

MACBA Collection. Martha Rosler: God Bless America!

Exhibition from 18 May to 15 October 2017



Martha Rosler Reads 'Vogue'. 1982. Single-channel video, colour, sound, 25 min 45 s
MACBA Collection. Long-term loan of Barcelona City Council

A PIONEER IN THE 1970S OF THE USE OF VIDEO as a tool for social analysis, Martha Rosler (New York, 1943) continues to be relevant for her political engagement and feminist perspective. For almost fifty years, her works have offered a critical examination of the workings of contemporary culture.

While her career has encompassed performance, photography, installation and essay writing, Rosler is perhaps best known for her work in video. *MACBA Collection. Martha Rosler: God Bless America!* focuses on Rosler's video production through eleven works spanning the 1970s to 2006. The show centres on the key thematic lines in Rosler's work, where politics as the ideological exercise of power, class hierarchy and economic interest is addressed, especially through the enactment of U.S. imperialism and the social control of women's bodies.

Together with anti-war videos, like the one that lends the exhibition its title, these works deal with themes such as immigration, labour exploitation, the complicity between multinational corporations, the U.S. government and dictatorial regimes of Latin America, and the transgressions of private life by state power. In a second, yet related, group of videos, Rosler foregrounds gender analysis, interrogating the domestic world and the instrumentalisation of the female body by the mass media, fashion and advertising, as well as by the scientific, medical and legal spheres. Referring to her work, Rosler has written: 'I want to make art about the commonplace, art that illuminates social life.'

1. Prototype: God Bless America!

2006

IN THIS BRIEF BUT INCISIVE ANTI-WAR VIDEO, Rosler presents us with a mechanical toy that plays ‘God Bless America’, Irving Berlin’s patriotic American song that has become an alternative national anthem. While the figure of the mechanical soldier alludes to the instrumentalisation of human beings on which all armies are based, the anatomical prosthesis reveals the piece to be a condemnation of the machinery of death, and, by implication, the politicians and international treaties that support it. Made at the time of the second Iraq war (2003–11), it could be taken as a specific commentary in opposition to that conflict. The fact that the figure was made in China reflects on the irony of patriotism in a globalised world.

2. Flower Fields

1974

MARTHA ROSLER FILMED THE FLOWER FIELDS ON the hills bordering Interstate Highway 5, which follows the west coast of the U.S. from the Mexican to the Canadian borders. An attention to colour in geometric planes evokes the tradition of American abstract art. Zooming in closer on this apparently idyllic scene reveals the hard, manual labour of the Mexican workers, often illegal immigrants who are employed to work in the fields. The immigration police car moving at high speed and the border control with which the piece ends serve to emphasise the precarious situation of the workers.



Flower Fields

1974

Single-channel video, colour, silent

3 min 40 s

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3. Secrets from the Street: No Disclosure

1980

FROM INSIDE A CAR, A CAMERA RECORDS the street life and graffiti in San Francisco's Mission District, where the lowrider car culture congregates. Meanwhile, the artist's voice can be heard reading one of her texts on alternative street subcultures, which she contrasts with the supposed national culture. Rosler addresses the viewer with messages such as: 'The secret is that to know the meaning of a culture you must know the limits of meaning of your own.'



***Secrets from the Street:
No Disclosure***

1980

Single-channel video, colour, sound

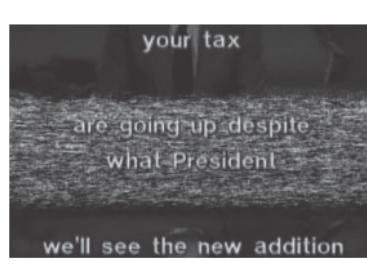
12 min 20 s

MACBA Collection. MACBA Consortium

4. If It's Too Bad to Be True, It Could Be DISINFORMATION

1985

IN THIS VIDEO ROSLER ADDRESSES U.S. geopolitical relations with Latin America. Her starting point was an article published by *The New York Times* accusing the United States government of spreading false information about Nicaragua: specifically, the purchase of Russian MiG fighter aircraft by Nicaragua, whose purpose, so the American government claimed, was to attack the U.S. The video incorporates press material and creates a disjunction between text and image that questions the supposed authority and objectivity of the media. As in the artist's other works, the formal structure is inseparable from its political analysis.



***If it's Too Bad to Be True, it Could Be
DISINFORMATION***

1985

Single-channel video, colour, sound

16 min 26 s

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5. Chile on the Road to NAFTA, Accompanied by the National Police Band

1997

ONCE AGAIN, ROSLER COMMENTS ON U.S. involvement in Latin America, in a video made as Chile was being admitted to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Chile has been hailed by some as an economic miracle, a marker of progress that contrasts with the political repression of its recent past. The subtext to this is the complicity of the United States in the military coup in Chile in 1973 that put General Augusto Pinochet in power. Rosler questions the cost of Chile's economic growth. Seen from the rear, a huge billboard on the road to Santiago at first appears to be a fist raised in a revolutionary gesture, but is then revealed to be holding a can of Coca-Cola, a symbol of U.S. imperialism. Meanwhile, the families of the victims of the coup write the names of the disappeared on a commemorative memorial.

6. Domination and the Everyday

1978

WHILE A WOMAN CARES for her child in a middle-class home, media messages (including a TV interview with a gallery owner about the art of the sixties) are combined with a text by the artist about everyday forms of domination. Rosler superimposes images of the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, advertisements from magazines and family photographs. The confrontation of audio, textual and visual elements summarises the effects of everyday experience where politics infiltrates and impacts on private life.

7. Semiotics of the Kitchen

1975

ONE OF ROSLER'S BEST-KNOWN WORKS, in this video the artist is shown in front of a kitchen counter displaying various utensils in alphabetical order, starting with an apron and ending with a tenderiser. Rosler adopts the role of an 'anti-Julia Child', the popular American TV chef who is credited with bringing French cuisine to the U.S. public in the 1960s. As suggested by the ironic title and Rosler's sometimes aggressive behaviour as she demonstrates the function of each object, a lexicon of domestic utensils is transformed into one that foregrounds anger and frustration. As Rosler herself maintains: 'When the woman speaks, she names her own oppression.'

8. Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained

1977

AS THE ARTIST UNDRESSES, a man in a white coat measures her body with a thoroughness that becomes progressively more invasive. Three women sound instruments according to whether the measurement recorded is above, below or exactly average. The video thus addresses the level of scrutiny to which women's bodies are subjected within modern society, as well as the imposition of standards and norms to which female bodies are expected to conform. More broadly, the video evokes the institutionalisation of pseudo-scientific measurement used historically to justify discriminatory racial theories and in contexts such as beauty pageants. Rosler also incorporates documentary photography produced by the American government in the 1930s for statistical purposes, while a voiceover lists crimes against women.



Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained

1977

Single-channel video, colour, sound

39 min 20 s

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9. Born to be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby S./M.

1988

ROSLER TOOK ON MEDIA PRESENTATIONS of gender and class in the 1980s with the 'Baby M Case'. Sensationalised by the media, the case involved a working-class surrogate mother, Mary Beth Whitehead, who decided she wanted to keep her child. The adopting couple, Elizabeth and William Stern, more affluent and of higher socially standing (a biochemist and a paediatrician), sued Whitehead and eventually won on the basis of Mr Stern's parental prerogative. Emulating the language and staging of American comedy, Rosler constructs a piece that alternates real television sequences and transcriptions of the trial with the artist's interpretation, highlighting the judicial bias in favour of the bourgeois couple and the public vilification of Whitehead.

10. Martha Rosler Reads 'Vogue'

1982

THE VIDEO AGAIN FEATURES ROSLER as the protagonist, in this case assuming the behavioural conventions and 'fashionable' dress of a television presenter. Rosler thumbs through an issue of the glossy fashion magazine *Vogue*, interspersing the images of glamourous consumer-culture with others showing Asian workers in garment sweatshops. Data on the hourly pay of these textile industry workers is contrasted with the high earnings of fashion models. These statistics and the harsh working conditions reveal the dark side of the fashion industry. The images of success and conspicuous consumption are therefore revealed to be simultaneously manipulative of wealthy women while exploitative of their poorer counterparts.

11. A Simple Case for Torture, or How to Sleep at Night

1983

MADE AS A REACTION TO AN EDITORIAL published in the right-wing *Newsweek* magazine in 1982, Rosler constructs a visual essay emphasising the dangerous totalitarian implications of the argument for torture advanced by the article. While the voiceover (enacted by the artist) begins with a simple reading from the original article, the video gradually reverses the argument.

The artist's contrary point of view is developed through images of press articles on subjects ranging from human rights to unemployment and the global economy. Advancing an exhaustive set of counterarguments, Rosler denounces the U.S. government and companies that support political regimes that resort to torture, as well as exposing the silence or bias of the press through its news coverage.



***A Simple Case for Torture,
or How to Sleep at Night***

1983

Single-channel video, colour, sound

61 min 50 s

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Exhibition organised and produced by MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

Curator:

Tanya Barson

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