



## RECIPES FOR REFORM

Food has long been used by artists not merely to evoke abundance or beauty, but to interrupt and intervene in fundamental aspects of life and society. The kitchen is a stage upon which to follow the scripts which dictate men and women's models of behaviour, and in turn a platform to critique them. Here, Susannah Worth discusses three seminal works by Martha Rosler, Barbara T Smith, and Mary Kelly that each use recipes to challenge the notion of the female role within the kitchen, the home and society.

Like all good recipes, Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) begins with its title, chalked up on a board as the day's menu. Only the top half of Rosler's face is visible from above the blackboard, eyes blinking, expressing all the warmth and welcome of a disgruntled dinner lady. Slowly the camera pans out. The scene is now set, and in a low-fi black-and-white blur the signs of the kitchen are visible: oven, fridge, teapot, and books of course. But there is no food in this kitchen, only food for thought, and Rosler employs various strategies to undermine the seeming complicity of presenting the feminist in the kitchen. In setting aside her skills in using colour cameras and post-production editing, she rejects the gloss and glamour of television and advertising. In constructing a fake kitchen in a loft apartment, a stage full of kitchen symbols, she satirises the sets used in TV cookery shows, while simultaneously creating an uncanny remove from the kitchen.

At a drawn-out 45 seconds in, Rosler puts the board to one side and dons her protective layer – the apron. What follows is an inventory of equipment. An alphabetical glossary of kitchenalia. Each item, from A to Z is presented to the viewer with a brief demonstration, recalling the on-screen likes of Julia Child and Fanny Cradock, or a department store sales demo. It's a parody she had used in *A Budding Gourmet* (1974) and went on to use again in *The East Is Red, The West Is Bending* (1977). However, in Rosler's kitchen there is no affection for the apron, no tenderness for the tenderiser. 'Bowl' gets a vigorous stir; 'Chopper' clangs inside a metal pan; 'Fork' jabs violently; 'Grater' scrapes sharply; 'Hamburger press' smacks together like an instrument of torture. 'Knife' is first caressed and later replaced on the tabletop with all the care of a mother with a newborn baby, but in between these actions Rosler uses it to stab, stab, stab three times at the air, the final time pointing aggressively towards the viewer. At the tricky end of the alphabet, Rosler uses a large knife and fork as extensions of her arms, to act out an implicating 'U' (you?), 'V' (elbows together), 'W' (arms out, bent at the elbows), 'X' (arms

crossed in defence). She then thrusts her arms up to the ceiling, throws her head back until it almost disappears, forming a Y with her whole body, and perhaps a silent desperate heavenward cry of 'WHY?'. After slashing a finalising 'Z' in the air in front of her with the Knife, she slowly folds her arms. Her shoulders and whole body look tense, her lips are pursed. She is motionless for a while, then flashes a shrug; a gesture of humorous resignation.

In *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler kindly – or not so kindly – provides a list of required tools, whereas, in her performance *Feed Me* (1973), Barbara T Smith allocates to herself the task of offering a selection of ingredients. *Feed Me* was performed as part of an event called All Night Sculptures which ran from sunset to sunrise at the Museum of Conceptual Art in San Francisco. The venue, more specifically, was the women's toilet, a large room with a toilet and a sink at one end. One at a time, visitors were invited into the room to interact with the artist. Each would find Smith sat naked, surrounded by items she deemed to have potential for sensual connections. Playing on a loop from a tape machine in the corner, was a recording of the artist's voice saying, 'feed me, feed me'.

In a reversal of so-called traditional gender roles, Smith invited participants to work out what she wanted and provide her with sustenance and care. I'll put food on the table but you do the rest. In discussions about the work Smith emphasises that she was naked, not nude; that she was in control of the set-up, and that she was opening herself up to meaningful interactions, to sharing and gaining. Sixteen men and three women attended the performance, and Smith herself has acknowledged that this may have been attributable to the rumours circulating prior to the event that she intended to make love with any and every male visitor to the show. In fact, she did have sex with three men that night and despite her insistence that she was in the position of power, another reading of this controversial piece is that she was offering her body in exchange for sustenance and attention.

When documentation for the work was exhibited in The Historical Box at Hauser & Wirth, London in 2012, it consisted of

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Barbara T. Smith  
Feed Me, Line Up 1973  
Courtesy of the artist and The Box, LA



two vintage prints, Smith's journal record of her interactions and five paperbacks used during the performance as well as a short descriptive text by the artist. One of the vintage prints shows her standing naked in the room. Her soft blonde hair hangs over her face as she looks down at something cradled in her hands. The sink is behind her, against a tiled wall and tatty brickwork. Some bottles are lined up along a bench. There's one rug on the floor and more covering a simple bed. The other photograph shows four people huddled around a door, presumably waiting their turn. These are some accounts of the 'ingredients' that Smith placed in the room.

### Ingredients:

- body oils, perfume, and flowers, wine and cheese, bread, books, and tea and marijuana
- bread
- fruit
- drinks
- books to read massage oils and
- perfumes
- tea and coffee

- beads and ornaments
- marijuana etc.
- a mattress
- rug pillows
- and a heater surrounded by things
- with which she could be fed such as body oils
- perfume
- food
- wine
- music
- and marijuana

It is a kind of retrospective recipe that Mary Kelly reveals in her *Post-Partum Document*. From 1973 to 1979, Kelly's work addressed the mother-child relationship, through her own experiences of raising her son. She focused on three important moments in the growth of a child: the introduction of solid foods; starting to speak; starting school. The first of six parts in the series – Documentation I – included 22 stained nappy liners, each presented on white card in a Perspex frame, along with a typed list

of the ingredients that Kelly had fed to her baby that day. It was a breakdown of what had been broken down and digested by her son. The recipe re-formed and the recipe re. formula.

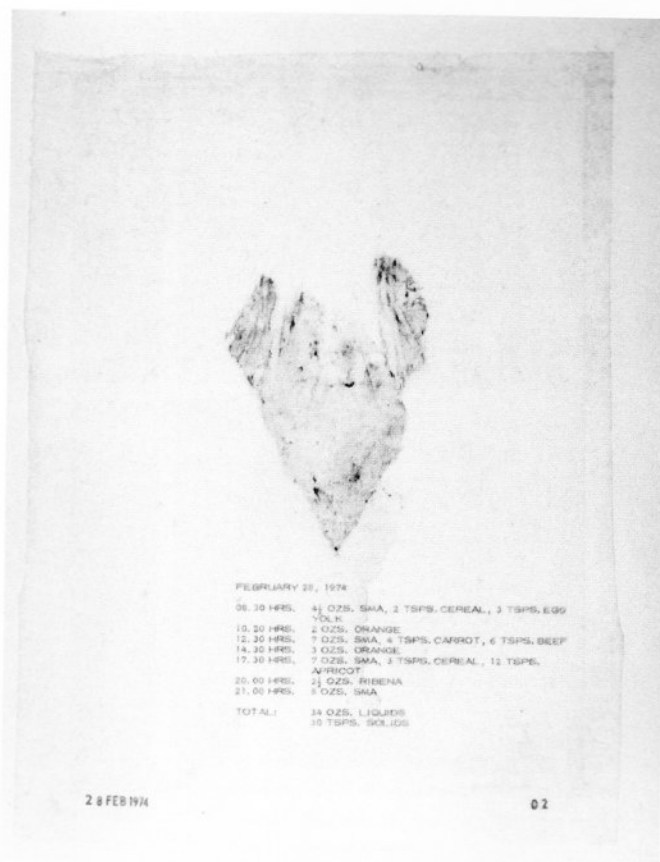
### Results:

- January 5, 1974 09.00 Hrs. 13.00 Hrs. 17.00 Hrs. 19.00 Hrs.
- 21.30 Hrs. total:
- February 28, 1974 09.30 Hrs.
- 10.30 Hrs. 12.30 Hrs.
- 14.30 Hrs. 17.30 Hrs.
- 20.00 Hrs. 21.00 Hrs. total:
- 7 oZs. sMa
- 4 oZs. sMa
- 4 oZs. sMa
- 3 oZs. oranGe, 2 tsPs. Cereal, 2 tsPs. aPPlE
- 8 1/2 oZs. sMa
- 26 1/2 oZs. liQuids 4 tsPs. solids
- 4 1/2 oZs. sMa,
- 3 tsPs. Cereal, 3 tsPs. eGG YolK 2 oZs. oranGe
- 7 oZs. sMa,
- 4 tsPs. Carrot, 4 tsPs. beeF
- 3 oZs. oranGe
- 7 oZs. sMa,
- 3 tsPs. Cereal, 12 tsPs. aPriCot 2 1/2 oZs. ribena 8 oZs. sMa
- 34 oZs. liQuids 30 tsPs. solids

Rosler stages an attack on the kitchen and all its signifiers; Smith switches roles and demands to be fed and nurtured; Kelly rubs your face in motherhood's laborious dirty truth. In reformulating the conventions of a recipe – from the equipment, to the ingredients and the results – these three works represent strategies that are key to 1970s feminism. Each was produced or performed by female artists against the background of the Women's Liberation movement, the backlash against a patriarchal system that restricted women to the private, domestic sphere, and demanded reconsideration of so-called women's work.

It is the essential, everyday nature of the recipe – and the preparation and consumption of food more generally – that makes these interventions so powerful. As a form of writing rooted in the practicalities of daily existence, in some ways it was an easy target. For so many women artists the studio was (and is) the kitchen table, the nursery, or the bedroom. Barbara T Smith once acknowledged that in the absence of any theatrical training, it was the skills she had acquired as a housewife that allowed her to create her performances, which often involved the preparation of food and the ritual of sharing meals. If the personal is political, you make art with the ephemera of your days, be it food, your own body, or dirty nappies.

While, on one level, the recipe is a mundane, quotidian form, it also presents an aspirational guide. This is what you



Mary Kelly, Post-Partum Document, Documentation I:  
Analysed Fecal Stains and Feeding Charts, 1974



Martha Rosler  
*Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975  
 Video still  
 © 2013 Martha Rosler.  
 Courtesy Electronic Arts InterMix  
 (EAI), New York.

want; this is what you need to do; take these step-by-steps to a better future. Along with the 'lifestyle' rhetoric and celebrity chef culture, this aspirational aspect would later become a much more individualistic vision for fulfilling your personal potential, but this was the heyday of second-wave feminism when hopes were high for a better, more equal society. If the recipe could be wrenched from the kitchen and kicked into shape, it could be given new purpose: Revolution à la Rosler.

Ripping up the recipe is not just an appropriation of the form, but also stages a critique of its illusive promises. In *Post-Partum Document*, Mary Kelly demands that attention be paid to the work of a mother, alone and unpaid, and in this case balanced alongside the role of the artist. In summarising and representing an entire day through the waste products of her child, Kelly creates an image of a woman drained of any sense of self, as though she exists only by extension. Her role is to support, maintain, nurture, nourish, feed, clean, feed, clean, feed, clean. Her scientific documentation makes invisible labour visible, and dishes the dirt on the cyclical, seemingly never-ending reality of childcare. Lasting satiety is impossible; the demands will never be completely met. The lists of ingredients that went into her feeding her son are repetitive and boring; boring to type out, let alone to perform, no matter how sun-drenched and gurgly the SMA advertisement. Kelly's work derides the image of the happy house-wife, refuting the lie that daily cooking is creative. To the inevitable critics of the

nappy liners, framed and hung on the gallery wall, she seems to be saying 'if cooking is creative, here's what I made'.

The medium for all three artists here is used to reject the rarefied art object, while the recipe – a form which, by its very nature, drives towards a result (the finished dish) – is re-formed so as to undermine a sense of satisfaction, completion or final product. *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is a freely available, intentionally bad quality video; *Feed Me* was a one-off performance for a few eyes only, with only the scantest record; and *Post-Partum Document*, which comes closest to gallery object, perhaps deflects the illusion most strongly of all.

In employing the recipe, Rosler, Smith and Kelly undermine the form's prescriptive bark, proposing a critique of the kind of imperative language that dictates their actions. They interrupt the voice of patriarchal authority, and reject the recipe book as rule book, full of lists and prescriptive instructions. But the site of the recipe is fraught with contestation and it cannot be washed down the sink entirely. Meaningful change can usually only be made from within society, and radical leaps away from the mainstream are not commonly open to women anyway, for the very fact of these responsibilities against which they were fighting. But in between drudgery and the dream are ways to enact change, and in the right hands, perhaps the recipe has the capacity to play an intermediary role in the space between art and life; between theory and practice; between fantasy and achievable reality.