

## Amy Charlesworth - Martha Rosler's 1970s postcard novel

AMY CHARLESWORTH: Hi, I'm Amy Charlesworth. And I'm a lecturer in modern and contemporary art history here at The Open University. The project that I'd like to talk about today is by American artist, Martha Rosler, and it's titled, *Service: A Trilogy on Colonization*. It's a two-year project started in 1976, and culminated in the publication of the artist book in 1978.

Originally, these were postcards that were mailed by the artist over a two-year period to a number of galleries, curators, other artists, friends and family in the San Diego area of Southern California, where the artist was living and working at the time.

These weren't holiday postcards. They were actually postcard novels that were all about cooking. The first story was that of an American housewife who wishes to be a very good home cook. And the second is the story of an American fast food worker in an unnamed chain somewhere in America. And the third is the story of a Mexican maid, or 'domestica', who's working for an American family north of the border.

All three novels were about the activity of cooking, but from very different perspectives as you can imagine, so the activity of cooking in one's own home, cooking in a restaurant, or cooking for another family in someone else's home. But each use a strategy of humour to talk quite explicitly about wider political implications and experiences of women cooking within the home.

So if we pause for a moment and think about the form that the artist chose to use, and read something in the artist's own words from the book, it might give us an idea of why Rosler chose to use the postcard form to talk about this everyday activity of cooking.

'Mail both is and isn't a personal communication. But whether welcome or unwelcome, it thrusts itself upon you, so to speak, and must be dealt with in the context of your own life. Its immediacy may allow its message to penetrate the usual bonds of your attention. A serial communication can hook you, engaging your long-term interest (intermittently at least). There was a lot of time - and mental space - around the instalment of these novels, time in which the communication could unfold and reverberate. So they are long novels, and they are slow ones...'

So we're reading this from a book with novels from start to finish. But the original recipients would have received them in a kind of instalment. And so the narrative was broken. So for each story, Rosler has chosen a different typeface. And for the experience of the American housewife, she's chosen a typeface that is quite reminiscent of handwriting, in many ways.

And I think what's interesting about Rosler is she's a feminist artist and very much interested in the experience of women. And the choice of the form of the postcard may seem quite an odd choice, but actually what it does is it enters the space of the home. At that moment, there was a question of politicising the space of the home, and not just thinking about politics as existing

outside of the home, on the political stage, or on the streets, that actually, the home was as much a space for political consciousness and action as out there, so to speak.

So the postcard is an interesting transition between the outside and the inside. I think it's important to think about the context in which this work was made in a time within American history. And so we're looking at the mid-1970s. And if you think about the decade prior, and also the '70s, there's a lot of social upheaval in America at this moment. So, thinking about the rise of new social movements, so you might think about the civil rights movement, women's liberation, the war in Vietnam. And we have to think about this broader social, cultural, economic, and political landscape and think about when an artist makes a work, how is it reflective of that moment? But also, how is it transposed, or how is it transformed in some way?

A lot of artists were actually using these similar systems of communication, so the postcard or the telegram, to actually distribute their work - so things like poems, abstract drawings, collages - across the world to not only other artists, but again, to curators in museums and galleries.

So what's quite interesting about something like Rosler's project, which we can read within this earlier moment of what was known as mail art, so mail as in a postcard, is to think about how it relates to artists using similar platforms for distribution of today, so the internet, or social media platforms, which allows artists to circumnavigate the usual systems of how one would show one's own artwork. And move away from market demands and the demands of what curators would particularly want to show in that gallery at that moment, so giving back a little bit of autonomy to the individual artist.

For Rosler's choice, the postcard does actually speak to connecting art to everyday life in that way.