

Martha Rosler's Photomontages and Garage Sales: Private and Public, Discursive and Dialogical

Karen Moss

My art is a communicative act . . . a form of an utterance, a way to open up a conversation.¹

—Martha Rosler

MARTHA ROSLER, A CRITICAL FIGURE in contemporary art since the 1970s, has developed an artistic practice that resists the customary cubbyholes and categories of art history. Chronologically, Rosler's work is most often considered part of the first generation of US feminist artists, since she began her career in the late 1960s. She works in various media ranging from photomontage, sculpture, and performative installation to film and video. She is also a prolific writer; her overarching artistic production is not only visual, but also verbal and textual. Her *modus operandi* is both dialectical and interstitial: she works between the actual and the metaphorical, or the real and the symbolic, and explores the spaces between private and public, personal and social, everyday life and the art world.²

Early in her career Rosler carefully positioned herself and her practice in ways that did not conform to the norm. She refused to develop a signature style, worked in less traditional or commodifiable forms (postcards, performance, and video), and favored presenting her work in alternative sites, assiduously avoiding the art market. She did not exhibit her photomontages of the 1960s and 1970s in a commercial

gallery until 1993, and her first retrospective, *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, traveled in Europe and the United States from 1998 through 2000. During the past fifteen years, however, Rosler has received numerous accolades and has had solo international exhibitions, most recently, a one-person project at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2012.

This essay examines aspects of Rosler's relationship to feminism and notions of private and public that appear in her early works and that she has revisited in recent years: her antiwar and feminist photomontages, first produced in the late 1960s, and then again in the 2000s, and a series of garage sales—performative installations that began in 1973 and resurfaced in conjunction with her first retrospective and culminated in last year's *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* at MoMA.³ In these two series, Rosler draws upon domestic themes from the private realm and then inserts them into the public sphere to formulate potent social, political, and institutional critiques. She uses dialogical processes and discursive strategies to undergird her ideas, attracting and engaging various audiences beyond the art world, an important aspect of her practice. With intellect and wit, Rosler produces works that are often about representation of the female body and its related subjects and subjectivities.

Rosler's photomontages utilize everyday images to critique political and social issues ranging from the Vietnam War to stereotypes about domesticity, female subjectivity, and the male gaze. Her series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (ca. 1967–1972) coincided with the peak of US military involvement in Southeast Asia and concurrent antiwar protests, while the feminist photomontages *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (ca. 1965–1972) parallel the beginning of the women's liberation movement. Rosler returned to making antiwar photomontages in the early 2000s, not long after the United States and coalition forces began fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, juxtaposing images from these war-torn countries with idealized representations of male and female subjects from contemporary advertising and media.

Rosler's garage sales are representations of the do-it-yourself events that she first encountered in the California suburbs in which objects circulate from private homes to a more public domain. By bringing everyday objects from wider society into the gallery or

art-related spaces, Rosler calls attention to the valuation systems at play in the art world in a setting where questions of worth, value, use, and exchange are simultaneously placed front and center and completely repressed and denied.⁴ While each installation is particular to its specific site and audience, they all foreground economic issues of consumption and commodification and the potential (or necessity) of informal, alternative income streams in people's lives. And since garage sales are enterprises often organized and arranged by women, they also reveal key feminist issues surrounding domesticity, gender roles, labor, and class dynamics—subjects that have been important to Rosler throughout her adult life. In the late 1990s, when the more recent iterations of her projects were held in art centers or museums, these works critically addressed the art world and its attendant social relations and audience reception. Her direct engagement with these issues was manifested in the live events she orchestrated for both an art-going public and a more general audience.

Despite the focus of this essay on Rosler's photomontages and garage sales, it should be noted that by the 1970s she was producing work in other media that also addressed issues of war and feminism. For instance, installations such as *B52 in Baby's Tears* (1972), an agricultural flat of live plants with the silhouette of a B-52 bomber cut into the tender vines, and *Diaper Pattern* (1975), in which comments by US observers and combatants in Vietnam are written on her son's well-worn cloth diapers, poignantly critiqued the war in Southeast Asia. Live performance and video installations include *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), her classic spoof of television cooking shows, in which a woman wields kitchen tools beginning with letters A through Z and becomes progressively more agitated as she goes through the alphabet acting out her domestic oppression. In *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (performance, 1973; video, 1977), Rosler strips as each part of her body is measured by men in white lab coats and judged by a panel of women, as a comment about socially enforced norms applied to females and others. *Losing: A Conversation with Parents* (1977), a "mockumentary" interview of the parents of a young girl who has succumbed to anorexia, strays into uses of food as a weapon: hunger strikes, famines, and concentration camps. The panoply of Rosler's interests extend far beyond war and feminism: labor and class, ethnic

and cultural histories, housing and homelessness, disinformation and media, urban and public space are all recurring themes in her subsequent production from the 1980s to the present.⁵

Rosler's roots as an artist, activist, and feminist hark back to an early period in her life. Raised in an Orthodox Jewish family in Brooklyn, she has commented on how her religious background made her aware of human rights and social justice and heightened her sensitivity to the public and the political at an early age.⁶ When she was twelve years old, her poem about integration was published in her yeshiva newspaper. By her mid-teens she had become involved with civil rights and antinuclear protests. The horror of the Vietnam War instigated her activism, and she has said that circulating feminist ideas began to influence her in the early 1960s "just a few minutes before the feminist movement actually got underway," while she considered herself a "feminist by inclination, and by conviction" by around 1967 or 1968.⁷

Rosler went to graduate school in 1971 to pursue a master of fine arts degree at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Located adjacent to the affluent neighborhoods of La Jolla, not far from the military bases of San Diego, UCSD was described by art department chair Paul Brach (husband of feminist artist Miriam Schapiro) as "a bastion of left-leaning individuals and political activism in a sea of John Birchers."⁸ At UCSD, Rosler's circle of acquaintances included faculty members Herbert Marcuse, Fredric Jameson, and Angela Davis (then Marcuse's graduate student), as well as visiting faculty, among them philosophers Jean-François Lyotard and Edgar Morin and filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard and Roberto Rossellini.⁹

From its inception, the UCSD art department embraced nontraditional art and interdisciplinary practices. Among the faculty were poet David Antin (whom Rosler had already considered something of a mentor in New York) and Fred Lonidier, a junior faculty member developing new approaches to social documentary. Rosler and her contemporary Allan Sekula both became involved with antiwar and labor protests and formed a student-faculty group together with Lonidier, fellow graduate student Brian Connell, and junior faculty member Phil (now Phel) Steinmetz that met regularly to discuss art and activism, politics and theory. Opposing modernist art that was isolated

from rest of culture, politics, and society, they took a particular interest in how photographic media (including film and video) and performance could develop new forms and address new audiences.¹⁰

Even before she entered UCSD, Rosler joined a feminist consciousness-raising group, the Women's Liberation Front, which was based at the university but included community members. While some feminist groups tended toward an essentializing form of cultural feminism, Rosler has said this was not the orientation of her organization, which focused on socioeconomic and class issues.¹¹ In her pivotal 1977 *Artforum* article, "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California," Rosler emphasized her view that feminism necessitated a "principled criticism of economic and social power relations and some commitment to collective action," which would align her with a more political or socialist feminism.¹²

The Women's Liberation Front would present lectures and workshops aimed to empower women to act on their own behalf and to enable them to claim their own spaces in the world. Consisting mostly of UCSD students with some women from outside the university, they presented lectures at high schools and community centers, speaking to women of all ages about the aims of feminism and antiwar activism. Rosler has said that she could explore questions of representation in a much more direct fashion by talking about them in a discursive manner.¹³

In public talks Rosler sometimes shows the groups slides of her early antiwar photomontages from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, in which she juxtaposed photographs of violence and war from newspaper and magazines with representations of modern home interiors from architectural and design magazines. For instance, in *Cleaning the Drapes* (fig. 1), a stylish woman with a bouffant hairdo vacuums her curtains, seemingly unaware of the soldiers holed up outside the window. *Balloons* (fig. 2) depicts a grief-stricken Vietnamese woman carrying her bleeding child within the interior of a modern home, with large balloons—possibly the remnants of a birthday party—in the background. Both are biting critiques of domestic complacency, US militarism, and the inundation of violent imagery via television, film, and print media during the Vietnam War era. In addition to the community presentations, Rosler also photocopied and distributed these antiwar photomontages on marches (as she had

also done while still living in New York City), and sometimes they were published in underground newspapers, such as San Diego's feminist newspaper *Goodbye to All That*.¹⁴ In all of these instances, they were disseminated to the public rather than to art audiences.

Prior to her antiwar works, Rosler produced what she has called her "feminist montages," the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (ca. 1965–1972), depicting women, selected from advertisements and women's or men's magazines, placed in various settings. These photomontages—sometimes showing nudes with oddly displaced and/or replaced anatomy—are witty critiques of domesticity, normative female behavior, and stereotypical representations of women. In *Bowl of Fruit* (fig. 3), one sees a glass container with green pears in the foreground of a photograph of a glossy kitchen, while in the background a provocatively posed nude tilts her hips as she coyly gazes over her shoulder at the viewer. The overt equation between ripe fruit and female fecundity, and the nude's highly exaggerated anatomy and pose, are clearly satirical. For *Small Wonder* (fig. 4) Rosler appropriates an undergarment advertisement with another provocatively posed model, pasting a photo of breasts over the bra and smiling red lips over the crotch of the girdle, a hilarious visual pun that is meant to recall Magritte's surrealist displacement in *La Viol* and that reveals what is proffered by the woman and imagined by the male spectator. *Hot House, or Harem (after Ingres)* (fig. 5) is a panorama of scores of recumbent nude women from *Playboy* filling the frame. By recontextualizing these familiar magazine images, the artist foregrounds the male gaze.¹⁵

Rosler and her feminist contemporaries eschewed single-discipline, heroic art and used oppositional strategies in rethinking the separation between art and life, the ordinary and the spectacular, and the private and public spheres. Desiring to develop new art forms that would resist commodification and wishing to engage with a broader public beyond the insular (and insulated) art world, Rosler has indicated that it was feminism that propelled her use of everyday, accessible materials and mass media as a decoy to draw people into her social critiques. She writes,

It was feminism that underlined for me that it is life on the ground, in its quotidian, thoroughly familiar details that makes up life as

lived and understood, but bears deeper scrutiny. I have, in my work, evoked the image of the decoy, a lure that attracts attention by posing as something immediately—reassuringly, attractively—known. The disclosure of the decoy’s otherness settles certainty and disrupts expectations.¹⁶

Rosler draws in her audience with materials and media that at first seem ordinary, but by dislocating images into uncanny, unsettling representations, she disrupts the presumed reading, forcing the viewer to confront their criticality.

During the same period in which she was making her early photomontages, Rosler produced a series of stuffed sculptures made of fabric and clothing, cast-off materials that served as surrogates for the female body and as signifiers of gender, domesticity, and class. She was not satisfied with the singular, static, necrotic quality of these sculptures, and soon they evolved into full-room installations that she felt had a capacity for spatio-temporal qualities and theatricality.¹⁷ Rosler’s *Some Women Prisoners of the Thieu Regime in the Infamous Poulo Condore Prison, South Vietnam* (1972) (fig. 6) is one of these installations made from cast-off US women’s clothing stamped with the name, date of birth, and serial numbers of the Poulo Condore prisoners and hung on chicken wire and topped with barbed wire. The work evokes an ominous, haunting outdoor environment calling up the real-world imprisonment of these women in Vietnam.

Shortly after making this piece, Rosler made an installation that went beyond constructing a hypothetical environment—she brought elements of the “real world” into the gallery. Rosler’s *Monumental Garage Sale* (1973) (fig. 7), located in the student art gallery at Revelle College at UCSD, incorporated performance with interactivity, demanding participation from both artist and visitors. As someone from New York City, Rosler was fascinated by suburban garage sales:

As a city dweller, I had never heard of [garage sales] until I moved to Southern California, where they are a highly popular, even beloved, pastime. Coming from a culture in which one donates unwanted items to charity or sells them on the street I saw the garage sale as a portrait in brief of a suburban society in which the hope of cashing in on cast-offs so that one might go out and consume again, led people unabashedly to expose their material lives to the scrutiny of

others. I saw it as an art form of contemporary American society and determined to create such a sale in an art gallery.¹⁸

As Rosler notes, these sales were unknown in New York, where houses have stoops instead of front yards or garages, and people most often donate goods to other people or to charity or, quite commonly, they simply put their unwanted items on the street for others to select. She also observes how in the city, people might be embarrassed to sell their possessions, or conversely, may feel a social requirement to give to those less fortunate, while the suburban consumers blithely sell their throwaways only to start their cycle of consumption again so they can “trade up” to a higher quality of goods — or simply to stay afloat.

For the *Monumental Garage Sale* Rosler filled the gallery with standard garage sale fare: clothes, books, toys, artwork, and jewelry on tables and racks — but it also featured some very personal objects such as private letters and photographs, baby shoes, underwear, used diaphragms, soft-core men’s magazines, as well as other abject, broken, and disused items. Every object in this sale was selected and arranged by Rosler: she featured the “best” items in the front in bright light; less desirable, least saleable, and personal items in darker areas; and finally, empty containers, including those from welfare food “commodities,” at the back of the gallery.¹⁹

Rosler assumed the persona of a single mother, a hippie in a counterculture Indian-print pinafore (fig. 8). This character was not that far removed from herself as a graduate student, living on a modest budget with a young child; however, in order to create a dialectic between self-identification and dis-identification, she utilizes a Brechtian device of distantiation.²⁰ During the exhibition, Rosler was always there to haggle with visitors face-to-face: her ongoing performance is to speak directly with the audience and to negotiate each of the sales transactions. Some visitors may not have even known she was the artist/author of the work: her subtle masquerade disguises her status as the singular author as the audience becomes her collaborators in the work. These conversations with the visitors are critical in that they underscore Rosler’s interest in the dialogical process with the public. Once again, she favored the idea of presence, sharing an actual physical space with the audience, who are themselves key participants in constructing the meaning of her work.

Rosler evokes other levels of presence by incorporating audio-visual elements into the installation. A slide presentation consisting of found images of family photos bought at an estate sale are nostalgic Kodachromes that do not appear to show the artist's own family (fig. 9). The work prominently also featured an audiotape based on Karl Marx's famous section in *Capital* about commodity fetishism and Rosler's self-interrogation in which she challenges herself: "Why not give it all away?" Rosler explains,

The tape consisted of a meditation spoken by the garage sale persona. Her musings express contradictory positions about things relating to the sale: exchange value versus use-value of material goods, social relations and their partial obfuscation by commodity relations, the origins of commodity fetishism, the conflicting emotions of desire and shame evoked by the prospect of selling one's cast-aways to friends and strangers... the fear of being judged on the evidence of one's "things." She asks questions about the social forms and social relations ranging from the trivial to the transcendent. She speaks one moment with the voice of an entrepreneur, at the next with that of the wage earner trying to supplement wages of ever-decreasing buying power; she reproduces fragments of the ideologies of positions within different social classes.²¹

Rosler's stream of consciousness "meditation" thus projects different personae and uses a shifting array of pronouns and voices, from the first-person voice of the seller/earner to remarks in the third person to Marx's ideological and historical commentary. These different aural texts articulate class difference and provide various access points for different audience members.

Crucially, Rosler advertised the *Monumental Garage Sale* in the *Pennysaver*, a free, local advertising paper, and as an art event in the local press, hoping to garner visitors from different neighborhoods, occupations, and social strata. According to Rosler, some visitors came as prospective buyers, poring over the content and examining each object in detail, determined to find flaws and get a bargain price, while others strolled through as though perusing goods in an actual city street: the tables and objects functioned as the built environment, the aisles as streets. Rosler transformed the white cube gallery into

a simulacrum of a real, everyday suburban experience, as the viewer experiences this quasi-street environment like a Debordian *dérive*.²²

The audience reception to the work varied considerably depending on whether people came for the sale itself and thought it was a community service by the university or whether they were local artists and UCSD students who went to a gallery to see an art project. An account of the *Monumental Garage Sale*, written in the UCSD newspaper by a graduate student of Herbert Marcuse's—and a friend of Rosler's—critiques the work because the “junk” disrupted the usual function of the art gallery, which should be considered a separate, sacrosanct, utopian space. Rosler saw this critique as an anachronistic notion of a sublime, transcendent modernism that could no longer exist by the early 1970s and said that the only possibility for her and other artists was to “kick out the boundaries between art and life” and shift the paradigm of art production into what later came to be called postmodernism.²³

In the back of the installation Rosler included a large blackboard with the phrase “Maybe the garage sale is a metaphor for the mind” to encourage the viewer to ponder the meaning(s) of the work. Ultimately, Rosler represented a “real” event and used mental and psychological metaphors to encourage viewers to consider social and commodity relations. For Rosler, the garage sale is not just a representation of an ordinary event, but a kind of worldview. She writes,

At issue was the representation not only of a type of event, a garage sale, but also of a mental history and a way of thinking about the world, which of course is something under social rather than personal control—in this case—a way of thinking about society in which social relations embody commodity relations and thus rest on wages, prices and profit.²⁴

Although Rosler includes personal and private items in her project, it is definitely not autobiographical. In contrast to some other feminist artists who also follow the credo that the personal is political, she avoids concrete references to her own biography and instead uses visual images and language to construct a persona that, like identity itself, is contingent, not cohesive.

The persona was tenuous; during the meditation she referred to herself sometimes as “I” and sometimes as “she”; she could not be seen in the slides: the people didn’t seem likely as her family. It should have become clear that not only was I not simply capitalizing on my status as an artist to make an autobiographical work out of the garage sale, there was no biography at all being offered. The slides, the tapes, the accretion of things suggested a “portrait” of a personality and a family. The arrangement of the items, the gradually diminishing illumination became a metaphoric representation of the mind, in which one “fronts” with one’s best attributes and private musings and memory reside in the mind’s “recesses.” The Garage Sale highlighted the dubious proposition that one is what one appears to own. (Again a “fake” portrait.) This is still a very contingent, unformed identity.²⁵

Ultimately, the *Monumental Garage Sale* is a destabilized pseudo-portrait of suburban life and of the artist’s own subjectivity that also represents and creates metaphors for economic, social, and psychological conditions.

A few years after the presentation of *Monumental Garage Sale* at UCSD, Rosler packed up all the remaining items and took the performance on the road as *Traveling Garage Sale*, appearing at La Mamelle, an artist-run space in San Francisco, in October 1977 (fig. 10). This constituted the only time where the work was installed in an actual garage. As Rosler has written, the site was industrial rather than residential in nature—a dark space filled with tables, with the slide show and audiotape making it feel somewhat theatrical.²⁶ Like its predecessor, *Traveling Garage Sale* was advertised within the art community as an art event and in local newspapers as an actual sale. The long narrow space, with the work installed, as at UCSD, with “good” objects in the front and “bad” in the back, forced people to slow down and really look at the commodities. The slides remained largely the same, although the audio seems to have been rerecorded for the 1977 show after Rosler had made a video of the show. According to Rosler, as at the original exhibition in San Diego, most people who came with an eye for bargain hunting did not pay attention to either the slide show or the audiotape.²⁷ With *Traveling Garage Sale* Rosler again assumed the dual role of conducting the sale and acting as the impresario of the event: she was not only artist/author/producer/performer but also

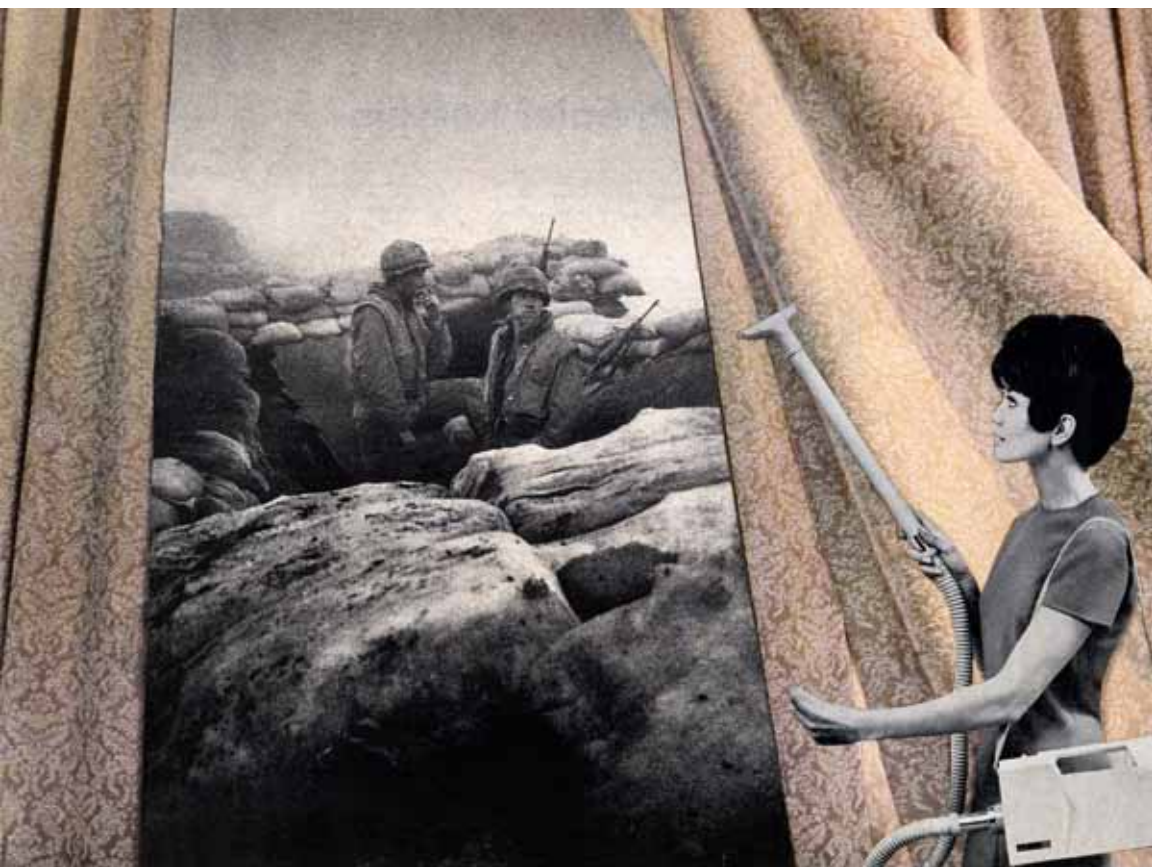


FIGURE 1 *Cleaning the Drapes* from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (c. 1967-1972)
Photomontage. Courtesy of the artist.

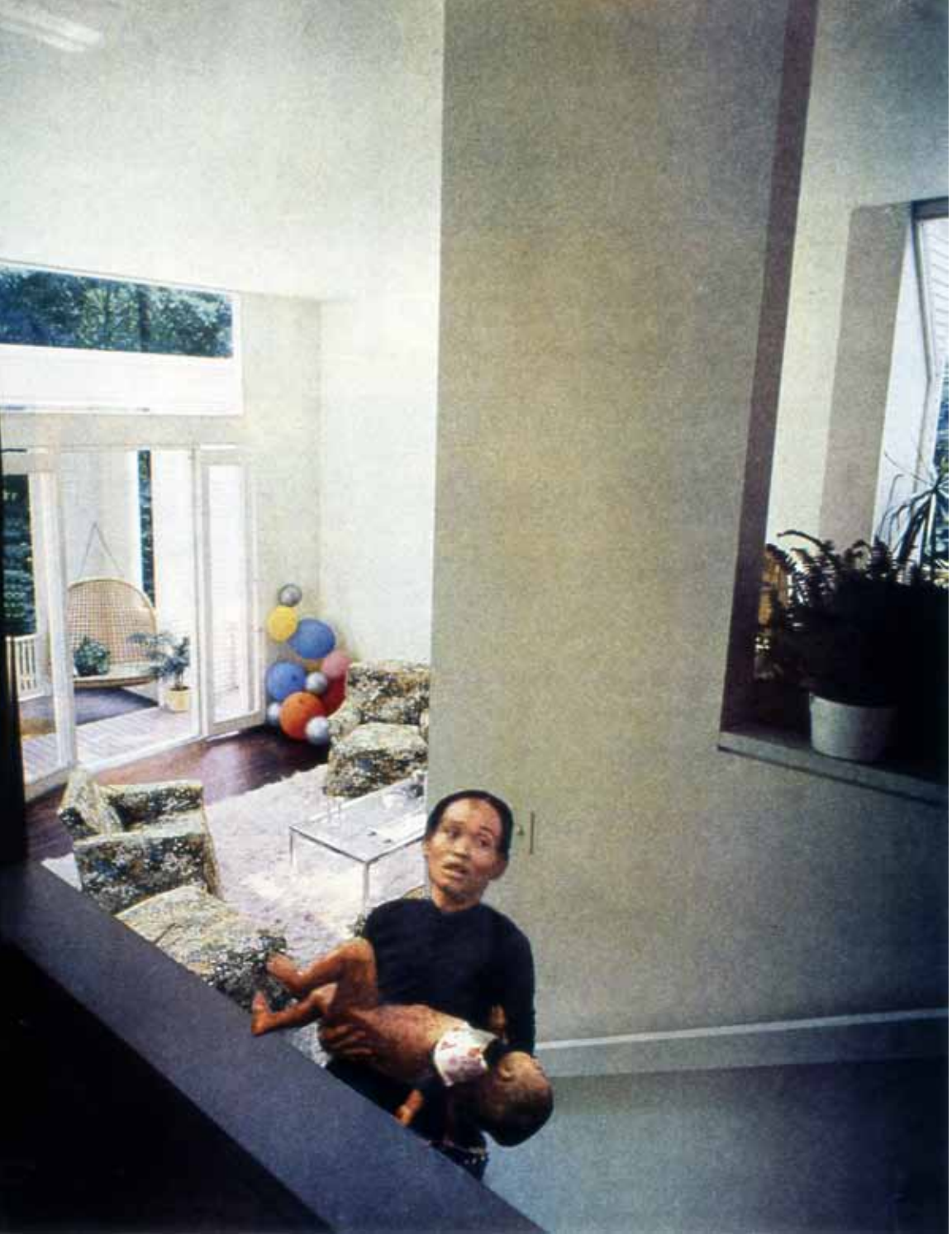


FIGURE 2 *Balloons* from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (c. 1967-1972)
Photomontage. Courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 3 *Bowl of Fruit* from the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (c. 1966–1972)
Photomontage. Courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 4 *Small Wonder* from the series *Body Beautiful*, or *Beauty Knows No Pain* (c. 1966–1972) Photomontage. Courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 6 *Some Women Prisoners of the Thieu Regime in the Infamous Poulo Condore Prison, South Vietnam* (1972) Photographs courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 5 *Hot House, or Harem: After Ingres* from the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (c. 1966–1972)
Photomontage. Courtesy of the artist.





FIGURE 7 *Monumental Garage Sale* (1973)
University of California, San Diego. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 8 *Monumental Garage Sale* (1973)
University of California, San Diego. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 9 Slide show at *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* (2012)
Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

FIGURE 10 *Traveling Garage Sale* (1977)
La Mamelle, San Francisco. Photograph courtesy of the artist.



A



B





C



D

FIGURE 11 (A–D) *Selected Garage Sale installations*

- A. Nederlands Foto Instituut, Rotterdam, The Netherlands (2000).
 - B. New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York (2000).
 - C. Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden (2002).
 - D. Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, England (2005).
- Photographs courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 12 *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* (2012)
Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Photograph © Werner Kaligofsky. Courtesy of the artist.



**MONUMENTAL
GARAGE SALE**







FIGURE 13 (OPPOSITE AND ABOVE) *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* (2012)
 Museum of Modern Art, New York.
 Above photograph © Werner Kaligofsky.
 Photographs courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 14 *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* (2012)
Detail of photo album. Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Photograph courtesy of the artist.



FIGURE 15 (FOUR IMAGES) *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* (2012) Signage. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photographs courtesy of the artist.

GARAGE SALE STANDARD

ISSUE #1

IN CONVERSATION: GUESTS
INTERVIEW WITH MARTHA ROSLER
 Community, memory, and work in the American garage sale.

THE GARAGE SALE AND OTHER
ARTICLES
 By Peter Fayer - Behind each of the individual objects in our issue is a long and sometimes colorful history.

REMEMBER FIRST DANCE
 By Christine Reed-Land
 Long, official, unmemorable, and the mother lode of all memories.

CONNECTIONS
 Alexander (P. 46), P. 42
VIEW
 The Museum of Modern Art
 2012 Fall, New York
LAST WORDS
 FROM THE ARTIST

THE SOCIAL

SO MANY LITTLE HUMAN
CONNECTIONS
 By Susan Wallace - Garage sales are places for the future, the past, and the present.

THE LIFE OF STUFF
 By Jeff Thompson - Why do we have so much stuff? What does it mean to own it? What does it mean to give it away?

ISSUE 1

An object is always more than what it is. A chair is never merely a chair, a spoon never merely a spoon. It travels through social worlds, and carries forward a history, belonging first to those who produced it, and later, to those who bought, used, altered, sold, traded, or discarded it. Value is ascribed to it, value is withdrawn, value is negotiated.

CONNECTIONS
 Alexander (P. 46), P. 42
VIEW
 The Museum of Modern Art
 2012 Fall, New York
LAST WORDS
 FROM THE ARTIST

A small, round, black object, possibly a speaker or a small lamp, with a cord attached.

CONNECTIONS
 Alexander (P. 46), P. 42
VIEW
 The Museum of Modern Art
 2012 Fall, New York
LAST WORDS
 FROM THE ARTIST

A small, black and white photograph of a horse sculpture, possibly a ceramic or metal, with a rider on its back.

LIVES OF

IN CONVERSATION: MARTHA
INTERVIEW WITH MARTHA ROSLER
 "I wanted to step into the world of the garage sale."

RECENT WORK
 By Christine Reed-Land
 An essay from the 2012 Museum of Modern Art exhibition.

RECENT WORK
 By Christine Reed-Land
 An essay from the 2012 Museum of Modern Art exhibition.

OBJECTS

AN ARTIST'S NEWSPAPER PROJECT BY MARTHA ROSLER

FROM JUNE TO AUGUST
 By Christine Reed-Land
 An essay from the 2012 Museum of Modern Art exhibition.

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The Meta-Memorial Garage Sale

REGULATED MARKETS
 What is a regulated market? What is a regulated market? What is a regulated market?

REGULATED MARKETS
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REGULATED MARKETS
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REGULATED MARKETS
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FIGURE 16

Garage Sale Standard (2012)
 Newspaper, issue #1. Published in conjunction with the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Published by the artist.



FIGURE 17 Cartoon illustration by Josh Neufeld from *Garage Sale Standard*, issue #1.

performed the curator's role of arranging and installing who selected, arranged, and installed the objects.²⁸

Twenty years later, with the launch of her traveling retrospective, *Positions in the Life World* (1998–2000), Rosler was invited to reconstitute the *Garage Sale* in several new venues in Europe and the United Kingdom (fig. 11).²⁹ Repurposing the original slides, audiotape, and chalkboard, she also included the video documentation from the 1970s versions in these new installations, each of which had its own unique physical site, sale items, and audience, although a core set of display items has traveled with the show since its inception. In 2002, at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the front window of the museum was devoted to the sale within, drawing in many passersby along Broadway, and again at Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the sale was located in the museum's temporary facility next to the central train and subway stations and thus similarly attracted many travelers and pedestrians.

For *The Fair Trade Garage Sale* at the 2010 Basel Art Fair, which was installed in Basel's Museum of Cultural History, Rosler solicited donations of many everyday items and cheap trinkets from the local art community, as a counterpoint to the hyper-commodified artworks sold at concurrent art fairs. When haggling with visitors, she gave the smallest discounts to the wealthy art collectors (some of whom had the audacity to ask her to sign the items they bought as though they were works of art). This sale within a plethora of sales in this city of finance reiterated how contemporary art is yet another high-stakes, globalized commodity. Its clearly ironic title references ongoing issues of equity in international trade and, as with the other recent garage sales in museum contexts, Rosler continues to blur boundaries between art and commodity, implicitly critiquing both financial and cultural institutions.

Rosler installed her *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* (figs. 12 and 13), the most complex iteration of the project to date, in the atrium of the MOMA for two weeks in November 2012. This was five years after a major recession hit the US economy and during the lead up to the so-called "fiscal cliff" debacle, and this latest installation clearly referenced issues of economic instability and class division. In this location, in one of the richest and most prestigious museums in the world—the "Kremlin of Modernism," according to Rosler—*Meta*

Monumental Garage Sale brought issues of economic privilege and consumption into stark relief as she transformed the atrium into “a lively space for exchange, not only of consumer goods, but also for real and fictive narratives, ideas, and interactions with the artist.”³⁰

In the two weeks it was in operation, during the annual Christmas shopping frenzy, *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* reached a diverse audience that included museum patrons, collectors, artists, students, and the general public. The MoMA public relations and marketing department sent press releases to the customary art press, but Rosler assembled her own team to post on Facebook, distribute flyers, and disseminate information through other outlets, including online publications by and for younger members of art milieu. With MoMA’s steep admission fee (the basic cost of admission is \$25 for adults), many visitors took advantage of Free Friday evenings, and the two evenings of free Education Department events during which the sale was also in operation. The art-going public came to see new work by renowned artist Martha Rosler, while the general public wanted to participate in the spectacular sale that looked like “the Brooklyn Flea dropped into the atrium of MoMA.”³¹

Rosler solicited the fourteen thousand items for the sale from museum staff, volunteers, board members, and the public, adding items from her previous installations. She supervised the entire installation and once again arranged the goods from the attractive and saleable in the entrance to the less desirable, more abject in the back, including a wall of T-shirts and women’s undergarments, e-waste, pornography, and empty containers. One could find quilts, kitchen items, jewelry, holiday ornaments, and other tchotchkes alongside personal objects such as Rosler’s own photo album featuring a family event (fig. 14) and big-ticket items, including a sleek “vintage” diesel Mercedes-Benz station wagon.

Rosler again sited the slides, audio soundtrack, installation video, and photographic stills of purchasers at previous sales, and she included the blackboard with the phrase “Perhaps the garage sale is a metaphor for the mind,” but *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* included more levels of written text and discourse than any other iteration to date. Instead of prefab garage sale signs, Rosler’s colorful starburst signs with hand-printed slogans — “Mean People Pay More,” “Everything Clean, Nothing Guaranteed,” “Haggle” (in English, Serbian/Croatian,

French, Spanish and, next to the Mercedes-Benz, in German, i.e., *Feilschen*)—were strategically placed throughout the sale (fig. 15). Visitors could engage with the artist in person or watch the sale proceedings via Livestream; she was there each day to engage with the public, and she invited buyers to be photographed with their purchases by a Brooklyn-based wedding photographer. These images were uploaded to Flickr under the handle “martharoslermademebuy” and could be accessed through a MoMA link called “See the Happy Purchasers.” As with previous sales, Rosler donated all proceeds from the sale to unnamed charities with no percentage retained by herself or MoMA (which in any case is legally enjoined from raising money in this fashion): she was adamant that the charities could not be publicly announced because that would convert the event to a charity sale. However, because the event was scheduled only a couple of weeks after the devastation wrought by Hurricane Sandy, she decided to post signs prominently in the exhibition announcing that one hour’s profit each day would be donated directly to hurricane relief.

The *Garage Sale Standard*, the exhibition’s tabloid-format newspaper, was distributed on site and throughout the city to provide a historical, social, and economic context for the project (fig. 16). The first issue, headlined “The Social Lives of Objects,” features interviews with anthropologist Gretchen Hermann and also Sabine Breitwieser, the exhibition curator, as well as other newly commissioned articles about the sociology and ontology of garage sales, their contents, and contexts.³² Odd sidebar articles include “Typologies of Garage-Sale Proprietors” and “How to Determine Value, Specifically, at a Garage Sale,” while Josh Neufeld’s cartoon depicts buyers purchasing prominent MoMA works by Giacometti, Matisse, Picasso, Van Gogh, and Warhol—the “high,” priceless art is replaced by and conflated with “low” objects on sale, a witty critique on assumed (and arbitrary) values of commodities (fig. 17). The second issue carries the headline “Work, Value, and Waste” and has articles about larger economic and labor conditions: families and domestic work, electronic waste, obsolescence, the museum and the market—and on a lighter note, it also includes an “Art of the Sale” crossword puzzle.³³ Finally, excerpts from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels run through both editions of the newspapers.³⁴

During the *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale*, MoMA's Education Department's held two free evening events, developed in conjunction with Rosler: "Exploring Value Systems" was a light-hearted discussion with a psychic, a stylist, and an art conservator who then met with visitors to assess the worth of their potential purchases, and a second, more serious discussion titled "Women, Labor and Work" included such speakers as Coco Fusco and Anton Vidokle from the visual arts organization e-flux. These copious texts and programs create a dialectic between the serious/theoretical and the humorous/satirical to reveal different and quite diffuse discourses about garage sales, making the project accessible to members of the public and scholars alike. Through them, Rosler reinforces the "high" and "low" dichotomy of the project and her desire to produce work for multiple publics, including global audiences.

In keeping with Rosler's ideas about history and representation, she has said that "by its nature the *Garage Sale* cannot be a historical work because commerce is always located in the present."³⁵ It has morphed from the original student exhibition in a small college gallery held in 1973, the same year the US involvement in Vietnam ended and the oil price shock sparked economic recession, to the meta (and mega) monumental project at MoMA in 2012, as the United States was struggling to recover from the worst economic slump since the Great Depression. Early iterations of the sales challenged the boundaries of what could be considered art as they interrogated the value of art, art spaces, and art audiences. In their twenty-first-century versions, the garage sales cannot be extricated from a reality where the trustees of art institutions increasingly overlap with the boards of corporations and financial institutions, and where commerce is omnipresent in arts organizations with cafes, gift shops, and other revenue generators disrupting the aura of the clean, white cube and shrine for culture.

Beyond these historical, socioeconomic, and art historical circumstances, the question remains whether the garage sales can retain their radicality today. While artists' performative interventions are becoming more common in mainstream museums, few such as Rosler's are aimed at critiquing social, economic, and other hegemonic structures of culture. Like other works emanating from 1970s feminism, Rosler's garage sales presaged (and now parallel)

contemporary social and public practices that emphasize criticality, encourage participation, and shift reception within museums and other contexts. An increasing number of artists during that past decade have opted to produce collaborative, situational projects in real-world sites around the globe, and as Grant Kester has recently written, these socially engaged, participatory practices “call attention to exchange as praxis,” which is just what Rosler accomplishes with her garage sales.³⁶ And from their inception, the garage sales have been inclusive, inviting participation by all, not just exclusive, art-aware audiences, as they debunked the modernist ideology of aesthetic autonomy that artistic value exists independently from social, economic, and political conditions.

In the past few years, elements of Rosler’s artistic production have come full circle as she has returned to her early photomontage themes of war and feminism from the beginning of her career. In *Lounging Woman* (2004) a lithe figure extends her legs upright over a modern chair as her head falls onto a white rug; she appears almost comatose, unaware of the soldiers in a bombed-out palace outside her window. Unlike the female figure in *Cleaning the Drapes*, who is distracted by her domestic duties, this corpse-like figure, with her red-mesh glove, is at best oblivious to, and at worst a stand-in for, the victims of war, and thereby she is a metaphor for our national complacency toward battles fought on foreign soil far from our own homes. *Victoria’s Secret* (2009) shows a towering lingerie-clad woman on a building wrap sheathing the construction site of a Victoria’s Secret store in Manhattan. Our gaze is forced upward into a soaring one-point perspective of this hyperbolic female figure with freakishly long legs, lace-clad tilted hips, a truncated torso, and a barely perceptible face. Rosler’s image of this unreal, unclad model, ubiquitous in advertising and fashion today, continues her earlier efforts to problematize how women’s bodies are represented (and constantly re-presented) in contemporary visual culture.

During the past forty years Rosler has presented her photomontages to feminist groups and disseminated them to the public through alternative distributions systems as well as in art magazines and exhibitions. Likewise, she has organized her garage sales in various contexts, from a college gallery and other alternative spaces to major international museums. With both of these series, she takes

images, objects, and subjects from the domestic or private realm and re-presents them in deceptively simple forms within the public sphere. Using the simple, the familiar, the quotidian, she lures in her audience to contemplate these recontextualized and resituated subjects to elucidate the complex cultural and social conditions in which these forms have been produced. While she remains the auteur of her projects, she speaks directly to her audience—visually, verbally, and textually—inviting spectators to actively participate in constructing meaning in her work. At the end of an interview with Rosler, Benjamin Buchloh once observed that her work was not “didactic and impositional” but “dialogic and activating.”³⁷ In these two bodies of work one may see how Rosler’s dialogical and discursive processes have produced powerful social and institutional critiques, fueled by her own wisdom and wit, and activated by her audiences.

NOTES

1. Martha Rosler, quoted in Michael Rush, “A Pure Artist Is Embraced by the Art World,” *New York Times*, Sept. 7, 2000.
2. See Mary Paterson, “Martha Rosler: Art Activist; Mary Paterson Interviews Martha Rosler,” *n-Paradoxa* 23 (January 2009): 91. Rosler defines the art world as the “large and amorphously bounded group of people who have some understanding of the frames or universes of discourse with which to understand works of art, including the capacity to understand irony and a certain degree of either overstatement or understatement and still know how to place their meaning within broader conversations of meaning.”
3. Organized by Sabine Breitwieser, Chief Curator, and Ana Janevski, Associate Curator, with Jill A. Samuels, Performance Producer, Department of Media and Performance Art.
4. See Martha Rosler’s interview with Sabine Breitwieser in issue one of the *Garage Sale Standard*, an artist newspaper published in conjunction with the *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale* at MoMA, 2012, <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/garagesale/garagesale1.pdf>.
5. *Ibid.*, 296.
6. In an email correspondence with the author (January 16, 2013), Rosler stated that her intellectual and moral formation was shaped by every element of her yeshiva education but was also informed by her interest in literature and semiotics. She also said, “It is difficult to disentangle the effects of the formal religious training from those of the secularized interest in parsing language and meaning that heavily invested my family life and culture regardless of whether I had attended yeshiva.”

7. Lynn Hershman Leeson, interview with Martha Rosler, New York, May 12, 2006. A transcript of the interview, conducted for Hershman Leeson's film *Women/Art/Revolution*, is available in the Stanford University Library Research On-Line Archives, https://lib.stanford.edu/files/Martha_Rosler-Updated_2011_03_22.pdf.
8. Paul Brach, "Cal Arts: The Early Years," *Art Journal* 42, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 27.
9. See Alexander Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," in *Positions in the Life World*, 78. Alberro notes how Godard's deconstruction of narrative and experiments with *sonimage* (sound and image) particularly influenced Rosler.
10. Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life."
11. See Hershman Leeson interview.
12. Martha Rosler, "The Private and the Public: Feminist Art in California," *Artforum* (September, 1977): 66. This landmark article begins with a discussion of the problematics of essentialist, cultural feminism in opposition to more politicized or socialist feminism. The article focuses on feminist artistic production presented by the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Los Angeles Women's Building, founded by Judy Chicago, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and art historian Arlene Raven in 1973, where Rosler would go see to exhibitions and performances and where she also participated in workshops and two exhibitions, *Performance Transformations* (1977) and *What Is Feminist Art?* (ca. 1977).
13. See Hershman Leeson interview.
14. See *Goodbye to All That—Newspaper for San Diego Women*, no. 3 (October 13, 1970) and no. 10 (March 9, 1970). In an email correspondence with the author (March, 26, 2013), Rosler underscored that the montages were photocopied for hand distribution at events and initially not intended for art exhibitions.
15. This image, made circa 1970, appeared on the cover of the 2007 catalogue for *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, a traveling exhibition that originated at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles. The nearly forty-year-old image elicited many comments on the museum's blog from those who felt it reified stereotypes to those who applauded its satirical intent and message of unabashed sexuality and sexual freedom. See fifty-six comments on the MOCA blog at <http://sites.moca.org/wack/2007/07/25/the-wack-catalogue-2>. For further discussion, see Richard Meyer, "Feminism Uncovered," *Artforum* (Summer 2007): 211–212, 538.
16. Martha Rosler, *Decoys and Disruptions, Selected Writings, 1975–2001* (Boston: MIT Press, 2004), ix. Rosler frequently references the idea of the "decoy." In an email to the author (January 16, 2013), she notes that a decoy is "wooden, flat in terms of message—once that is discovered you have to do the work to give it back all its meaning," emphasizing that the reception and mean-

- ing of the decoy are incumbent upon the viewer/receiver. See also Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life."
17. See Martha Rosler, "Installed in the Place of the Public," *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (2001): 59.
 18. *Ibid.*, 66.
 19. See Martha Rosler, "Traveling Garage Sale," *High Performance* 1, no. 2 (June 1978): 22–23.
 20. Rosler's work is influenced by Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*, the principle of defamiliarizing and distancing material in art and theater to avoid viewer identification and catharsis. Alberro also discusses Brecht's development of the *lehrstück*, or learning play, a pedagogical procedure for anti-expressionistic/antinaturalistic theater that addresses contemporary social and political issues, as also important for Rosler. Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life."
 21. Martha Rosler, *High Performance*, 23.
 22. Debord defined the *dérive* (drift) as "a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances" in his "Theory," *Les Lèvres Nues* 9 (November 1956). Rosler states that the most likely influences on this aspect of her work are Henri Lefebvre's Marxist critique of everyday life and Guy Debord's situationist theory. See Buchloh, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 48.
 23. See Hershman Leeson interview.
 24. Martha Rosler, *High Performance*, 23.
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. Martha Rosler, email to author, January 16, 2013.
 28. This multifaceted performance foreshadows a later curatorial role in *If You Lived Here . . .* (1989), part research-based artwork, part curated group project, and part discursive series with three discrete exhibitions, four public meetings, and numerous auxiliary events on the subject of homelessness and housing in the United States and beyond, at the Dia Art Foundation, New York City.
 29. *Garage Sales* were part of Rosler's retrospective at the following venues: Generali Foundation, Vienna (1999); Institut d'Art Contemporain, Villeurbanne-Lyon (1999); Museu d'Art Contemporani, Barcelona (1999); Nederlands Foto Instituut, Rotterdam (2000); and the New Museum for Contemporary Art, New York (2000). Subsequent sales took place at Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2002); Project Arts Centre, Dublin (2004); The Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (2005); The Sprengel Museum, Hanover (2005); and The United Nations Plaza School, Berlin (2008). The 2010 Basel Art Fair was the venue for *The Fair Trade Garage Sale*, curated by Jens Hoffman for *Art Parcours*, June 2007.

30. MoMA press release for the *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale*, <http://press.moma.org/2012/05/martha-rosler-meta-monumental-garage-sale>.
31. This comment is from the author's son, Maximilian Moss Familian, a resident of Williamsburg who frequents the Brooklyn flea market.
32. Articles such as Peter Frase, "The Garage Sale and Other Utopias"; Kendra Sullivan, "So Many Little Human Constructions"; Christine Smallwood, "Remember that Duck"; and Jeff Weinstein, "The Life of Stuff" appeared in the first issue of *Garage Sale Standard*. See <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/garagesale/garagesale1.pdf>.
33. Articles in the second issue include an excerpt from Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James's feminist classic "The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community" (1972) and Dayna Tortorici, "Part of the Family." See <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/garagesale/garagesale2.pdf>.
34. Literary excerpts include those from Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900); Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1856); Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (1848); Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892); Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (1895); Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (1915); and Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1900).
35. This quote from Rosler appears in MoMA's online promotional material for the exhibition, which can be viewed at <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/garagesale/past>.
36. Grant Kester, *The One and the Many, Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 28.
37. Buchloh, "An Interview with Martha Rosler," 20.