

Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*

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Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* investigates an oppressive relationship between women and language, using linguistic structure to refer to social ordering systems that perpetuate sexism in arenas as private as the family kitchen but as public as a television show. Viewers approach this piece as filtered through popular media—its style mimics a TV cooking show. Further layers of signification are invoked through the dialogue this piece has with mass culture genres, scenarios of production, and means of distribution and reception. Commerce and labor relations are also at play here, as they relate specifically to women, in a post-war era that produced an escalation of commodities marketed to women. Rosler seems to point to the metaphoric through the literal: she uses kitchen tools as weapons, revealing the power already at our fingertips.

Commenting on *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler once said: "when the woman speaks, she names her own oppression."¹ Semiotic theory, developed in part by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, posits that words are not simply peripheral labels given to things but rather are "collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world."² Language utilizes symbols that depend on the absence of the referent. A Lacanian understanding of language defines it as something other, as that which saturates the pre-existing symbolic world.³ A subject is constituted upon insertion into the linguistic order, an articulated system of difference that constitutes meaning. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman."⁴ Women learn their place as subordinate in society through socialization into language. The pervasiveness of language itself makes it nearly impossible to create distance from it or to evade it in any meaningful sense. The urgent question that Julia Kristeva identified was "what can be our place in the symbolic contract" of language?⁵ In *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler does not attempt to find a new women's language, instead she utilizes what operates as the "women's language" of American suburban life—here, woman *is* naming her own oppression in a powerful reckoning with prevailing concepts of femininity.

In Rosler's piece, the filmic representation of each object is paired with its linguistic articulation. The effect of pronouncing a word while demonstrating its image is didactic and

¹ Electronic Arts Intermix, "Semiotics of the Kitchen," Martha Rosler. EAI.org

² Roy Harris, *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein*. (London: Routledge, 1988) ix.

³ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (New York: Norton, 1977) 65-66.

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (Vintage Books, 2011) 283.

⁵ Julia Kristeva "Women's Time" "trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake in *Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology*, ed. Nannerl O. Keohane, Michelle Z. Rosaldo, and Barbara C. Gelpi. (University of Chicago Press, 1982) 41.

reminiscent of childhood word games. As kitchen objects are organized alphabetically, Rosler teaches the viewer a language. Rather than “apple” or “alligator,” “a” is for “apron.” The apron comes first as a visual signifier of the labor that is to follow, both in this video and in a housewife’s daily work. This is the female child’s task: to learn the names of these tools she will be expected to use. *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is a mock-educational video—when viewers already know the names of the cooking utensils, they can consider themselves integrated into a socioeconomic system that requires that women not only know these objects but also own them.

In the postwar era, the suburban housewife became an idealized image of a particularly American womanhood. The proliferation of commercial products was through to be her boon—the gas stove, the refrigerator, the blender, the peeler, the toaster—the market for kitchen appliances and all number of household goods skyrocketed after World War II. And in this new field of choice between commodities, the wife and mother was the master of decision. Supposedly, “she was free to choose automobiles, clothes, appliances, supermarkets; she had everything that women ever dreamed of.”⁶ This image of the truly feminine, fulfilled mother, “in charge” of the household and unburdened by any other concern was disastrous for real steps toward sexual equality as well as the mental health of so many American women. Betty Friedan’s important 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, brought many of these problems out into the open. “Is *selecting* (pop’s basic, “Duchampian,” move) an act of aesthetic power or a sign of mere acceptance—like shopping?”⁷ Woman’s only arena of choice was shopping for the family, particularly buying food and home appliances like the ones referred to in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.

This period of American culture was equally oppressive for women in art. As Rosler cynically quips, “women, by virtue of their earthliness and closeness to Nature, their involvement with childbirth, were foreclosed from Genius.”⁸ Her sardonic invocation of “Genius” is reminiscent of Linda Nochlin’s seminal 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Nochlin makes the case that it was “*institutionally* made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence or success” because they were barred from academies or other forums that would allow them access to art and instead pressured to “direct her major attention to the welfare of others—family and husband.”⁹ Women, throughout history, were prevented from speaking for themselves in art or in life. In the 1960’s, women all over the country were having nervous breakdowns: they described feeling empty, angry, and desperate in their supposedly perfect suburban lives. Friedan often encountered a linguistic inability in these women to voice their discontent: “when a woman tries to put the problem into words, she often

⁶ Betty Friedan, “The Feminine Mystique” in *The Essential Feminist Reader*, ed. Estelle B. Freedman. (New York: Modern Library, 2007) 272.

⁷ Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004) 97.

⁸ Rosler 90.

⁹ Linda Nochlin “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (Art News, 1971) 176, 164.

merely describes the daily life she leads.”¹⁰ The various appliances and utensils Rosler displays operate metaphorically as an enumeration of stifling tasks expected of the American housewife. The demands on women that they spend their whole life in domestic servitude precluded a chance to find their own identity through creative work.

The question of labor becomes apparent: *Semiotics of the Kitchen* has to do with sexual division of labor. The repetitive nature of household work is reflected in Rosler’s measured demonstration of each object, one after another. There is the sense that she could begin again, or that her next task is to return each thing to its proper drawer or cabinet. Maintaining the household is a devalorized type of labor that is set in opposition to other kinds of masculinized work. Mierle Laderman Ukeles also explored this classification, itself a representation of labor, in her *Maintenance Art Performances* of 1973-1974. Helen Molesworth sees a connection between Rosler and Ukeles, writing in her essay “House Work and Art Work” that both artists are “explicitly concerned with how ‘ideologically appropriate subjects’ are created, in part, through the naturalizing of unpaid and underpaid domestic labor.”¹¹ Ukeles set forth two opposing categories of human labor in her “Maintenance Art Manifesto,” “development” and “maintenance,” representing two gendered positions: male and female, creation and preservation, public and private, progress and repetition.¹² Rosler does not present her work as part of a manifesto. She approaches these issues with more subtlety and perhaps greater historical staying-power. In *Semiotics of the Kitchen*,” Rosler cuts across mass-media and academics, combining the image of the suburban housewife with theories of semiotics but ultimately showing that “neither is able to provide an adequate account of the role of wife/mother/maintenance provider,” in Molesworth’s opinion.¹³ The political project of women’s liberation is problematized by the inescapable nature of language. A simple message of the video is impossible to precisely pin down—with language. It therefore embeds its critique of language into its own discourse.

When Rosler performs her housewife-ness, it feels artificial and staged, which is only to point out that in fact this identify category, delimited on all sides by four homey walls, is also arbitrary and socially constructed. She discourages identification, playing the role of cook “as if the stage directions were written by Bertolt Brecht: straight-faced and purged of emotion.”¹⁴ Her aim was indeed a “distancing effect,” one that would break the viewer’s emotional identification in favor of recognizing a more systematic feminist meaning that was not simply unique or personal.¹⁵ To understand this work as a performance of domesticity itself is underscored by a bound book on the shelf behind Rosler that reads “MOTHER” in all caps. That is the label for these actions and their perpetrator.

¹⁰ Friedan 277.

¹¹ Helen Molesworth “House Work and Art Work” *October*, Vol. 92, (Spring, 2000) 77.

¹² Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “Maintenance Art Manifesto” 1969.

¹³ Molesworth 79.

¹⁴ Molesworth 91.

¹⁵ Rosler 8.

The objects that Rosler presents to the camera are weapons. By the time we reach “c” in the alphabet, the “chopper” prefigures what is to come—she slices aggressively into nothing, clanging metal on metal. Each object’s action is repeated dramatically, three times or sometimes more. The knife is brandished in a threatening pose, as is the fork, and even the pan. The “hamburger press” and “nutcracker” get clacked together like evil torture devices. Nearly every object has some capacity for violence. She intones the name of each device, calling them into being as weapons that shift back agency to the woman who has been dominated by these oppressive tools. The objects that are vessel-like, i.e. “ladle,” “measuring implements,” “quart bottle,” and “spoon,” are aggressively emptied and tossed off-screen. Each of these gestures is a refusal of prescribed meaning. She uses these tools for something other than their normal purpose; the broader implication urges a reconsideration of the notion of “normal purpose” as it relates especially to the formation of identity categories for women.

The framing of the opening titles acknowledges the medium of television itself. Rosler transgresses the boxed-in space of her TV studio/kitchen by gesturing fiercely toward the viewer, and by flinging imaginary food beyond the frame. Portable video technology had been introduced in the United States in 1965 with the Sony Portapak, creating an opportunity for far more people to become involved with video production. Mass viewership of national syndicated networks created an industrialized conception of society, linked through isolated vision. Throughout her career and to this day, Rosler utilizes familiar forms that draw on pop culture—garage sales, tv programs, mail art—as a way to interrogate cultural practices. The slow introduction shot scrawled on a chalkboard evokes the director’s clapboard, which is always edited out of Hollywood productions. Rosler herself referred to a “wrenched pacing and bent space” of the video that exposes the artifice of the medium, “the mediating agencies of photography and speech.”¹⁶ She confronts the camera’s gaze and literally threatens the viewer looking in at her, jabbing forward into space and hurling outward past the screen’s frame. This attention to conditions of reception represented a shift towards the viewer, away from the privileged masculinist creator that Michael Fried championed. Fried’s derogatory descriptor, “theatrical,” became a tactic of postmodern disruption of modernist categories.¹⁷ Douglas Crimp describes a “preoccupation with the ‘theatrical’” of Fried, a way of “‘staging’ a picture” to reveal its artifice and lack of autonomous signification.¹⁸ Rosler’s show is indeed overtly staged, calling attention to the medium of television as well as the cooking show genre; she called the character of *Semiotics of the Kitchen* “an antipodean Julia Child.”¹⁹ Engagement with pop consciousness through mass media forms was a way of getting right to the heart of social concerns.

¹⁶ Rosler 8.

¹⁷ Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, (Dutton, 1968) 161.

¹⁸ Douglas Crimp “Pictures,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979) 76-77.

¹⁹ Rosler 7.

Semiotics of the Kitchen utilized popular images and genres of women in media, such as the domestic housewife and cooking show host, while also (somewhat absurdly) bringing in semiotic linguistic theory to an unacademic address. Her deadpan deliberateness discourages identification with her unique subjectivity, pointing to a far broader significance. Rosler presents familiar objects, objects whose names we already know, as a demonstration of the violence we can do to the patriarchy with the tools we already have. She described the protagonist of the piece as a woman who replaces standard kitchen tools' "domesticated 'meaning' with a lexicon of rage and frustration."²⁰ The very concept of a lexicon or alphabet requires a certain set of arbitrary yet agreed upon units of meaning. The arbitrariness of signification is crucial for the understanding of identity categories as well; women are considered domestic *by nature*, and the kitchen her natural habitat. She can speak only through these ridiculous tools that ensure her continued oppression. Woman is a sign in a system of maintaining order, and her very body is part of the code. But the reading does not have to be passive. On the contrary, Rosler slices through the air, puncturing the quiet realm of the kitchen—"XYZ."

²⁰ Rosler 7.

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