

## Benjamin Buchloh : A Conversation with Martha Rosler

bb What do you consider the beginnings of your work as an artist?

mr I studied painting at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, and I studied with Jimmy Ernst and Ad Reinhardt at Brooklyn College.

bb Did you work with Reinhardt? Was he your teacher?

mr I didn't study painting with him. He taught art history. His teaching style was like Zen—he would show slides of Asian art and say, "Here is one and here's another, and another..." There was great interest at that time in Eastern philosophies and their reflection in a certain kind of artistic understatement. That went well with, not Reinhardt's cartoons and drawings with their forceful attitudes, but with his paintings. Everything was very... silent, and concentrated. I found his paintings astonishing. But I was soon tossed out of the abstract expressionist mentality by pop and fluxus and so on. And, as you know, I hung out with the poetry avant-garde.

bb I didn't know that. You were not aware of or involved with the New Left?

mr I was, indeed. It was really the Vietnam War that pushed me decisively to the left, but in my mid-teens I was already involved with civil rights and antinuclear protests.

bb I think it's interesting to ask how a person in the early 1960s would have moved toward the left, after the destruction of left culture in the United States.

mr A whole generation moved to the left! In any case, left culture hadn't been totally destroyed—I grew up in New York, where there was a fairly active non-CP [Communist Party] left, and it included young people. Despite my early religious schooling, by high school I had friends involved in various forms of activism. American ideals of inclusiveness and democracy led to the movements of the sixties. I naturally gravitated to the left, first over inequality and injustice—reinforced by those religious values—then over the nuclear threat. But by the mid-sixties the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley and the anti-war movement began to have a tremendous effect at all U.S. colleges.

bb How did your aesthetic interests form at that time—before encountering Reinhardt? Were you aware of the moment in painting in New York in the forties and fifties?

mr Not at the time: I was much too young. My family had always designated me as "the artist," not necessarily in a positive way—from the earliest grades I got in trouble for drawing in class. I was convinced I would grow up to be either an outlaw or an artist—and that they were very similar. Later I would go to MoMA and the Whitney, which was attached to it, although so much art gave me a headache after an hour. I wrote a paper in high school—where I majored in art, by the way—on Giacomo Balla. I was fascinated by futurism and surrealism—an early painting of mine showed a railroad train and tracks in the sky. Another was a watercolor of a girl looking out a city window over roofs—very much ashcan school. That lineage of American representation—George Bellows, George Tooker, Jack Levine, Charles Sheeler, the ever-popular Edward Hopper—interested me. You can see what direction I was going in. But I didn't like the Soyars—too sentimental. I didn't much like Käthe Kollwitz for the same reason, and also for her expressionism. They were favored by the left,

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but it was not possible to be anything but an abstractionist at the time. When I started painting seriously, of course, I turned my attention to the abstract expressionists.

bb So at that point there was no photographic culture in your horizons?

mr Photos were everywhere. I was, in fact, taking pictures. But many artists did.

bb Were these pictures preparatory for painting or separate?

mr Street scenes. They had nothing to do with my painting.

bb Did you study photography at Brooklyn College?

mr No, but I used the darkroom, which was run by students of Walter Rosenblum.

bb Oh, so you were in the right hands. That is important to know. So what did he teach? The thirties, the forties, the New York school?

mr He *embodied* New York photography, the Workers' Film and Photo League. His darkroom advocates were the vehicle by which his ideas reached me: gritty subjects, tough life out of doors. But New York was full of photographs: Manhattan scenes, classy celebrity portraiture, magazine photojournalism. Everyone subscribed to *Life* magazine. But even though I was interested in photography, I had my eye on something else.

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bb How did the street photography that you practiced fit in?

mr It was street photography, but not of people. It was photography of streets and vehicles—although I also took pictures of natural subjects, like mushrooms in the woods. I wasn't much interested in making pictures of people, yet I remember one photograph of people sitting on garbage cans on the Lower East Side, signs of poverty. Photography was, the art world told us, of a lesser order, mired in temporality as opposed to the transcendent world of painting. So you could deal with it as a practice less mediated, more immediate, than the one the art world had mulled over so intensively. It was accessible and vernacular, and it was low key...as far as I knew then, photography had no critical history. I didn't feel I needed to engage with large questions.

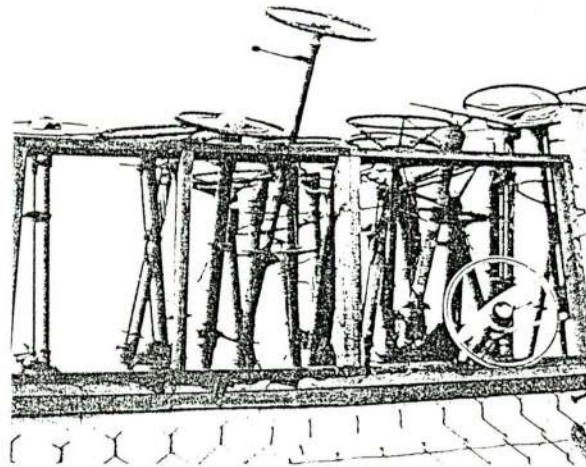
bb Were you a writer as well at the time, in addition to doing photography and painting?

mr I'd been writing from an early age.

bb Writing criticism or poetry?

mr Poetry, short stories; I even won the literary prize at my yeshiva.... Later, I published a critical piece on James Joyce's *Ulysses* in the college journal—on mirrors and photographs in *Ulysses*! In any medium there was an underlying search for an authentic voice—that was, I think, the common theme, inflected by French Existentialist despair. It led to my initial rejection of pop art as a form of distracting cynicism. I'd had to fight for a voice, since I was often accused—wrongly, of course—of copying pictures I'd drawn and stories and poems I'd written. My teachers and my family found it inconceivable that such an uncompliant child could produce anything original.

Untitled, c. 1964.  
Black-and-white photograph.



In a continuation of thirties' Popular Front cultural politics, the question of authenticity for the left centered on popular culture, asking, Is this the authentic voice of "the folk," or just a corporate substitute or overlay? Folk music, blues, Woody Guthrie, were favored musical forms, and avant-gardism in all media was regarded with suspicion. This was important to me. But my friends in art and poetry were not involved with those questions.

I remember discussing pop's legitimacy with the poet David Antin—David and Elly Antin were like a second family for me in New York, even before we all moved to San Diego. I was asking, in effect, what about Oldenburg, Rosenquist, Warhol? David replied, abstract expressionism is dead—it's played out, it's boring; there's nothing left. I asked myself over and over, how does an artist develop a style and how does an artist change that style—How can you ever stop doing one thing and start doing something radically different? Antin's reply brought home that not only do styles change but the entire paradigm changes.... It was like someone opening a door I didn't know existed. I had naturally dealt with question of style in literature, but it hadn't occurred to me that the search for stylistic appropriateness wasn't necessarily linked to a palpable seriousness and to the private self. That a kind of unyieldingly ironic, deceptive wit could be another engine of production. I likened my realization of the possibilities to my sudden comprehension of the physical concept of acceleration in calculus: that speed relates to motion but acceleration is the rate of change of that rate; it's a metaconcept that is subject to mathematical operations. I blinked and said, that's right! Although I continued to paint abstractions, pop pointed me toward direct use of mass-culture imagery, the things that had intrigued me in old magazines, cheap advertising, and so on. I made assemblages and began to make photomontages with quasi-surreal themes, mostly using images of women, from Joan of Arc to the happy housewife.

bb So your first photomontage would be 1966? Without any knowledge of John Heartfield?

mr I don't know, I think it's not possible to know nothing of him.... My initial influences, though, included Max Ernst's surrealist collage novellas and other surrealist works, and even the quirky San Francisco artist Jess. But collage was obviously the medium of the twentieth century.

bb What about Rauschenberg, did he give a license for photomontage?

mr His work was too painterly. In photomontage I wasn't interested in painterly effects. Quite the opposite. Who are the collage artists in pop? Not Warhol but Rosenquist and Wesselmann. I was interested even though I didn't particularly like what they were doing. Putting elements together by painting fragments was much more interesting than pasting things onto a painted canvas. Rosenquist was more interesting than Rauschenberg. His work was, on balance, more metonymy than metaphor. pop was more interesting in visual art than in poetry, however. Here are people like Gerard Malanga and others associated with Warhol and pop, making poems out of snippets of popular music and jingles—analogous to pop collage, but I was much less accepting of it in poetry, probably because I thought there was still room for complexity of expression.

bb What kind of poetry were you looking at, Beat poetry?

mr To begin with, as a beatnik teenager I was, but my older poet friends were dismissive of Beat literature as uncontrolled expression. My new friends were of the cool school—the New York school. It's difficult when your friends are talking about Black Mountain and Cage and aleatory principles and you like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. But I learned to pay more attention to the more controlled language traditions. I had already read the earlier predecessors—Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Gerald Manley Hopkins, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Pound and Eliot, and so on—and I'd seen the Living Theatre's productions of Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Ionesco, Luigi Pirandello, and Samuel Beckett.

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bb Warhol would be an interesting connection, in a sense, because he does link the Stein tradition with the photographic tradition with the Pop tradition. Do you remember your first encounter with Warhol?

mr It was, oddly, through *Time* magazine; they reviewed the Brillo box show. I kept the article for years. For *Time* it was a total spectacle and hype...which it clearly was, but it also had a significance that eluded them. So there is Warhol, throwing a wrench in the works and I'm thinking...if this can be done, then what am I doing? What was immediately interesting about Warhol was that he was a total work of art. He wasn't a man who pushed his work forward with a stick and said, "Now I will explain why this is so offensive." He had a persona that went with the work. Of course, so do most artists, but his was an obvious provocation. At the same time I was going to Happenings. That posed a problem: on the one hand you have Happenings and on the other you have Warhol. These two things don't go together.

bb Neither does the Living Theatre.

mr But the Living Theatre made a kind of bridge the way Happenings did, and Carolee Schneeman—you have remnants of abstract expressionist "acting out," but there is also an engagement with a political text, with real events. It's not about Zen Cold War aestheticism, like Cage. An interesting thing about Warhol that seemed to establish a continuity with the Black Mountain school and Cage was his dandyism, the cool removal.

bb You didn't see Warhol's shows?

- mr I was still too young. I felt you needed a very large admission ticket to enter the gallery world. Privileged spaces.
- bb Is there already a feminist component in the complexity of that moment, along with the political dimension?
- mr Feminist, yes, but not in art. The "woman question" has been around forever, and much discussed throughout the fifties—certainly on the left, although that's not where I encountered it. But there was no such thing as a feminist art, as far as I knew.
- bb But Carolee Schneeman? Did you see her perform?
- mr Yes. That was a bit later, probably '65 or '66. But was that work feminist?
- bb Were you aware of Eva Hesse at that time? Did you see her work?
- mr Yes, and I think I was subsequently influenced by her strangely repellent organic forms, but I was more interested in Robert Morris at the time. In the early seventies, when I read Michael Fried's 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" in Gregory Battcock's book *Minimalism* I thought it was a good analysis, although he was taking the wrong side. I wish I'd read it in '68. I was very interested in the idea of presentness, sharing an actual physical space with your audience, and how that smashes the modernist paradigm.
- bb The modernist paradigm of pure visuality.
- mr Yes, and therefore transcendence. Because there is no pure visuality in the world. What I liked about Morris' work was the finish and control, the wit, the lack of interiority—all of which, I suppose, is properly described as theatricality. What I didn't like was that it shared a deflated, down-to-earth approach with Pop without any of the engagement with social imagery. It seemed to be occupied with the de-transcendentalization of art without replacing it with anything but form, which struck me as a bit sad. But still interesting.
- bb Like Stella paintings?
- mr I actually liked those because there was an uncertain element to them; they were not as uncompromising as three-dimensional objects, with defined edges. The fact that they were black was itself very interesting. I saw them as relating in some way to Reinhardt.
- bb Later, Stella admitted he was trying to make a fusion between Rauschenberg and Reinhardt. What interested me about pop was that it was directly engaging with the imagery, rather than with the objects. That's why Warhol was more interesting than Rauschenberg.
- mr It got rid of the nostalgic element.
- bb But you didn't see the affirmative dimension involved; you thought it had a critical dimension?
- mr I saw it as critical. I wrote an unpublished essay against Lawrence Alloway's insistence

that there was no critique in pop. I was less concerned with Warhol as a direct model, though, than with other elements of pop, because it seemed to me that Warhol was his own best follower. Of course, at the other extreme of criticality one knew Richard Hamilton, but the problem was that he was not rigorous like Warhol, whose works were reproduced, they were gridded, and they were all totally visible—there was no confusion about what was at stake. You didn't have little pieces of things aesthetically juxtaposed to other little pieces. The problem with, Kurt Schwitters was arrangement. Warhol wasn't interested in arrangement, nor was I.

**bb** You sound like Donald Judd when he said in the sixties that European painting is dead because it is all composed; it is always balancing one thing against another. So, what is so great about centrality and anti-compositionality from that perspective at that moment?

**mr** It is seizing control of the discourse, the reading, and focusing attention: "Look here now!" Don't look here in order to go somewhere else in your mind. I thought if you are going to engage with everyday life, you have to be very careful about selecting what is to be looked at.

**bb** Isn't that like an advertisement slogan, "Look here now"?

**mr** Indeed.

**bb** So, pure affirmation. It hails you, like ideology, to say "Look here now."

**mr** Why pure? What does a person bring to looking? And what is the intention of the person that is asking you to look? I think it's the same problem with photography. It took a while for me to understand that just because you are looking at something doesn't mean you understand the historical meaning.... You need other information. The thing about Warhol was that he made you focus on the bad Other, by affirming all the "plastic" values that intellectuals and artists claimed to despise, that even the culture at large claimed not to want. It seemed like a logical development of the many critiques of mass culture and modern American life of the fifties, like Henry Miller's *Air-Conditioned Nightmare* and Paul Goodman's indictment of the entire educational system for training people to enter the corporate rat race.

**bb** What about Clement Greenberg's "Avant-garde and Kitsch"? You must have read that.

**mr** Yes, I did. And Harold Rosenberg's *Tradition of the New*, another defense of so-called advanced art, and in some sense more interesting. But Greenberg was problematic because, first, he was writing in the thirties and, second, he was the promoter of the people we were hoping to replace, the high modernist painters. I read that essay very critically.

**bb** The essay dates from his highest moment as a leftist.

**mr** As a Trotskyist. That's not the popular-culture left, that's the other left!

**bb** The aristocratic left. So what trajectory represents the popular-culture left of America?

**mr** Folk music and documentary. There was a simultaneous cherishing of the traditions of past masters of art—museum works—and of classical music, but there was a strong

distinction between popular culture (good) and mass culture (bad). In music, no lover of rock n' roll could quite agree, but in respect to advertising, it was easy. Warhol, by focusing your attention on mass culture, could only, I felt, be pointing to its artificiality and its arbitrary and corporate nature—especially from the standpoint of the indigenous popular culture it was supplanting.

bb If you go back for a moment to the poets and Gertrude Stein and to their emphasis on a low-key, formal approach to language—that was certainly not oriented at popular culture?

mr I wasn't so interested in popular culture per se; I was interested in critique.

bb There is an interpretation of Warhol as an American artist who wants to resuscitate existing traditions of residual popular culture. Would you have seen it in those terms at the time?

mr I saw it as sheer critique without offering any alternative. Not even necessarily engaging in critique but *representing* critique. It was sheer negativity.

bb What was your relationship to fluxus?

mr I knew of their work, largely through the Antins, but wasn't that deeply into it, since they didn't then seem to offer me a direct model. Fluxus seemed systematic and anti-institutional and rational, pervaded by a kind of European irony. That was another element in my reception of people like Warhol, that he was a weird outsider looking at America and musing about its implacable façade.... Living in San Diego, I truly realized how insufficient that was, that even irony is insufficient. Because critique has to be...there has to be a thread to pull. The very totalization of the simulacrum that Warhol had engaged in made it inaccessible to people who didn't grasp the possibility that it might *embody* critique. As a result, I started to think about what photography might do, especially with careful text or context, since it can engage so easily with experience.

But in San Diego I also continued with abstract painting, very dark in palette and low key. Eventually I began to feel alienated from this work, which I loved to do, by my political priorities, which by then included feminism. By the time I entered the university, I was already working with women artists, often on collective exercises, and also with a politically oriented women's liberation group. My feminist concerns led me to sculpture—I saw that the reason I wanted the work to be in the room, as opposed to on the wall, had to do with the representation of a physical presence, a physical body, and often a woman's body. So I went from making hanging canvas structures to objects stuffed with cotton batting—generally old clothes or cheesecloth. About then I was reading the Fried essay. To me the soft sculptures paradoxically seemed to be getting closer to what photography does—say, street photography: the representation of bodies in space, not as a sculptural element, of course, but with direct reference to time and place.

bb When you talk about street photography, about whom are you actually speaking? Garry Winogrand?

mr Oh, say, the Hungarians in Paris in the twenties, the Film and Photo League, of course Walker Evans and Robert Frank, perhaps Helen Levitt, a certain kind of generic fifties magazine work, and so on. Winogrand was a fairly negative example.



clockwise from top right:  
Phil Steinmetz, Martha Rosler, Allan  
Sekula, and Fred Lonidier at Martha  
Rosler's house, Del Mar, California,  
c. 1976. Photo by Phil Steinmetz.

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- bb Even though I know that photographers of your peer group have referred to him as a crucial breakthrough moment of looking at American pop culture from a different angle.
- mr That is not me. I saw that kind of difference first in Robert Frank's *Americans* and then in Lee Friedlander, whom I also saw as a bridge to abstract expressionism and pop. He did a book with Jim Dine called *Work from the Same House*.<sup>1</sup>
- bb Were you increasingly aware of agitprop traditions, and when did you become aware of Soviet culture and the legacies of Russian and Soviet constructivist productivism?
- mr That interest was reawakened through Godard. And, I suppose, it brought to mind that whole tradition of Soviet film that I used to see in New York. The Trotskyist Young People's Socialist League, or YPSL, held cultural events. They often showed Eisenstein's *Potemkin*, and the first time I saw it I was probably 15 years old. I think I saw *Strike* also.
- bb The same way the Film and Photo League showed the first Soviet films in the thirties and forties in New York to photographers like Helen Levitt.
- mr Sure. I didn't know Dziga Vertov's work, which Godard took as his model by the early seventies, but I certainly saw what Eisenstein was interested in and that montage constituted the work. By the end of the sixties, nothing was more important than film for what I and many other people were doing.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Frank, *The Americans*, First U.S. Publication, 1959; Lee Friedlander and Jim Dine, *Work from the Same House* (London: Trigram, 1969).



- bb Flashback to Russian film, more so than any other practice of the Soviet avant-garde. It was film in the early phase.
- mr Well, I was also interested in Russian photography, theory, painting, design, posters—everything, since it was geared at a mass audience. Actually I'd always been interested in Russian painting—Malevich, Rodchenko, Popova. Malevich's work seemed related in some respects to both Rothko and Reinhardt.
- bb But nobody recognized that or wanted to say that. Seeing Soviet films when you are 15 years old and reconciling that with Ad Reinhardt in '65 is a long stretch.
- mr In the sixties, film—the history of film and contemporary European, so-called art house film—was essential to every artist and intellectual's education. Furthermore, I spent a childhood in the local movie theater. But maybe it's the Eisenstein-influenced side of me that started doing those political photomontage works. By the mid-sixties, many people were interested in relationships among film and photography, sculpture, and what is on the canvas, the wall, the page. The incipient collapse of high modernism precipitated a search for new ways of knowing and representing, and new ways of reaching audiences. At that point everything was "heterodox": there is no one source of knowledge, there is no one line of production.
- bb It is not so evident that there was heterodoxy if you look at the homogeneity of your peers or predecessors by one generation. For them—e.g., Carl Andre—in spite of a similar horizon of historical awareness, to come up with the fully resolved, integrated, homogeneous work of art was the *sine que non*. What has made the reception of your work difficult for a long time is its heterodoxy, a model that allowed for a broad range of writing, collage, montage, film, video, photography...that heterodoxy suddenly could not be readable anymore.
- mr You are talking about artists who were championed by that institutionalized art world and its publicity organs. But there were so many other artists doing other things in the late sixties and early seventies, rejecting the traditional routes and even the goal of mastering a medium. One development was conceptualism. For my work that diversity of production you refer to was crucial. Everything I have ever done I've thought of "as if": Every single thing I have offered to the public has been offered as a suggestion of work. Now "as if" is club lingo, the verbal equivalent of a shrug. But it's nothing like what I mean by "as if," which is that my work is a sketch, a line of thinking, a possibility.
- bb But not in terms of a voice generalizing the possibility of "everybody becoming an artist."
- mr No, that seemed ridiculous...that is what I disliked about Beuys and about the Cagean idea of the transformation of everyday life into a series of aesthetic encounters. That is tantamount to saying that art doesn't exist and furthermore that it doesn't matter. That it's nothing.
- bb Or it's tantamount to saying that this condition would be an ideal state to achieve. That everybody would become an artist. That is why that is such an insane statement.

- bb I would like to discuss your photo/text work *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*.<sup>2</sup> But before that I would like to talk about two other elements, by going back to the subject of San Diego. How did the photographic aesthetic of your group peer group come about? All of a sudden there was a whole photographic aesthetic, as though it had come from nowhere. It's going a bit too fast.... All of a sudden everybody around you is practicing a certain type of politicized photo-documentary approach that is very much geared toward a critique of the present and seemingly no longer engaged in aesthetic questions at all.
- mr We were engaging with aesthetic questions, but that wasn't the main business. And I'd started doing political photomontages in New York years before I ever heard of any of these people. I said before that what was interesting about Warhol was that everything was flat and on the surface, that everything was clear and carefully gridded so that you understood exactly what was being addressed. So on the one hand I was fascinated by the systematicity of the grid and on the other hand I was taken with collisions that yielded a certain elusive third effect, the legacy of Surrealism that had intrigued me from high school.
- bb Fred Lonidier's *Twenty-nine Arrests* responds in a very explicit way, not only to one particular artist, namely, Ed Ruscha,<sup>3</sup> but to a certain type of conceptual art, offering a very critical countermodel. What was your relationship to the photographic practices of Conceptual Art at the moment, and how did you position yourself in regard to those? And within that process of developing a countermodel to Conceptual Art, how did you receive social documentary photographic practices of the 1930s? Is there a link between those two, and if so, how did that happen? Or did it happen separately or simultaneously without a direct causal connection?
- mr Speaking about myself, as we've established, although I began with painting, I have always looked at photographs. When I went to grad school, I got together with that group of people we were discussing, who were mostly photographers: Fred Lonidier, and then Phil Steinmetz, Brian Connell, and Allan Sekula. There were a few other people in our group, Steve Buck for a while, and later Adele Shaules and Marge Dean, but I worked most closely with the first four. Everybody had an interest in critique, but we had various degrees of direct political activism and orientation. We met virtually every week for several years and considered ourselves in many ways a working group, battling ideas around—the film critic and painter Manny Farber, for whom I was a teaching assistant, called us “that cabal down there” in the darkroom. We were all quite aware of photographic conceptualism. We read political theory and art and film theory and criticism, especially *Screen* magazine, discussed contemporary work, talked and argued with David Antin, met with a literary group organized by Fred Jameson, and interacted with Herbert Marcuse and his students—who included Angela Davis—in class situations and in conjunction with the constant protest events. To return to Fred, about whom you asked specifically, like the rest of us he was politically active and saw photography as usefully integrated into his activities as a form of political work.
- bb So one could say that was the communicative dimension of photography that attracted him?

<sup>2</sup> *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, black-and-white photographs and text, 1974/75.

<sup>3</sup> *Twenty-nine Arrests: Headquarters of the 12th Naval District, May 4, 1972*, San Diego, black-and-white photographs, 1972.

- mr Yes, but again like all of us, he didn't, for example, think "I will be a photojournalist for the left"—it wasn't as simple as that.
- bb But you didn't think "I am going to do the same thing as Douglas Huebler," either. So, what kind of photography did conceptual art represent to you all at this time?
- mr We saw photographic conceptualism—unlike the basically formalist nonphotographic conceptualism of, say, Kosuth—as a version of pop art, though there was also the other dimension of photographic conceptualism that is a version of systems theory: Photography would then be seen as a system of representation that you bring to bear on other systems.
- bb While eliminating narrative and traditional forms of social representation.
- mr Yes. It was idealist, formalist. That's not what we had in mind, any of us, since representing the social and even employing narrative was our intention. Certainly we were uninterested in the traditional single-print aesthetic, where you have a bounded field as the arena of operation. But what made us different from other people, like Dan Graham or perhaps even Doug Huebler, was that we were interested in developing an aesthetics of photography that rejected formalist modernism while still believing in the power of the formal elements. At the same time, we would use photography at will, without necessarily valorizing it. We wanted to be documentarians in a way that documentarians hadn't been. For example, most of us (certainly I did) avidly attended the endless screenings of films on campus, from Michael Snow and structuralist film to new feminist films to European and Latin American film to gangster films and wanted to produce photo sequences that looked like exploded films. As viewers of Godard, we wanted to parasitize all forms—and foreground the apparatus. As readers of Brecht, we wanted to use obviously theatrical or dramatized sequences or performance elements together with more traditional documentary strategies, to use text, irony, absurdity, mixed forms of all types....
- bb As opposed to post-pop conceptualism?
- mr Well, much of that seemed self-referential or nihilistic, constrained and stingy or just plain irrelevant.
- bb Conceptual photography has a pretty complicated photographic aesthetic, with fairly complex theoretical and aesthetic underpinnings.
- mr Partly because it engages in a form of deception. It pretends.
- bb That is not what they thought. They thought they were giving you the most honest account without any pretenses.
- mr But how can you be blind to a medium? To mediation?
- bb By using a cheap portable camera with no conventions involved at all. The deskilling of photography takes place programmatically in conceptual art. It rejects all of modernist photographic aesthetics with a Duchampian approach, saying that a photograph is a mere indexical trace recorded by an optical chemical system. And if

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you take a photograph of a gas station, that is worth as much as everybody else being photographed on earth. There is no hierarchy at all. I don't want to go into this, but there is a fairly complex set of terms operating in conceptual photography.

mr Why is that complex?

bb In its prohibition of narrative, in its prohibition of referentiality, in its prohibition....

mr It is photography degree zero. But that is hardly complex. It is a little blind.

bb Degree zero is a pretty complex model and it has haunted us for a long time.

mr And it continues to do so.

bb So you oppose conceptualism's photography degree zero with your photography model, which rediscovers American traditions of the 1930s, namely FSA photography.<sup>4</sup>

mr I came at it using two different models. On the one hand there was the argument you've just invoked, that photography is nothing; and there is no skill involved. We take it to the corner drug store—and in fact I did. But then I didn't, because I came to accept that it's not possible to hide who took the picture, especially when it is an artist who already has a developed aesthetic sense. It seemed, also, that one could try to develop new aesthetic means by looking at the history of photography. I was looking at people like Robert Frank, August Sander and Erich Salomon, Weegee and Arbus, Friedlander and Winogrand, Danny Lyon and Larry Clark, even Elliott Erwitt, but not necessarily as direct models. But that was the moment in which the FSA photographers were being named and differentiated. But surely you can see the remnants of my own interest in that conceptual tradition in all my photography, including *The Bowery*.

bb Is that when you discovered the FSA history? Because we are talking about the early seventies, a moment when this was not yet a common discussion. The history of FSA photography was written later.

mr Not too much later. The books I knew of in that period were William Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, Hurley's book *Portrait of a Decade*, and Roy Stryker's *In This Proud Land*.<sup>5</sup> It was the Photo League's history that was harder to find. I was already interested in Walker Evans, having read *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with intense interest years earlier. I saw Evans too as something of a dandy, and I was interested by the powerful aestheticism of his approach.

bb What about his *Crimes of Cuba*? Why would he be a dandy doing that type of work? I thought that the leftist dimension of his work might have been attractive to you.

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4 The photographers of what became the Historical Section of the FSA, or Farm Security Administration, organized by Roy Stryker of the Roosevelt Administration in Washington, operated from 1935 to 1943. In that period, about 270,000 images were produced. The first three people hired were Carl Mydans, Walker Evans, and Ben Shahn. Next were Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, followed by others.

5 William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University, 1973); F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana, 1972); Roy Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land, America 1935-1943 as Seen in the Photographs*. (New York: Galahad Books, 1973).

FSA

1935-1943

Roy Stryker, Rexford Tugwell

photographers

Jack Delano, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, John Vachon,  
Russell Lee, Marion Post Wolcott, John Collier, Jr.,  
Carl Mydans, Gordon Parks, Ben Shahn, Arthur Rothstein

- mr I didn't know that work in particular, but some Cuba photos were important elements in *American Photographs*. His basic dandy aesthetic of detachment and disdain could actually be bent to convey a political dimension. Compare him to the more overheated rhetorical turns of partisan photography of the thirties, for instance, including the Film and Photo League—which I also admired, but it didn't seem like the kind of hybrid I was after. A strong aspect of Evans's *American Photographs* (and later of Frank's *Americans*) was its powerful sequencing—so much of the meaning of the work is in the interstices. And remember that in the early seventies the whole photo world was still operating on the single-print modernist aesthetic. Now, if you compare Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* [1963] with *American Photographs* or *The Americans*, you can see that they have structural elements in common: the structured image itself and the sequencing. Yet they are opposites. In *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* the sequence is one plus one plus one, and it is simple accretion that makes the point. In Evans and Frank, it is one plus two plus three plus four, so the actual sequence and the content make a difference. Yet they both depend on seriality, something that the photo world did not permit. Of course, I was also interested in Walker Evans's notion of the urban. I didn't see very much of it in the other FSA photographers, because the Farm Security Administration was, of course, primarily focused on the rural.
- bb What about Dorothea Lange's urban photographs?
- mr Yes, but they concentrated on the people more than the setting. Lange, for all her strengths, focused on human interest, even a monumentalization of the poor and of the unorganized. Not a model I would be comfortable in adopting. There are no saints in my religion. Bourke-White, on the other hand, not an FSA photographer but an important photojournalist, was too professional, her work too controlled and formalized. Shahn and Delano were terrific, but again, focused on the portrait, the narrative incident, and Shahn's wonderful photography nevertheless seemed searingly misanthropic. Actually, we didn't get to see that much of Jack Delano's work. Russell Lee's strength and weakness were his wry clownishness, Rothstein was interesting and a focus of controversy, but later a commercial entity, like Lee. I was interested in John Vachon and John Collier for their anthropological rationalism, but I saw so little of their work that it could hardly make a great impression. Marion Post Wolcott's work seems to have been largely suppressed, because all we ever saw was her rather fabulous depictions of the good life in postwar Florida. Evans's career, however, was not circumscribed by his relatively brief stint with the FSA but went far beyond it, from his Cuba photos to his FSA and *Fortune* work to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to the subway photos of *Many Are Called*, which I did not accept.

Nevertheless, although I was deeply affected by *American Photographs* and the complexity of Evans's vision, his cooled-down echoes of Paris street photography and Russian constructivist photography, I didn't take Evans as the man to emulate, and his work didn't have the same sort of productive influence on me that, I think, Godard's did. But Evans provided a certain revelation that was similar to what I've said about Godard and the urban. A direct homage is visible in one of my Bowery photographs: I was very struck by a picture Evans had taken of a store front with a bunch of hats piled up against a window. It seemed like a Bohemian inversion of the received discourse of the urban: for him the street was the safe and known place, and the shop interior is presented as a glimmering shadow, a semi-dangerous, unknown space. That's what I think that photo is about—the essential unknowability or undisclosability of this interior space.

bb What about Berenice Abbott?—her work focused totally on urban subjects.

mr Yes, but her work is pretty cold. Crisp, jewel-like, detached. It doesn't suggest a political awareness the way Evans's work seemed to, even without overt partisanship. Paul Strand is miraculous, but mostly his work from the twenties. One of the things that was both appealing and problematic was his Third Worldism—we were seized by a tremendous Third Worldism in the seventies, yet also critical of it. But I did see Strand as being the person who began to move American photography from pictorialism to modernism, an inestimable advance. I admired his film work, the way he employed his still photography's modernist, constructivist, Russian-formalist style, as in *The Plow that Broke the Plains*<sup>6</sup>—basically a government propaganda film. But I think that he has been discounted and his work has been looked at only sporadically because of his political sympathies.

bb How does your reorientation toward that history of photography come about when it is clearly not motivated exclusively in the rediscovery of that history but also served as a construction of a license for a different type of photographic aesthetic that is both anti-pop and anti-conceptual? You discovered aspects of photography history as tools for projects for which there was hardly any legitimizing basis evident. And it allowed you to construct an opposition to pop art, and to Warhol, and it allowed you to construct an opposition to conceptual art. After all, you must have been aware of its California variety; Huebler and Ruscha in particular must have been on everybody's mind, because they were very visible in California at that time.

mr Well, we were not in Los Angeles, but you are basically correct, although Ruscha was much more visible than Huebler. And locally in San Diego, don't forget John Baldessari. He came from National City, California—he wasn't from the upper West Side, or the Lower East Side. He was an American! In 1968 his work provided the first time I saw a photograph exhibited as a nonvalorized object. It was painting on canvas that was, I think, a faithful rendering of a photo with a guy leaning against a pole smack in the middle, with the word "wrong" at the bottom. That is meta-discourse; I had never seen photographic meta-discourse before. Not only did he use a dumb photo, he made a point of it by sticking a word on it, because of course words were forbidden in photography.

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<sup>6</sup> Directed by Pare Lorentz for the Resettlement Administration Unit, 1936. The Resettlement Administration was the predecessor to the Farm Security Administration (FSA).

bb Was he one of your teachers?

mr No, but when I moved there in '68 I got to know everybody socially, through the Antins. By the time I became a student in '71, John had left for Cal Arts. I think Allan Sekula had taken courses with him.

bb So how does one get to your work from the photography history that you had rediscovered? When you produced *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* in 1974, it appears as a project of historical archaeology of sorts. But it is also a project which constructs a new photographic aesthetic, an alternate aesthetic altogether.

mr Photography allowed me to generate an image and not to have it be a representation of my own interiority. And also it solved for me the paradox of style I have mentioned already. I could break the box of interiority, subjectivity, and authenticity.

bb Was that not what conceptualism had proved to some extent?

mr You mean inadvertently proved...it demonstrated it.

bb Was *The Bowery's* relationship to Walker Evans very self-conscious at the time?

mr If so it's primarily because he provided the least time-bound—and the least Norman Rockwell-like because least small-town oriented—of that lot. Who else did I have as a model?

bb Well you didn't do *Twenty-nine Arrests*, as Fred Lonidier had done. You don't directly relate two conceptual practices anymore in the *Bowery* piece. You are going to Walker Evans, not to Ruscha or Baldessari, and that is a very peculiar shift, even though you are clearly coming from a post-conceptual aesthetic that makes the photographs and the textual elements equivalent. But you reclaim American photographic history with a social or a social documentarian agenda at the very moment when the subjects and forms of that practice were clearly discredited. You reclaim that legacy as a foundation or legitimization for your work.

mr I see reflections of my reading of Walter Benjamin's "Short History of Photography" there, including his discussion of the caption. And of Roland Barthes and the Birmingham Cultural Studies approach, as in Stuart Hall's articles on the meaning of news photographs. These authors, and Debord and situationism, and film theory and the French and Latin American film makers, were far more directly influential than, say, Ruscha. I had been very impressed by futurist poetry and its typographic experiments, and I was well acquainted with concrete poetry, having already had Ian Hamilton Finlay and others in *Pogamoggan*, the poetry magazine I had helped Lenny Neufeld and Harry Lewis publish in the mid-sixties in New York. I was also in close contact with some of the *Art & Language* group in New York at the time I developed the *Bowery* work, in 1974: Ian Burn, Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge, Terry Smith, Mel Ramsden... all the non-Americans. I'd even put my friendship with Elly Antin in the mix, and Hans Haacke, ahead of more visible contemporary conceptual work. I was interested in something more than just an oblique relationship to life as lived. But I must say that when I decribed my plan for the piece to a close collaborator, he said it sounded stupid. My guess is that it seemed to him too static and without internal development;

in other words, it was missing the basics of traditional documentary—narrative and people. In fairness, though, I have to say that when it was finished, he took back his criticism.

*The Bowery* was in a sense genealogical. It looked back to a history that was decrepit and said, there is a reason for its decrepitude, but it's a mistake to throw this away. It is not simply a set of dismissive quotations, as one might say about some of the appropriation artists' subsequent take on photographic history, and yet it *is* a set of rough quotations of a style, for want of a better word. It also demanded, much as you may disagree, a new look at the urban at the depth of New York's fiscal crisis. The work intended a structural critique, yet without high drama or human actors. Only banks, storefronts, and empty bottles. The photos are really deadpan in that the building fronts are mostly totally flat against the picture plane, and perhaps that is derived from looking at Hilla and Bernd Becher, and Evans, if not the *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* approach.

bb Seriality and a kind of strangely punning quotation even of the technique of the documentary photograph as an attempt to really internalize it or make it the standard of your own work—even on that level it is a quotation. The black-and-white formality is very emphatic and at the same time casual, but it is not totally deskilled like a photograph by Huebler or Dan Graham. It plays between skilling and deskilling in a much more complicated way than conceptual photographers ever had.

mr I try to approach that interplay in everything. That's part of the "as if" idea.

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bb The linguistic dimension turns conceptual aesthetics completely upside down because you introduce almost an Artaud-type language model as opposed to a tautological, self-reflexive, self-referential, analytical-language model. Suddenly language is directly somatic and physically motivated again. All the terms complementing your photographs are slang terms of the body and the social descriptions of drunkenness. So that language model that you introduce is as anti-conceptualist as the language model of the postcard pieces was anti-conceptual in its explicit reference to actually existing social reality on the level of the most banal everyday conditions. So you establish a radical countermodel, both on the level of language and on the level of photographic practice.

But why the photographic history of social documentary and Walker Evans is reclaimed is still not clear to me. What do they represent? You say that they had failed. It was clear that they had failed. But do they represent an American model of a politically conscious artistic practice that you wanted to bring closer to your own horizon? That you thought it was better to refer to Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange and the Farm Security Administration than to Heartfield and the Russians?

mr I took for granted that as a person interested in redescribing American life, I should try to draw on my predecessors. But I think we should refer here to the leavening of playfulness and humor, of poetry and stand-up comedy, that the language provided. It also was unauthored, collective, historical, vernacular, and nuanced. It had many attributes I wanted photography, and art in general, to have.

bb The fact that photography seemed to have provided openings for women artists in the twenties, thirties, and forties when the visual arts had not provided them—that must have been an additional interest.



- mr I was passingly familiar with that work, and of course I knew Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, and Berenice Abbott, as I've suggested. The question had been, "What is it about a camera?...well, maybe that is what women can do." My answer was that painting was giant and male and heroic and photography was small and go-about-your-business and do good work. Once I decided that photography (which as I said I always was doing even while I saw myself as a painter) was a good thing and an important thing, it did make a difference. And I was rather distressed and annoyed by the masculinism of the students of Walter Rosenblum, the idea of going out on the street and rescuing images of the down and out. In the seventies—not the sixties—I did think that there was a kind of documentary that was interesting, in addition to Latin American film like *The Battle of Chile*, *Vidas Secas*, or *La Hora de los Hornos*, there was in the States the photo work of Ken Light and Earl Dotter, Steve Cagan and Mel Rosenthal, Barbara Koppel's great film *Harlan County, USA*, and the ground-breaking film *With Babies and Banners*, people working with labor without being deeply polemical, all these people who knew the labor movement and photography but who haven't made a career in the art world. Their work was interesting and complex and, like Fred's, it was both used within the labor movement and was in dialogue with aesthetic traditions—like the Film and Photo League, these are organic intellectuals. They don't see their primary audience as an art audience or their primary mode of circulation as publications for the middle-class world—yet some of them were quite interested in affecting art discourse or at least reaching the art audience—remember that we are dealing, overall, with the first generation in which people with all sorts of political and social aims for their photo work went to art school. For many subjects I didn't look too hard at whether the makers were male or female; I was intent on looking at the work.
- bb So photography as a model became attractive at the moment when you and your peers in the early seventies were trying to reconsider or reconstruct a different type of cultural production and trying to ground it in local traditions rather than looking at Heartfield or looking at Russian and Soviet artists, who would have been other examples in the 1920s.
- mr I can't speak for what my peers were thinking. When I did look at Heartfield, I thought he was a master of something I was only fooling around with. His work was more sophisticated, with a highly developed sense of how to mix together irony and newspaper quotations, various forms of text and imagery. I was glad to know he existed—and surely I was subsequently influenced by his work. But, to answer your question, it seemed more important to work with indigenous or local traditions. That just seemed like a logical outgrowth of the scene and situation we found ourselves in. Why reject the FSA or Lewis Hine or the Film and Photo League? So much of the Film and Photo League—Lou Seltzer, Sid Grossman, Arthur Leipzig, Bernard Cole, Dan Wiener, Sol Libsohn, Bill Witt, Morris Engel, Ruth Orkin, Lester Talkington, and of course Walter Rosenblum—were of that New York milieu that I shared. Their work evidenced some of that Popular Front sentimentalism, but they were not after abjection but rather exhibiting working-class vitality, and for some even a Jewish self-help tradition.
- bb To bring it home, so to speak, and say there is a tradition here that has to be reactivated and reconsidered?
- mr Absolutely. The American left has always been divided about whether to love or hate the USA. The fact is that wholesale cultural import is cruel, dishonoring the work of

people who came before you. I thought it was important to reclaim important but abandoned practices, to show that others had gone before. I was, after all, making an argument about a native tradition, not about Soviet or German prewar work. For *The Bowery* I thought Evans was the person who knew the urban scene the best. He knew how to represent something about the ways in which the shop, the street, and people passing by form a unity. That allowed me to extract the people and still have the landscape of the city street, partly because the ghosts of the people are there, if you will allow me. Partly because they are in Evans's photographs, but also because we already understand what a city street is and what the Bowery represents and so on. At the same time I couldn't rest with photography alone because I didn't want to re-valorize the silent image or the single image. And that is why that work took the form of a grid, straight from conceptual art or minimalism. The title, "The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems," is as important or unimportant as the rest of the piece. It is actually part of the piece.

bb "Inadequate" to what?

mr A descriptive system; descriptive systems are inadequate to experience. But then the question is, what is experience?

bb You are using two descriptive systems. So they are both inadequate.

mr Well, aren't they?

bb So that is a double critique of conceptualism in its two-pronged radical approach.

mr I think it was in a sense more of a critique of humanism—yes, perhaps of conceptualism, but what was moving me more was the underlying humanist notion of the commensurability between representation and experience and even its optimistic view of progress.

bb So *The Bowery* is not a utopian piece but a work defined by double negation?

mr That is correct. But that doesn't mean that I wasn't in some strong sense a utopian. Remember that this was a gallery work—it had a rather specific task.

bb Was it shown? When was it shown first?

mr I don't keep such records, but perhaps at the 1975 show "Information," at the San Francisco Art Institute or the 1977 show there called "Social Criticism and Art Practice." Possibly in late '75 at the Whitney Museum Downtown. Certainly at the Long Beach Museum in '77, in a solo show David Ross gave me when he was the director there, and in a solo show at and/or in Seattle in '78. I showed it at A-Space in Toronto. And I think I showed it at Véhicule Art in Montreal. It may have been shown at one or two other places in the seventies, and it was shown at the Vienna Secession in 1981 around the time the book you published came out.<sup>7</sup> Of course it has been shown quite a few times since, and copies are owned by several museums. I was glad to put it in a book, but I still had to think twice. I didn't, like you, see a book as its logical home. I saw it as a gallery work, hanging with other artwork. I was doing different kinds of

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7 Martha Rosler: *Three Works* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 1981).

work with different audiences. The postcard works were to be mailed out, and it was an entirely different mode of address.

- bb So the postcard pieces<sup>3</sup> were never shown in galleries?
- mr Yes they were, but a little later, and they were also published as the book *Service*, at the initiative of Printed Matter in 1978, when it was publishing artists' books and not simply distributing them.
- bb What about *Tijuana Maid*?
- mr Sure. That was the third postcard novel, in Spanish—but they've all been shown in galleries. But the works' primary mode of distribution was ineluctably the mail, and when they are shown in art-world institutions, they are representing themselves as mail works. But from its inception I felt that *The Bowery* was a work for art galleries and museums. I have to stress that one critic has attacked me for showing and selling this work, and that is really a misunderstanding—people now think it was originally a book work, since you published it at Nova Scotia. It was meant as an art work, hanging on the wall—why else would I bother calling it “inadequate”? Who cares about inadequacy of representation? The general public doesn't care about inadequacy, the art world and artists care about adequacy of representational systems. The title showed that whatever other people might make of the work, its primary audience was the person interested in the production of meaning through art or language, or poetry.
- bb What is the implication of what could be adequate? Activism?
- mr Activism is not a representational system. You have to ask yourself, and the answer is that fundamentally there is an incommensurability between experience and language. I don't think that any system of representation is adequate.
- bb But the whole rediscovery of social documentary photography was partially a critique, as it was a repositioning of an established model whose boundaries had been discovered. I know you are responding to it. You are replacing it, for example by doing video work. Is that less “inadequate”?
- mr No, but it is better in some ways because at least people move and speak and aren't fixed into icons. But there aren't any people in that piece because how do you adequately represent the experience of other people? That was the main problem.
- bb But the critique that you formulated in the essay “In, around, and afterthoughts...”<sup>9</sup> of that historical model points in various directions. It points to the limitations of the black-and-white photograph, it points to the limitations of the melioristic approach of art deployed in the state interest. It points to the rupture between actual social existence and the representation of that social existence. Is this a critique of the model that had just been reintroduced by you into aesthetic discussion?
- mr But at the end of the essay, which, I wrote to accompany the work itself in the Nova Scotia book, I say in effect, this isn't a massacre of the documentary possibilities but a call for the invention of the new.

<sup>3</sup> A *budding gourmet* (1974), *McTowersMaid* (1974), and *Tijuana Maid* (1975).

<sup>9</sup> In *Three Works*, *op. cit.*

- bb** So the new that was to be more adequate would be what? Different technology, activism, different types of intervention what is the implication of the "inadequacy"?
- mr** Well for one thing, we can't simply follow the work of the past—that *is* inadequate! For another, the new representational technologies quite possibly *are* better. They are certainly more up-to-date, such as working on the web. Or maybe they should work in conjunction. For example, to stick with my San Diego friends, Fred Lonidier's photo works on labor issues are often accompanied by video interviews. Also, using several different types and levels of written text, it's as though he was foreshadowing the interactive computer piece. We all shared an impulse to develop more complex ways of address—the opposite of the "parachuting photographer," who would go somewhere, take pictures of some crisis, and get the hell out, which resulted in the valorization of the photographer, anyway. We all made use of pre-existent forms and moved them toward some other meaning. I've referred to my own work as a type of decoy. Fred's decoys were didactic license-plate holders, T-shirts, or snapshots about labor issues meant to speak directly to the assembly-line workers making them. Phil Steinmetz made beautiful, sardonic photo albums that in effect deconstructed his inland-California working-class family. Allan Sekula devised conceptually rigorous and formally inventive photo narratives and has made significant contributions to photographic history and theory. Brian Connell made ferociously brilliant videotapes, one of them about another decoy, the fake islands in Long Beach Harbor that hide oil-drilling rigs. Adele Shaules did video interviews of women about soap opera before it was a popular academic subject and also made a tape about her three sisters who were Paulist nuns. None of us wanted to reduce the engagement of art with real-world issues but rather to try to figure out how to renovate and reinvent forms. The group also felt that since Allan and I seemed to be able to write, it would be useful to write about what was, in effect, our collective labor of investigation and redefinition.

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One of the things I have never wanted to do, and I hope I never have done, is to tell people what to do. I'd rather be saying, "Here is the problem—why don't you come up with a solution?" In *The Bowery* I was suggesting some possibilities, but I wasn't offering a formula for how to go forward. Because, in fact, the *Bowery* piece was about stopping, not going forward. But if someone shows you where the door is and points to the handle, they are saying that it may be closed, but you can open it and walk through, and maybe you'll be able to do something really great.

- bb** How does one get from the *Bowery* piece to *Semiotics of the Kitchen*,<sup>10</sup> for example, as a spectator who is confronted with your work for the first time? There is a link, of course, and there is a project, however, and that is not obvious.
- mr** One obvious similarity is that in each I am working with the notion of a grid and the interplay between subjectivity and forms drained of subjectivity, dehumanized—which, you could say, is something of what I was getting at with the quotations of documentary: that they have been drained of real meaning. I probably shot the photos for the *Bowery*, and shot the videotape within a week or two of each other, in the late fall of 1974. So I was thinking of them virtually simultaneously.
- bb** There is also a connection between the postcard pieces and the *Semiotics of the Kitchen* in terms of a reorientation of the subject matter toward the sphere of the

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<sup>10</sup> Black-and-white videotape, 1975.

domestic. Clearly the beginning of a feminist approach is already evident in the postcard pieces, perhaps earlier than that. To my knowledge those are the first pieces that indicate a very specific feminist orientation of your work. Yet, even in "Bringing the War Home," the focus on the home and the sphere of domesticity as the sphere supposedly disconnected from politics was already foregrounded to some extent.

mr Actually it already was in the photomontage series "Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain"—I made the first one in that series about 1965, but I picked up the phrase "beauty knows no pain" from a somewhat later film of that title by Elliott Erwitt. It is uttered by the leader of a group of Texas cheerleaders he was filming. This series of mine, which hasn't yet been widely seen, perhaps, is mostly about representations of the feminine in advertising and art. The antiwar series "Bringing the War Home" carried forward some of the feminist concerns in the other photomontages—which, by the way, I continued to make. All of them invoked the domestic interior, specifically, *representations* of the domestic interior, and the construction of separate categories and thus separate spaces. The subject was "photos of," rather than simple experience. And *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, which I made when I was back in New York in 1974/75, is about "television representations of." For *Semiotics* I had to use someone's loft because the kitchen wasn't supposed to look like a suburban kitchen. It had to look like some kind of strange set—a sign for a kitchen. The work I did using clothing was about domesticity and the feminine. But I realized that the strategies I used in "Bringing the War Home" were more compelling to me than stuffing clothing. I thought it was better to get away from the materiality of sculptural objects.

bb I saw references to it before, but I don't know what "stuffing clothing" was as an activity. You stuffed clothes to make sculpture out of them? In San Diego, with the garage sales?<sup>11</sup>

mr Earlier than the garage sales, but the garage sales were part of that impulse to take the clothing of "just yesterday," with the ghosts of people still in them, and to denaturalize them in some way so that they told a social story rather than an individual story. There were a couple of works using clothing that were specifically political, namely, *Diaper Pattern* and *Some Women Prisoners...*, in the mid-seventies.<sup>12</sup> But I decided that photography did better what I needed to do than an object situated in a room.

bb But the garage sales were also performance pieces. Those were a very peculiar and unreadable kind at the time, I suppose.

mr Why?

bb You told me that most of your fellow students criticized them.

mr It was the Marcuse contingent—his students in the philosophy department. The art students understood it well enough! A Marcusan wrote a polemic against the work in the university newspaper: how could I have actual objects, *such* objects, for sale in an art gallery? We wound up having a public discussion with Marcuse and a few other people about the role of art, what is an appropriate art object....

<sup>11</sup> *Monumental Garage Sale*, performance and installation, 1973; *Traveling Garage Sale*, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> *Diaper Pattern*, installation with diapers and text, 1975; *Some Women Prisoners of the Thieu Regime at the Infamous Poulo Condore Prison in South Vietnam*, installation with stamped clothing and barbed wire, 1972.

- bb But the *Garage Sale* was also a peculiar type of performance work, right? There is a paradigmatic shift in defining that as a performance work as opposed to say—Carolee Schneeman, or Joan Jonas, or Vito Acconci doing performance work in the late sixties. And suddenly you are doing a Duchamp ready-made on a grand scale—dealing with objects, dealing with consumption, domesticity, you are not dealing with that definition of the body. Even though later on in *Vital Statistics*<sup>13</sup> the body comes into your work, in a major way.
- mr *Vital Statistics* and the *Garage Sale* were both done in 1973.
- bb So there again we have heterodoxy in its utmost form. It is not easily correlated, but ultimately one senses that there is a link.
- mr Again, it is the question of the setting versus the figure in the setting. In the *Garage Sale* there was a note on a blackboard at the back that said, maybe the garage sale is a metaphor for the mind. I'm constantly setting up works where you think you are dealing with one thing but maybe you are dealing with something else. So I might say, "Don't look at the person, look at the object." In *Vital Statistics*, I don't look at a physical setting but at the person. But it is always dialectical. It is always x plus y—the person and the setting, what do they mean? Can we distinguish them? How does one shape the other? How much of this is determined not by the individual who has owned these objects but by a society that offers certain fixed paths? Is the mind I'm referring to a kind of universal structure or one shaped by particular social formations? In *Vital Statistics* of course, there was a paradox of an individual person's being a representation of a system not only of physical regimes but also of a system of ideas about appropriate bodies—whether racial or gendered—and how this creates subjects.
- bb Had you read Foucault by that time?
- mr No, I had never even heard of him. I cannot explain this.
- bb The tape is clearly not a Marxist feminist tape alone. But *Semiotics of the Kitchen* also engages, by its title, then-current theory formations. Criticizing them, or undermining them, in the very same way conceptual art was questioned in the *Bowery* piece. So there is a dialogue with theoretical and artistic practices governing the moment of the late sixties and early seventies. I always thought of the *Garage Sales* as major responses to a certain type of performance aesthetic of the sixties.
- mr Yes, it is anti-expressionist, and that's why I said I was never a fan of Antonin Artaud.
- bb But what is the subject conception of expressionist performance that is opposed? It almost seems that you propose a Foucauldian conception, rather than a Marxist subject conception.
- mr And maybe I could have done better if I'd read Foucault or even heard of him. But actually I think the influence was more likely Debord or Henri Lefebvre—and you can't say that Lefebvre was not a Marxist, though maybe not the usual kind. He showed how even the most ordinary conditions of modernity produce a subjectivity that internalizes the regimes of surveillance. But feminism itself provided sufficient impetus. It's odd to hear you talk about these works as heterodox, since they seem

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13 *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, performance, 1973; videotape, 1977.

so all-of-a-piece to me. You yourself sketched out the way they follow a certain form, in that I pick a model of art production or some mode of theoretical address and say, "Look there!" I was quite interested in deprivileging modes of production. At a work's inception, I would try to figure out what was the best mode of production for its idea. But then I might use the text of a postcard novel or a performance of a written piece as a videotape, not simply let it rest.

bb Then there is another element entering the work at a slightly later moment again—as, for example, in *Secrets from the Street*.<sup>14</sup>

mr That is considerably later—1980.

bb *Secrets from the Street* foregrounds, for the first time, your interest in public space and architecture and the structure of urban social context.

mr Every time I moved to a city, I did work about city streets. When I made *The Bowery* I had just returned to New York for a while. When I made the videotape *Secrets from the Street*, I had moved to San Francisco. When we talk about my living "in San Diego," for that period I lived in small beach towns, sometimes on dirt roads, once on an avocado ranch. San Diego anyway wasn't a city—it was some weird hybrid—an abandoned downtown of disused buildings and then zillions of suburbs. All my work there about urban space took place in my dreams: I would dream about sidewalks—literally. So as soon as I moved back to a city I naturally started working about cities again.

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bb But to me the *Bowery* piece was primarily about photography and secondarily, if at all, about urban space. That might have been a misreading on my side.

mr How does anybody know that, though? A concern with space so clearly shows up in the airport photographs. The Bowery photos and the airport photos<sup>15</sup> are both about the production of space in light of particular social forms. And they both use language to try to de-authorize photography while still not disclaiming it. They aren't about the people in the space but about the space itself as a product of a social system. One of the first photomontages I ever did, on a 4 foot x 8 foot Masonite sheet, was called *International Style or International City*, in about '65. Its size was ambitious, and it was about urbanism, on the ground and in the air. I find, looking back, a great concern on my part with questions of space. I see much of "Bringing the War Home" as trying to solve the riddle of segregated representations of clean spaces and dirty spaces of human habitation.

bb But *Secrets from the Street* struck me when I saw it for the first time particularly because it seemed to recognize that public urban space is totally opaque and not penetrable by analytic theoretical insight based on representation.

mr Doesn't *The Bowery* say that as well, right in its title?

bb Yes, I guess it does. So "inadequacy" in that title also meant the inability to represent the actual underlying social structures of those spaces.

mr Yes.

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<sup>14</sup> *Secrets from the Street: No Disclosure*, color videotape, 1980.

<sup>15</sup> "In the Place of the Public," color photographs and text, 1990–98.

**bb** But *The Bowery* it is so confined and so closely inscribed into the photographic legacy, whereas the San Francisco tape is really raw, and seemingly unformed.

**mr** Yes, it's a videotape. But it is like a surveillance film, and it was shot on film. The tape opens with the focusing of the film camera, but that is followed by a series of still photographs. In the editing, I stopped the film often. The frame goes slightly dark and you have, in effect, photographic stills. The construction of the piece is a hybridization of still photography and moving images. Think about Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, which was very important for me. People rarely talk about Marker, but he was very important for Godard as well. But at the time I made *Secrets from the Street* there was no real video tradition, the foundational history was still being laid down, so it was easy not to engage with video history the same way I had engaged with photographic tradition.

In *The Bowery* I was trying to work out some way of incorporating photography into my work while showing that I had a critical relationship to it. But that doesn't exhaust its subject. It invokes humanism and its failures and it invokes social space. I didn't realize the degree to which that figured in it for me until somewhat later, but I think now it is quite clear. I keep doing the same works over and over again, only about different things! The airport and the road photographs<sup>16</sup> both engage with questions of space and also with photography and the photographic apparatus and what it can do. What is figurable, what is not, what is considered a "snapshot" and what is an aesthetic image—what is photographic form?

**bb** One could also turn the question about heterodoxy around and say what is the legitimacy of anybody's quest for unity or continuity at this time, anyway? Why do I insist on the question of heterodoxy when, let's say, the *Seattle*<sup>17</sup> piece that you did follows the *Baby M*<sup>18</sup> piece? How do they relate? And how does the feminist agenda of your work situate itself with regard to the work's urbanist agenda? And how do they get reconciled, if at all? Where is the structuralist critique as one methodological model or the critique of structuralism as another methodological model? Where does that link up with the re-enactment of a production that does not presuppose the inability to represent or construct historical narrative? So every time one looks at the work another set of questions seems to come in. They are linked but they do not appear to be part of an easily identifiable over-all project. But perhaps that quest is in and of itself flawed—to want to have an over-all cohesive project when we look at the work of an artist.

Perhaps one should recognize that it is precisely destabilization that it wants to generate. If one would compare your work for example to say, Cindy Sherman's, that difference would become instantly obvious: same generation, same history, an American woman artist growing up in the seventies being educated in a fine art department in a university, coming into the public in the late seventies and early eighties.

**mr** Don't you think one of the main projects of the feminist critique of modernism was to challenge the idea of the artist as some kind of coherent subjectivity who has got his thumbprint on every work? I don't want people to engage with the persona of the creator. It's a complete bore, and it trivializes the work. You can't get it away from

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<sup>16</sup> "Rights of Passage," panoramic color photographs, 1995–97.

<sup>17</sup> *Seattle: Hidden Histories*, 1991–95.

<sup>18</sup> *Born to Be Sold: Martha Rosler Reads the Strange Case of Baby S/M*, color videotape co-produced with Paper Tiger Television, 1987.



yourself; it is stuck to you. It is always in your face that you always have to be the creator of a product line with a signature style. And as I said earlier, I had evaded the question of authenticity by deciding that it was the wrong question. Since I came of age in the period of Duchamp and conceptualism, I thought what really unites these things is my perspective, my version of deep structure, and I couldn't help it if it wasn't apparent. And the word "style" was replaced by the word "strategy." Why should an artist stick with one thing? We are not a craft.

bb How would one describe your position, say, from the writing? After all, we haven't talked about the critical writing's being a major element of your work—going from that all the way to a project that engages with environmental and ecological questions, as in the *Greenpoint* piece, for example.<sup>19</sup> Coming from an explicit feminist position, as in the early work *Vital Statistics*, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, to *Baby M*, and in the urban pieces, in particular addressing aspects of class. So does your heterodoxy have to do with the complexity of the model of Marxist theory that you introduce into the work—since it has become infinitely more complex? I think would it be possible to go about it in those terms—namely, to say, well, there is just no homogeneous theoretical position available for anybody, either as an intellectual or as an artist at this moment. Unless you want to have certain things imposed on you. That is one of the problems—the degree of specialization imposed on cultural producers has become such that it is basically unthinkable not to deliver one product consistently.

mr How did this happen to us, though? We were supposed to be destroying all that. And you know the pop model...

bb You know, paradoxically, Warhol is kind of the figure for that in a sense. He delivered a homogeneous product, ultimately.

mr But he can also be taken as the model of somebody who didn't. Somebody who insisted on working in film and with multiples and prints and with ateliers and performance and writing. You can hold up Warhol as the model of serial production, and I can hold him up as the model of a producer who refused—in fact, specifically took on—questions of mastery and questions of a product line. His work is constantly in dialogue with those issues. And I do see him as an important model in that regard, someone who said, "You have to follow me, I am not following your dictates."

I think what was formative for me was the development of the artist's space's in the late sixties and early seventies: artists get to decide what art is—not dealers or museums or even critics. "Heterodoxy," or hybridity, is another way of proclaiming your independence from the idea of the romantic artist who is, as the romantic movement claimed, a pipe played by the winds of genius. Only now, the winds of genius are the winds of the market. Duchamp said, in effect, "I am calling the tune and I am playing the tune, and I play it in this medium or that medium." I write critical essays, but I am not a critic. I don't have the training, my historical knowledge is too spotty, I am insufficiently scholarly. But I write criticism the same way I do art, on that same model of "as if." I'm not against specialization, but it's very powerful to tell people they don't have to see themselves as passive audiences instrumentalized by their position. I never want to make the audience feel that I am a magician—quite the opposite. I would rather have them think of me as a ham-fisted person who is trying something that they

(the audience) could do better. If people think, "There's something there, but I could do that better"—well, wonderful—do it! "I can make a better videotape" or "I could do a better performance," well, please do it!

**bb** The work, because of that, is not didactic and impositional but dialogic and activating.

**mr** My work seems didactic, but if you try to figure out what the message is, I don't think it's so clear. Take *Secrets from the Street*, for example, or *Domination and the Everyday*.<sup>20</sup> They have a really strong text, but in each case it repeats. It's a text. It loses its force as *the* text, and becomes *a* text. By the second time around, the viewer is saying, "Wait a minute..." Then you are grounded in your own space. The first time around you are straining, the second time around you are already standing back in your world and you think, "Now I can *think* about this!"

I was influenced by Brecht's *Lehrstücke*. I get to pose the questions. But I feel it would be self-defeating for me also to generate the answer. I may have an answer, but there is more to the world than me. It is very likely that the answer that you generate will be a better answer than my answer, so why should I presume to tell you what my answer is?