

Martha Rosler, *An American in the 21st Century*

Galleria Raffaella Cortese is pleased to announce the third solo show by Martha Rosler, *An American in the 21st Century*, occupying all three spaces of the gallery. The exhibition brings together three key works by the artist—spanning video, photomontage, and sculpture—in a discursive dialogue with one another that reflects her longstanding engagement with theory, criticality, and the written word. At its heart is a concern for the most insidious operations of authoritarianism, and the manifestation of proto-fascist tendencies and policies in the current political climate.

At via Stradella 7, the large-scale installation *Reading Hannah Arendt (Politically, for an American in the 21st Century)*, dating from 2006, highlights the significance of the political philosopher's writings on totalitarianism, censorship, and the culture of fear. Arendt, a refugee from Nazi Germany, fled to the United States where she became a public intellectual, and continued to write and publish in both English and German. Passages from Arendt's writings are printed in English and her own German versions on translucent panels, which are hung from the ceiling, allowing visitors to encounter the selections from a distance, up close, or overlapping one another. Many of the excerpts are taken from Arendt's 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and other writings, which offer scathing analyses of the roots and historical import of totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. The texts Rosler has chosen highlight the salient characteristics of these political tendencies for *any* "American in the 21st century". The role of ordinary citizens, both active and passive actors in these global scenarios, are fundamental to Arendt's political themes, just as they are in Rosler's reflections on them. Along the lower edges of each panel, Rosler includes commentaries on each selection, translating Arendt again into her own poetics, while speaking to—and, literally, through—her words to reflect on the contemporary moment.

Screening at via Stradella 4, the feature length video *A Simple Case for Torture, or How to Sleep at Night* (1983) is an indictment of US government support for regimes which practice torture, and a sardonic reworking of the title of a chilling 1982 opinion piece by American philosopher Michael Levin, "The Case for Torture". Published in *Newsweek*, the piece unabashedly asserts the moral necessity of the use of torture in a world beset by terrorist threats, arguing that "there are situations in which torture is not merely permissible but morally mandatory." The article was written at a time when torture was widely and unremittingly acknowledged as illegal and immoral, and an irreducible mark of barbarism. Rosler's video follows Levin's argument through to its totalitarian implications, featuring accounts of death squads in Latin America that maintained the power of authoritarian governments through extraordinary brutality.

It notes that the United States government openly supported these governments and covertly assisted others, even as it claimed to support freedom and oppose terrorism around the world. The work centers particularly on the American press and its role as an agent of disinformation on behalf of the aims of state.

Among its tools are its use of language, selective coverage, and the implicit legitimization of a point of view that attempts to establish a justification for torture and domination. Rosler couches her consideration of the ethical stakes of torture in an impressionistic barrage of visual and aural clips from radio reports, comic books, newspaper and magazine articles, and television advertisements and features. This tornado of information passes across the screen at breakneck speed—too quickly to be read or fully absorbed—while standing in for images of bodily torture that never appear, except in words and historical scenarios. Occasionally, the onslaught of data is interrupted by views of the Manhattan skyline and its bridges, or glimpses of Rosler herself: in a hand mirror, in a parked car, in front of piles of political books, or manipulating war toys. Through its juxtapositions of media reports, superimposed slogans, advertising imagery, newspaper clippings, and scripts read by ordinary people, as well as excerpts from philosophers Foucault and Adorno (his words are placed in the mouth of a television journalist), Rosler offers a reflection on the written word, its writers, and its readers, who must make their way through the multifaceted narratives of the power and authority of the state.

The photomontage series *Off the Shelf* (2008, 2018) takes via Stradella 1 back to its origins as a Milanese bookshop. Started in 2008 and expanded ten years later, the series comprises a selection of scanned book covers and spines covering diverse categories ranging from *War and Empire* (2008) to *Art, Education, Activism* (2018). To create these digital photomontages, Rosler arranged books thematically from among the 9000 books that constitute her library, allowing subtle visual and verbal dialogues to emerge through juxtaposition and repetition. The perspective-less gradient backgrounds—a common device of digital design—remind us that books and texts increasingly circulate digitally, a technological manifestation of the ways in which they have always transcended their material existence as objects. These works are not reading lists, but points of entry into certain areas of interest and concern. As both real and digital objects, they serve as a commentary and a series of indexes that supply the fundamental element to the function of education, arranging the complexity of the world and the way we think of it.