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Commodification and Womanhood in Martha Rosler's *Cargo Cult*

Description

Martha Rosler's *Cargo Cult* (fig. 1) is a vertically-oriented scene of a ship deck with large rectangular containers and eight figures. The upper half of the composition has a ship's bridge against a gray background, and the containers are on the deck in the lower half of the composition, with male figures in two groups of three and one pair. The colors in the piece are mostly shades of gray, white, and black for the majority of the ship, along with shades of brown and tan for the figures. The ship's bridge comes from the left of the composition and stops slightly before the first column of containers on the right. Two short cylinders protrude from the top of the bridge, with an antenna in between extending to the top of the composition. Near the top, two flags are hanging from a perpendicular pole; an American flag on the right and a blue and yellow flag on the left. Toward the right, two mechanical hooks are hanging from the top of the picture plane; one stops just after the top of the bridge, the other extending further to connect to wiring that holds up a container being lifted from the ground. Part of a crane is positioned diagonally in the upper left corner of the composition.

The foreground has the first group of male figures, two of whom are handling the right side of a container towards the bottom right of the composition while the third appears to be standing roughly in the middle. A second group of three men are also standing near the middle of the composition, positioned in the middle ground on top of a row of containers. A line from the containers splits two men on the left to the one on the right. The men on the left appear to be listening to the man on the right, who looks to be gesturing toward the container being lifted below. Finally, at the top of the containers, there are two men laying down on top of the third container from the right, looking below.

There are multiple containers in the scene, stacked and loaded on the deck in rows of four with six columns. The bottom two on the left column are almost completely cut off from view, and the containers on the right column all stop before the edge except for the bottom right one, where only half of it is visible. Most of the containers have images of women as they apply various types of makeup—mascara, eyeliner, foundation. The images are both cropped and magnified to focus on different parts of their faces.

Analysis

Cargo Cult makes use of multiple elements and principles to create an effective piece. The first one is the use of color; the color scheme of the piece is largely monochromatic and muted, using shades of black, white and gray. The desaturated colors contrast with the flesh tones of the images of the women depicted on the containers, thereby emphasizing them as the focus in the piece. Next is form and rhythm; each of the containers in the piece are the same shape and direction, as well as repeating imagery in the women applying makeup. This repetition creates a rhythm that unifies the piece. Lastly, there is proportion; the size of the women's faces and facial features vary, adding interest to the piece. The eight male figures also help to emphasize the women as the focal point, due to their relatively small size next to the containers, where they are roughly half of the size.

Context

Martha Rosler is a conceptual artist who has worked since the 1960s in a variety of mediums, including photomontage, photography, video, installations, and performance art. Based in Brooklyn, New York, Rosler creates work dealing with the media, architecture and the built environment, and the everyday issues people face in public spaces. These ideas are often explored in relation to how they affect women, such as the artist's interest in the social roles and expectations placed on them in the media, specifically photography.[1]

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[1] Martha Rosler, "Vietnam Story," in *Artists Respond: American Art and the Vietnam War, 1965-1975*, ed. Melissa Ho (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2019), 351.

Cargo Cult is one of the thirty-two works created for her series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966–72). The series is concurrent with Rosler's more well-known series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, and both series use the medium of photomontage, where a new image is created by cutting, gluing, rearranging, and overlapping photographs. For *House Beautiful*, Rosler presents works that combine imagery from the Vietnam War in *Life* magazine with the idealized American homes in *House Beautiful* magazine. The result is a collection that exposes how collective experiences of war are shaped by the media. In a similar fashion, *Body Beautiful* takes elements from undergarment advertisements together with imagery from cheap porn magazines and *Playboy*, creating images that recontextualize the presentation of women's bodies.[2]

Overview of Conversation

Section One

From the beginning, the scholars discussing Martha Rosler's work as a whole have acknowledged the extent of her creative practice. Their discussion includes her diverse oeuvre that lacks a distinct medium while being connected by a consistency in ideas, her yeshiva upbringing and education at the University of California, San Diego within the antiwar and feminist movements of the 1970s, and the artist's focus on women and society. Many of the scholars covering Rosler draw from theory that the artist utilizes, as well as the interviews the artist has participated in and her critical writing as evidence of their arguments about her work. Scholarship on Rosler's feminist photomontage series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* has been largely comparative, with only a few scholars attempting to grapple with the series directly between 1990s to the 2010s.

Scholars in 1998 and 2001 first brought up the *Body Beautiful* series in comparisons and brief descriptions of its formal elements. Notably, there is discussion of how the individual works in the series relate to broader explorations of sexuality, commodification, and how Rosler

[2] Ibid, 351.

is achieving social criticism through the layering of meanings. It is also mentioned primarily in relation to its concurrent series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, and how *Body Beautiful* served as a blueprint for both the formal technique and political critique employed in the now famous series.[3] More visual description/analysis and historical context around the series was achieved with a work of scholarship in 2007 focused on a work within the series itself and its inclusion as the cover of *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*. The criticism surrounding its presence in an exhibition catalogue for feminist art and whether it was complacent with or resisting social constructions of femininity and ideas of consumerism further contributed to the discussion around the *Body Beautiful* series, especially considering the original context the work was being created in.

From 2012 onward, scholars continued with comparative analysis of *Body Beautiful*, positioning the series and specific works from it as an example of the social critiques being expressed. There were consistencies in what those critiques were, such as the contradiction of women as both a commodity to be sexualized and as domestic figures, as well as challenging the male gaze by recontextualizing the magazine imagery used to create the collages. The series is brought up in a work that also discusses her installations of the *Garage Sales* (fig. 2), the relationship both series have with public and private spaces, and the significance of Rosler's use of everyday subjects to encourage the audience to think about the expectations and conditions that structure society. Scholars in 2018 and 2019 have continued to reiterate the importance of notions of public and private, material specificity, and non-visual meanings within the quotidian that the audience is invited to grapple with in Rosler's work. There is the suggestion that Rosler's practice is art as a catalyst for social change, one that bridges the gap between various experiences. Discussion on *Body Beautiful* is still minimal and comparative, in relation to *House Beautiful* and her video *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (fig. 3).

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[3] Jayne Wark, "Conceptual Art and Feminism: Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Eleanor Antin, and Martha Wilson," *Women's Art Journal* 22, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2001): 44.

Section Two

The scholars with the most helpful information about the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* and its relation to Rosler's oeuvre would be Alexander Alberro, Karen Moss and Richard Meyer.

Alberro is an art historian with a focus on contemporary art.[4] His 1998 essay was published in a book accompanying Rosler's first retrospective, showing work from over fifty years. His essay tackles what he views as the major dialogues that operate within her creative process, as well as her use of decoys to reveal a deeper understanding of social and political issues. Using Rosler's *A Budding Gourmet* (fig. 4) as a starting point, the author outlines the dialectics of gendered food production and the production/consumption of culture; disjoined forms of communication versus the overwhelming constant of mass communication; and the public sphere and the privileges visible in interior spaces that the artist explores throughout her work. Alberro was the earliest to write about the theoretical methods that influence her practice, including frameworks from Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin.[5] The author considered how political critique shows up specifically in the formal elements of the *Body Beautiful* photomontages, encouraging audience participation and addressing contemporary issues. He also discusses the series from the perspective of surveillance as a form of social control over women, and the paradox of women being both fetishized and a defetishization of the art as an object. Alberro's final contribution toward the *Body Beautiful* series was a brief, but notable, comparison between the "defacement" seen in *Greetings* (fig. 5), a photomontage of political figures, and the women depicted in Rosler's feminist photomontages.[6] The essay concludes with the author's claim of dialectics that reinforce Rosler's work, using everyday subjects to

[4] "About," Alexander Alberro, accessed November 23, 2025, https://www.alexalberro.com/about; "Alexander Alberro," Columbia University, accessed November 23, 2025, https://arthistory.columbia.edu/content/alexander-alberro.
[5] Alexander Alberro, "The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy," in *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), 80, 85. Specifically, he mentions that Rosler draws from Brecht's concept of *Lehrstück*, or "learning-play," as well as Benjamin's Marxist perspective of montage as political critique.
[6] Ibid, 102.

create work that connects with a broad audience. His essay is cited among later scholars of Rosler's work, particularly in regards to *Body Beautiful*.

Moss is an art historian with a focus in post-war American conceptual and performance art.[7] Her article, "Martha Rosler's Photomontages and Garage Sales: Private and Public, Discursive and Dialogical," focuses on Rosler's two photomontage series *House Beautiful* and *Body Beautiful*, alongside her *Garage Sale* installations from 1973 to 2012. The author examines the artist's relationship with feminism and notions of private and public as they show up in the previously mentioned series from their first iterations to more recent ones. Moss gives historical context to the creative practice of Rosler, from her yeshiva education to her time at the University of California, San Diego that influenced her ideas around feminism and ways of addressing new audiences in nontraditional ways, such as through photography. Moss gives examples of how *Cleaning the Drapes* and *Balloons* (figs. 6 and 7) in Rosler's *House Beautiful* series as a way of critiquing the domestic complacency and the distribution of violent imagery through television and media. She also claims that the artist recontextualizes the familiarity of magazine imagery in her series *Body Beautiful* in a way that acknowledges the male gaze. The rest of the essay goes on to discuss all of the iterations of the garage sale performance installations, up to her most recent *Meta-Monumental Garage Sale*, analyzing how Rosler's creative decisions shifted or stayed the same across its run time. Moss's final conclusion is that both the photomontages and the garage sales bring together subjects and imagery from domestic, private spaces to be re-presented in the public sphere; they are intentionally simple, familiar and everyday things that the audience is made to interact with and use as a medium to question the conditions that enable them to exist in society.

Meyer is an art historian specializing in twentieth century art.[8] Originally written in 2007 and republished with an addition a decade later (2017), Meyer's article focuses on one

[7] "CV/Biography," Karen Moss, accessed November 17, 2025, http://karenmoss.art/cv-biography/.
[8] "Richard Meyer," Stanford University, accessed November 17, 2025, https://art.stanford.edu/people/richard-meyer.

particular work from Rosler's *Body Beautiful* series: *Hot House, or Harem* (fig. 8). The essay describes the controversy around the work's position as the cover for *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* catalogue. In the first section, Meyer attempts to retrieve the historical and cultural context of the piece at its conception, comparing it to the recent criticism it was receiving. He discusses the material specificity of Rosler's decisions, and how she specifically was looking for *Playboy* magazines that had already been discarded and how *Hot House* mimics the ideas of mass production and disposability of women. Meyer also grapples with *Hot House* and how it differs from its original context of a collage that was never meant to be sold versus the reproduction of the piece for the use of marketing. The second section continues the conversation through the examination of an alternate cover design created by the artist Mary Beth Edelson, featuring the faces of the artists in the exhibition collaged onto the *Playboy* nudes, concluding the article with a reflection on the contradicting perspectives within feminist art around issues of sexuality, politics, and commercialization. The questions that Meyer posed about the tension between Rosler's original intentions and the commercialization of the work later on also adds a level of discussion around the meanings associated with the *Body Beautiful* series, as the interpretation of commercializing women's bodies is scarcely discussed by other critics. The historical context behind this piece allowed for a greater understanding around the historical context of this series and how it connects to the more recent feminist landscape it was being exhibited in.

Each of the three scholars reach slightly different conclusions about the meanings depicted in both *Body Beautiful* as a series and individual works that are used as evidence for their claims. However, there is an overlap in the importance of the audience, as well as private and public spaces and issues of women's sexuality. Additionally, the authors of these sources are all art historians and/or critics, who have backgrounds in modern and contemporary art, twentieth century art, or photography, giving them an insight into the methods and ideas Rosler is pulling from.

Extending the Conversation

Cargo Cult is one of the more ubiquitous works in *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* due to being on the cover of *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*. However, there is little to no analysis on this work individually within the current scholarship, or how insights about the series as a whole can extend to a discussion around *Cargo Cult*. The only source that mentions the piece by name is in a brief biography on Rosler. In a single paragraph about her use of photomontage, it positions the *Body Beautiful* series as an interruption of magazine advertisements that bring attention to how women's bodies and body parts are used to market consumer goods, using *Cargo Cult* as an example of a "collision" of imagery that creates new meaning while critiquing the source material.[9] Following this thread, I argue that *Cargo Cult* presents women as a commodity, reflecting the perspective of a system that—figuratively and literally—compartmentalizes and sells ideas of what femininity should look and act like. I will approach this through comparisons with other notable works in *Body Beautiful*, and bringing in feminist and Marxist frameworks that influence Rosler's practice and how this work can be interpreted through them.

Body Beautiful is a series that challenges the social norms and expectations of women presented in media like magazines. Multiple scholars put emphasis on works featuring fully naked women and body parts collaged on top of advertisements, with *Hot House, or Harem* being one example of the former. Moss claims the sheer number of nude women that fill the frame of the piece recontextualize the imagery to forefront the male gaze.[10] This is a perspective shared by Meyer when he stated that this piece used the women's multiplicity as a form of defiance:

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[9] "Martha Rosler," in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Cornelia Butler (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007), 291.
[10] Karen Moss, "Martha Rosler's Photomontages and Garage Sales: Private and Public, Discursive and Dialogical," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2013): 691.

> Their seemingly boundless proliferation, their refusal to stay within the prearranged space of male fantasy, creates a new visual and narrative context, a context that is *Hot House*. Rosler's Playmates have been asked to provide "Entertainment for Men" one too many times. In response, they overproduce female submission to the point where it becomes something like its opposite – a wave of naked defiance.[11]

For both Meyer and Moss, *Hot House* resists the narrative of domesticity and submission being projected onto them by the (male) viewer. Additionally, Moss made a claim for *Small Wonder* (fig. 9), a piece with montaged breasts and smiling red lips placed on top of a woman in an underwear advertisement. The author describes the work as "a hilarious visual pun…that reveals what is proffered by the woman and imagined by the male spectator."[12]

In comparison to *Hot House* and *Small Wonder*, *Cargo Cult* lacks any visuals of the body, focusing solely on the faces of the women being presented for the audience. There is no explicit sexualization in its fragmentation of the body unlike in *Hot Meat* (fig. 10), which features a side profile of a woman's torso on the front of an oven and *Damp Meat* (fig. 11), a piece showing the buttocks of a woman on a dishwasher. *Cargo Cult* shares a similarity to *Hot House* in presenting the multiplicity of women, but with a key difference in what it means. Meyer considers the ideas around mass production and disposability of women with the knowledge that Rosler specifically looked for the images of women in recently discarded issues of the *Playboy* magazines.[13] He determined that the women in this piece were actively rejecting their commodification at the hands of the viewer. The women in *Cargo Cult*, on the other hand, are still performing and participating in conventional notions of femininity as they continue to apply makeup despite being moved into a different context. Like the woman in *Small Wonder*, they still

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[11] Richard Meyer, "Feminist Art Re-Covered," in *A Companion to Feminist Art*, eds. Hilary Robinson and Maria Elena Buskirk (Newark, NJ: Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019), 219.
[12] Moss, "Martha Rosler's Photomontages and Garage Sales," 691.
[13] Meyer, "Feminist Art Re-Covered," 217.

attempt to “proffer” an ideal, to sell an expectation.

Furthermore, the placement of the women on the front of cargo containers also alludes to its original use case. Generally, the façade of a container is labeled with “operational markings” that delineate information such as size and type, weight limits and stacking capabilities of an individual container.[14] Presumably, it can be inferred that anything not fitting within the parameters set by the container is unlikely to be loaded onto it. By collaging the cosmeticized faces of women onto the photograph, Rosler is adding external messaging of commodification expressed in the piece.

Beyond strictly focusing on visuals, *Cargo Cult* also shows evidence of Marxist and feminist perspectives that Rosler was using to further her ideas of commodification of women. Marxist ideas are mentioned in Alberro’s discussion of Rosler’s practice; he claims that Rosler’s dialectical approach to montage as a form of political critique was rooted in the tradition of European Marxists such as Walter Benjamin. He also suggests that Rosler’s work mimics the approach that Benjamin takes, stating “Rosier moves from the smaller unit of meaning, monad, or fragment to connect to the tremendous prevailing edifices of myth, ritual, and social and economic practices.”[15] In other words, fragmentation is used as a method of exploring larger societal issues. This shows up most obviously in Cargo Cult’s fragmentation and magnification of the women’s faces, with one being purely a close-up of an eye. The “montage as critique” aspect comes in with the women’s faces being placed on top of containers meant to be part of a ship’s “cargo,” presumably to be sold and consumed.

Feminist frameworks in Rosler’s work come into play with Elizabeth Richards’s article “Materializing Blame: Martha Rosler and Mary Kelly.” Richards, in discussing how violence and trauma are received by civilians through media, points out how presenting idealized images for

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[14] Susan Nalevac, “How to Read Shipping Container CSC Plates, Markings, & Export Surveys,“ *Container Management, Inc.*, February 7, 2025, https://www.containermgt.com/how-to-read-shipping-container-csc-plates-markings-export-surveys.
[15] Alberro, “The Dialectics of Everyday Life,” 74, 80.

consumption was an important feminist issue at the time, as it hindered efforts toward equal rights. Alongside that, the author also suggested that Rosler's *Body Beautiful* series made the viewer "consider the contradiction found in stereotypes of women, such as being domestic and docile while also sexual and objectified" when pairing women from advertisements and various settings.[16] Applying this to *Cargo Cult*, the women being presented in the piece all have make-up being applied or already on their faces, alluding to their original context as an advertisement. Once again, their placement on the cargo containers allude to goods that will be sold. In this new context, however, make-up is not the product rather than an accessory to it—the women themselves—that advertise an idealized woman for mass consumption.

Rosler's *Body Beautiful* photomontages grapples with issues around how women are presented and consumed in mass media, critiquing what was considered acceptable and challenging the expectations of the audience. Even in the current social climate, these images still continue to spark discussion about women's rights and how we respond to the media that we consume. As Richard Meyer stated about the controversy around *Hot House*, "the feminist past still has the power to disrupt business-as-usual in the present."[17] As technology advances and tactics change, it is important we continue to interrogate the messages—explicit and implicit—that we receive through the media.

[16] Elizabeth Richards, "Materializing Blame: Martha Rosler and Mary Kelly," *Woman's Art Journal* 33, no. 2 (2012): 4, 8.
[17] Meyer, "Feminist Art Re-Covered," 224.

Images

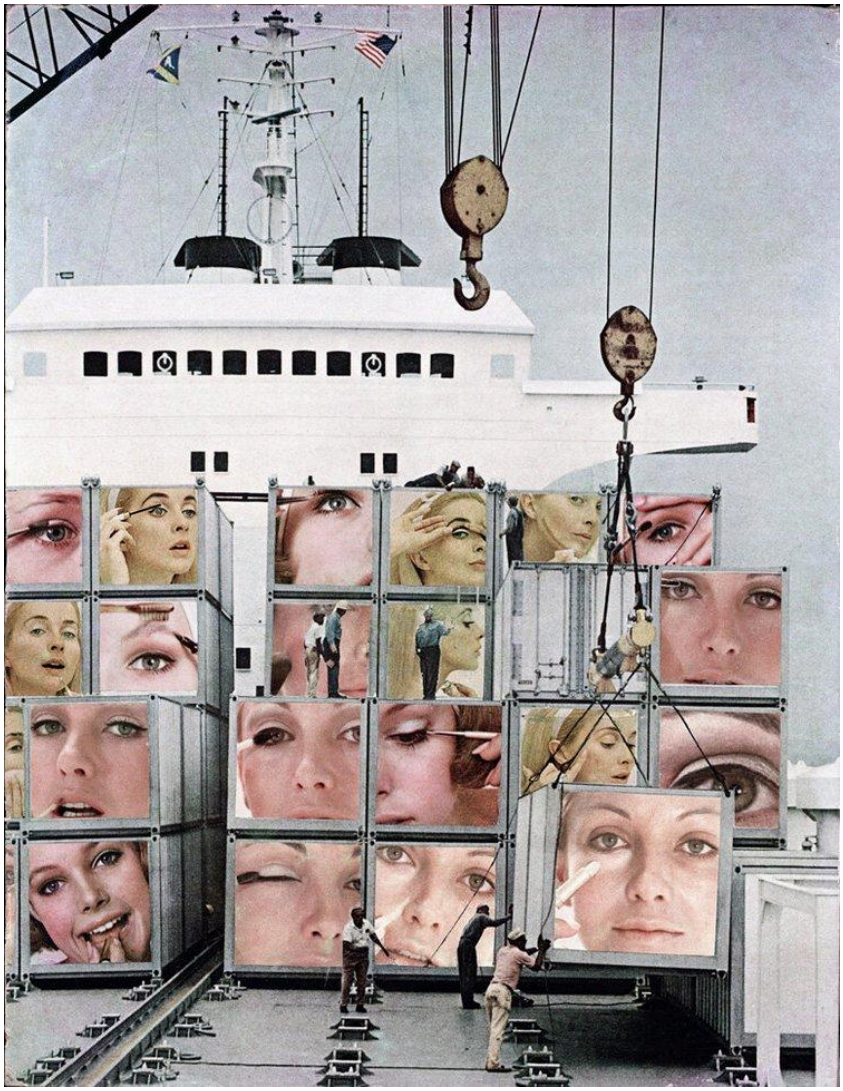

Fig. 1. Martha Rosler, *Cargo Cult*, c. 1967–1972, photomontage printed as photograph, 39 ½ x 30 ¼ in.

Fig. 2. Rosler, *Garage Sales*, 1973-2012, multimedia installation and performance with secondhand clothing, objects, texts, audio elements, and slide projections, installation view Basal Art Fair, Switzerland

Fig. 3. Rosler, still from *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, 1977, color video, sound, 39:16 min.

Fig. 4. Rosler, still from *A Budding Gourmet*, 1974, video, sound, 17 min.

Fig. 5. Rosler, *Greetings*, 1965, photomontage; originally, collage on masonate sheet, 4 x 8 ft.

Fig. 6. Rosler, *Cleaning the Drapes*, c. 1967–72, photomontage, 17 5/16 × 23 ¾ in, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

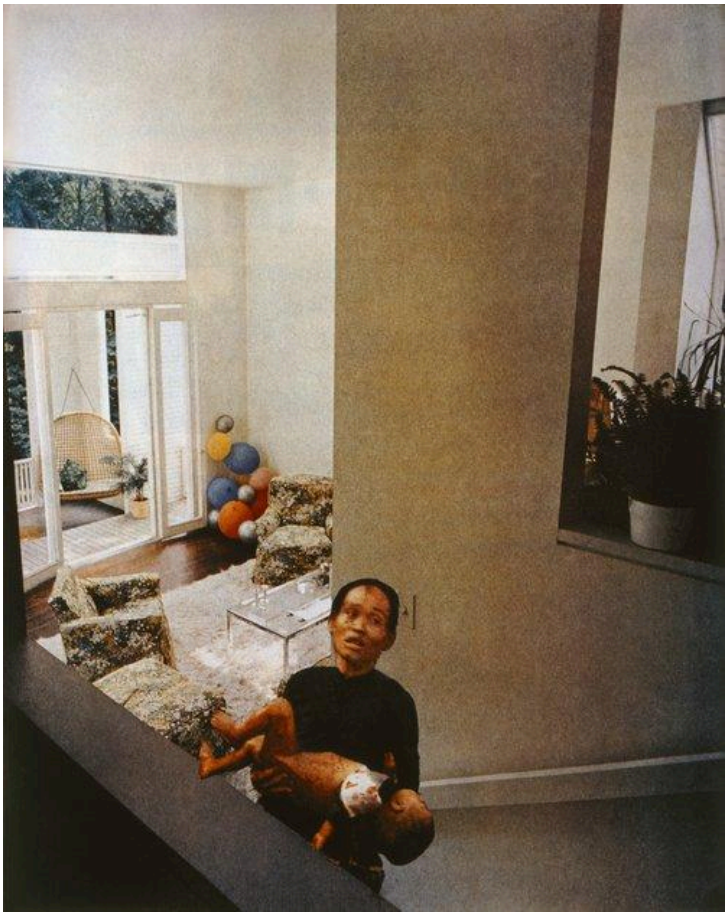

Fig. 7. Rosler, *Balloons*, c. 1967–72, photomontage, 23 11/16 × 18 ⅞ in, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Fig. 8. Rosler, *Hot House, or Harem*, c. 1967–1972, photomontage printed as chromogenic print, flush-mounted to acrylic, 19 ½ x 48 in.

Fig. 9. Rosler, *Small Wonder*, c. 1967–1972, photomontage printed as chromogenic print, 24 x 20 in.

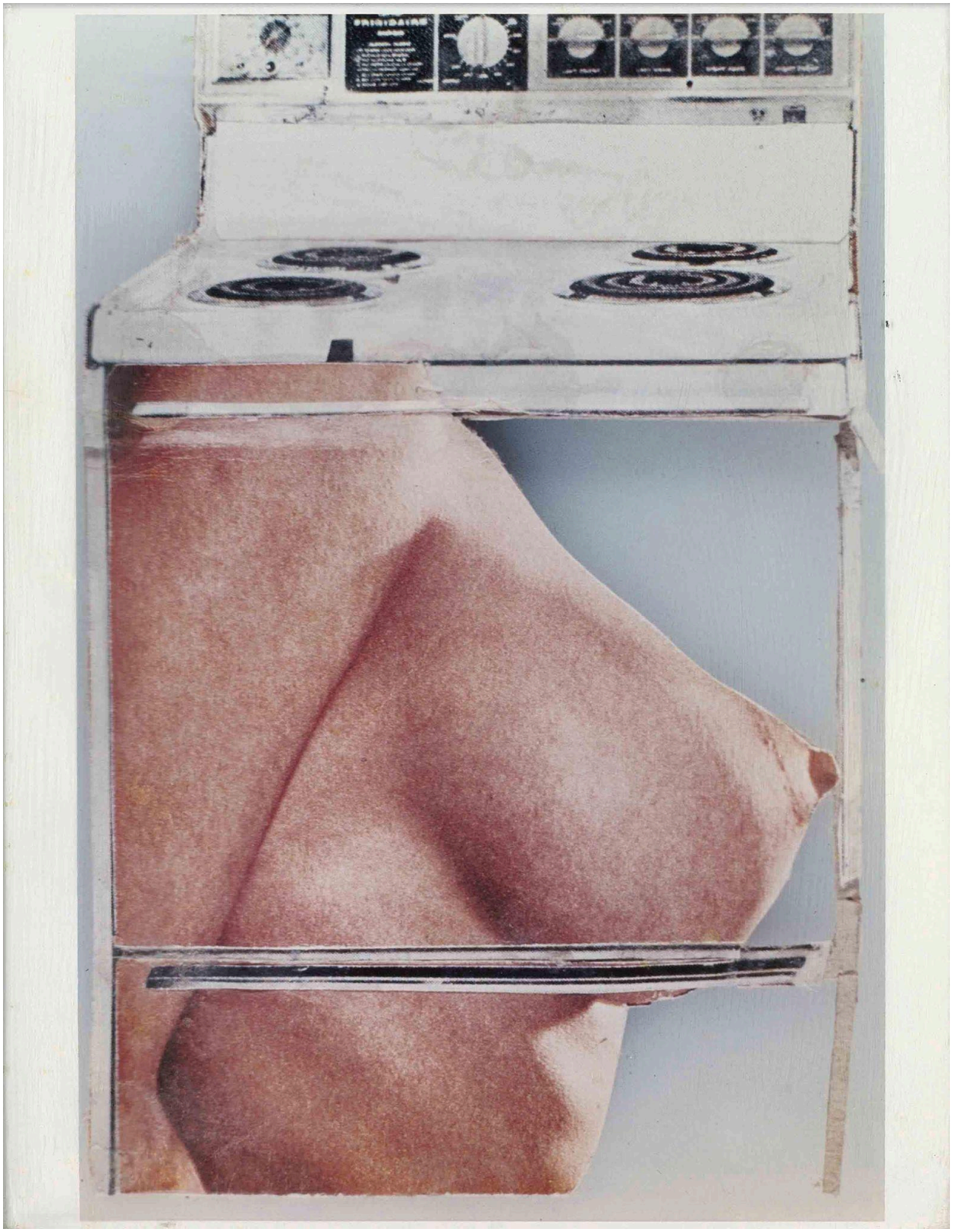

Fig. 10. Rosler, *Hot Meat*, c. 1967–1972, colour coupler print, 13 ⅝ x 10 ⅝ in.

Fig. 11. Rosler, *Damp Meat*, c. 1967–1972, photomontage, 20 x 16 in.

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