

DARSIE ALEXANDER:
After five decades, Rosler continues her work at a steady pace, making art that provokes and challenges us. In these two works from 2006, she looks at the consequences of war, bodies impacted in particular by the effects of the IED, or the improvised explosive device.

MARTHA ROSLER:
Most of the works I've done about the war are about the suffering of the other side, but I would never want to leave out that of the soldiers. The leg is a large-size version of a prosthetic leg, because the wars of the 2000s brought us signature injuries, one of which was traumatic amputation of limbs. To put it another way, a lot of combatants lost limbs. And I wanted to make it really large so you couldn't miss it, that this is an artifact of our soldiers suffering in the war.

And it happens to be that of a woman. It has Gucci sandals stenciled at the top to say another form of female footwear, no longer applicable here. And it moves, because legs move. And it moves kind of like a tall ship back and forth, creakily in the space.

SHIRA BAKER:
As a companion piece, Rosler offers a video of a toy soldier playing "God Bless America"—the camera pans down to focus on the exposed armature of the doll, which resembles a prosthetic limb. Decades after her collaged anti–Vietnam War fliers, Rosler is still interrogating the human cost of war, both inside and outside traditional art spaces and modalities.

MARTHA ROSLER:
We need to be out there, but we also need to be in here, because otherwise the art world will go on doing the things it's done in the way it's done it, and that is not really the best that art can be.