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Second-Wave Feminism, Video Art, and Postmodernism

The codevelopment of second-wave feminism and video art in the 1970s helped create an environment in which artists moved from modernist thought and questions of material to postmodernist thought and critiques of representation. This is exemplified by the artist Martha Rosler whose video work *Semiotics of the Kitchen* used feminist thought and postmodernist critique of culture to communicate with its audience. Works such as this heralded in an era in which feminist and video artists took complete control over their work and used postmodernist methods to communicate with their viewers.

Video art and second-wave feminism developed at the same point in history. In 1967, the Sony DV-2400 was introduced to the public and allowed people to create videos from home for the first time. Usage of the video camera spanned from family videos to experimental video artwork by artists. Prior to the introduction of the video camera, artists used film cameras in the creation of moving visual work. Prior to the introduction of the home video camera, the medium of video was limited to television and movies. Bruce Nauman's *Pacing Upside Down* (1969) is an example of early video art, in this work he inverted the camera to appear as though he was on the ceiling and he paced around in circles until he was out of frame. Works such as these focused on material questions of the medium and experimented with how video itself could function.

At the same time, in the early 1960s to 1970s the women's movement developed into the distinct second-wave of feminism. Second-wave feminism is focused on sexuality, reproductive rights, violence against women, and equality in the workplace. Second-wave feminism primarily

surrounded white women's issues, but the movement strongly interacted with the civil rights movement. The codevelopment of these movements allowed for a unique development in video art in its usage by feminists to communicate their displeasure with the above mentioned oppressions.

In addition to their fight for the goals of second-wave feminism, feminist artists began to reject modernist ideas. Modernism and Modern Art rose due to the industrial revolution and was prominent from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s. Modernist artists sought to develop artistic languages from the lens-based mediums of photography and video.¹ Modernist art was often concerned with an artist's reflexivity to a medium and their own life.² To feminist artists modernism was a male-dominated rhetoric that did not address representation or concepts of identity.³ Second-wave feminist artists worked in a number of different mediums including writing, photography, and performance art. In their rejection of modernism, these artists began to deconstruct dominant modes of representation in media and culture.⁴ This new movement became known as postmodernism.

Postmodernism in art marks the distinction between the end of the Modern Art period and its explorations into the Contemporary Art period (c. 1960s-present) and new ways of thought in the creation of artwork. Postmodernism critiqued power structures and what they are built upon.⁵ Instead of looking to the medium for answers, postmodernist artists examined dominant representational practices in art, media, and culture then created art that countered them.⁶ Postmodernism was used primarily by marginalized groups to communicate their struggles with oppression and within power structures. Second-wave feminist artists used

¹ Chris Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video Art*. 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 282.

² Meigh-Andrews, *A History of Video Art*, 282.

³ Meigh-Andrews, 287-288.

⁴ Meigh-Andrews, 82.

⁵ Meigh-Andrews, 82.

⁶ Meigh-Andrews, 82.

postmodernist thought to critique representations of femininity, stereotypes, female sexuality, and violence against women in media and culture.⁷

The emergence of video art in the early 1970s allowed postmodernist artists to create artwork in direct dialogue with film and television. At the time, video was a completely new medium and had no precedent into what it should look like, this led to a wide range of experimentation in the medium. Performance artists experimented with video as a way to document and reproduce their work even when the artist was not present. This approach to video soon developed into its own form of feminist video art, where artists developed performances specifically for video.⁸ An artist who exemplifies the transition of performance art into video art and modernism into postmodernism is Martha Rosler.

Martha Rosler is an art critic and artist who works in the mediums of photography, text, performance, and video. Martha Rosler is a notable feminist artist, and was involved in groups such as the Feminist Studio Workshop in the 1970s.⁹ Martha Rosler's artwork *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) is a video that used the then popular concept of semiotics to satirize and criticize the role of women as caretakers.¹⁰ The video follows the format of a children's alphabet lesson in which Rosler stands centered in front of the camera and goes through the alphabet A to Z and shows a corresponding kitchen item to each letter. Rosler also demonstrates violent or dramatized usages for each item, such as at the letter "I" for "icepick" Rosler stabs the icepick into the table in front of her.

⁷ Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni. *Art/Women/California 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 282.

⁸ Fuller and Salvioni. *Art/Women/California 1950-2000 : Parallels and Intersections*, 109.

⁹ Fuller and Salvioni, 300.

¹⁰Charlotte Brunsdon. "Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella." *Cinema journal* 44, no. 2 (2005): 111, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3661098>.

Semiotics of the Kitchen is postmodernist in its reference to cooking shows, children's lessons, and semiotics and in its deconstruction of these motifs to critique the role of women as domestic caretakers. The video starts with Rosler centered holding a chalkboard that states "Semi-otics of the KITCHEN ©75 M. Rosler" as the camera pans out to a set that is reminiscent of a cooking show, with a table centered in front of the viewer and Rosler positioned behind it, as a TV-chef would. Rosler used semiotics to divert the expectation of the viewer, who may expect showings and demonstrations of kitchen items for their intended purposes. The video starts tamely, with Rosler calmly putting on her apron for "A" and picking up a bowl for "B", but as she progresses through the alphabet Rosler begins to use items in aggressive and exaggerated ways such as at "L" for "Ladle" when Rosler scoops and stirs imaginary soup and then dramatically flings it over her shoulder. Throughout the video Rosler keeps an uncanny neutral expression and the way that she uses each item suggests that she is displeased, angry, or unfit for her position. Postmodernist artwork is built on the use of recognizable symbols, such as the format of the cooking show, but it diverts the viewer's expectations and makes them question why power structures exist the way they are. By her show of the absurdist female chef, Rosler makes the audience question why women are forced into these traditionalist roles, and whether or not these roles lead to satisfaction or displeasure.

The combination of feminism and video art led to a before unseen role taken on by Rosler: a feminist in the kitchen. Most second-wave feminists rejected taking on traditional roles, but in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* Rosler took on the role of caretaker to communicate the absurdity of the role to the audience.¹¹ Rosler's performance in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is reminiscent of performance art in its usage of artist as performer. Videos such as this helped pave the way for a

¹¹ Brunsdon, Charlotte. "Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella," 111-112.

prominent type of second-wave feminist and video art: artist as director and performer. Similar to performance art, as artist and subject, a person is able to take on full control of their work.

In television and movies of the 1970s women were often cast to play sexist roles that were written and directed by men. In contrast to that, artists such as Martha Rosler had full control over the characters that they portrayed, how these characters were captured, and how the artwork would then be distributed. Women became both artist and subject to occupy space through video. By distributing their artwork to audiences through television channels, galleries, etc. feminist artists began to saturate the market of video art. Video is a medium that communicates directly with its audience, so it was attractive to feminist artists who immediately wanted to get their message out.¹² In addition to its accessibility through communication, video also offered a preexisting language through media and capture of real-life objects that artists could communicate with and build off of.

Autonomy was a major goal of the second-wave feminist movement, so an artist's complete control over the artwork they made added symbolism of empowerment and independence to it. When recording themselves, artists such as Martha Rosler took pre-existing tropes, such as that of female tv-show chef/host and flipped them on their heads to show that the people in those roles were real women who faced the struggles of sexism despite their cheery appearances. This motif can also be seen in the photography work of Cindy Sherman, who created the series *Untitled Film Stills* in which she took on the roles of stereotypical film characters.

In the 1970s the work of second-wave feminists, video artists, and postmodernists all merged to herald in a new era of art. Second-wave feminists rejected modernism and deconstructed representational issues in media and culture to critique power systems. By adding

¹² Catherine Elwes. *Video Art, A Guided Tour*. (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2005), 41.

the issue of representation to art, and creating artwork about it from a first-person perspective feminists helped push forward postmodernist thought as a mode of critique. In the 1970s, video art was a new medium and feminist artists used it to directly interact with symbols in movies and television and deconstruct them from their own perspectives. Martha Rosler is an artist who exemplifies the communication between postmodernism, feminism, and video art in her piece *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. This work is one that explored communication techniques between artist and audience through Rosler's performance and occupation of space as the satirical cooking show chef. In her performance as both artist and subject, Rosler left audiences questioning the roles of women in society and showed a way in which artists could directly communicate with their audiences through video.

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