

Martha Rosler  
*Lounging Woman* 2004  
 from 'Bringing the War  
 Home: House Beautiful,  
 New Series'



Last year your work was in an exhibition at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin called 'The Studio'. When one thinks of the studio one immediately thinks of the Pollock-esque splattered, hermetic space of the protean painter. By contrast your studio is very ordered and very cerebral, I would say. What do you think your presentation says about your methodology?

**Martha Rosler:** That presentation was a highly idealised picture of my space, which of course is messy and horrendous. But the basic honest and true element is that it is an office. One of the shockers for me as an artist is, as I used to say, no one ever told me in art school that I would be a secretary to a mythical artist called Martha Rosler. Further, nobody ever told me – because they could never have imagined it – that I would be the digital assistant to an artist who literally no longer exists.

I was interviewing in the spring for an assistant and the person said 'So, would you say that 90% of your work is done at the computer?' and I became quite indignant until I realised that was probably an underestimate. So the fact that my studio, with its rows of slides and tapes and so on, is nevertheless centred on a computer, and of course the indispensable radio, is what the Hugh Lane

conveyed. Unfortunately this is a dangerous thing to say, especially in the States when the art market dictates that everyone be a painter and a dumb one at that.

**IB:** The work that I saw in 'Issue' at the ICA in 1980 was a series from 1974 called 'Tijuana Maid' and it took the form of postcards, so that was an early form of address for you. What made you decide to use that mode?

**MR:** My practice is to a large degree rational and text-based; even if the outcome is an image, there is still a basic framework of textuality. I was sitting in some graduate class in the early 70s and thinking about ways to address the public – because the topic of the moment was of course artists attempting to seize control from the gatekeepers of institutions, magazines and so on. Trying to get rid of the middle person and address the public directly. And my friend Eleanor Antin had done her '100 Boots' postcard series, and we were living at that time as exiles from New York in a very small town called Solana Beach, California, and I was thinking about postcards as a mode of address. I realised that I would like to do a serial postcard 'novel' that had no images at all. So this idea really bypassed not just the actual modes of distribution of art to

the public but also the expected, which would be that art be based on images, be they incidental or descriptive. I wanted to produce a series of false autobiographical works, or at least start with one about my subject of the day, which was women and food. First I sent out a text card on another subject, which was complete on one card. Then I cobbled together a mailing list from nowheresville and sent the food novels.

**IB:** Who did you send them to?

**MR:** Partly I used Ellie's [Eleanor Antin's] list, partly I sent them to a bunch of alternative galleries, younger curators all over the country and to friends. Then the first card novel, *A Budding Gourmet*, was picked up by the *Village Voice*, and it turned out that there was a recipe network – which by the way is alive and well online – and people then wrote to me. So people collecting recipes, who had no interest or involvement in art, also came to be on my mailing list.

**IB:** It strikes me as a kind of viral strategy. It comes unannounced through your letter box.

**MR:** Spam.

**IB:** Yes, spam. Do you think that the internet is an analogy for that today?

**MR:** I do, yes. You may be surprised to know that some people were offended by the appearance of a postcard in their mailbox unbidden and saw it as an intrusion, and I said, 'Well, why is that more offensive than, say, a flyer trying to sell you furniture?' And of course they had no answer, but I guess it was because it was too close to something they might have been interested in.

**IB:** It could be because postcards are always celebratory, they are news from a holiday, or news from somewhere pleasant ...

**MR:** ... with a picture.

**IB:** One of the most important and influential aspects of your work is your lens-based work, your use of photography and video. Some of your best known works – also shown at the Whitechapel in 'Inside the Visible' – are your rephotographed collages where you juxtaposed images of Vietnam with domestic interiors. Can you say something about how you got to that methodology and why?

**MR:** The methodology of montaging?

**IB:** Yes, it's so different in a way from Dada collage, for example.

**MR:** Yet, it's a direct outgrowth of Dada – actually Surrealism; Max Ernst was my first model on this and a Californian artist named Jess who worked with what subsequently we

would call clip art and made them into elaborate tableaux. What interested me about those practices, as opposed to the Dada photomontage of which we saw very very little in the US in the mid 60s, was the rational space – they weren't flying off at all angles. I was very taken by the idea of giving a viewer a place to stand, and therefore the photographic became the obvious choice because photography tends to suggest the possibility of a real space, if you don't just cut it up and ignore the idea of perspectival relationships. I was very much interested in the picture of the world that our culture propagated, one that suggests that there were numerous 'worlds', none of which quite intersected with one another or, if so, in some arcane way. I wanted to suggest the unity of the world and therefore our – at least putative – responsibility for what went on within it, and that in particular related to the space of representation in which women were inserted, and which we disclaimed as being actually about us. Also of course it was to do with the notion of a war elsewhere, on others' territory, which we could say was happening 'over there', 'outside somewhere' although we could hardly disclaim responsibility. So that was my aim.

**IB:** To a certain extent both the sources you use could be regarded as not quite readymades but found images, so was there something about authorship in there as well? You took what was already out there in the world.

**MR:** Even the postcards, you had to work hard to find my name anywhere – there was just a tiny little rubber stamp with name and address on the back of the card. Authorship was also in question in the 60s, and how we arrived at it. I think Pop Art very much revolutionised the notion of who created what and what the nature of a work of art might be in a culture so dominated by corporate culture and a culture industry.

**IB:** Again there is a difference I think, quite a radical shift from Pop Art. One thinks of Richard Hamilton, in Britain, or Claes Oldenburg: their relationship to the everyday and popular culture is essentially – dare I say it – apolitical, except in its refusal of the idea of great master art and the masterpiece, and in its juxtaposition with Abstract Expressionism. In your work you intercepted something unpalatable and shocking, a woman whose arms have been blown off in a deluxe sitting room – that jarring effect takes it away from these ravishing, beautiful but kind of hilarious interiors.

**MR:** Well, first I never accepted that Pop was apolitical. In fact I still have some long screed that I penned in the late 60s or early 70s about

the absurdity of trying to read Pop as though it had no deep political meaning just because the people who made it said so. Clearly Pop was about the nature of the world, and the social world that's its subject, and therefore it could hardly refrain from being 'political'.

I would also like to offer something of a gentle corrective about what you said, because frequently people in thinking about these images of the Vietnam War retrospectively give them an expressionist content that they simply don't have. The image that you appear to be describing was of a young girl, a 12-year-old girl, who is missing a leg and part of her arm, and you can see them bandaged in the foreground of a black and white photograph of quite a nice lounge. But everything in these images is quite still. In fact I was an anti-expressionist but it is inevitable that when we see these confrontations, especially for the first time, that the horror comes first, and that is a legitimate emotion. But I don't think that horror is my genre. I really prefer to stay quite cool, even to the point of stasis, rather than showing a lot of blood or providing some kind of moment of shock.

**IB:** When did you first pick up a video camera?

**MR:** I didn't actually. My video work had an entirely different origin. I was a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego, and David Antin, who was my professor, made friends with Charlie Cox, who ran a medical school facility where they were doing something a little bit new, which was videotaping autopsies and operations. It was in the basement of the medical school. He suggested to me and three guys that we should learn to do video, which actually was already an art world practice because this was 1973. We all went, and I learned how to use a studio camera and a switcher, and to study the electronics of wave forms, and to read the wave form monitors and so on. A few years later David Ross, who was the director of the Long Beach Museum, said, 'I want to give you a show but you have to make new tapes, so here's a camera.' He gave me a Hitachi 3030 which is a big, clunky, not very good – but at the time a state-of-the-art – portable colour camera, and I made four tapes in two weekends and that was my first use of portable equipment. A couple of years earlier I borrowed a portable black and white tape deck from an artist equipment collective in New York, Film/Video Arts, and I made *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.

**IB:** What year did you make *God Bless America*?

**MR:** 2006. It was part of a show in which I had a 3.5 metre high blue prosthetic leg that

slowly kicked and a number of invisible sound fields that you walked through. As you probably know, the traumatic amputation of limbs, particularly legs, is one of the signature wounds of the current war in Iraq because of the improvised explosive devices that the opposition uses. There is another work about war that I called *Fascination with the Game of the (Exploding)(Historical) Hollow Leg* in which I use legs as a metaphor for phallogocentric emptiness and of course missile power. In *God Bless America* you have a child's toy in a home environment which opens to something larger, and it is derisory.

**IB:** In terms of the presentation of video where did you want it to appear? In a gallery? On a monitor? Or did you have ambitions to get it on to television? What was its route to the public?

**MR:** In the beginning there were only monitors. Then there was some artists' cable – very little but some. Even in the mid 70s my work was on some artists' cable networks. PBS showed some people's work, but I knew it would not show mine, particularly with its use of appropriated imagery. It was sort of in the Allan Kaprow model of small audiences – one after one after one, rather than mass audiences. The thing about video was that it was cheap and cheap-looking. It had no 'standards', you didn't have to make things that looked like high production value film; and it was easily transmissible in various ways to various audiences, most of whom who were quite eager to see it. Though most of the audiences were of artists and art publics, that was by no means all: there were frequently other groups that were interested in seeing things, especially once there were small players available, then it could be seen anywhere.

**IB:** What did you feel about the recent restaging of *Semiotics of the Kitchen* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery?

**MR:** Well, you invited me to do it as part of 'Performance 2' and I said that it was never meant to be a live performance but that I would be happy to do it as an audition. So we put out a call for young women. Twenty-six young women saw the tape and we rehearsed a bit. I told them what I would like them to do, which was to be expressive, without harming themselves or others, with kitchen implements. We staged it in groups as a round. The first group began and then another and another and then we got together at the end and enacted the semaphoric ones. It really was a terrific experience. I very much enjoyed working with that diverse group of women on what became a theatrical performance.

Martha Rosler  
*The Bowery in two  
 inadequate descriptive systems*  
 1974-75  
 detail



**IB:** Are you making a tape?

**MR:** Yes, we are working on it.

**IB:** All of the works that we have spoken about draw on the world of mass media, popular culture, magazines and television. Was that initially inspired by the cookery shows?

**MR:** Absolutely. There were no projections in the mid 70s, so everything would be on the same kind of box – the telly – that you would watch at home. So all the gestures are throwing things outside of the box, and everything is in fact quite small. It's meant to be quite small as was *God Bless America*, which is meant to be seen even smaller. It was indeed inspired by the late Julia Child who was our great inspiration.

**IB:** Another form of address has been your work as a writer and teacher, but there are a number of publications that you have been involved in both as a writer and as an editor – curating in a sense. Has that gone all the way through your practice?

**MR:** I wrote stories as a schoolgirl. I considered myself an artist but I was actually an English major in college, although I also studied painting, especially at the Brooklyn Museum School. It wasn't at all clear to me, when I finally settled down, what it was that I was going to do.

Writing is a tremendous chore. It often feels like a big distraction. I often think if only no one asked me, I wouldn't do it. But that of course is a self-serving lie, because I even respond to blog posts. Why am I doing this?

That shows that I really am demented! Because that is really a mistake. I don't mean posts about me, I mean on political subjects.

**IB:** A book that we were looking at earlier published by the Dia Foundation called *If you lived here focuses on urban space, on the city. When did you move from California back to the East Coast?*

**MR:** 1980.

**IB:** What *If you lived here* brings together is a number of different voices talking about the city. I wanted to use that to talk about your Bowery piece. Can we just talk a little bit about that, the move and the inspiration behind the Bowery Project?

**MR:** I'm from quite a large island off the coast of the US and from the westernmost tip of it, which is Brooklyn, New York – the island being Long Island in case you were wondering. I then moved to southern California and I became immersed in the local American culture. I made quite a number of works, one of which was a garage sale. What I discovered was that much as I liked living in this strange, countrified environment, I dreamt of side-walks, which was quite chilling for somebody who had long imagined that they were a country girl at heart but trapped in the city. In 1974-75 I graduated and moved back to New York for a year. That's where I made *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. I walked down the Bowery every day, and I just had this idea that I would like to make a work that is about documentary, about the city and particularly the Bowery,

which is an archetypical skid row. And about how these representations are inevitably stereotypical. They are always of the 'bums', not of the streets.

I was keen, unlike all the other work that I had been doing, that it be a museum work or a gallery work. I meant it to hang on a wall with other works of documentary, to ask questions about the tradition of documentary. I arrived at its title a bit late. It's called *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* – the reason being that there are more images of words than there are of the spaces, and there are no images of people. I didn't want the viewers to think that I was saying 'no, pictures are not privileged above words, words are privileged above images', but let's remember that when we are talking about representation, they will always betray their subject, and that includes any form of representation. This is a commonplace now, but it wasn't such a commonplace then. And as so often with artists I had to work my way there.

The images are of the Bowery; it is a walk down the Bowery. The words I put together by asking people 'what are the words that you use for "drunk"?' I also consulted a slang dictionary because I particularly wanted historical and even outmoded Elizabethan words for drunkard so that the words switched from a series of metaphorical, adjectival terms to outdated and contemporary noun forms.

**IB:** Looking back at it now, there is an unexpected sense of it as an archive of something that has

stewed  
 boiled  
 potted  
 corned  
 pickled  
 preserved  
 canned  
 fried to the hat

disappeared, which is the Bowery itself as this kind of space. This is in a way a kind of a memorial from 30 years later to a streetscape that doesn't exist anymore. In Manhattan, as here in London, the massive force of money and gentrification has even eroded what were once no-go streets which have become a shiny developer's dream. There is a sense of something that has gone but not been replaced by something better.

**MR:** I will have to be, once again, slightly rude. First of all as I was walking here, along the bank of the Thames, I was acutely conscious of the fact that, both late last night and today, one could hardly be unaware of being in a kind of Disneyland of history. That one could walk through Southwark, through the alleys and byways late at night, without there being anything to be scared of. The Bowery is similarly being gentrified.

When I teach photography I begin by showing a documentary image to my students and saying, 'What was the photographer thinking about?' Invariably they say 'about history' and I say, 'that's probably the last thing on the mind of the photographer'. Photographers don't work like that. Photographers by and large take photographs for immediate purposes, not to create an archive of what may not be the same in 30 years.

So I would say that you are fulfilling your role as a museum person. But I really must say that I had absolutely no interest in creating an archive. I was very interested in the systematicity of recording. I would say that my influence was, even at some remove, Pop. It was Ed

Ruscha. The idea that if you want to take a picture of a street you have to picture every element on the street of every shop window and that it could not be a random selection.

Obviously when you see the work itself, it is not every shop window, but the rolls of film show just about every shop window. What I was thinking about was documentary as a social practice and as a museological object.

**IB:** Were you thinking about the great historical photographers, Walker Evans, for example?

**MR:** How could I have failed to think about Walker Evans? New York was a very vibrant documentary photography city and the abstract painters fulfilled their desire for pictorial narrativity by taking pictures in their off hours. We very much appreciated documentary. I wouldn't have said Walker Evans at the time, but looking at it now it clearly is the Walker Evans tradition. But I would also say Ben Shahn and Robert Frank and other photographers, so it was a particular tradition more than a particular author.

**IB:** In *Documenta* this summer we saw something quite different, we saw parks and gardens in Kassel itself, often punctured by molehills. Can you say something about that?

**MR:** It was called *Kassel Gardens* (from the *Perspective of a Mole*); there was a tiny joke in this because 'Something Gardens' is a typical name for a neighbourhood in Los Angeles that is in distress, the opposite of a castle garden. It was mole season when I was in Kassel

taking the pictures, and I was struck by the fact that molehills are tolerated all over the beautiful well-kept public gardens. I did a little research and found that moles are protected. What protected means is that you have to get permission to kill them. Which means, finally, that you can kill them. One of the themes at *Documenta* was 'bare life', and the whole question of 'bare life' relates exactly to the classes of people who are stateless but are protected by the king, which means in effect that they can be killed. Their protected status actually leads to their end, which is very interesting – I know that I am vulgarising the concept a bit.

I was asked to show flower photos at *Documenta* along with *The Bowery* and I thought about what this would mean to the viewers. It is a body of work: I am an avid gardener and I take photographs of flowers. I think the curator wanted to show my range from the deplorably political, which of course she liked, to other images of communal life.

But I was not going to be the mature artist who shows *The Bowery* from 1974 and flower photos from 2005, because I thought the viewers will think I am dotty, especially people who have seen me embroidering flower tapes on stage. Something's wrong. So I thought I have got to do more than this. They arranged local tours for me with a man named Achim Vorreiter, so that piece is 'Kassel from the viewpoint of Achim Vorreiter'. I wanted gardens that represented neighbourhoods in every class. But I also wanted

Martha Rosler  
 Prototype  
 (God Bless America)  
 2006  
 video still



historical landscapes. Kassel is one of those reinvented German cities after the bombing of the Second World War. Kassel was, and remains, a large military manufacturing town. So you had not only the current gardens from every class, starting at the castle – many of these aesthetic images punctured, as you say, by moles – but also the greenhouse and the conservatory down to the working-class park, which, as Achim said, is largely a dog run. But also the landscapes that are now nothing but hillsides of mostly greenery with occasional little smashed tiles on the sites where the slave labourers, who were primarily from Russia, Poland and Yugoslavia, were forced to live and to take cover during the bombing, which means that they were killed in mass numbers. Because this hillside was between the tank factories, it's called the Black Path; it's right between the main train station – which is not the one that visitors to Documenta use – and the munitions factory. Some of the bullet-shaped shelters that the local people were allowed to use, but not of course the slave labourers, are still located there, in private gardens. Finally there are the very beautiful landscapes of the Rose Hill. The Rose Hill is a very large artificial construction right between the Documenta Halle and Aue pavilion, where all the rubble from the downtown area was shoved over the edge of the cliff. The town fathers then threw dirt on the new hill and planted a rose garden. It is a series of landscapes which is both exactly of the moment in May when the golden chain laburnum is blooming and the first flowers, and also of the history of Kassel ...

**IB:** Inevitably the molehills – one couldn't help reading them as the return of the repressed ...

**MR:** ... the history of Kassel coming up,

through the agencies of the mole, itself a well-known political symbol ...

**IB:** ... Yes, making visible the invisible seems to be the leitmotif throughout so much of your work.

#### Audience questions

**Q:** How much planning went into Semiotics of the Kitchen? There are certain stages when it looks as though you have made a split-second decision. The first few times that you move the nutcracker there is silence, but the last three times there is a noise and it is almost as though at that moment you decided that you wanted there to be an audible crack. There are a few other instances where you change your movement half-way through. To what extent did you plan this?

**MR:** Well, it was many years ago, but it is not the first take and I am a sneaky person. It is true that there is no sound with the nutcracker but it would have been *nothing* to go back and insert a sound, *nothing*. But I decided to leave it alone. And whatever is crossing my face at the time, I can't say, but I had already gone through it at least once on camera. We didn't save the first take so I have nothing to compare it to. So there are spontaneous elements but there were also things that maybe were mistakes – I can't remember whether the sound of the nutcracker was a mistake or not – that could have been repaired, but I decided not to. I am untrustworthy, as far as what seems spontaneous.

**Q:** I want to ask about the scale of your work. There seem to be certain choices made about a particular take on scale. At the moment there seems to be a certain gigantism in art, that perhaps this museum embodies to a certain extent. I wonder whether the issue of scale is something that you make a conscious choice about.

**MR:** I think scale is something we can't evade.

One of the favourite gambits of the powerless – and artists are always alternating between maniacal self-aggrandisement and feelings of marginality – one of the favourite gambits is to treat something as a miniature. So you make a model of something, you shrink it, or you change it in some way. I think that I am constantly manipulating the scale, or the idea of scale, by changing the size of the things I am replicating or making some reference to. I don't think I have a single strategy but it is something that no artist can avoid and perhaps, as you say, the institution, the art market and the institution – we know already in Abstract Expressionism that the easel painting became a mural-sized object – demands large objects. The public demands objects to worship. There is always a need for something, a sun to be worshipped or something of that order. We can hardly fail to comply. It may be odd to remember that the standard size of a photograph used to be 8.5 by 11.5 inches and nobody, who wasn't doing this as a conscious postage stamp-sized image now, would dream of presenting 8 x 10 inch photographs, unless it was a 'signature' thing to do. So the scale is something that comes at us as a problem and something that we need to address.

I am interested also in scaling down large concerns, which is slightly less about actual scale than about conceptual scale. Talking about the microcosm of world events within the home, the micropolitics of home and domesticity and also things like driving in your car, or going through the airport as a traveller, or riding on the tube.

**Q:** I have recently been studying the work of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham. Barns-Graham felt that her early success overshadowed her later work, and while the success of her early work did put her on the map it also made her feel as if she had died when she was young. What do you feel about the success of Semiotics of the Kitchen in relation to your current work?

**MR:** I was a success as a young person only ten or 20 years after I was that young person. Everybody hates my work when it's made. Except the feminists – I have my audiences. But mostly the audience sneers at whatever it is I do. You can't imagine that anyone wanted to show *The Bowery* when I made it, or *Vital Statistics*, or *Semiotics of the Kitchen* or *Losing* or any other tapes that I made. I have the luxury of being a success at an early age only in retrospect.

Now that doesn't get rid of the question of how annoying it is when you have to be constantly looking at *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. The answer is that in 20 years maybe you are going to want to see *God Bless America* or the works that I did in Documenta or Münster.

So I am annoyed in two ways. But I do understand that this is what institutions do, they write history. And one thing that *really* annoys me is the way that institutions and art historians rewrite history. What annoys me is not about me at all: it is the rewriting of the history of video to create a completely false picture of how video began, who was doing it, what it looked like, and what it was about and also the rewriting of the history of Los Angeles (of which San Diego is a largely unnamed addendum). Both of those annoy the daylights out of me. I can say this in full voice because I am one of the lucky ones. I am actually mentioned in these early histories but in fact they are fabrications. I think that art historians usually do better than museum people because they are less involved with objects and more involved with stories.

**Q:** I was wondering about your decision to reprise *Bringing the War Home*. Could you just talk a little bit about that, was it a similar experience or a very different experience?

**MR:** It was a meta decision, and it was one that I knew would get me in trouble for the following reason. I haven't made montages really – except for one or two random ones – since the early or mid 70s. I decided to go back to the exactly identical form in order to say that this is exactly the same situation, there is no difference. To say to you in the art world who knew those images, and who have the reprehensible habit of fetishising them as though they were either attractive or glorious at the time they were made, that this is about something happening that you are responsible for. I made a decision. I knew I would be criticised for repeating an old form, but I wanted very much to use the same form of address.

This time something happened that is different from the last time, and I knew it would be different. This time they began in the art world; the first series was never in the art world. But this time I knew, now I have made a name for myself as an artist, that if I did this they would be in the mass magazines immediately, and they were. So my route to getting them into, say *Der Spiegel* magazine or in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, was to put them in the art world. The art world itself has metastasised in the interim and draws in a mass audience. So I felt that I was doing the same thing but at an entirely different moment and the message was, 'What's different? Not much'.

As to making the images, what's different is that I did cut and paste them, but they are digitally produced. I decided not to use Photoshop but nevertheless to print them digitally because at the moment our technology of image production is much more sophisticated,

and these new ones of mine are much slicker and depend on different types of imagery than before.

**Q:** I find myself writing an essay on art for society's sake – are you transforming, or just commenting on the social and political issues of contemporary life?

**MR:** Much as we like to think otherwise, I have never believed that art transforms society. All social movements are social movements and they all involve the imposition of a political will, either on the basis of social currents, or on the basis of revolts from below. Whether they take the form of a literal revolt or not I won't say. But to put it as simply as possible, social change depends on social movements, and all that artists can do is be a partner to a kind of concentrator of ideological currents. I do see myself in that role if possible, but I certainly do not see artists as literally leading. I think it's important because on the one hand artists are belittled for an unfulfillable messianism, and on the other they are chastised for abandoning utopianism. We may have a messianic propensity, we may suffer from utopianism, but still it would be a mistake to believe our own press. I would like to be a part of whatever it is that people are doing to move us to a better place than this one.

**Q:** It seems that a lot of your practice has a political bite to it. You tackle issues of gender, of sexuality and of domesticity. Do you want politics to be a part of your work?

**MR:** Yes. In the past I used to be criticised by feminists for mucking up my feminist critiques by simultaneously referring to issues of geopolitics. I'm not so good at agit-prop. I would always like there to be something else going on, but I am allergic to saying 'and now we will all rise and salute the flag' or something of that order. I am at base a conceptual artist, and what I mean by that is that I would like to engage you in the arena perhaps of the visceral but also of the rational. I would like, perhaps, for you to leave the work with a question, and not just an answer. I am always arguing with people. I am arguing with someone at the moment about what the newer photomontages mean and what the older photomontages meant, because they may mean one thing at the first level, but inevitably there is always something else going on. I don't think that we are as compartmentalised as people might think we are. I do think that they tend to take on various instantiations of the political because I am from that generation of feminists who said that everything is political,

and that there are macropolitics and micropolitics. That applies not just to the politics of gender, but to all locations of power, and I am postmodern enough to say that it is not useful to talk about victims and victimisers necessarily, but about other issues as well.

**Q:** Writing in 2004 in *Artforum* you discussed the responsibility or duty of art as a specific zone of art activism. How has this changed since the early 70s? What chance is there for bona fide art activism now, bearing in mind the market and other conditions?

**MR:** I am always the world's worst prognosticator. I wrote an article called 'Post-Documentary?' just as documentary became the genre of the moment. So you are asking the wrong person. However, we can dust off our old homilies and say that it is always darkest before the dawn, and there is plenty of potential for art activism as a result of the market. This is from direct experience. I teach in two places: at the Städelschule in Frankfurt and at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University in New Hampshire. I have seen a sudden attachment to the notion of art as activist practice, art as a performative industry, art as guerrilla action, art as viral, art as aggressively public – especially on the part of young women artists – and as cerebral, in a way that it's not supposed to be. All those things at once, a tremendous resurgence of interest in every form of art that is not painting or sculpture. So I would say that the question is not whether there is possibility, but whether there is a will and a desire. And judging from the Städelschule, where students are not doing this in reaction to the school's imperatives, and from Rutgers, where they are, there is tremendous potential.

The problem is that – actually I just wrote something about this for *October* magazine – the question is not to blame artists for their lack of engagement, but to blame the general public. I don't think that artists are any more guilty than any of us sitting in this room for the continuation of engagement in Iraq. I think that social movements have difficulty gaining purchase in a world which is such a 'Society of the Spectacle'. So it is difficult to maintain focus. Yes, there is the possibility. It just requires people to be determined to hang on with something. ■

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