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Why Martha Rosler wants to make me buy

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Martha Rosler in conversation with Krzysztof Pijarski

Krzysztof Pijarski: In 2012 you organized a gigantic garage sale in the atrium of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A quite outrageous idea, one might think, selling trinkets – or worse: objects of need – in a place reserved only for the most precious examples of modern and contemporary art. How did the museum respond to this overload of objects, and to their mundaneness?

Martha Rosler: When I was installing my show, the registrars freaked out because they insisted that they had to make loan documents for each thing that I hung on the wall, complaining, “It’s too many, it’s too many, it’s too many!” The curators had to intervene to persuade them to make up some sort of blanket document, which they did very cursorily and reluctantly.

KP: Exactly, it’s the idea of short-circuiting a large institution using the bureaucratic standards or procedures they have to follow. I think what you did at the MoMA – putting the reality-claims of that institution into quotation marks – is incredibly interesting. Especially there, as much as that institution puts any work shown there into quotation marks – everything automatically becomes something else, something “meta.” This is why, I reckon, you called your show Meta-Monumental Garage Sale. And why the website of your show – martharoslermademebuy.net – is an ironic pun on the Abramović retrospective of 2010, when the motto of the day was “Marina Abramović made me cry.”

MR: I thought it was funny.

KP: It absolutely was. I love the way you allegorized the logic of the art world in this simple move. One of the first things I wanted to ask you is how you have seen your project change. When you first did it, in 1973, it was during the oil shock, in the context of an international economic crisis, that is. And now you did this monumental show in what is symbolically the most important art institution in the world, right after the meta-monumental financial crisis we all have suffered from. How do you see the connection between those?
MR: Nobody at MoMA is going to admit to being affected by real world events – except Hurricane Sandy, because that was the visible, physical infrastructure of the city being damaged in a serious manner. In a way it was both an acknowledgement and a denial. The only indication of the hurricane, though, was that the museum felt it necessary to plead with me, in a very cool fashion, to help their image. First they insisted: “you must say where the money is going.” I was literally prepared to cancel the event rather than do that, since I felt that would damage the show, by turning the shopping motive – the raw hunt for a bargain – into a charitable impulse. We came to a different agreement, when I suggested announcing that one hour’s profit a day was being donated directly to Hurricane Sandy relief. So they could acknowledge the catastrophe but not the crisis.

I kept expecting the financial situation to come up in some way, and it did come up in some of the journalists’ questions, from people who, like you, had done the reading and knew that the first Garage Sale was during the oil shock and that this one is also taking place during a very serious economic downturn. But mostly the whole event suffered from presentism – critics couldn’t take the time to think about the show in terms of any kind of philosophical, theoretical, sociological, social, or historical underpinning. All they could think about was commodity relations. We had to rely on our two-issue Garage Sale Standard newspaper to make some of the missing connections.

I would have liked to pay more attention to building into the signage something about the ongoing wealth gap in New York, for example, but because of the hurricane we lost the period just before the installation, and the whole show itself ended up being a real, behind-the-scenes crisis for me and my crew. I would’ve actually tried to have some more nuanced relationship visible to buyers, but since the people who came to buy weren’t going to talk about the economy, it was not possible. But, except in our newspaper, and obliquely via those signs announcing our daily donations to Sandy relief, the show as staged lacked direct reference to the fact that one sells things during moments of need.

When an institution like MoMA holds such an event, it’s assumed that it is to the benefit of the institution. Very few people stop to think about where the money is going. Journalists asked that question beforehand, but for most people, if MoMA is...
holding the sale it, then it must be for MoMA’s benefit… In reality, though, because it is licensed as a nonprofit, MoMA is not permitted to accept money under those circumstances; I don’t understand how they get around that with the proceeds from their stores. I am sure some people were harboring such questions as “Oh, is the artist doing this to make money?”, “Is the museum doing this to make money?” Is this in some odd way a service to shoppers in the holiday season?

Unfortunately, since the last-minute discussions with the museum about responding to the hurricane were necessarily hasty, we didn’t get to explore what one might be able to say about the actual relationship to moments of need. I had a number of suggestions for the museum, which they ignored. But certainly you can’t tell people, “Hey, come and get cheap things!” to replace what you might have lost, when they first have to pay 25 dollars as the price of admission. If, to look at another suggested approach, buyers would be offered 25 dollars back after a purchase, that money would be taken away from the unannounced charities where it was actually going and it would go instead to the museum, by means of the ticket.

KP: That is one of the most interesting aspects of the whole project, I think – apart from what it directly aimed at: the way it rendered opaque the machinery that produces the reality effect of this museum, while also showing to what extent it proceeds through reduction, by abstracting from rather than pointing to. An object lesson of sorts. It also throws up questions about the idea of alternative economies: can you instate local or alternative economies in this kind of globalized setting? It seems that here the institutional frame made it totally impossible.

MR: I knew that having it at MoMA would change the project greatly. It became “meta monumental” because it raised a host of questions about both the event and the institution. In the earlier instances, the institution didn’t overwhelm the work, but here it was inevitable that it would do exactly that, so the questions had to be posed on a meta level. Not just looking at the nature of transactions and value and all kinds of theoretical relationships to value within a museum, but rather what happens when you are at in an institution where the dominant signification of any work is set up by virtue of its simply being in that institution, where “the walls are made of money.” This is at a moment where cultural value is almost coterminous...
with actual monetary value – as cultural capital, social capital, financial capital, and so forth – and where the idea of individual transactions and the relation between people are rendered as if through a distancing lens. I hung banners with arrows, one, with a black arrow pointing down to the sale, said, 'save money,' and one proclaiming 'spend money' was pointing up, at the galleries. But the point of the work was not to set up any alternative economy; it was to set up a world of possibilities and to expand the question beyond bargains and necessities on the one hand and desire and possessions on the other. Some, possibly many, visitors missed some or all of the whole framing mechanisms, but our newspaper was of course good for opening many of these questions, and they were especially handy for people to read while waiting to get in.

**KP:** In a strange way all this goes back to the larger question of the museum, especially in the United States where museums didn’t originate in kings’ and sovereigns’ collections as in Europe but were established by private people as philanthropic gifts, so that everybody might participate in the educational aspect of art. And now we have arrived at a moment in which American museums are building new extensions and also keep raising the entrance fees. In Chicago and Boston they are already approaching $30 – who can afford that? What is more, in the financial crisis the richest people only lost money, and they recovered quite quickly, while others lost their livelihoods and often their homes. How do you explain raising – or not lowering – entrance fees in such a context?

**MR:** Museums have simply discovered that people, and especially tourists, expect to pay a lot for entertainment, and that is the model they are following. MoMa kept pointing out to me that the average admission actually paid was about eight dollars, that art students are always admitted free, and that there are free hours and free programs. But that does not change the fact that the basic admission is prohibitive, and most people anyway aren’t even aware of the other opportunities.

**KP:** I really liked the way you introduced this topic in the lecture you delivered in Warsaw, when you mentioned that in 2010, when banks made record profits again after the financial crisis, Citibank suddenly wanted to talk to the Occupy movement…
MR: And right after that they got rid of Vikram Pandit, the company’s CEO who had made the suggestion. They pushed him out the door. He seemed to have been guided by a certain kind of placatory social guilt and I think that Citibank is not interested in having a director with social guilt that manifests as this kind of desire to placate the rabble.

KP: There was an interview in Camera Austria with Noah Fischer from Occupy Museums, done by Artur Żmijewski and Joanna Warsza in the context of the Berlin Biennale. Fisher tells the story that during Occupy MoMA, the director, Glenn Lowry, came out to them and expressed interest in and respect for their cause, offering a place to discuss matters inside the museum. And they said no, because they weren’t there to negotiate an outcome. Their goal was not incremental change, slight adjustments in the way this institution and the art world work. Their issue is with the very foundations of that world, not with details, and they knew the moment they started negotiating, they would be co-opted.

I must say I liked the decisiveness of that gesture, but at the same time I wanted to ask about the relationship between what you do in the museum and what you do as a part of the Occupy movement, because you have been involved, right? How do you see that playing out? How do you see it from a distance now? What did it bring about?

MR: My physical participation in Occupy Wall Street was highly sporadic, since I was in New York so little during the height of it. I did manage to join its actions when I was home and also after I finally returned, and I still do. I was living in Berlin for most of 2011, and there Occupy manifested for just one day. I visited Occupy Amsterdam and Occupy Frankfurt, but I did not join them. My heart was with Occupy Wall Street, which I followed avidly through Facebook, Skype, private messages, and livestreaming of events.

It is very difficult to know how to think about Occupy right now. Occupy has been widely acknowledged as the most effective organizers of Hurricane Sandy relief, and they are continuing to work on specific issues: agitating about student debt – as you may know the student debt is a gigantic burden in the U.S. – and what they are calling the rolling jubilee, retiring anonymous people’s medical debt and so on; Occupy groups are also working on housing defense and with immigrants and low-
wage workers. The Occupy group Arts and Labor is still active. But of course it was the ability to occupy a space that lent the various occupations their visibility.

Before my MoMA project, during 2012, I invited my friends in Occupy Museums many times in the year, and even right up to the show itself, to come do interventions in my show, which after all was a show centering on money and value in MoMA atrium. Although they kept saying they would, they didn’t, no doubt because they had lost interest in the museum and art spaces at the moment, especially because the unprecedented storm left so much to be attended to. I thought that the museum occupations were a bit premature, but they may have simply been abortive.

In fact, I’ve been much more interested in the wider social aspects of Occupy myself than in the museum elements, though a friend involved with Occupy Boston has said that Occupy is always about one’s own place of work – about one’s labor – if nothing else. Therefore it makes sense for artists to be involved in those questions. For example trying to rethink the question of art as waged labor, of asking that artists be paid – which is interesting, because it’s mainly women artists who ask it, and the question is analogous to the question of wages for housework. Asking ourselves what we do for free and why should it be free, why should we volunteer, etc. There is a concomitant movement to pay interns, both in the US and in England. But I’ve lost the thread of your original question.

**KP:** The place of the Occupy movement. I am afraid the system that brought this whole crisis upon us has not changed a bit. So on the one hand, there is kind of feeling of community which is really great and it might do a lot of good locally but on a more general level I do believe that in many respects we’re basically still where we were.

**MR:** Well, there are a couple of ways to think about it. One thing is that social movements take a long time. The Seattle “alt-globalization” moment of 1999 did have a serious outcome in Occupy that was in some ways much more sophisticated. Remember, Occupy – properly called Occupy Wall Street – started in one tiny park in Manhattan and instantly spread around the world. Its horizontalism and anti-party structure are a legacy of Seattle, but its immediate example was, of course, what we’ve come to call the Arab Spring. Occupy Wall Street itself was directly inspired by the events in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, which in turn was inspired by the
events in Tunisia, and which spread to other countries in the Maghreb, and as I am working on this interview, Turkey is experiencing an uprising very much cognizant of these previous manifestations.

I found it really interesting that Occupy took hold even in very small towns and communities around the US – in all kinds of unlikely places, not just towns affiliated with colleges, and it drew in more than just young people. It was, in many ways, cross-generational. It’s important to realize that the Occupy movement – and this is one reason why people like me have been so enthusiastic – is, in many ways, a continuation of the student movements of the 60s: another version of May 68 and the movements in the US and elsewhere. It was astonishing to recognize the same rhetoric and forms of organization, this kind of participatory democracy, even the horizontalism of the early student movement in the US ... if nothing else, Occupy radically changed the rhetoric of grassroots activism and the political process in the U.S. for at least the year that it was visible in public space. It directly affected the rhetoric of Obama’s re-election campaign, and it reinstituted a public discussion of social and economic inequities, the intolerable control of the nation’s wealth by a tiny percentage of the superrich and thus has reintroduced a consideration of social class. It has also connected a whole generation of young dissidents with the struggles of others, mostly low-wage, often immigrant workers, and the organized labor movement.

**KP:** You said you saw ‘the current grassroots occupations as eruption of a new set of issues related to a new set of social relations of production.’ Do you really see a new set of social relations of production taking hold?

**MR:** Well, that is all about immaterial labor, right? The thing is that the transformation of some predominant world economies into post-industrial societies is new. But that’s just beginning. We have to take a longer view than ten years. What is so hopeful about Occupy is that it instills in a new generation of people an appreciation of the legacy of other ways of thinking and acting against forms of domination. Neoliberalism insists on separating
people; Occupy is helping to rejoin them.

**KP:** And how do you see the role of art in all that? Would you for example draw a distinction between art as a practice and activism as such?

**MR:** I don’t know... Sometimes I feel I must point out that as artists we have to remember to act as citizens in order to be effective. Art does not make a revolution; social movements do. But right now, somehow, I am not moved by these questions. I am one of those quasi-romantics who do believe that what art represents, if nothing else, is the imagination of the realm of freedom. Art always misdirects and redirects attention. The imagination allows us to make our world and to transform social relations. The French thought that poets need to lead the revolution, presumably because their interventions occur in the realm of language and the imagination rather than object relations or products. As Hannah Arendt pointed out, artists were against society before they were against mass society, and positioning oneself against a social order in that way is extraordinarily valuable in trying to think through other possible social orders. As much as I hate the whole art “scene,” to the point of thinking of stopping being an artist, I am an artist. I nevertheless regard the task of artists as being precisely that – to point to a different way forward for human life. Of course if there will be a human life.

**KP:** And in the last couple of years, have you seen art that would do this kind of work you’re describing?

**MR:** Well, one might want to say – and I think people have said, rather annoyingly – that picking up a cardboard box and ripping off a panel and writing slogans and naming things is the act of poetry that I am describing. I wrote a short article for *Photoworks* magazine in Britain on the protest signs made by the right-wing populist Tea Party movement – this was before Occupy Wall Street – pointing out the way that their signs represent the misunderstanding of words and meaning; they destroy language and are proud to be illiterate and unschooled. They often don’t understand the matters they are complaining about. For example, they don’t know that Medicare is a government program! They’re yelling at the government: “Hands off my Medicare!” when that same government is pushing to increase their medical benefits and safeguard the Medicare program. One could...
object, “Oh, Martha, your article is just class insults.” Well, in a sense yes, in that most of the people with these hand-written signs are from the rural working class, but in another sense no, it is about simple stupidity. We know that the Tea Party was funded by billionaires and Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News, so it’s a matter of people being led around by the nose to defend the interests of the rich. It’s interesting to see the different rhetorics spontaneously deployed by Occupiers. Many of their signs and slogans, even though they did not in fact stem from educated middle-class people, were much cleverer and more sophisticated. That points to a very different way of thinking from that of the Tea Party members – not authoritarian and not locked into imaginary fears brought to them by another class of people. Take the very popular Occupy sign, “Shit is fucked up and bullshit.” It is so terrible, it’s embarrassing. And yet it is funny. It is an articulate expression of incoherent frustration, rather than being some moronic yelp of victimization. So that’s the poetics, of course.

It’s not that one looks for an artwork that does these things. These have to be dynamic expressions that translate and concentrate analyses – another example is the “bat signals,” that is, the night-time projections. Krzysztof Wodiczko is very well known for projections, but Krzysztof’s work is sophisticated to a degree, so that the ordinary person sometimes does not understand its import. Whereas the bat signal… everyone understands it. Another way to send out nighttime messages was begun by the Overpass Light Brigade, which is described as a collaborative, activist public art project. It started in Milwaukee, Wisconsin—another epicenter of the fight against plutocratic destruction of workers’ rights, in 2011 – and it has provided a model for Occupy-style messages around the country, generally on highway overpasses. Or take the meme “99%.” When you see “99%,” on a sign or projected on a bank, everybody knows what that’s talking about. This is a kind of pithiness that is incorporated visually and linguistically, and is of course immaterial, in the most basic sense, that it is not a thing.

I think what artists do in exigent situations like that is primarily agitprop, and that may also involve making clever signs. It’s typographic art or poetry – conceptual elements are boiled down into an immediate expression; that’s enough for me for now, though it’s not the type of work I do. As I saw with my antiwar group Artists Against the War, the most effective work we did involved boiling down elements of
protest into things that were visually engaging – it’s rather like what lies behind advertising, but without being intentionally manipulative. I’ve always been allergic to righteous causes that use advertising tactics to subvert. Even in my most directly agitational work, I avoid using language at all, and I try to lower the emotional temperature by avoiding expressionist tropes.

KP: Thank you for the conversation.

Footnotes

1 See http://marinaabramovicmadecry.tumblr.com/.