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OUT OF THE PICTURE

Erin Bell

Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems
by Steve Edwards. Cambridge:
MIT Press, 2012. Pp. 122, 32 color
illustrations. \$35.00 cloth, \$16.00
paper.

Even though the term *postmodern* remains a contested category of periodization, aspects of its theoretical parameters appear fixed in myriad texts. While scholars may grapple with the terms of an era that remains indeterminate in certain purviews, ironically, it seems an established enumeration of artists exists that exemplify the mood and aesthetic of the postmodern. Indeed, whether neophyte or experienced scholar, if one surveys texts pertaining to postmodernism, one can readily establish a short list of artists considered canonical to the period.

So while the demarcation between modern and postmodern may remain elusive to some, most accounts of feminism and postmodern art, for example, cite the resonance of Cindy Sherman's photo stills and self-portraits, Mary Kelly's *Post-partum Document* (1973–79), and Barbara Kruger's photo collage *Your Gaze Hits the Side of My Face* (1981), though, invariably, texts will also include citations of additional artists.¹ Likewise, studies relating to photography and postmodernism typically contain a decisive list of artists within their pages. Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings* (1971), Victor Burgin's *Between* (1986), and Sherrie Levine's photographs of the work of male "masters" are often referenced in survey texts to explicate the qualities of postmodern photography.²

As a photographer, filmmaker, and author whose work is typified as postmodern, Martha Rosler is usually mentioned in these volumes. Her installation, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Systems, 1974–75*, which is comprised of a series of forty-five gelatin silver prints of text and images on twenty-four backing boards, is usually considered Rosler's *pièce de résistance* indicative of the postmodern aesthetic. *The Bowery* is described in many critiques as subjectless, stark, or cool, and the subjects, if there were any, would be the Bowery bums who are indexed only by their empty bottles and smashed cigarette packages—the detritus working in tandem (or against) the images of the text. Rosler's *Bowery* is often cited in monographs on postmodernism for shattering notions of representation and/or for Rosler's consideration of the tension between text and image. As such, *The Bowery* is frequently named as a "significant work of the 1970s," according to Steve Edwards, yet "it has received no sustained gaze" (6).

At issue, then for Edwards, whom readers might recognize from his work as an editor at both the *Oxford Art Journal* and *Historical Materialism*, or his books *The Making of English Photography: Allegories* (2006)³ and *Photography: A Very Short Introduction* (2006),⁴ is that analyses of Rosler's work are inadequate themselves. Not only

are they typically limited in their explanation of the project's theoretical resonance, but *The Bowery's* inclusion in said surveys "usually functions . . . as a marker of the shift from one paradigm to another, warranting a couple of sentences, a paragraph at most—just enough to make the point—before moving on to the next object and the next topic" (6).

It is not difficult to locate evidence to back this particular claim. In Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), for example, Rosler and *The Bowery* receive many quick, one-line mentions, as well as one "longer" analysis that is approximately three paragraphs. Likewise, Rosler's body of work warrants two separate, one-line mentions in Jacques Rancière's *The Future of the Image* (2007),⁵ but these relate to her photomontages and not *The Bowery*. Neither Rosler nor *The Bowery* are cited once in the 350-page "authoritative guide" of postmodernism titled *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (2001),⁶ nor is Rosler's body of work mentioned in *Postmodernism* (2001) by Eleanor Heartney.

Part of the import, then, of Edwards's analysis of *The Bowery* is that his book performs a sustained read of the installation; one that is complemented by biographical information about Rosler, such as her association with the San Diego group, her knowledge of language poetry, her familiarity with the

work of theorists such as Herbert Marcuse and Bertolt Brecht, and the relationship of her work to Jean-Luc Godard and other avant-garde filmmakers. Edwards also spends a fair amount of time contextualizing *The Bowery* in relation to Rosler's other works, which is enhanced by the inclusion of a series of illustrations of such pieces (including *The Bowery*).

Edwards notes that, to critics like David Hopkins, "Rosler's project instigated closure around the image of the victim, and the drunk in particular," and, for Hopkins (as quoted in Edwards), *The Bowery* "also closed down on representation in a way that equated with the social nullity of her alcoholic subjects" (10). Edwards, in contrast, reads *The Bowery* not necessarily as a site of closures but of openings. He states, "*The Bowery in two inadequate systems* strikes me much more than a critique of humanist documentary . . . Pace Hopkins, I think it is a radically open work and despite the dead-pan mode it is not an affectless one; at least for the attentive viewer or reader *The Bowery* does not block access to history" (18–19). As such, Edwards's analysis of *The Bowery* can itself be described as an *opening* because he unlocks a variety of possibilities within the work. Whereas many critics read the installation as a negation of documentary practices, for example, Edwards strives frequently to demonstrate (through

quotations from Rosler as well as his own analysis) that *The Bowery* can be opened to a reading that implies "a reinvention of documentary" (77), leading to "a new form of critical documentary" (81) rather than its demise.

Moving organically through summaries of critical theory regarding *The Bowery*, cited quotations from Rosler in past interviews, as well as a copy of Rosler's own diary notes that appears to be plans for the categories of text in *The Bowery*, Edwards establishes an exhaustive analysis of *The Bowery*. Edwards's observations are especially keen when he discusses facets of the *The Bowery* that have been neglected by other critics, such as Rosler's use of three blank "image" spaces at the beginning of the installation. Edwards claims that the "blank, black spaces" (101) at the beginning of *The Bowery* illustrate a connection to avant-garde film of the time, which employed the use of black leader tape to draw "attention to the disjuncture between word and image and gestures toward the difficulty or inadequacy of forming" (102–3). These "blanks" in Rosler's work, though often overlooked, establish a "zero-degree work" (109) for Edwards, as he suggests that the "black leader tape" of the empty frames of *The Bowery* are equatable to Roland Barthes's "writing degree zero" (109).⁷

While this text may offer new avenues of interest to even those

well familiarized with *The Bowery*, the short book is accessible for a variety of readers because of its inclusion of Rosler's biographical information, illustrations, a copious number of citations from a variety of sources. Indeed, Edwards's book could possibly even be a primer for readers new to postmodern studies because he elucidates the tensions within the field while citing many key critics and theorists (including Fredric Jameson, Allan Sekula, and Benjamin Buchloh, to name a few). If there is one complaint about this book, it is that, at a mere 122 pages, readers may experience the same sense of impatience with the brevity of the text that Edwards suggests of other reviews of Rosler's work. Indeed, many of Edwards's points deserve further consideration and study.

Erin Bell is a graduate teaching assistant and doctoral candidate in the Department of English at Wayne State University. Her areas of interest include twentieth-century and contemporary American literature, as well as theories of gender and sexuality. Her research has appeared in Lilith: A Feminist History Journal, Journal of American Culture, and Trespassing Journal: An Online Journal of Trespassing Art, Science, and Philosophy.

NOTES

1. For example, see Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodernism, Movements in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 51–64. Heartney's chapter "Postmodern Feminism" highlights the work of Sherman, Kelly, and Kruger, yet, perhaps because of space constraints, wedges homoerotic content within the same chapter, including the photography by Robert Mapplethorpe and the "singing sculptures" and "flamboyant photographic murals" of Gilbert and George (60), ostensibly because gay male and woman can each be categorized as Other.
2. Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism, New Accents* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 18, 41, 122–23.
3. Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).
4. Steve Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction, Very Short Introductions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
5. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliot (2007; repr., Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009), 56, 63.
6. Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, 2nd ed., Routledge Companions (2001; repr., New York: Routledge, 2005).
7. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1999).