
FOR AN ART AGAINST THE MYTHOLOGY
OF EVERYDAY LIFE

1. Where do ideas come from? All the myths of everyday life stitched together form a seamless envelope of ideology, the false account of the workings of the world. The interests served by ideology are not human interests properly defined; rather, ideology serves society by shoring up its particular form of social organization. Ideology in class society serves the interests of the class that dominates. In our society, that ideology is held up as the only possible set of attitudes and beliefs, and we are all more or less impelled to adopt them, and to identify ourselves as members of the “middle class,” a mystified category based on vague and shifting criteria, including income levels, social status, and identification, that substitutes for an image of the dominant class and its real foundations of social power.

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Martha Rosler, *Housing Is a Human Right*, 1989. Times Square, New York. Still from short Spectacolor animation sponsored by the Public Art Fund in its series *Messages to the Public*.

Historically, the advance of industrial capitalism has eradicated craft skills among working people and *economically productive* activity within the family and thus lessened our chances to gain a sense of accomplishment and worth in our work. More and more we are directed to seek satisfaction instead in “private life,” which has been redefined in terms of purchase and consumption and which is supposed to represent, as the antithesis to the workaday world, all the things missing from work. As the opportunities for personal control diminish for all but a relative few, self-confidence, trust, and pleasure conceived in straightforward terms are poisoned. In their place, advertising, the handmaiden of industry, promises personal power and fulfillment through consumption, and we are increasingly beguiled by an accordion-like set of mediations, in the form of commodities, between ourselves and the natural and social world.

Our mode of economic organization, in which people seem less important than the things they produce, prompts us to stand reality on its head by granting the aura of life to things and draining it from people: *We personify objects and objectify persons*. This fetishism of commodities, as Marx termed it, is not a universal mental habit; it has its origins in a productive system in which we are split off from our own productive capacities, our ability to make or to do things, which is transformed into a commodity itself, the abstract leveler “labor power,” which is saleable to the boss for wages. We experience this condition as alienation from ourselves as well as from others. We best comprehend ourselves as social entities in looking at pictures of ourselves, assuming the voyeur’s role with respect to our own images; we best know ourselves from within in looking through the viewfinder at other people and things.

Those who aspire to move upward socially are led to develop superfluous skills—gourmet cooking, small-boat navigation—whose real cultural significance is extravagant, well-rationalized consumerism and the cultivation of the self. These skills, in seeking legitimation, mimic skills once necessary to life; skills which, moreover, were tied to a form of social organization that we think of as less alienated and more familial than our own. Things—in this case, skills—that once were useful and productive are now reseen through the

haze of commodification, and we are sold back what we imagine as our ancestral heritage. People's legitimate desire for meaningful, creative work and for self-determination is thus forced into a conformingly reactionary mode of expression.

At the same time, women, trapped in an economically unproductive and often unsatisfying activity or relegated to low-paying, low-status jobs on top of home and family maintenance, see entrance into the job and skill marketplace as an emancipation from economic dependency and as a chance to gain a social identity now mostly denied us. Yet many of us can see that moving from slavery to indentured status, so to speak—to “wage slavery” or more privileged types of paying work—is only a partial advance. And arrayed against us now are not just an escalating right-wing reaction against our demands for equality with men and deceitful attacks on our bodily self-determination but also the marketing of new commodifications of our lives, resting on the language of liberation. While we achieve greater acceptance in the job market, we seem to slip back toward object status, accepting without complaint the new ways in which we remain defined by *how we look* and by the style in which we *perform* our lives. Meanwhile, merchandisers strive to extend an obligatory narcissism to men. New expressions of sexuality play upon pretend transferences of power from men to women and the symbolic acting out of rebellion and punishment. Again the desire for self-determination is drowned in a shower of substitutions and repressions.

2. How does one address these banally profound issues of everyday life, thereby revealing the public and political in the personal? It seems reasonable to me to use forms that suggest and refer to mass-cultural forms without simply mimicking them. Television, for example, is, in its most familiar form, one of the primary conduits of ideology, through its programs and commercials alike. One of the basic forms of mass culture, including television and movies, is the narrative. Narrative can be a homey, manageable form of address, but its very virtue, the suggestion of subjectivity and lived experience, is also its danger. The rootedness in an I, the most seductive encoding of *convincingness*, suggests an absolute inability to transcend the individual con-

sciousness. And consciousness is the domain of ideology, so that the logic of at least the first-person narrative is that there is no appeal from ideology, no *metacritical* level. Given the pervasive relativism of our society, according to which only the personal is truly knowable and in which all opinions are equally valid outside the realm of science, the first-person narrative suggests the unretrievability of objective human and social truth. At most, one or another version of the dominant ideology is reinforced.

Yet this inability to speak truth is the failure not so much of narrative as of the naturalism that is taken as narrative's central feature. Break the bonds of that naturalism and the problem vanishes. One can provide a critical dimension and invoke matters of truth by referring explicitly to the ideological confusions that naturalism can only falsify through omission. A character who speaks in contradictions or who fails to manage the socially necessary sequence of behaviors can eloquently index the unresolvable social contradictions—starvation in the midst of plenty, gourmetism as a form of imperialism, rampant inflation and impoverishment alongside bounding corporate profits—that underlie ideological confusion, and make them stand out clearly.

3. In dealing with issues of personal life in my own work, in particular how people's thoughts and interests can be related to their social positions, I use a variety of different forms, most of which are borrowed from common culture, forms such as written postcards, letters, conversations, banquets, garage sales, and television programs of various forms, including human-interest interviews and cooking demonstrations. Using these forms provides an element of familiarity and also signals my interest in real-world concerns, as well as giving me the chance to take on those cultural forms, to interrogate them, so to speak, about their meaning within society. In video, for example, I see the opportunity to do work that falls into a natural dialectic with TV itself. A woman in a bare-bones kitchen demonstrating some hand tools and replacing their domesticated "meaning" with a lexicon of rage and frustration is an antipodean Julia Child. A woman in a red-and-blue Chinese coat, demonstrating a wok in a dining room and trying to speak with the absurd

voice of the corporation, is a failed Mrs. Pat Boone or a low-budget appliance ad. An anachronistically young couple, sitting cramped and earnest in their well-appointed living room, attempting to present a coherent account of starvation, are any respectably middle-class couple visited by misfortune and subjected to an interview.

4. In choosing representational strategies, I have avoided the naturalism that I mentioned earlier as being that which locks narrative into an almost inevitably uncritical relation to culture. Rather, I aim for the distancing effect that breaks the emotional identification with character and situation that naturalism implies, substituting for it, when it is effective, an emotional recognition coupled with a critical, intellectual understanding of the *systematic meaning* of the work, its meaning in relation to common issues. In video I tend to seek this effect with a wrenched pacing and bent space; an immovable shot or, conversely, the obvious movement or the unexpected edit, pointing to the mediating agencies of photography and speech; long shots rather than close-ups, to deny psychological intensity; contradictory utterances; humor and burlesque; and, in acting, flattened affect, histrionics, theatricality, or staginess. In written texts I also use humor and satire, and I may move a character through impossible development or have her display contradictory thoughts and behavior or, conversely, an unlikely transcendent clarity. In photography I pass up single-image revelations and often join photos with text.

5. There is another critical issue to consider: the choosing or seeking of an audience. I feel that the art world does not suffice, and I try to make my work accessible to as many people outside the art audience as I can effectively reach. Cultural products can never bring about substantive changes in society, yet they are indispensable to any movement that is working to bring about such changes. The clarification of vision is a first step toward reasonably and humanely changing the world.