

# **martha rosler, 3 works**

2006 edition

## **I the restoration of high culture in chile**

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## **II the bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems**

**in, around, and afterthoughts  
(on documentary photography)**



THE PRESS OF THE NOVA SCOTIA  
COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN



THE PRESS OF THE NOVA SCOTIA COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN  
5163 Duke Street  
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3J 3J6  
www.nscad.ca

To Ursula Eder, in whom I first saw the beauty of thought brought to bear on art.

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Editorial Director: Susan McEachern  
Manager: Christopher McFarlane  
First edition production and layout: Gary Kibbins  
Second edition production: Arthur Carter, AustenHouse  
Printed and bound in Canada

Back cover illustration: Photographs from *The Bowery* by Martha Rosler

Available through D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers  
155 Sixth Avenue, 2nd Floor, New York, N.Y. 10013  
Tel (212) 627-1999 Fax (212) 627-9484

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication  
Rosler, Martha

3 works / Martha Rosler.—2006 ed.

Complete contents: I. The restoration of high culture in Chile—II. The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems—III. In, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)

ISBN-13: 978-0919616-46-2

ISBN-10: 0-919616-46-1

1. Politics and culture—Chile—History—20th century. 2. Documentary photography—New York (State)—New York—Bowery (Street). 3. Documentary photography—Social aspects. I. Title. II. Title: Three works.

TR820.5.R68 2006 779'.092  
C2005-906686-5

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## afterword: a history

This book grew out of an invitation, in 1979, by Benjamin Buchloh, then editor of the NSCAD Press, to help open a series of short publications. Buchloh wanted to publish the photo/text work *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*, which he had seen me present in slide form to the photo department at NSCAD, as well as *The Restoration of High Culture in Chile*, which I had presented at the same lecture. Revisiting the book more than 25 years after its initial publication is an odd experience; the first time around, you don't have to check the rearview mirror. I offer here some remarks about the works themselves, considering each in turn. Because of the reception of *The Bowery* and the accompanying essay, "in, around, and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)," I devote more space to a consideration of these works.

In December of 1974, I was living in New York's East Village.<sup>1</sup> I walked down the Bowery virtually every day. New York City in 1974 was suffering a crippling fiscal crisis; the great Port of New York was shutting down, small businesses were closing or moving away, and the mostly white middle class had fled the city in large numbers. All this drove down the city's tax receipts, and services and infrastructure were not being maintained. The Bowery, at the neglected eastern edge of Chinatown and Little Italy in Lower Manhattan, was extremely decrepit, although the permanent twilight cast by the overhead transit line, the Third Avenue El, had cleared when the line was removed about twenty years earlier. The Bowery was the locale of transients and drunks (and, more recently, a few drug takers), almost exclusively male, along with the cheap bars and single-room occupancy hotels, called SROs, that served them, as well as restaurant supply stores and a cluster of fancy lamp and chandelier suppliers at the street's northern end, where it hooked into Third Avenue. I got the idea to do a photo documentary about the Bowery, but I wanted to incor-

porate a critique of documentary practices. (As my essay suggests, the area's transients, on the street at any hour, were an ever-present, highly symbolic photographic subject for tourists, art students, and nascent documentarians.)<sup>2</sup> I took the photos in a couple of days, and I assembled the lexical text, relying on library and informal research, in New York and also back in California, where I edited and printed the whole work about six months later. At that time, a significant part—but by no means all—of my work was intended to bypass art world means of exhibition and dissemination; as a result, much of it took the form of postcard works and videotapes also circulated by post. *The Bowery*, however, was intended from the start to hang on the same walls as other photographic works, and from the mid-1970s on, it was shown in museums and noncommercial galleries in California and elsewhere, and I regularly presented it in talks.

In *The Bowery*, language, in the form of photos of typewritten words and phrases, appears alongside images with equal presence, and in this context, is meant to exercise a subversive force. By the late 1960s, language per se was no longer rigorously excluded from art, as it had been for some time under high modernism. Linguistic theories had become central to artistic debates, but only as photography became of interest to artistic elites and "vanguards"—for a host of reasons—did the relation of language to the photographic image begin to be seriously considered. There had been few works, if any, in which

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1. A native New Yorker, I was in the midst of a decade of living and studying in San Diego county, with a few breaks of varying length back in New York; this one lasted eight or nine months.

2. The men on the street repeatedly expressed indignation at being photographed, and on one occasion I had to flee a pursuer who imagined I was photographing him.