The Host and the Roast:
Kitchen Humor in Feminist Video Art and Pop Culture

BY

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

This project addresses questions of female subjectivity by examining video art made in the 1970s by American artists Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler. Their work is considered in comparison to popular culture by means of two television cooking programs *The French Chef*, hosted by Julia Child, and *Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen*, hosted by Nadia Giosia. Each chapter in this dissertation examines the functions of kitchen humor and popular culture, and how each woman uses it in her work.

This dissertation tracks the genesis of kitchen humor. A theory of kitchen humor has been developed made up of three elements that include the perturbed relationship women have with the domestic sphere as both a site of oppression and a site of resistance; the performance of domestic rituals, such as food preparation; and the use of humor, such as satire, to bring attention to the problems of socially prescribed gender normativity.

Pop culture examples range from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* to Lucille Ball’s slapstick performances on *I Love Lucy*, and also include formative American cook books from the pre-war era. Taking all of this in stride, feminist video artists in the 1970s used kitchen humor to grapple with the multifaceted nature of what it meant to be a feminist and used satire to advocate for change in the definition of gender roles.

Key texts used in understanding the political nature of humor include Umberto Eco’s “Frames of Comic ‘Freedom,’” Mary Douglas’ “Jokes,” and Richard M. Stephenson’s “The Conflict and Control Functions of Humor.” These texts are further supported through the discussion of feminist authors’ work including (but not limited to) Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*, Hélène Cixous’ “Laugh of the Medusa,” and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

The trajectory of kitchen humor beginning with post-war pop culture, moving through 1970s video art, and ending with contemporary popular culture shows kitchen humor to be considerable element in feminist visual culture.
Introduction

In the annals of early video art, certain works stand out for their combined impact of social activism and humorous representation of pop culture. Feminist artists Martha Rosler and Suzanne Lacy both made video works in the mid-1970s that have helped to shape what has become a canon of feminist art.

Emerging in the mid-1960s and coming into its own in the 1970s, video art exists as a unique locus of feminist thought. A convergence of experimental ideas and experimental technology, analogue video is arguably the first medium that was uniquely accessible to women since there was not a pre-existing framework for video within the (masculine) canon of art history.

This project examines kitchen humor in pop culture and feminist video works from the 1970s. With a backbone of video art by formative American artists Martha Rosler and Suzanne Lacy, critical examination is taken into television cooking programs as counterpoint to the videos. Given the emphasis of the kitchen and cooking show as a framework for the satire in both Rosler’s and Lacy’s works, I look to television icon Julia Child and her program *The French Chef* as a case study of kitchen humor in visual culture that was in large part rejected by feminists of her day, though in retrospect can be seen as having embodied many of the ideals of later feminism. Bringing the discussion into a contemporary context, the recent cooking show *Nadia G. ’s Bitchin’ Kitchen* is examined for the long-term impact of kitchen humor.

Each of the women used humor, specifically satire, to critique and reject, or complicate the norms of a patriarchal society. These artists referred to some element of the domestic in their works, an element I posit comes out of a preexisting trajectory of
postwar domestic humor, as found in popular culture, specifically television. Though a relatively rich body of texts exists around gendered humor and feminist humor in writing, the same cannot be said for video art, even though some similar frameworks contribute to feminist video art.

**Framework of Humor and Freud: Structures, Subversion and Satire**

Building a clear framework of humor has lead to the inclusion of work by theorists who have written about the cultural significance of humor and its subversive implications. These theorists include feminist scholars such as Nancy Walker, whose book *A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture* (1988) was instrumental in pinpointing the uniqueness of domestic humor to women in American culture, and Helene Cixous whose “Laugh of the Medusa” (1975) about the power of women’s laughter and subjectivity is significant to any discussion of feminist art and humor. Feminist cultural scholar Nancy Reincke addresses the problematic nature of Freudian theory within a feminist context, “Antidote to Dominance: Women's Laughter as Counteraction,” (1991) as the emphasis on woman as subject is at odds with Freud’s theory of joke telling in *The Joke and Its Relation to The Unconscious* (1905).

Theories of humor that have been most useful throughout are ones that acknowledge the potential power that can be harnessed through humor. Specifically, in her essay “Jokes” (1975) Mary Douglas examines a concept she calls “uncontrol” which is socially allowable through humor because humor holds a special status. Richard M. Stephenson also takes on this subversiveness in his article, “The Conflict and Control Functions of Humor” (1951), when he suggests a structure through which to understand
the functions of humor are either as controlling or as engaged in struggle. The most formative theory of humor throughout this dissertation has been Umberto Eco’s “Frames of Comic ‘Freedom’” (1984) in which the author articulates the idea that humor can bring attention to the oppressive nature of societal frames.

The satire-themed issue of the feminist magazine *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (1985) offered the most concise explanation of satire as an integral element to political activism, taking as its starting point a feminist agenda. The Editorial Collective of the magazine at the time, made up of Emma Amos, Day Gleeson, Avis Lang and Ellyn Lanyon, wrote the definition. Looking to these various theorists establishes humor as a nuanced and subversive component of society, as is seen in the art works and television programs examined herein.

The mid-1970s represents a key period in both the production of video artworks and feminist thought. A decade after artists first started to experiment with video, many of the works being made were highly experimental while involving a somewhat more ‘polished’ aesthetic than those works of the late 1960s. The medium of video itself was established enough to be included in exhibitions and art school programs. Simultaneously, the second wave feminist movement that emerged in North America in the 1960s came to maturity in the 1970s. By focusing on this specific period, this project will address the uniqueness of the time and ideology of the chosen works.

This dissertation has grown out of a strongly defined canon of feminist art historians and cultural theorists that addresses women’s subjectivity and visual culture in significant ways. These include the recognition of *earnest* feminist video art that tends towards an intimately confessional format as well as radical and *angry* feminist cultural
producers in the 1960s and 1970s. Both areas are important and have footing within the works discussed. However, the very notion of a funny feminist is still unusual, even possibly seen as an oxymoron, especially when looking to artworks made in the early days of video production. Language is needed for understanding and culturally situating feminist artists’ videos that are politically active, humorous and culturally complex. So-called activist art, and much feminist art as a whole, is often examined solely for its political message. This project brings together the important formal qualities of the works discussed with the political messages they carry.

**Intersectionality**

A theoretical framework that this is important for any feminist argument is that of intersectionality – the recognition that forms of oppression are experienced simultaneously and should not be considered to exist independently of each other.¹

Further work is needed to fully address feminist video art and kitchen humor in the 1970s in relation to issues of race and economic status. The works by the artists and cultural makers examined here were generally understood to be aimed at an audience of middle-class white women, and though racial identity is not purposefully ignored, nor is it

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¹ Astrid Henry has written in her article “Fittstim Feminists and Third Wave Feminists: A Shared Identity between Scandinavia and the United States?” (2014) “Intersectionality being the theory that identity categories are interlocking: gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and nationality never function in isolation but always work as interconnected categories of oppression and privilege” and she outlines the history of writing about feminist intersectionality over the last century as taking hold in the 1960s and 1970s. Henry, Astrid. “Fittstim Feminists and Third Wave Feminists: A Shared Identity between Scandinavia and the United States” Feminist Studies, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2014): 659-687. For additional insight about intersectionality see:

adequately addressed. Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler have both dealt with broader issues of oppression in numerous other works outside of the scope of this project, specifically those around race, economic and sexual oppression. The parameters of kitchen humor are by no means closed to artists that engage more directly with issues of racial oppression. Throughout this project the aim has been to keep the focus as narrow as possible to support the development of the theory of kitchen humor principally in relation to Julia Child, and as such work by Lacy, Rosler and Giosia bring out a rich discussion.

The Power of Laughter, The Weapon of Humor

Feminists often seem to carry an unfair reputation for being dour, angry or solemn and overly sincere in their dealings with the world. As the polarizing academic Camile Paglia wrote in 1995, “Feminism has become a catch-all vegetable drawer where bunches of clingy sob sisters can store their moldy neuroses.” Paglia’s statement, a full twenty years after most of the videos here were made, is in keeping with a certain perspective about the emotional and neurotic nature of feminists that grew out of anti-feminist

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3 Moravec, Michelle. “In the Name of Love: Feminist Art, the Women’s Movement and History,” 71-85. In The Waitresses Unpeeled: Performance Art and Life, ed. Jerri Allyn and Anne Gauldin. Los Angeles: Draft Publication, 2008. “I was puzzled by the seemingly blind acceptance of the implication that 1970s feminist art was grim and dour. The story of feminist art history largely rests on a teleological narrative ending with postmodernism and has created a persistent mythology that all 1970s feminist art relied on essentialism and earnestness.” (73-75)


Also: “On the march for what they still haven’t got Women Arise” 16B Life Magazine, Sept. 4, 1970, vol. 69, no. 10. Kate Millett is “the furious young philosopher who got it down on paper”

rhetoric from the 1970s. Paglia is rejected by the many women as anti-feminist\(^5\) and yet her ideas have had resonance because of a continuous rumbling that supports the patriarchal system of oppression.\(^6\)

That more attention has not been paid to the humor found in feminist creative production is indeed an oversight. It’s not just that feminists can be witty and satirical; Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler have harnessed the power of laughter in their works, a key concept that deserves a moment of reflection. Going back to the height of second wave feminism, a vital text that emerged from the discourse is Hélène Cixous’ “Laugh of the Medusa,” published in 1975. This canonical text poetically calls for female empowerment and personal agency via the act of writing through the body, a notion that translates into artistic production more broadly, including the video works examined here. Cixous called for women to claim their positions as subjects and creators in the very first few sentences of her text:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) For feminist critique of Paglia see:  

\(^6\) On another note: As Regina Barreca wrote about her own politicization: “I thought “feminist” meant no more steamy flirtations or prolonged shopping trips. I thought it meant braided hair and short nails, maybe mandatory tofu. I certainly associated feminism with humorless, dour, and--worst of all--unblinkingly earnest women. That was because I was accepting the male version of things, which was sort of like believing the mouse's version of the cat, since it entailed being given access to a vision that could see nothing besides teeth and claws.” Barreca, Gina. “Why Anti-Feminism Is Illogical, Unnecessary, Evil, and Incredibly Unsexy” *Psychology Today*, Aug. 3, 2009. https://www.psychologymtoday.com/blog/snow-white-doesnt-live-here-anymore/200908/why-anti-feminism-is-illogical-unnecessary-evil-and (accessed Apr. 20, 2016) blog post, adapted from her book *I Used to be Snow White But I Drifted*.

The very title of the text identifies the threat, and the power, of female laughter. Cixous speaks to the psychoanalytic mantra of the “lack” that women have and the fear it supposedly induces in men, and states instead that it is woman as subject not defined by comparison to a male subject that is threatening to a patriarchal system. As Cixous wrote:

“Wouldn’t the worst be, isn’t the worst, in truth, that women aren’t castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.”

Thus Medusa, as representative of the powerful woman, is redefined not as monster but as the subject. The Medusa was a figure claimed by feminists for her strength and power, her laugh, as per Cixous’ analysis, conveying these characteristics.

In keeping then, women’s humor offers a logical venue for feminist ideas to be played out. Kitchen humor has proven to be a nuanced space for the claiming of personal agency. As Cixous so rightly stated, the act of creative production can itself be a radical event. She wrote:

“[W]e must write her self, because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history.”

The key is that by representing her self, as done by the video artists in this project, woman can create her self and impact a shift in an oppressive patriarchal system that has a tradition of silencing women. Although this dissertation purposefully avoids any kind of universalizing theories of “woman” for the obvious reason that one category cannot be

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9 Cixous’ text would not have been a direct influence on the artists in this project, as it was not published until 1975 and translated into English in 1976, later than most of the videos were made. However, it is a highly significant text that speaks to feminists’ engagement with ways of representing the self, the concept of laughter, and a rhetoric being developed that was embraced by women in second wave feminism.
representative of an entire gender, in the case of Cixous’ call to action, the ideals are very much in keeping with the outcomes of the feminist video artists examined in the upcoming chapters.

**What is Kitchen Humor?**

At the heart of this project is kitchen humor and how it functions within both popular culture and video art. The very phrase “kitchen humor” brings to mind intimate, cozy and casual conversations occurring in a predominantly (or “traditionally”) women’s space, sitting at the kitchen table over a cup of tea but more often doing some cooking or baking together. Kitchen humor suggests a laugh because of a personal story, women sharing an experience that may be both poignant and silly in a surrounding that is safe enough that they can laugh at themselves without worrying about being embarrassed or humiliated. But this is not the extent of what kitchen humor means.

As this analysis develops, it becomes clear that kitchen humor does not simply involve the physical site of the kitchen in the artworks being examined. To fully understand the implications of kitchen humor as a feminist construct in the visual arts, the definition must be recognized as being more comprehensive than simply having a work situated in the kitchen. As will be seen through the analyses of the videos, the domestic rituals and everyday activities traditionally understood to be “women’s work” are also wrapped up in the idea of kitchen humor. Thus, housework, childcare, beauty rituals and the ordinariness of home and intimate space can also fall under this banner of kitchen humor. Kitchen humor underscores that for many women, their safest space, that of the home, is also the constant site of patriarchal oppression, a site where gender roles are
regularly reinforced by a society slow to embrace change. The genesis of kitchen humor is tracked through post-war domestic humor.

Three elements that make up kitchen humor are the perturbed relationship women have with the domestic sphere as both a site of oppression and a site of resistance; the performance of domestic rituals, such as (but not limited to) food preparation and the preparation of one’s self; and the use of humor such as satire to bring attention to the problems of socially prescribed gender normativity. With pop culture influences ranging from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* to Julia Child’s *The French Chef* and Lucille Ball’s slapstick performances on *I Love Lucy*, feminist video artists in the 1970s used kitchen humor to grapple with the multifaceted nature of what it meant to be a feminist and used satire to advocate for change in the definition of gender roles.

**Chapter Summaries:**

Two feminist artists making videos in the mid 1970s involved kitchen humor in their work as a way to demand their subjectivity as well as to respond to gender stereotypes within popular culture. Videos by American artists Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler will be examined in comparison to television cooking programs *The French Chef*, hosted by Julia Child, and *Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen*, hosted by Nadia Giosia. Each chapter in this dissertation examines the functions of kitchen humor and popular culture, and how each woman uses it in her work.

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Chapter One “Kitchen Humor, Feminist Discourse and Visual Culture: A Case Study of Julia Child” lays out a theoretical framework of kitchen humor and focuses on popular culture, with in-depth analysis of The French Chef and additional consideration of I Love Lucy, situating the cultural climate and visual culture around kitchen humor.

Chapter Two “The host and the roast: Suzanne Lacy, Julia Child, and Satire” involves a very close textual reading of Lacy’s video Learn Where the Meat Comes From, among other works, in comparison to specific episodes of The French Chef and the result of Lacy’s satire of Julia Child. Some of the questions address gendered stereotypes, the cultural consumption of women’s bodies, the satirical mimicking of cannibalism and the threat of a woman out of control.

Building on Chapter Two, Chapter Three “Slaying the Dragon of Kitchen Drudgery or The Un-Joy of Cooking: Martha Rosler” looks to Rosler’s videos including Semiotics of the Kitchen, The East is Red and the West is Bending and A Budding Gourmet and a text-based work she made called The Art of Cooking: A Mock Dialogue Between Julia Child and Craig Claiborne. Rosler’s satirical kitchen humor raises questions about the function of maintenance labor, the mishandling of food, and the role of the spectacle and the state in the creation of identity.

Chapter Four “Coming Full Circle: Kitchen Bitching and the Bitchin’ Kitchen” considers the long-term impact of the video art made by Lacy and Rosler and the irrefutable influence that Julia Child had on 21st century popular culture through a case study of the contemporary television cooking show Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen starring Nadia Giosia. This chapter delves into changes in popular visual culture in regards to kitchen humor and the impact of Riot Grrrl feminism.
The importance of this project is clear: the canon of art history is still made up primarily of male artists’ histories and stories, and women’s voices, while growing in number, are far from being on par. Analogue video, as a medium, existed most actively for a comparably short period of time (consider consumer level digital video emerging in the 1990s), and due to its ephemeral nature the physical videos made in the 1970s are deteriorating. While there exist texts on this early period of video art, the moving image in the context of the history of art is frequently a lesser-studied, experimental area secondary to fixed images of photography, and the more permanent media of painting and sculpture. Most importantly, the content of the videos is ripe for examination. A story that needs to be told emerges from a history of a women-centered kitchen humor combined with how humor has been used as social critique in these works.

**Reading Contemporary Feminism**

The approach to feminism in this project relies on a nuanced reading of the cultural implications of what it means to be a woman in American society. Some of the theorists from the 1960s and 1970s included in this project shaped second wave feminism within relatively narrow confines, and while revolutionary, contemporary feminism necessitates a different approach. This need for nuance is especially necessary in the analysis of pop culture. While Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler have made activist pieces of video art with very clear messaging, the women in popular television have incorporated feminism into their humor in a less overt approach.

The lived experience of women who want to be recognized as subjects can be at odds with the image portrayed of sexualized object. Does this take away from the
feminist messaging? Can the two coexist? It is this writer’s opinion that they can, since in our imperfect world feminism must come down to a woman’s choice to be and present what she wants. It is not a neat fit with the ideals of feminism as they were expounded in the 1960s and the reality is that for feminism to be successful women must be able to make it their own. This is not a wishy-washy approach, but in fact an evolution of how feminism fits into mainstream pop culture. The patriarchal system may have made the kitchen a site of oppression of women, but the tenacity and joy for women of defining one self can make this same place a site of resistance.
Chapter One.
Kitchen Humor, Feminist Discourse and Visual Culture
A Case Study of Julia Child

The scene is set: a cooking show begins, and a woman wearing an École des Medicales badge on her blue blouse explains how to ask the butcher for various cuts of lamb by using the highly unorthodox tactic of showing the butcher where on her own body the cuts should mimic. A questionable approach packed with innuendo has the hostess slowly devolve from gourmand into a snarling beast, complete with plastic fangs. Clearly not the renowned and easily recognized television personality Julia Child, video artist and feminist Suzanne Lacy is thumbing her nose at all that Julia Child represents. The stay-at-home wife and mother, boundaries of domestic space and the kitchen as a ‘women’s place’ are all being satirized in this 1976 video Learn Where The Meat Comes From. (See Images 1, 2)

As a pop culture icon, Julia Child transformed cooking in America, as well as setting the tone for television cooking programs. However, Lacy’s complete dismissal of Child does not allow for a more nuanced reading and begs the question of why Child was so accessible and in so many ways not the stereotype of the postwar housewife. Child’s performances were witty and in some ways elevating to the individual as well as the food itself. In the 1970s when Suzanne Lacy and Julia Child were simultaneously representative of women in the United States, complex questions were being negotiated by feminists about how women could and should represent themselves while claiming their personal agency.
What is missing from the discourse? Kitchen Humor.

The history of kitchen humor is one of a socially allowable, acceptable venue for women to criticize and make fun of the patriarchal system in the post war era that was, by all accounts, a time of confined gender roles. The need for change was brewing. Some feminists, such as writer Betty Friedan and artists Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler, have been critical of what could be referred to as domestic humor because they were not looking for an allowable or acceptable way to express need for change, but purposefully trying to break with existing traditions for expression. The result? A complex development in which a broader and more nuanced take on domestic humor emerged – that of kitchen humor. The outcome is this dissertation, which takes a moment in the1970s, rereads and reinterprets domestic humor and chronicles the development of kitchen humor to emphasize the significant social impact and historical and contemporary relevance of key feminist video art works and the popular television shows.

This chapter examines kitchen humor from the post-WWII era and its implications for feminist video art, looking to the often self-deprecating humor of women aimed at a female (in part newly suburbanized) audience. A narrative backdrop is established through a case study of Julia Child and the kitchen humor in her performances on her television program *The French Chef* (1963-1973), with emphasis on a specific episode that highlights ‘the chicken sisters.’ While pop culture icons such as Julia Child can be seen as encouraging feminist ideals by validating the homemaker and the domestic arts, many feminists of the 1970s, including the artists examined in this project, were very critical of the domestic as gendered space and the validation of domestic practices. Child

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12 See also: Regina Barreca, Editor. *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy.* (New York: Gordon & Breach, 1988.)
is an interesting point in the trajectory of kitchen humor, connecting feminist video art with popular culture and offering an approach to thinking about a social critique that worked within the boundaries of the domestic sphere.

Domestic Humor: The Antecedent of Kitchen Humor

Domestic humor historically has referred to a type of humor that was directed at women, specifically homemakers, and generally dealt with the realm of the domestic as its subject matter. Written, performed, and created by women for women, domestic humor was a safe space for the gentle and pointed critique of the domestic sphere: the traditional role of women in the home, the space and activities of the kitchen, relationships with husbands and children. Fundamental to the most successful domestic humor was that it made these critiques without alienating the audience of women. It raised common issues of contention and concern, but did not shame or embarrass the women who saw themselves in those roles. As a result, one common approach to this type of humor was for the performer to make fun of herself and in doing so symbolically wink knowingly at the audience of women, establishing a shared joke between performer and audience and ensuring that the teller and the recipient shared the irony, satire, and lighthearted whimsy of the situation.

The articulation of kitchen humor developed here complicates the locus of domestic space and provides women a vehicle for self-determination as well as a political agenda for radical change within a patriarchal system.
During the post World War Two era in the United States a nascent kitchen humor began to gain popularity in women’s magazines and books. This writing was often in the form of short poems or stories, sometimes in fictionalized memoirs and was a cautious step towards a socially acceptable critique of the domestic sphere in which many women found themselves. In times before the widespread viewing of television, and before the introduction on television of female comedians such as Lucille Ball, in *I Love Lucy*, which began 1951, this kind of writing reached out to women in the pre- and newly-suburbanized America.

American audiences found their first female comedian who became a pop culture icon in Lucille Ball. *I Love Lucy* was markedly different than television shows which preceded it, starring real-life couple Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. Lucille Ball’s performance as Lucy Ricardo was full of perfectly timed jokes and zingers, slapstick physical comedy, and outrageous facial contortions that could express her character’s emotions from immense glee to dismal broken-heartedness only milliseconds apart. The trajectory of each episode followed a similar format with Lucy trying to escape the doldrums of domestic life, and Ricky the entertainer (Desi Arnaz’s television personality), begrudgingly watching her attempts. Each episode concluded with Lucy’s ultimate failure to “make it” and her return to the domestic sphere, though without achieving the ideal in that space either. Lucy’s constant searching for satisfaction outside of the home was indicative of her dissatisfaction within the home. As Peter Hales wrote in his book *Outside the Gates of Eden* about America in the Nuclear Age, *I Love Lucy*

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13 Jessamyn Neuhaus, ““Is It Ridiculous for me to Say I Want to Write?”: Domestic Humor and Redefining the 1950s Housewife Writer in Fan Mail to Shirley Jackson,” *Journal of Women's History* - Volume 21, Number 2 (Summer 2009) 129: “Domestic-humor magazine articles peaked in the 1950s and early 1960s, offering readers at least the sense of expanded opportunities for publication; conversely, the term “housewife writer” carried with it the possibility of condescending derision.”
“profoundly undermined the picture of suburban-homemaker bliss so heavily touted by America’s most powerful institutions.”14 While Lucy Ricardo undertook domestic tasks with what appeared to be relative success (the house and clothes were clean, food was prepared and eaten, dishes were washed), Lucille Ball performed these tasks on the show with the humorous antipathy. As Hales noted, the weekly half hour sit-com “described in disguised form the uneasy place of the ideal of American womanhood in Cold War America.”15

Lucy Ricardo’s slapstick comedy clawed at an existence in which she would be successful as a professional entertainer, while the show played up Ricky’s expectations of her to be proficient as a homemaker. For example, in the episode “Pioneer Women” aired March 31, 1952 (Season 1, Episode 25) in the first two minutes of the show Lucy calculates that she has hand washed two hundred thousand dishes during her marriage to date, and wants an electric dishwasher. Ricky thinks it is too expensive and he challenges her to complete the domestic tasks the ‘old fashioned’ way – without the assistance of any technological gadgets. The dialogue from this moment in the episode includes a perfectly delivered punch-line by Ball and Ricky Ricardo’s explicitly sexist assumption that women are more frail than men:

Ricky: “Listen your grandmother didn’t have all the modern electric conveniences, and they didn’t just do the dishes, but they swept the floor, they churned the butter, they baked the bread, they did the laundry and they made their own clothes!”
Lucy: “Sure where are those women today – dead.”
Ricky: “I’d like to see you girls run the house without any of these modern conveniences.”
Lucy: “Yah, you couldn’t get along with them any better than we could.”

15 Hales, *Outside the Gates of Eden,* 165-166.
Ricky: “Ah, honey we’re men! We’re rugged!” (3:45-3:55)

By calling up the memory of their grandmothers, Ricky insinuates that the proper way, the *authentic* way to be a successful woman is to be enslaved by domestic duties. The Ricardos’ neighbors Fred and Ethel Mertz take part in the disagreement, and a wager ensues between ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ to live life for a day with only the technology available in 1900.

What results is hilarity through kitchen chaos, when Lucy makes bread with thirteen yeast cakes instead of three and the dough rises to ludicrous proportions. Lucille Ball plays up the range of emotional responses to the situation, for example when she kneads the bread dough it is at times with the playful exuberance of a child with a new toy (See Image 3) but devolves to a level of anxiety when the dough proves difficult to handle, even with the aid of Ethel. As the episode progresses an impossibly long loaf of bread emerges from the oven and pins Lucy against the wall. (See Images 4, 5) The concluding image of the episode shows the four friends all biting into a giant slice of bread together. (See Image 6) They have survived their ordeal, the bet is called off and though Lucy and Ethel have hardly succeeded in their attempts to be *authentic* women, there are no hard feelings. 16

Although the critique of domesticity is most often quite gentle in kitchen humor from the pre- and post-war eras, there does exist, as Nancy Walker indicates in her article “Humor and Gender Roles: The “Funny” Feminism of the Post-World War II Suburbs” (1985) an underlying but present hostility in much of this writing. With best selling books

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16 In regards to the role of television and *I Love Lucy* in particular, Hales wrote: “Just as the television itself became a physical anchor for the domestic spaces of Americans, so this single most popular show of all time provided a cultural anchor for the drifting identities of postwar Americans.” Hales. *Outside the Gates of Eden*, 184.
such as Betty Bard MacDonald’s *The Egg and I*, a fictionalized memoir of MacDonald’s experience with her husband on a start-up chicken farm published 1945 (the inspiration for the “Ma and Pa Kettle” films), domestic humor crept into popular culture and assumed a female audience. Very often this humor included self-deprecating stories of women who presented themselves as less-than-adequate homemakers, barely avoiding catastrophe in the domestic sphere. However, as Walker explains, the popularity of these stories carries a deeper significance involving protest.17 Walker writes:

…humor becomes a strategy for coping with frustration, and the reader feels a bond with the writer who can simultaneously delineate and rise above the familiar, uncomfortable situation. Finally, and most important, the reader is subtly invited to agree with the writer about the source of discomfort – to assent to the proposition that someone or something is at fault in a culture that isolates and trivializes women’s experience.18

This collective, almost conspiratorial understanding between writers and readers sets the stage for what is to follow in the 1960s and 1970s, both in popular culture and in the visual arts. It is the beginning of a shared and gendered-female experience or viewpoint, which gains grounding significantly by the feminist movement in the 1970s.19

**Episode #206 of The French Chef: To Roast a Chicken**

*Julia Child Presents The Chicken Sisters! Miss Broiler, Miss Fryer, Miss Roaster, Miss Caponette, Miss Stewer, and Old Madam Hen. But we’re spotlighting Miss Roaster of the year, measuring in at fourteen, fifteen, fourteen! We’re roasting Miss Chicken today on The French Chef!*20

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18 Walker, “Humor and Gender Roles,” 102.
19 For example, consider the 1975 film *The Stepford Wives* starring Katharine Ross, about the replacement of women with robot replications by their husbands in order to fulfill the American dream of ‘perfect’ life in the suburbs. Understood to be a critique of suburban domestic life, the film (now a cult classic) makes clear that the feminist movement was becoming entrenched in popular culture.
20 For more transcribed excerpts from *To Roast a Chicken* please see Appendix 1.
With this introduction, Julia Child began an unusually absurd and theatrical episode of her famous PBS program *The French Chef*, on April 16, 1970. What is of course lacking from any transcription of Julia Child is the absolutely unique quality of her voice, the sing-songy way she presented the chickens, and her undeniable physical presence. A giantess in the kitchen both figuratively and somewhat literally (since the chef herself stood over six feet tall), Julia Child enacted a piece of culinary theatre full of early kitchen humor that complexly bridged American domestic humor of the post-war era with the that of the exploding feminist movement, acting as both model and catalyst for feminist artists from the later 1970s to use as subject matter and parody in their video works.

While Child’s television program is full of humor due to her easy-going manner, high-pitched voice and slightly eccentric behavior, *To Roast a Chicken* falls within a special realm of kitchen humor regarding feminism and women’s experiences more broadly. This episode specifically is fitting for an exploration of Child’s kitchen humor since, of course, the chicken itself is often made into a symbol of woman: chicks, chickies, hens, hen parties, clucking as a maternal type of voice, squawking as a shrill female voice, and so on. *To Roast a Chicken* brings together these underlying associations with a campy theatricality that creates a kind of knowing smile between audience and host: the insinuated conspiratorial wink that pervades Julia Child’s humor is an integral element to the critique of this program.

It is impossible to have a discussion of theories of humor without acknowledging Sigmund Freud’s writing on the subject, specifically that of jokes. Freud posited that in

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21 Note: *The French Chef* began on National Education Television, the predecessor to the Public Broadcasting Service, which existed from 1952-1970. In October 1970 PBS replaced NET.
every joke experience there is a joke triangle involving the male joke teller, the (female) object of the joke and male listener-voyeur. In this triad, there is no room for a woman to tell or appreciate a joke, only to be the butt of the joke. Nancy Reincke raises the question then, what if the joke teller is female? Or the laughter resulting is that of the woman, indicating a power over the role of the object of the joke?²² While a helpful place to begin, Freud’s approach to jokes and humor does not allow for the existence of female subjectivity.²³ Clearly the limits of Freud’s framework make it inappropriate for the following analysis of *The French Chef* and the video art.

The historically pervasive opinion that Freud’s theory is sound, and that women just do not/can not understand humor has been countered by such feminist writers as Nancy Walker, who identifies that within a history of humor, men’s humor has generally been associated with joke telling and women’s humor with stories, skits and fantasies.²⁴ Walker emphasizes that jokes are but one element within humor and that a gendered-female humor style is often less about identifying a victim of a joke and more about creating a recognizable situation, seeing the universal in the personal. This approach is evident throughout *The French Chef* generally and in *To Roast a Chicken* specifically. *To Roast a Chicken* begins with a thirty-second introduction in which Child has lined six chickens up on her studio kitchen counter, from smallest to largest, their legs facing forward as if each is sitting up. (See Image 7) As she introduces each chicken Child touches it lightly with a large knife, though when she gets to “Miss Roaster of the year”

Child gently places her hands on the chicken, picking it up so that the legs are still facing forwards, the sitting position maintained – Miss Roaster looking very much like a small person without a head. (See Image 8) As the credits for the program begin, the title overlays the scene, and the camera focuses in on each chicken: a row of naked, headless birds, each somehow vulnerable in its fleshy yellow-white skin. Right before the music begins, the sound of chickens squawking can be heard. As the music plays, Child herself is partially visible behind the birds, and seems to be dancing along to the jaunty tune, bouncing a little with each high note.

After the introduction music ends, Child goes on to explain roasting chicken in more detail, all the while keeping her hands on what would be the “shoulder” of Miss Roaster, or conversely, on its headless neck. Combining technical advice with eccentric portrayal, Child breezily describes the roaster in terms that bring to mind both a woman and the food. She says:

Welcome to *The French Chef*, I’m Julia Child. You know we speak of a covey of quail and a gaggle of geese, and a pride of lions, well this is known as a peep of chickens, that’s their official name when they’re in group as they are. And you know we’re always broiling, broiling and grilling, and baking and braising and barbequing chickens, but what’s ever happened to the roast chicken? Here is this beautiful, great, big, old, lovely, not old, just the perfect type of roaster, about six pounds, and yet half the time you can’t ever find a roaster like this in the market, there just isn’t enough demand for it.

As Child takes her hand off of “Miss Roaster” the bird slowly slumps onto the chicken next to it and seems to rest on “Miss Fryer” for a little bit of support. (See Image 9) Before moving on to the next bird, Child puts the current one off to the side onto a tray, shifting her neat row of chickens (that this viewer can’t help but think of as ‘ladies’) into a pile of poultry. During this segment, the camera gives a close-up of each chicken, also
making the chef’s hands clearly visible, as they get shinier with chicken slime throughout
the description, a tiny piece of chicken skin clinging to Child’s knuckle. With her hands
chicken-glossed, Child rests one on her waist, puts on her glasses, and opens the fridge
door, spreading poultry contaminants all over her pristine kitchen.

Beginning with the smallest bird “Miss Broiler”, Child gives an explanation of
what makes each bird identifiable, and as she does so picks up every chicken
individually, a little wrinkly puppet waiting to be brought to life. Referring to her ‘peep’
of chickens as “The Chicken Sisters” Child immediately brings to mind a group of
women, the clucking and squawking sounds right before the introduction music almost
filling in for the sound of a live studio audience. With each chicken, Child includes some
off handed comment that humanizes them in an amusing way. For example, not all of the
chickens on display are in fact female, as Child herself points out when she comes to the
capon and the caponette. Child describes them:

A capon, what it is a rooster who has had what is known as operation
eunuch, and like all eunuchs it’s gotten rather fat and heavy, but he’s a
fine bird for roasting, and there’s another bird called a caponette who has
had the same kind of treatment but he’s been on the pill rather than having
an operation.

In essence Child turns these emasculated roosters into hens referring to all as ‘Miss.’ She
continues with her farcical humanizing of the birds with the stewing chicken, which
Child refers to as being part of “the senior citizens group.” By the time Child reaches the
last chicken she has made it clear that the young chickens are the most flavorful and
juiciest, ending with “old lady hen, and she’s not really terribly scrawny but she’s pretty
old, and she’s only good for soup.” Child seems very comfortable in the mixed messages
she sends her audience, of the birds as food but also as individuals paralleling women in American society.

Throughout *To Roast a Chicken* Julia Child maintains a balance of absurdist humor and pointed culinary instruction. Another example of this is when Child demonstrates how to identify the age of a chicken to be roasted by looking at the flexibility of the breastbone:

And this is this little fryer here, and you notice that the tip of the breast breastbone is very flexible flexible*[sic]*, it moves back and forth and up and down, and that is because it is cartilage, and I’m going to with this tiny knife cut down here so you can see that this is just cartilage, can you see that that’s white, it’s a little white, it’s not bone at all. In comparison with your stewing chicken, I’ve already cut down, it’s complete bone but it isn’t as hard as old lady hen, but you know that this chicken is beyond the age of consent would you say? Well anyway, it’s not a young chicken and it can’t be roasted.

As Child is saying this she demonstrates her point by pulling back of the chicken skin to display the glistening flesh and the flexible or inflexible breastbone, an action that is closely framed by the camera to show the flesh and bone in detail. The result is Child again making a funny, and uncomfortably corporeal connection between the chicken carcass and a woman’s body. By referring to the stewing chicken as “beyond the age of consent” Child makes a direct comparison between an old chicken and a woman of sexual maturity, clearly the “little fryer” being a parallel to a woman (or girl) below the age of consent. Thus a younger, and virginal chicken is the more desirable for roasting.

Child evidently got a kick out of the puppet-like quality of fowl, as seen in another episode of *The French Chef* called “Cooking Your Goose” (Season 2, Episode 2), during which the chef holds up a headless, plucked goose, and makes it “flap” its wings and says “Here it is, just sitting up waving at you.” (See Images 10, 11)
There is, undoubtedly, a component to Child’s humor that anthropologist Mary Douglas would refer to as ‘uncontrol.’ In the 1975 essay “Jokes,” a part of Douglas’ work on social structures, she wrote about the subversive nature of joke telling and the permissibility of socially inappropriate comments within the context of humor. Though Child does not tell any traditional jokes per se in *To Roast A Chicken*, her handling of the chickens, the ever-so-slightly irreverent tone she sets in the kitchen, and her reference to the birds as “Miss” fits Child’s performance into this category of ‘uncontrol’ as there is clearly something happening in the kitchen under her watch that subverts the conventional approach to cooking and homemaking. Building on texts about joking and humor by Freud and Henri Bergson, Douglas points out that for both Freud and Bergson, the use of humor was an “attack on control.” In her book *A Very Serious Thing*, Nancy Walker pulls out a key element within Douglas’ text on the subversiveness of humor and the idea of uncontrol (humor) winning over control (social norms). Douglas states that,

> Whatever the joke, however remote its subject, the telling of it is potentially subversive. Since its form consists of a victorious tilting of uncontrol against control, it is an image of the leveling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones.

Thus the teller of the joke has special status within the society to bring ‘uncontrol’ to a given situation and to be critical of the social structures in place. So too, Child’s use of humor can be seen as a gentle nudging against the patriarchal system that would keep

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women in the kitchen. In her position as television cooking show hostess, Child could subtly acknowledge the ennui many women felt about being homemakers and point out the absurdity of the bounds of patriarchy through something as quotidian as cooking chicken.

What makes *To Roast a Chicken* such an interesting case study is that, due to Child’s reputation and social standing, her ideas and performances were well received and respected. As a result, for Julia Child to bring humor into the kitchen and explain the different types of chickens with language full of innuendo, it can be deduced that her audience was receptive to these ideas. This episode, originally aired in 1970, seven years after the beginning of the program, indicates that Child was confident in the way she communicated with her audience. Child’s gentle use of humor in this domestic setting does not undermine the fact that the humor also functioned as a subversive action against the social norm.

In a further explanation of the subversive nature of humor, Richard M. Stephenson discusses humor as both a form of social control and as a ‘weapon of conflict’ in his article “The Conflict and Control Functions of Humor” (1951). Stephenson offers an approach to humor that is connected to maintaining the social norm, particularly around the idea of a collective community, a shared understanding or a conspiratorial response by an audience. Stephenson’s examples are in relation to economic stratification (which often includes racial stereotypes) though in the case here the conflict and control functions of humor are understood in relation to the patriarchal system. Diverging from Freud’s psychoanalytic model that emphasizes underlying aggression in humor, Stephenson instead states that humor can function to critique
(conflict) or reinforce (control) social boundaries. The conflict function of humor involves strategies often associated with political commentary, including satire and parody. Stephenson states,

The particular adaptability of humor as a conflict weapon lies in the fact that humor may conceal malice and allow expression of aggression without the consequences of overt behavior. In this capacity, analysis of humor is particularly revealing of tensions and attitudes which may not be expressed in any other form.

Thus radical and political ideas, such as a critique of patriarchy, can emerge through humor in ways that might otherwise prove impossible. While feminism has many “weapons of conflict” humor exists uniquely as a weapon in which a person can express controversial ideas without being ostracized by an unsympathetic society.

The control function of humor operates quite differently, as Stephenson explains,

As a means of social control, humor may function to express approval or disapproval of social form and action, express common group sentiments, develop and perpetuate stereotypes, relieve awkward or tense situations, and express collective, *sub rosa* approbation of action not explicitly approved.

The kind of humor found in *I Love Lucy*, while hardly maintaining the social ideal of domestic bliss, seems to balance precariously between Stephenson’s control and conflict functions of humor. The character of Lucy strives to break away from the confines of the kitchen; her attempts are a critique of the patriarchal system, a seemingly clear example of the conflict function of humor. In contrast, the conclusion of each episode with Lucy returning to her role as homemaker shows that the humor being used reinforces the social norm, and is an example of the control function of humor.

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30 Stephenson. “Conflict and Control Functions of Humor.” 570.
Popular culture very often tends to reinforce societal expectation, with television programs reassuring the viewers that they are on the correct path. Although in many ways Julia Child embodies a kind of domestic perfection as adopted by the media, her humor can be seen less as fitting into Stephenson’s model of control and is more aligned with his idea of conflict. Her use of humor is subversive and unexpected.

While Douglas and Stephenson identify that humor can give voice to prohibited topics, Umberto Eco looks to broader philosophical repercussions of humor. One of the most insightful texts about humor that has helped shape the definition of kitchen humor in this dissertation is “Frames of Comic ‘Freedom’” by Eco. In his essay, Eco postulates on the humor and ‘the comic’ in a carnivalesque context, which also brings insight to this reading of How To Roast a Chicken. Eco suggests that a key problem approached by humor may be the socially structured frame itself. In coming to his point, Eco examines the potential for social transgression that the carnivalesque (in the medieval sense) offers, and comes to the conclusion that although it occurs, social transgression in this context actually exists to reinforce the law, not to truly break it (akin to Stephenson’s control function of humor). Eco writes that:

… comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgressions: on the contrary, they represent paramount examples of law reinforcement. They

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31 In her book A Very Serious Thing Nancy Walker makes brief reference to Eco’s ideas about the comic and humor in her analysis of overtly feminist humor with some success, but she conflates the two terms or perhaps simplifies the difference, which Eco painstakingly identifies. She writes that: “The comic is revolutionary; it inverts the rules […] In its fundamental overturning of the law or frame, the comic is analogous to feminism that seeks change in radical ways. Instead of breaking the rules, it imagines a different set of rules. This explains why feminist humor so often involves fantasy…” (Eco, “Frames of Comic ‘Freedom’,” 9). While Walker’s point comes across, after reading Eco’s text, he states that the comic acts to reinforce the existence of said rules, while humor actually undermines the social conventions – a more logical fit for the goals of the feminist movement and feminist activists, humorists and artists. In Eco’s text, humor is “reminding us of the presence of a law that we no longer have reason to obey. In doing so it undermines the law.”

remind us of the existence of the rule.\textsuperscript{33}

Eco’s text offers a compelling and succinct differentiation between humor and comedy. Most notably here, Eco explains that through humor one can point out that the social frame itself is inappropriate, does not fit, and is inadequate. Eco states:

\begin{quote}
In comedy we laugh at the character. In humor we smile because of the contradiction between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with. But we are no longer sure that it is the character who is at fault. Maybe the frame is wrong.
\end{quote}

\ldots

Thus the performance of humor acts as a form of social criticism. Humor is always, if not metalinguistic, metasemiotic: through verbal language or some other sign system it casts in doubt other cultural codes. If there is a possibility of transgression, it lies in humor rather than in comic.\textsuperscript{34}

It is, then, not merely the comic but through humor that social criticism and transgression are possible, suggesting that humor offers a deeper way to question the norms of society and to disregard or break social laws.

This is a very useful idea as it helps unpack the complexity of Julia Child’s use of humor and of kitchen humor more generally. The issue at hand seen in kitchen humor is that the frame of patriarchy itself is not the right fit for many women. The humor brings the audience’s attention to this fact. The absurdity and vaudevillian nature of Julia Child’s performance in \textit{To Roast A Chicken} gently steers the audience. Coming back to Eco, Julia Child’s kitchen humor can be read through his ideas as bringing focus to the limits and the problematic nature of patriarchy as a framework. Eco would see Child’s humorous presentation of the chicken sisters as the “contradiction between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with.” In this case, Child’s humanization of the chickens and gleeful descriptions of them as both “ladies” and as food is incongruous

\textsuperscript{33} Eco, “Frames of Comic ‘Freedom’,” 6.
\textsuperscript{34} Eco, “Frames of Comic ‘Freedom’,” 7-8.
with the traditional notion of the controlled chef. In Child’s situation, the kitchen is
becomes slightly skewed from the norm. Thus in Eco’s terms, this incongruity brings into
focus the inherent feeling of difference about this setting of the kitchen. For Eco, Child’s
chicken sisters do not just show the chef herself to be witty, they show the frames of
femininity and domesticity to be ridiculous. This is why Julia Child was such a radical
presence in popular culture and for feminism. As a whole of course, the aim of feminism
is to take down the barriers that exist as a result of patriarchy and establish equality,
something Julia Child played out in her kitchen humor on The French Chef.

The French Chef relied (at least initially) on a presumed female audience. Julia
Child made assumptions that the viewer was familiar with shopping at the market and the
butcher, and although she offered step-by-step instructions, her cooking show
purposefully replicated a home kitchen – one can presume in order to connect more
strongly with her audience and to emphasize that French cooking was something that
could be accomplished by any American woman in her own kitchen. For example, in To
Roast a Chicken, Child removes a bag of giblets from the interior of the bird, as well as a
few handfuls of chicken fat, which she emphasizes should be kept and used: the giblets
(and a small piece of chicken neck she later cuts off the bird) for soup and the fat to be
rendered to cook with. Although she does not give an explanation of how to do this, or
even what rendering is, Child assumes the viewer knows what she is suggesting and has a
certain level of familiarity cooking and working in the kitchen, which given the date it
was made (1970) speaks quite directly to the female homemaker.35

35 Not to be overlooked, the viewer is a woman who not only has a television (common by 1970 in many
middleclass households) but also would be looking for cooking ideas, and would have the time to actually
watch the program during the day. An implicit class and race: that is white and middleclass, exists in this
assumed audience.
Although her humor is not overtly critical of the domestic sphere, within *The French Chef* there exists a conspiratorial humor between Child and her audience. If kitchen humor could be performed by such a well-recognized figure as Julia Child and cast into some doubt the seriousness of the domestic sphere, in looking again to Eco, what *other* cultural codes would be cast into doubt? How else could women break out of the mold that had so shackled them within the domestic realm? The writings on humor thus far discussed establish that humor has social and political power that can be used as a weapon (notably by women and minorities) as a way of disrupting societal frames, particularly the white, patriarchal norms of North America, a key theoretical backbone to this unfolding analysis of feminist video art.

In Julia Child’s *To Roast a Chicken* there exists a kind of assumed community, and her humor suggests friendship and a nonjudgmental setting in which to laugh at oneself and the absurdity of a situation. As Stephenson wrote:

> Humor expressed in the controlled laugh or smile may serve as a means of communication, signaling the intent and nature of the communicating parties. In this capacity, it functions as a means of approach to interpersonal contact and interaction, indicates safety or friendship, and signalized approval, disdain, and other forms of attitude and feeling.\(^{36}\)

Child’s humor offered a reprieve from the isolation of housework for the homemaker/viewer, and nodded to a certain lack of satisfaction experienced by many women that Betty Friedan explored in her now-canonical *The Feminine Mystique* of 1963. For Stephenson, Julia Child’s absurd chicken sisters would have been a signal of approval from Child to her audience, a validation of their need for more than the domestic offered.

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\(^{36}\) Stephenson, “Conflict and Controls Functions,” 570.
Kitchen Humor and the Early 1960s: A time ripe for The French Chef and Julia Child

Though the postwar era is often thought of as being one of stringent gender roles, in her analysis of cookbooks from the 1950s Jessamyn Neuhaus points to the complex nature of society and the less obvious, more nuanced reading of such important cultural texts as cookbooks – an indication of what was going to come in the early 1960s with Julia Child and The French Chef. Neuhaus writes:

When a cookbook author advised her readers that they would find deep fulfillment in daily cooking duties, other possibilities were, paradoxically, raised. The rhetoric of cookbooks in the 1950s actually did not assume that women would be completely fulfilled by domestic labor. An assumption is unspoken and, to the contrary, postwar cookbooks stated, over and over, what women’s roles were, what they would accept and what they would enjoy.  

Through her examination of cookbooks, Neuhaus identifies that the feminine mystique Betty Friedan wrote about in 1963 was, in subtle ways, emerging in the bibles of the kitchen and domestic entertaining.

Technological advances in the kitchen were frequently extolled as virtues in cookbooks such as the classic pre-WWII Joy of Cooking (1931) and The American Woman’s Cook Book (1939) which for example, included a full page photograph of a woman using her Sunbeam Mix Master with a smile on her face and had the caption “The machine beats time as well as batter while you supply the brain that makes the cake” (See Image 12). This was a product placement that showed the home cook how she should look (coiffed and buttoned) and emphasized that time saving efficiency was a goal in and of itself since standards of cooking and cleaning were ever escalating in reaction to

and in spite of new technologies.\textsuperscript{39} Additionally, in this cookbook with over one hundred and seventy-six photographs, only four include a male presence and it is to demonstrate carving methods. In these four photographs, only a man’s hands and arms are visible (maleness implied by the cuffed shirt sleeves, jacket, placement at the head of the table) indicating the public role of carving meat to be of the gendered male domain, while everything else is within the realm of the woman.

The need for a woman to be reassured of the satisfaction she would experience through cooking was a pervasive, if small, component in popular cookbooks emerging in the 1950s such as \textit{Betty Crocker’s Picture Cook Book} (1950). This cook book has a section called “Short Cuts” which includes a page broken into a grid of fifteen squares each with a piece of advice and half illustrated with thumbnail sized drawings. As way of introduction, there is a poem at the top of the page (Italics in original):

\begin{quote}
If you're tired from overwork,  
Household chores you’re bound to shirk.  
Read these pointers tried and true  
And discover what to do.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

These tips are aimed at easing the physical strain of domestic labor as well as suggesting pointers on emotional health, such as,

\begin{quote}
For personal outlook. Eat proper food for health and vitality. Every morning before breakfast, comb hair, apply make-up, a dash of cologne, and perhaps some simple earrings. Does wonders for your morale.
\end{quote}

Another pointer is to “Harbor pleasant thoughts while working. This will make every task lighter and pleasanter.” This is illustrated by the face of a smiling woman surrounded by her “pleasant thoughts”: a man and a woman walking together, the same couple on a

\textsuperscript{39} Neuhaus, “The Way To A Man’s Heart,” 543.  
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Betty Crocker Picture Cookbook}, 431.
beach with a palm tree, a sailboat out at sea, the same couple kissing with another person looking on from a podium – a reference to the happy woman’s wedding. (See Image 13) The final tip, in the bottom right corner square is to “Notice humorous and interesting incidents to relate at dinnertime, etc.” and is illustrated with the woman smiling and reaching her arms up to a cat in a tree. All of these “Short Cuts” are examples of how Betty Crocker’s Picture Cook Book instructed the reader on what was appropriate behavior in the face of the drudgery of domestic duties. This implicitly recognized the need to battle boredom, but also reinforced the expectation that a woman always be well put together and beautiful (with make-up and earrings), and have entertaining and lighthearted observations to relate to her husband and family. Within Betty Crocker’s Picture Cook Book there is not space for a woman to need intelligent conversation or work outside of the home. Women reading this cookbook were reminded to be pleasant above all else.

Somewhat different within the realm of cookbooks is Peg Bracken’s popular I Hate to Cook Book (1960) which still assumed it was a woman’s role to cook, but reassured her she was not alone in her dislike. The intimate size of a small novel, instead of the large tome that most other cookbooks presented, the I Hate to Cook Book was, as the introduction stated for

those of us who hate to [cook], who have learned, through hard experience, that some activities become no less painful through repetition: childbearing, paying taxes, cooking.  

Equating cooking with childbearing and paying taxes certainly identifies it as a physically and emotionally painful event, and Bracken tries to minimize the pain by offering recipes

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that are quick and easy to make. The commentary throughout the book is amusing, but is also telling about how women who did not like to cook were viewed: lazy. For example, the recipe for Stayabed Stew is (original italics) “for those days when you’re en negligee, en bed with a murder story and a box of bonbons, or possibly a good case of the flu.” If not lazy, the woman making this stew would have had to be ill.

In the Household Hints section, of the seventy-five carefully chosen tips two are about weight loss. Thus as well as reinforcing that cooking is a woman’s duty, Bracken underlines that women must strive to achieve ideals of beauty, for example: “36. If you want to lose weight, paste a picture of a pretty, slender girl on your refrigerator door. This will discourage you from opening it too often.” Thus, even with Bracken’s acknowledgement of the drudgery of cooking, there was no escaping society’s expectations of women. Neuhaus writes that this kind of contradictory messaging in cookbooks is indicative of an often overlooked dissatisfaction with gendered roles from the 1950s:

… these expressions of potential dissatisfaction with culinary duties in post-WWII cookery texts offer historians important evidence of the instability of gender norms in the 1950s; norms that academics and the more general population have too often taken for granted.

The entrance of Julia Child into the lives of American women via television in 1963 thus occurred at a time when it was becoming recognized that women’s intellectual or emotional needs were not being met through cooking and domestic tasks. Integrating humor into her performances immediately made Julia Child a welcome guest who gave technical insight into all things culinary, but also reassured those who were dissatisfied

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42 Bracken, I Hate to Cook Book. 13.
43 Bracken, I Hate to Cook Book. 124.
44 Neuhaus, “The Way To A Man’s Heart,” 543.
that there was humor in the absurdity of domesticity. Women might find solace through the recognition that the homemaker role was complex for many and that there could be both satisfaction in learning to prepare a new food, while at the same time needing to poke fun at themselves for being part of the institution of patriarchy, or even come to terms with the dissatisfaction such a role might entail. As will be explored through video art by Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler, when feminist artists are considered in the equation, a more radical call for action ensues.

Having been an icon of French cooking and entertaining at home for over thirty years, it is important to recognize the real revolution in cooking that Child was instrumental in bringing into the American home. Postwar recipes through the 1950s often emphasized time-saving products, highly processed foods, and peculiar combinations of ingredients. In the I Hate To Cook Book for example, Beef À La King includes both condensed chicken noodle soup and condensed cream of mushroom soup, and is prefaced with the following: “Don’t recoil from the odd-sounding combination of ingredients here, because it’s actually very good. Just shut your eyes and go on opening those cans.”45 Who could forget the ubiquitous chocolate tomato-soup cake (involving condensed tomato soup and a package of chocolate cake mix), the veritable plethora of Bundt cakes made with cake mix and pudding mix (involving a bit of sherry in the adventurous recipes), or the many kinds of Jell-O and marshmallow “salad” which Neuhaus refers to as “ornamental cookery”46 that have become time honored family recipes at get-togethers. Even pre-war cookbooks such as The American Woman’s Cook Book has a startling array of jelly-molded “salads” and aspics, numerous recipes for

45 Bracken. I Hate to Cook Book. 13.
46 Neuhaus, “The Way to a Man’s Heart”, 534.
Taking this tradition of American cooking as a comparison, Child’s approach was indeed a revolution. She made French cooking, generally perceived as complex and sophisticated, something that could be incorporated into regular American life. Child used fresh ingredients and celebrated the traditions of the French palette in a way that heightened American cooking without speaking down to the women who made up her audience. The complicated relationship between food and social standing will be revisited in the critical analysis of Martha Rosler’s video *A Budding Gourmet* in Chapter Three.

Julia Child’s accessibility and calmness in front of the camera are the key to her becoming the media sensation she was. Although Child emphasized her professional training by wearing a badge on her shirt from the École Des Trois Gourmandes, her cooking school in Paris, she was by no means a stereotypical chef. Though clearly an expert in her field, and precise in her actions and directions, there was something extremely casual about the way Child presented herself in the kitchen.

As a result of *The French Chef*, along with her well received cookbook *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (Volume 1, 1961: Volume 2, 1970), Julia Child offered a media image of the feminine and domesticity that was strikingly different than the stereotype of another television persona, the character June Cleaver played by Barbara Bilingsly made popular on the television show *Leave it to Beaver* from 1957 to 1963. While maintaining the image of the competent and talented chef, Child’s specific engagement with French cooking leant her an air of sophistication and adventurousness. Her non-normative attractiveness was one of the things that made Child so accessible to
her viewers. She was conservatively stylish without being especially glamorous or “too” beautiful, again making her an individual to whom female viewers could relate. Julia Child was successful and funny, a combination that suggested to women there was more to aim for than the fleeting youth and beauty so idealized by the media.

There is a common conjecture played out in television that a funny woman is not beautiful and her personality has to compensate for her lack of beauty. In this regard Lucille Ball was seen to be very different. Ball could make herself ridiculous and still maintain her glamorous appeal. As described in a lengthy profile for Time in May of 1952,

In reaching the TV top, Lucille’s telegenic good looks may be almost as important as her talent for comedy. She is sultry-voiced, sexy, and wears chic clothes with all the aplomb of a trained model and showgirl. Letters from her feminine fans show as much interest in Lucille’s fashions as in her slapstick. Most successful comediennes (e.g., Imogene Coca, Fanny Brice, Beatrice Lillie) have made comic capital out of their physical appearance. Lucille belongs to a rare comic aristocracy: the clown with glamour.47

Indicative of the times, the profile refers to this successful entertainer and business woman as “luscsious Lucille,” astoundingly includes her height and weight, and suggests that in her role as Lucy Ricardo Ball got to “fulfill her lifelong ambition of playing a housewife.”48 In contrast, profiles about Julia Child would often include her height, as she was unusually tall but none included her weight. As Child was not considered beautiful she was not sexualized in the media the way Lucille Ball was. The Time profile of Lucille

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47 “Sassafrassa, the Queen.” Time. 5/26/1952, Vol. 59 Issue 21, p64. 6p. Accessed Feb. 23, 2015. http://web.b.ebscohost.com.proxy.cc.uic.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=90e872c6-5304-4af4-be11-d5c1bee39de6%40sessionmgr114&hid=110&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=a9h&AN=54167752 Note also that Lucille Ball is referred to in the profile by her first name, another common trope that trivializes her professionalism. She clearly could not be “Miss Ball” since she was married, but “Mrs. Arnaz” would have been a confusing title as well.
Ball on the other hand makes a point of reinforcing her beauty in contrast to her comedy. Although it recognizes her humor, the profile still forces gender normative stereotypes upon Ball, denigrating her talent and holding high the cultural value of woman-as-homemaker.

Unlike the character of June Cleaver, who was competent but almost personality-less, the picture of restraint with her classic beauty – always high-heeled and perfectly coiffed around the house, Lucy Ricardo was messy around the edges, with flour on her clothes or her hair coming unpinned. June Cleaver was the idealized picture of domestic bliss and perfection while the whole premise of I Love Lucy was Lucy’s inability to achieve such bliss. Where June was frequently shown cooking in her well-appointed kitchen with new gadgets on the countertop or serving her family, Lucy’s kitchen was drab and minimal and domestic tasks were fraught with tension. As Hales noted, “what marked out Lucy’s kitchen was its lack of any indications of respect or interest.” 49 Lucy Ricardo may have desired new kitchen technology (as in the “Pioneer Women” episode), but her reality was a utilitarian space in which Lucille Ball performed domestic drudgery with self-deprecating kitchen humor.

In contrast to the character of Lucy Ricardo, Julia Child was a highly successful business-woman, world traveler and elegant professional, her success giving added legitimacy to domestic tasks, such as cooking and entertaining. In added contrast to June Cleaver, Child had depth and humor. Julia Child connected the professional with the domestic in a way that made her an undeniable role model for many American women who in the postwar era were striving to prove themselves as capable of having successful

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49 Hales. Outside the Gates of Eden, 173.
careers and also of maintaining their homes to an unrealistic level of perfection. Julia Child, Lucille Ball and Barbara Bilingsly were all television pop culture icons existing simultaneously who represented a complex ideal (or reaction against an ideal) of how cooking and domestic tasks function within the maintenance of socially prescribed gender roles and how, in the case of *I Love Lucy* and *The French Chef* kitchen humor could alleviate some of this tension.

**Establishing a Feminist Rhetoric (and Rejection) of Domestic Humor: Betty**

**Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique***

Leading the way in the development of a feminist rhetoric around humor, Betty Friedan roundly rejected the historical model of domestic humor in her influential book *The Feminine Mystique*. First published in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique* put into words what many middle-class American women had been feeling and experiencing for decades: a depression, anxiety and loss of self in the face of the gendered expectations and norms of suburban life. The book rightly inspired many women to action in its call for personal agency and was a catalyst for the early days of second-wave feminism in the United States. As the book became canonical in the feminist movement, so too did Friedan’s rejection of domestic humor become an established part of feminist lexicon/rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s. As will be examined in upcoming chapters, Friedan’s rejection had clear implications for the video artists discussed in this project. The feminist discourse around domestic humor was explicitly negative. As this dissertation addresses, there has been a need for a new articulation of feminist humor.

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50 For additional women theorizing women’s humor see Regina Barreca, Zita Dresner, Emily Toth, Gloria Kaufman, Linda Morris, and June Sochen.
related to the domestic sphere. Referring to “Housewife Writers” Friedan did acknowledge that some of the domestic humor of her day was entertaining but couched her response as follows:

… there is something about Housewife Writers that isn’t funny – like Uncle Tom, or Amos and Andy. “Laugh,” the Housewife Writers tell the real housewife, “if you’re feeling desperate, empty, bored, trapped in the bedmaking, chauffeuring and dishwashing details. Isn’t it funny? We’re all in the same trap.” Do real housewives then dissipate in laughter their dreams and their sense of desperation? Do they think their frustrated abilities and their limited lives are a joke? 

Although Friedan’s critique carries legitimacy, she misses the potential for empowerment through laughter or even the possibility that laughter can be a weapon for change, as Hélène Cixous makes so clear in image of the laughing Medusa. The opportunity for a nuanced and more complex reading of kitchen humor was missed by Friedan and, as a result, kitchen humor was largely closed off to her audience.

Serendipitously, The Feminine Mystique was published on February 19, 1963, just eight days after the first episode of The French Chef aired. The two were important cultural phenomena for women across the United States, and the timing speaks to women’s need to see themselves within popular culture and be inspired by what they found. As Laura Shapiro wrote about the coinciding timing of the rise of Child and Friedan:

Each one made an immediate impact and quickly amassed a following; each one proved to be so profoundly influential that she was credited with starting a revolution. Child put the kitchen at the centre of home life, while Friedan put women at the centre of their own lives, but there was more overlap than conflict in the huge welcome each received from the public. Homemakers read The Feminine Mystique for the same reason they

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watched *The French Chef*. They had been waiting for a long time, and they were hungry.\textsuperscript{52}

Most kitchen humor was found in women’s magazines, with which Betty Friedan had a complex relationship as she had written for them for many years previous to writing *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan found much of the content in women’s magazines to be problematic and insulting,\textsuperscript{53} made clear for example, with her inclusion of the entire table of contents from an issue of *McCall’s Magazine* (July 1960).\textsuperscript{54} She pinpointed women’s magazines as reinforcing gendered and domestic norms and an ultimately repressive society, and not adequately representing the unhappiness of many women. She wrote:

> A geiger counter clicked in my own inner ear when I could not fit the quiet desperation of so many women into the picture of the modern American housewife that I myself was helping to create, writing for women’s magazines.\textsuperscript{55}

Friedan even questioned if the purchasing of the very magazines (and purchasing power in general in relation to the domestic sphere) was the only power for women living within the feminine mystique.\textsuperscript{56}

> It is a false assumption that women’s magazines only portrayed housewives as happy and the domestic as being an ideal. This is complicated since the rhetoric in such magazines is not feminist, and at times is even anti-feminist in tone as Eva Moskowitz discusses in her 1996 article “‘It's Good to Blow Your Top’: Women's Magazines and a Discourse of Discontent, 1945-1965.” Moskowitz writes that some magazines recognized

\textsuperscript{52} Laura Shapiro, *Something From the Oven. Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America*, (Viking Press, New York, 2004), 230-231.

\textsuperscript{53} For further examination of Friedan herself and the moment in which she was writing, see Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

\textsuperscript{54} Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 81-82.

\textsuperscript{55} Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 80.

\textsuperscript{56} Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 119.
the discontent and depression among housewives, and would advise their readers to try find happiness in the domestic instead of rebelling against it, as Friedan called for. As Moskowitz writes,

By focusing public attention on the plight of the American housewife, turning her into a national social problem, these magazines contributed to a discourse of discontent. They documented on an unprecedented scale the difficulty women had in finding satisfaction in their homes and personal lives. In an admittedly oblique way, they pointed to a problem that Betty Friedan would later name, “the problem that has no name.” More radical feminists, a few years later, would name this problem sexism and develop a comprehensive set of strategies to combat it.57

Popular culture such as television shows and women’s magazines were often contradictory in their messaging, with the recognition of women’s discontent (such as in *I Love Lucy*) and the ultimate reinforcement of society’s norms for women to stay in the kitchen. While recognizing the importance of *The Feminine Mystique*, Moskowitz argues that Friedan was unfairly dismissive of women’s magazines from the time, and that in fact women’s personal testimony documenting their unhappiness was common throughout the magazines.58 Friedan found it easy to vilify women’s magazines, an easy target since they were not known for their nuanced readings of a cultural climate, however her rallying call for change was essential to the feminist revolution of the 1960s.

Women’s magazines obviously were not calling for any kind of revolution, as would be seen with such publications as *Ms.* beginning in 1971, but they did not always simply sweep women’s dissatisfaction under the rug. In Friedan’s search to find the reasoning behind the mystique she so significantly identified and vilified, Friedan pinned some of the blame on domestic humor in women’s magazines and in the portrayals of the

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57 Eva Moskowitz, “‘It's Good to Blow Your Top’: Women's Magazines and a Discourse of Discontent, 1945-1965” *Journal of Women's History*, Volume 8, Number 3 (Fall 1996): 78.
58 Moskowitz. “‘It's Good to Blow Your Top’,” 87.
domestic in television shows such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957).\(^{59}\) Friedan overlooked a more nuanced reading of self-deprecation in much of the humor that could have served as a place of female empowerment. The stage is then set for how and why feminist video artists Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler were inspired in the mid 1970s by popular culture such as *The French Chef* and used kitchen humor to make art that demanded female subjectivity.

\(^{59}\) Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 104.
Chapter One Images


Image 3: Lucille Ball kneading dough as Lucy Ricardo in *I Love Lucy*, “Pioneer Women”

![Image 3](image3.png)

Image 4: Ball responding to the impossibly large loaf of bread in “Pioneer Women”

![Image 4](image4.png)
Image 5: Ball pinned to the wall by the loaf of bread in “Pioneer Women”

Image 6: The gang all biting into a slice of bread in the final shot of “Pioneer Women”
Image 7: Julia Child in “To Roast a Chicken” with her ‘peep’ of chickens

Image 8: Julia Child in “To Roast a Chicken” holding Miss Roaster
Image 9: Julia Child in “To Roast a Chicken” when Miss Roaster rests on Miss Fryer

Image 10: Julia Child in “Cooking Your Goose”
Image 11: Julia Child in “Cooking Your Goose”

Image 12: The American Woman’s Cook Book (1939), Sunbeam Mixer photo
Image 13: Betty Crocker’s Picture Cook Book, 1950, selection from “Short Cuts”

Good posture prevents fatigue

When standing, keep erect posture... do not slump or bend over tasks (poor posture is more tiring). Remember sitting uses much less energy than standing.

Alternate sitting down tasks and standing up tasks. Don’t be on your feet too long at one time.

Check up on yourself

If after following all these rules for proper rest, exercise, diet, you are still tired and depressed, have a medical check-up and follow doctor’s orders.

Refresh your spirits

“Recreation” means “re-create”... for enthusiasm and courage. Garden, paint pictures, pursue any hobby, look through a magazine for home planning ideas, read a good book, or attend club meetings.

Notice humorous and interesting incidents to relate at dinner-time, etc.

Image 14: The American Woman’s Cookbook, Jellied salad

ENCHANTING GOSSAMER IN AN ASPIC JELL DISGUISES STURDY CABBAGE AND CARROTS IN A TEMPTING SALAD MOLD
Image 15: *The American Woman’s Cookbook*, Jellied fruit salad
Chapter One Appendix

Appendix 1:
Excerpts from To Roast a Chicken, Episode # 206, The French Chef, April 16, 1970
(Julia Child is the speaker of each quote, and quotes are in chronological order.)

“Julia Child Presents The Chicken Sisters! Miss Broiler, Miss Fryer, Miss Roaster, Miss Caponette, Miss Stewer, and Old Madam Hen. But we’re spotlighting Miss Roaster of the year, measuring in at fourteen, fifteen, fourteen! We’re roasting Miss Chicken today on The French Chef!” (Followed by a few seconds of the sound of chickens clucking and squawking.)

“Welcome to The French Chef, I’m Julia Child. You know we speak of a covey of quail and a gaggle of geese, and a pride of lions, well this is known as a peep of chickens, that’s their official name when they’re in group as they are. And you know we’re always broiling, broiling and grilling, and baking and braising and barbequing chickens, but what’s ever happened to the roast chicken? Here is this beautiful, great, big, old, lovely, not old, just the perfect type of roaster, about six pounds, and yet half the time you can’t ever find a roaster like this in the market, there just isn’t enough demand for it.”

“But the real roaster is this beautiful birdie here. This one is six and a half pounds and it weighs five and a half to nine months, in other words it’s in the full glory of its chickendom, and it has a wonderful taste, it has a great skin texture, and they can weigh from four pounds to seven. … And they’re always expensive, they’re twice as much expensiver than broilers and they’re twice as good.

… And then you have another type of roasting chicken, this is what’s called the capon or sometimes caponette. A capon, what it is is a rooster who has had what is known as operation eunuch, and like all eunuchs its gotten rather fat and heavy, but he’s a fine bird for roasting, and there’s another bird called a caponette who has had the same kind of treatment but he’s been on the pill rather than having an operation. This one happens to be a real capon and he’s seven to ten months old and he weighs about eight pounds, and he’s a beautiful bird.”

“And then you have the senior citizens group here. We have this one who is a stewing chicken or fowl, and when you look in the market it will say fowl or stewing chicken, and this should not be over twelve months old, and it’s extremely good for stewing and it makes a wonderful chicken salad, and it makes a fine soup. And then you have old lady hen, and she’s not really terribly scrawny but she’s pretty old, and she’s only good for soup.”

“And this is this little fryer here, and you notice that the tip of the breast breastbone is very flexible [sic], it moves back and forth and up and down, and that is because it is cartilage, and I’m going to with this tiny knife cut down here so you can see that this is just cartilage, can you see that that’s white, it’s a little white, it’s not bone at all. In
comparison with your stewing chicken, I’ve already cut down, it’s complete bone but it isn’t as hard as old lady hen, but you know that this chicken is beyond the age of consent would you say? Well anyway, it’s not a young chicken and it can’t be roasted.”
Chapter Two.
The Host and the Roast: Suzanne Lacy, Julia Child, and Satire

Satire, like caricature, must above all be intelligent, insolent, precise and funny. It must be merciless, unrepentant, probing, and distressing to its targets. It’s not sledgehammer slapstick, it’s not sheer insult, and it’s not gags. Satire is imminently sociological; without a point of view or an analysis, one cannot produce it. …satire takes aim at a chunk of the social or cultural order, and at its most effective, it may even (in certain time and places) be an aid to elimination, an enema in the polluted channels of the Establishment. Satire, like feminism, envisions change. Always, however, there must be wit as well as incisiveness – a rare combination…

Written in 1985 by the Editorial Collective of Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics, this passage is the introduction to an issue on satire that ties together the specificity of feminism with the powerhouse that is satire as a critical strategy. In the 1970s, a period of simultaneous progress and backlash as a result of second wave feminism, the stage is set for artist Suzanne Lacy, in whose work this rare combination of wit and incisiveness brings to the forefront the complicated relationship between pop culture and feminism.

Social and cultural footholds and triumphs for women were made more complex when contrasted with the rise of pop culture television icons, notably with Julia Child. The hard-won victories of second wave feminism, experimental artwork finding traction in the new medium of video, and the cherished traditions of the domestic sphere could seem to be odd bed fellows, yet these are the driving forces behind the artworks of...

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60 Editorial Collective (Emma Amos, Day Gleeson, Avis Lang and Ellyn Lanyon), “Satire,” Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics, Vol. 5, No. 2, Issue 19: 1985. Accessed April 9, 2012. http://heresiesfilmproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/heresies19.pdf Though this definition was published a full decade after most of the work in this chapter was made, it speaks to the way satire was being used a strategy previous to it’s definition, as so very often the arts are at the cutting edge of philosophical experimentation and expression.

Suzanne Lacy (and others). Julia Child as chef and homemaker and Suzanne Lacy as activist could coexist for many women working in and outside of the home. The element of satire, the “laughing at ourselves” that is clear in Julia Child’s gentle humor and Suzanne Lacy’s directed critique, makes this coexistence possible, and gives a cultural permission for both to be funny. Lacy’s works, specifically the video *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, fulfill all of the criteria of kitchen humor.

**Suzanne Lacy as Satirist**

Artist Suzanne Lacy engaged directly with Child in her 1976 piece *Learn Where Meat Comes From*. Lacy’s video is set up as a satire of a television cooking show in which the artist performs a version of Child and her cooking program. The premise of the work is that Lacy is the host of a television cooking show and is giving instructions on how to choose and buy certain cuts of lamb from the butcher. As the video develops, outrageous and disturbing comparisons are made between cuts of meat from a lamb and similar muscle groups on a woman’s body. The artist stands behind a wooden counter, on which lies a prepped lamb carcass. Behind Lacy there is a large diagram of the lamb, indicating where various cuts of meat originate on the lamb’s body (See Images 1, 2). Lacy dons a ‘Julia Child costume:’ a blue blouse and apron, complete with a string of pearls, and a badge affixed to her chest that reads *Ecole des Medicales*, a slight deviation from Julia Child’s *Ecole des Trois Gourmandes* badge, the name of the cooking school Child ran in Paris out of her kitchen with Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle from 1952.
to 1953, which Child referred to as the “school of three hearty eaters.” The resulting image is strikingly similar. Although she begins the video fully in the role of the television host, over fourteen minutes and twenty seconds Suzanne Lacy slowly and ecstatically transforms into a beast, snarling over the meat.

By using her own body Lacy was part of a movement to find new modes of communication for women outside of a system of language that limits the ability of women to claim their selfhood as subjects. Feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and others directed women towards *écriture feminine*, a ‘self writing’ within the text and an engagement with the physical self through which women would be able to demonstrate personal agency and be the subject of their own lives and histories. As Hélène Cixous stated in 1975 in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” her call to action for the feminist movement:

> By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display … Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.  

By making woman the subject of the artwork, and more to the point, by making women’s *self* the subject of the piece, Lacy engages with the very practice Cixous is demanding. The unspoken modes of communication involved for Lacy, including vocal grunts and snarls, but more specifically her bringing together her body and that of the lamb open a dialogue for women to (re)create a system of communication somehow separate from the normal modes of signification.

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In the video Lacy teaches the viewer how to ask a butcher for specific cuts of meat. Lacy moves points to the instructional chart and then to her own body to make it clear what part of the animal’s body a certain cut is from. This quickly takes a turn to the absurd when Lacy explains a “famous crown roast that you can fashion out of these ribs…” and holds up a set of lamb ribs, fully intact and cleaned of meat. Though she first situates the ribs against the lamb carcass on her counter, Lacy then holds them up to her own body, her flesh starting to become overlapped in this viewer’s imagination from that of the meat on the counter top. The cleaned ribs superimposed over Lacy’s own torso make evident the physiological similarities between the woman and the lamb. (See Image 3). Lacy’s devolving voice and guttural pronunciations make the artist seem more beast-like than human. When Lacy demonstrates where to find the lamb’s scapula (shoulder blade), she stretches out her body to mimic that of the lamb, which proves to be similar in size to Lacy herself (See Image 4). The boundary between woman and lamb quickly unravels in front of the camera. Over the duration of the work, Lacy’s speech becomes harder and harder to understand, until eventually she unleashes the ‘beast’ within: the artist, wearing plastic fangs ends the piece by sinking her fangs into the perfectly cooked roast saddle of lamb.

Lacy’s shift between the instructional hostess and a snarling animal critiques domestic roles and expectations of women in mass media representations and addresses the influence of the media speaking to a female viewer of both the artwork and The French Chef. The kitchen humor in Learn Where Meat Comes From moves from the absurd to a level of ludicrousness through satire. Where the gentle tone of a conspiratorial wink can be found in Julia Child’s program, Learn Where the Meat Comes From
suggests not only that women were being represented as consumable objects, but also that Julia Child herself (or at least her media persona) embodied this notion. Where the ‘naked’ chickens sitting in a row on *To Roast a Chicken* have an undeniably vulnerable and human-like quality, the woman-sized lamb carcass in Lacy’s video speaks much more violently to consumable female flesh, drawing a clear link to the domestic sphere as the host for tyrannical oppression. Lacy makes overt references to cannibalism throughout the work, both as the snarling beast and as the woman-as-meat.\(^\text{64}\) As Martha Rosler has so adeptly observed,

\begin{quote}
Lacy mines the idea of Otherness. If only men define subjectivity, then women are denied it: if, therefore, only men are fully human, women are beasts. Lacy, like Shapiro, identifies with the beast, but also with the beastliness of humans, who shape the bodies and control the lives of beasts, kill them and eat them (she’s still a meat eater).\(^\text{65}\)
\end{quote}

**The Delectable Woman:**\(^\text{66}\) **Iconography of the Lamb, Cannibalism and Satire**

Suzanne Lacy’s choice of the lamb is pertinent as both medium and symbol in her work. The lamb itself brings to mind the iconic poem known by heart by North American

\[^{\text{64}}\text{The symbolism of the lamb beyond the parallels with the female body cannot be ignored. Ritual sacrifice of lamb occurs in many cultures, but the symbol of the lamb in Christianity as that of Christ himself, and very the notion of the Eucharist exist as unspoken cultural signifiers for any Western audience. The consumption of the Eucharist can be conflated with the consumption of the lamb flesh. Christ as shepherd and a television instructional chef as type of shepherd identify some interesting parallels. However, a more consistent reading of Suzanne Lacy’s use of lamb takes the viewer in a different direction, assuming the audience has this cultural knowledge of such symbolism, making it humorous by sexualizing the body of the lamb and emphasizing the woman-as-lamb symbol throughout the video.}\]


\[^{\text{66}}\text{With a nod to Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman*, 1969, a book that culminates in a woman baking a woman-shaped cake and eating it. Delectable here is chose for its double entendre: meaning both delicious and delightful or even beautiful, all having to do with consumption. Lacy revels in erotic delight in her video, unlike Atwood’s main character Marian McAlpin who experiences revulsion in relating her own body to food. The two works, made almost a decade apart (as The Edible Woman was written in 1965, though not published until 1969) can also be seen as indicative of how second wave feminism itself changed between the 1960s and 1970s.}\]
children “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”  
(See Appendix 2 for complete poem). This lamb, “whose fleece was white as snow” follows Mary to school “which was against the rule.” The lamb in the poem waits patiently for Mary as she is educated and then returns to the domestic sphere with her. The lamb with its white, fluffy wool is the embodiment of feminine purity and innocence, and must stay in the realm of the domestic. That the “lamb” would become a woman, and sexualized in the process of enculturation, seems radically at odds with the symbol the lamb represents. Lacy’s performance in Learn Where the Meat Comes From brings this complication to the surface. She is the “lamb” as the demure hostess, yet the obvious final outcome for the little lamb from the poem is to turn into the roast, greedily devoured by Lacy-as-beast.

Not to be ignored, the most well-recognized symbolism associated with lamb is by way of Christian iconography in reference to ritual sacrifice and Jesus. While innocence and purity is associated through the connection to Mary Had a Little Lamb, nature, cruelty, death, and the patriarchal foundations of the Christian church also come into play through a Judeo-Christian tradition. Lacy harnesses all of these iconographic meanings in her handing and mishandling of the lamb. As Sharon Irish has concisely observed in her book Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between, in regards to Learn Where the Meat Comes From:

While on one level this humorous tape mocked cooking shows and housewives who watched them, on another level Lacy was continuing her experiments with representations of death, vulnerability, violence and the self by performing as a lamb and then eating it. Lambs, of course, call to mind animal sacrifice in various religions, in addition to the Christian apostle John’s reference to Jesus as the “Lamb of God.”

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67 Written by Sarah Josepha Hale and originally published in Poems for Our Children, (Marsh, Capen & Lyon, Boston, 1830).
*Where the Meat Comes From* was a solo video performance, there are some themes that connect it to her large group projects of the 1980s: the use of video; the focus, however parodic, on a traditional women’s sphere, in this case cooking; and the physical merger with an animal carcass and all it represents – death, nurture, the other.\(^{68}\)

With utmost seriousness, the artist-as-host indicates that the meat in the cheeks of the lamb can be pan seared or made into soup, and one cannot help but imagine it is in fact, a woman’s cheeks that will be made into soup. The literal consumption of a woman’s body, prepared with care to be eaten with flourish, brings to mind cannibalism, the consumption of humans by humans. “A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift offers satirical insight into the link between cannibalism and vulnerability. Published in 1729, in an era when Irish poverty was, by many British heartlessly seen as a burden on the kingdom, Swift offers an outlandish, possible solution. Fully titled “A Modest Proposal For Preventing The Children of Poor People in Ireland From Being a Burden to Their Parents of Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to The Public,” Swift suggests that poor Irish infants be treated as livestock, a delicacy for the cannibalistic appetite of high society Britain and America:

> I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or broiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.\(^{69}\)

Though somehow Swift’s language is more disturbing due to his graphic description of how and when babies could be eaten, the model (or tradition) that Swift proposes is an interesting conceptual thread in the tapestry that is kitchen humor. Swift’s text brought


attention to a vulnerable and mistreated Irish population as well as to what he saw as a cold and unsympathetic English attitude towards this oppressed group. Using cannibalism as the basis for his satire, Swift made the case that the frame of his society itself was unacceptable. The act of cannibalism is such a loathsome idea that suggesting it is indicative of a desperate situation. Swift used “A Modest Proposal” as a call for social change, and so too Lacy uses the association with cannibalism to call for change, her video speaks of the oppression of women by a system of patriarchy. Swift implicitly asks what kind of society would treat people the way they treat livestock, considering them to exist as ingestible delicacies. In Learn Where the Meat Comes From Lacy asks the same questions and in doing so points a finger of blame directly at Julia Child and Child’s perceived role in reinforcing the oppression of women through cooking.

Lacy makes implicit that in Learn Where the Meat Comes From the body of woman is the delicacy on the menu for a cannibalistic society that would destroy her in order to enforce social normativity.70 The eating or farming of individuals lower in society, or in some way commodifiable or disposable has a strong, if squeamish, tradition in the arts, from “A Modest Proposal” of 1729 to much more recent dystopic texts such as Margaret Atwood’s A Handmaid’s Tale, from 1986.71

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70 For more on the self-policing of society, the reinforcement of socially normative behavior, and the unconscious adoption of such behaviors see: Louis Althusser “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970); Michel Foucault Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (1975); Judith Butler Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990).
Though a satirical reading of cannibalism is logical and valuable to an analysis of Lacy’s work as demonstrated by Sharon Irish and others it is limited in a key area: the nuanced complexities of the moment are lost if the interpretation stops there. Lacy’s satire of cannibalism brings out implicit references to sacrifice of flesh – both woman and livestock, a tactic that works to “dismantle the human-animal boundary” a well established approach by animal rights activists, according to writer Elizabeth Cherry, used by Lacy though clearly with a different aim. If the human-animal boundary is dismantled, the ingestion of flesh can only be seen as cannibalistic or sexual. For Lacy, the woman’s body and the lamb’s body symbolically intermingle equating the sexual ingestion of woman with the physical ingestion of meat, the sexual object as passive as the butchered lamb.

Although Lacy chose cooking as a symbol of gender inequality and many feminists understood patriarchy to be typified by traditions that bound women to the kitchen, not all women saw cooking as an oppressive task. Popular culture was quick to ascribe value to domestic tasks undertaken by women, through, for example, the embrace of Julia Child. As is the case for kitchen humor, the intimate space of the kitchen is both safe and oppressive. Thus in reading Lacy’s video the humor and nuance, is of course, seeing oneself in both the host and the roast.

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73 Cherry, Elizabeth. “Shifting Symbolic Boundaries: Cultural Strategies of the Animal Rights Movement,” Sociological Forum, Vol. 25, No. 3 (September 2010): 458. A more recent example of this was an a People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) ad campaign from 2010 featuring actress Pamela Anderson, showing her nude body delineated in the same way as the beef and lamb charts from the cooking programs. The campaign slogan: “All animals have the same parts” “Have a heart, go vegetarian”
Lacy also brings this visceral and tongue-in-cheek approach when she takes aim at the patriarchal system in her Monster series of the 1970s using lamb carcasses. In Learn Where the Meat Comes From (1976), Lacy blurs the boundary between woman and lamb. Or more accurately the boundary between the public and the domestic or private self. The fetishized body is entwined in the blur of desire and consumption. Similar aesthetic elements emerge in Lacy’s performance Lamb Construction (1973) a work involving a lamb carcass nailed in pieces to a wooden structure, and her installation and performance Voices in the Desert (1978) in which Lacy dressed three lamb carcasses in showgirl-type costumes, again making reference to the petite woman-sized proportions of the lamb carcass and the implicit references to ritual sacrifice and perhaps Christian iconography. Lacy took the unusual step of inviting the audience to write their personal experiences of sexual assault directly on the gallery walls, intimately involving the viewer in the actualization of the work.74

Components of Lacy’s script for Learn Where the Meat Comes From are taken directly from two lamb episodes of The French Chef. Seeing Learn Where the Meat Comes From it is almost unfathomable to this viewer that Child would use the technique of comparing one’s own body to that of the meat to be eaten to advise her viewers. This technique it is not only ripe for satire but creates an uncomfortable psychological place where the meat to be bought it too close to the human body, too like that of our own. In The French Chef episode “Roast Saddle of Lamb” (Season 5, Episode 13) Child explicitly recommends showing a butcher which cut of meat one wants by demonstrating on one’s own body. (See Images 5, 6) Presumably Child incorporated this as a teaching

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tool for her audience, however it begs analysis. As Carol J. Adams wrote in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* there is an inherent and oppressive connection between representations of women and the visual and linguistic culture of meat consumption. For Adams there is a “cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption, which links to butchering and sexual violence in our culture.” Child’s fragmentation of her own body speaks to how permeated our culture is with imagery of woman-as-consumable. This is problematic, as Adams claims, because of the resulting objectification of the subject. Adams explained this patriarchal process thusly (my italics):

> …a subject is first viewed, or objectified, through metaphor. Through fragmentation the object is severed from its ontological meaning. Finally, consumed, it exists only through what it represents. The consumption of the referent *reiterates its annihilation as a subject of importance in itself.*

Although Child evidently saw the demonstration as a valid tool, the resulting metaphorical connection between woman’s body and meat to be eaten is unavoidable, and the subject is brought into question. Lacy’s satire in *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* takes Child’s demonstration to a heightened level of absurdity and macabre humor. Though somewhat lengthy, it is crucial to understanding the intention/impact of Lacy’s video to read the transcripts side by side. Julia Child says (1:16-2:35):

> And sometimes you might have a little trouble communicating with your butcher, so I want to show you exactly where it comes from so you can tell him exactly what you want. […]And I think the best thing to do it to show it, show on yourself because you’re made the same way, say you want the whole double loin of the small of the back that runs right the way around, and you want from the thirteenth rib to the hip bone, and I think if you say that he will know exactly what you mean. [Child has turned around to show on her lower back where to indicate to the butcher on the lamb]

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Child follows this by describing how to trim the lamb saddle, and explains in so doing what the other parts of cut are good for, such as the less-palatable spleen, (3:58) “And you have this sort of a reddish flap up at one end, which is the, the spleen, and that makes very good cat meat.” This is notable since Child indicates the saddle of lamb is an expensive cut of meat to purchase. Giving economic consideration to, and finding uses for, the animal parts not called for in the recipe is common in Child’s program, to wit saving the chicken fat for other cooking needs in To Roast a Chicken.

In comparison, Suzanne Lacy as both chef and lamb/snarling beast, uses much of the same language as Child in her demonstrations, but takes the imitation of the lamb much further than Child. Lacy describes each muscle group on the lamb and how it can be prepared, the result being a strong connection between the cuisine and one’s own body parts. Lacy says,

[Voice over] Now if all of this sounds too complicated, there’s a simple method. If you’re willing to make yourself utterly ridiculous [at this moment Lacy is looking face to face at the lamb head she holds at eye level] you can learn the cuts of meat in a few minutes. Here’s what you do: get down on all fours and imagine you are a lamb. Try to imitate the movements a lamb would make, and notice which muscles you use. Imagine you are a curious animal, often turning, lowering and raising your head. The muscles of your neck will be rich in flavor.
(9:18 – 10:43) (See Image 7)

A notable difference here is that while Child directs her audience to imagine where the specific cuts of the lamb are, Lacy directs her audience to try to become the lamb. The difference is very significant. Lacy refers to the viewer as ‘you’ but the ‘you’ is no longer a person, ‘you’ has become a ‘curious animal.’ Thus the statement by Lacy that “The muscles in your neck will be rich in flavor” makes this viewer acutely aware of how neck
muscles feel as the head moves, and wonder what size pot would be needed to cook them up. As Lacy continues in this vein:

Wriggle the muscles on either side of your backbone to frighten away a fly, these will certainly be tender. Breathe deeply and pull your head grass-ward, the front of your chest from your neck to just above your waist and from a cut along your breastbone to your shoulders is the brisket. [Lacy holds lamb pelvis bones against her own body] Walk around on your hands and knees. The sections from your hands down to elbows, and feet to knees are sold as soup bones. Now begin peacefully chewing grass. The large muscles in your cheeks will be used for soup meat, lamb burgers, or may be fried. [Lacy holds up large lamb leg bones, hikes up her own skirt and compares the lamb bones with her leg, moving the bones and her knee, and thrusting her pelvis at the same time – a parallel movement.] Finally, move your tongue. This can be baked, boiled or pickled. And in lambs is a real delicacy.  

Lacy’s satire of Child in this monologue takes the instruction to a ludicrous level, where the movements of the artist as she compares her knee joint with that of the lamb simulate intercourse. Lacy’s instructions to become the animal again ‘dismantle the human-animal boundary’ which Child herself does with a milder tone and less overt manner.

Child used this technique from the very first episode of The French Chef called “Boeuf Bourguignon” (Season 1, Episode 1, 1963) when, less than two minutes into the episode Child shows a cutting board with several cuts of meat on it, and she says “this is called the chuck tender and it comes from the shoulder blade, up here” (1:53) though the camera is focused in on the cutting board, so the viewer can only see her hand and the meat, the other hand leaves the frame and seems to be pointing out her own shoulder. She continues showing another cut of beef and says, “this is called the undercut of the chuck,

77 Note: the text that appears from the video in this dissertation has been transcribed by this author, but on the artist’s website, she has quoted this passage slightly differently (likely from a written text instead of the video itself), and it reads: “Finally, move your tongue as in chewing, baa-ing, or screaming: this can be baked, boiled or pickled, and in lambs is a real delicacy.” The difference, notably the inclusion of “screaming” clearly has implications about the intention of the voice-over persona in the video. See: http://www.suzannelacy.com/1970smonster_meat.htm
and it’s like the continuation of the ribs along here where it gets up to your neck.” (2:02) As Child is saying this, the camera pans out so that the chef is visible as she draws a finger up her side along her ribs, with a smile. (See Image 9) Unlike Lacy, Child does not make sexual insinuations through her demonstration. Child was not petite or closely proportioned to a lamb herself and while undeniably professional in her style, Child was not considered beautiful. Perhaps this distance from the sexual is what gave Child’s demonstration some legitimacy as a method. Lacy on the other hand, was a pretty, slim young woman and there is an element of ageism in her satire. By pointing a finger directly at Julia Child in her satire, Lacy missed the point of Julia Child’s radical presence within the American television landscape.

As well as the direct quotes, Lacy mimics some of Child’s actions from one of the lamb cooking episodes with slightly different wording. For example the artist begins her piece by demonstrating how to remove a large bone from a leg of lamb, using exactly the same technique Child uses at the beginning of the episode “Roast Leg of Lamb” The French Chef (Season 6, Episode 13). After rather graphic demonstration involving cutting, scraping, and twisting of bone, flesh and tendon, Lacy’s arm, elbow-deep in a large piece of meat emerges, victorious, with a large leg bone, just as Julia Child had done in the television episode. (See Images 10, 11) Unlike Child though, as Lacy turns into the beast later in the video she gives the lamb carcass the occasional sexually charged slap on the rump, or passing caress as when she is comparing the smaller appearance though higher meat yield of the rump roast to the hind shank of the lamb (5:50). These sexually charged moments are antithetical to the how Child presented
herself and handled food. This is what Julia Child says as she describes deboning the leg in the episode “Roast Leg of Lamb” (2:17):

Now it’s easy enough to get the butcher to take the hip bone out for you, but to get the leg bone is a little bit more of a problem. And there are two ways of taking it out, that’s where it lies. You can loosen it from inside of the meat and scrape the meat down and then when you get down to the knee joint inside to make a slit in the skin and then cut all around the bone there, cut out the uh, tendons and then pull the bone out, but it makes a hole in the side, and I like the meat left whole with no tears in it. And so, to get it out from inside, you have your bone attached, you cut all the meat away and then you scrape all the way down and cut and cut and cut, and then, you get down to the most difficult part which is at the knee joint right here where the skin is very, very thin.

As she explains this, Child is carefully and methodically demonstrating the appropriate technique for cutting the flesh from the bone, and pulls the large leg bone out, which she has cut away in front of the viewer. Child has indicated this is not necessarily an easy task, but throughout maintains the light and professional tone she is known for. Suzanne Lacy, in comparison, approaches the bone removal at two intervals. The first occurs in the introduction of the video, showing Lacy pulling the bone out of the meat with complete composure. Later in the work, the artist uses a voice-over to explain the technical maneuvering necessary, much more akin to Child’s explanation. At this second stage there occurs a disconnect, or fissure, between Lacy as chef and Lacy as beast. The contrast of the voice over with the action creates a distance between the two personas.

While a very calm instructional voice over describes the removal of the leg bone, the video shows Lacy to be devolving to a baser nature (11:10) (See Image 12):

[Voice-over] Ask your butcher to remove the fell and all fat from the whole six and a half pound leg. He will willingly remove the hip and [Lacy with fangs, her heavy breathing and snarling louder than the voice over, her hands all over the lamb] at the large end of the meat, but may balk at taking out the leg bone from inside the meat. If you have to do this yourself locate the ball joint end of the leg bone buried in the thick end of
the meat [snarling Lacy-as-beast’s excitement level has raised, she opens her arms and stands up triumphantly.] Cut around it to loosen the flesh, then scrape the flesh away down the length of the bone until you come to its opposite ball joint inside the meat and …. Now comes the most difficult part of the operation [Lacy-as-beast is rough handling the lamb, snarling loudly], releasing the bone from the tendons attaching it to the rear shank, being very careful not to pierce through the knee flesh.

In comparison to the sophisticated satire throughout the video, the mimicking of the bone-removal lends an air of physical humor to the video. Both Julia Child and Suzanne Lacy bring a certain “can-do” attitude to the mastery of the kitchen. The contrast of snapping tendons and the composed feminine hostess are jarring.

Lacy goes to great lengths to establish a contrast in tones between the chef and the beast, when as chef she describes the cultural associations with the dish itself, though Child herself does not use this type of language. Lacy says (7:06-8:44):

Roast saddle of lamb. What a luxurious sound. It bespeaks good restaurants, great feasts and English country houses.

There are other details Lacy appropriates from Julia Child which reinforce the satire and the transformation from chef to animal. For example, Child comments on the strong flavor of lamb which some people “are not terribly fond of” and how to “tame” the flavor by removing as much of the fat as possible (“Roast Saddle of Lamb” 5:10-6:08). In her video, Lacy applies a rosemary-mustard sauce to “take out some of that wild, strong lamb taste that some people don’t seem to like” (0:11 – 3:26). Lacy’s inclusion of this is poignant, as it speaks to the underlying “wild woman” character of the seemingly-innocuous lamb, the language once again bringing to mind woman-as-lamb, woman-as-beast. Even the lamb (symbolic of a passive woman), the tamest of animals, has a wild flavor waiting to be unleashed or tamed. The “wild” woman was traditionally associated
with sexual promiscuity, and represents a kind of social and sexual “uncontrol” as Mary Douglas has written in her essay “Jokes.”

In Lacy’s introduction to the carving and cooking of the lamb her choice of words foreshadow her metamorphosis into a beast. In the persona of Lacy as chef, she exoticizes the lamb in a way that hints at a darker nature. She says (3:28 – 4:14):

Good morning, today’s lamb means zesty flavors, and serving possibilities that challenge even the wildest imagination. Shish-kabobs impaled over and open fire, sizzling lamb chops, roast leg of lamb, and bubbling lamb stew.

The “zesty flavors” “wildest imagination” and “impaled over an open fire” set the tone for the video that unfolds. Julia Child, in comparison, introduces the roast saddle of lamb she’s about to prepare as being: (0:40-1:09) “terribly easy to cook and serve and if you’re having a chic little dinner party for six to eight people this is a great piece of meat to have.” Where Lacy speaks to the viewer of the “zesty flavors” and “wild imagination”, Child’s use of “chic” keeps the lamb firmly in good taste and indicative of a level of sophistication that would appeal to the desires of the American homemaker.

Having let her “wildest imagination” take over, Lacy the beast begins to behave in a fashion that is both erratic and erotic in her handling of the lamb carcass. At the twelve-minute mark of the piece, Lacy pulls open the belly-side of the lamb and it partially falls, partially is tossed off the counter top by the artist. (See Image 13) The beast’s intentions are clearly to devour the lamb and she dives onto it out of the camera frame. At this point, the screen goes black and the following text appears: “Due to the adult nature of the subject matter, this program has been edited for television viewing.”

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Signaling a return to the ‘cultured’ chef, five seconds later sweet recorder music begins again, and the screen has cut away to the oven. Once again composed, Lacy takes a big whiff of the roast as she takes it out of the oven and then holds the pot out for the audience to see. (See Image 14) Emphasizing the sophisticated role of the gourmand, and in so doing the extreme dichotomy represented by the wild woman, Lacy says to her audience: “Ahh, gigot farci roties a la moutard. A feast fit for a queen.”

Along with the preparation of the food in the kitchen, *The French Chef* always included how to serve the meal for guests. On the whole all things related to domestic cooking have traditionally been gendered-female, but one of the few cooking-related tasks commonly thought of as belonging in a man’s domain has been carving meat at the table. The public display of carving a roast, an act necessitating a very large knife and fork, traditionally speaks to the assumed male *provider* of the meat than it does to the assumed female cook. There is an inherent understanding of the value of the tasks as a result. The male public display of wealth (seen in the size and quality of the meat) and the ability to be a provider is socially accepted as being more significant than the female private actions of the kitchen and domestic labor. Both Julia Child and Suzanne Lacy engage with the social implications of carving the meat in their work. Child discusses the social ritual related to carving and serving during “Roast Saddle of Lamb” for example when she says (22:50):

> It’s much easier to carve these in the kitchen, as you’ll see when we reassemble it again that it looks very nice. Well this really all depends on the master of the house [smiling] and if he loves to carve it’s sort of a nice show-off piece.

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79 This comes at the end of the episode, unlike Child’s use of the phrase at the beginning of “Roast Leg of Lamb” when Child says: (00:00 – 00:25) “If I ever manage to get the bone out of this leg of lamb I’m going to show you a marvelous recipe. It’s a French one called Gigot Farcì, it’s Roast Leg of Lamb today on *The French Chef*.”
This type of comment was common lexicon in cooking instruction, as Julia Child taught women not only to cook, but also to observe the gendered social rituals of the time: to serve meals with style, recognize the various roles women and men would have been expected to play as hosts, and implicitly, to put the desires of the “master” of the house first.

As Luce Irigaray has written in *This Sex Which is Not One*, in a patriarchal society, women’s desires exist unrecognized or as secondary to those of men. Irigaray’s thoughts on women’s sexual desire should be contextualized in regards to a woman’s satisfaction in the outcome of her work, whether domestic or other. As Irigaray writes:

… if a woman is asked to sustain, to revive, a man’s desire, the request neglects to spell out what it implies as to the value of her own desire. A desire of which she is not aware, moreover, at least not explicitly. But one whose force and continuity are capable of nurturing repeatedly and at length all the masquerades of “femininity” that are expected of her.81

Thus, even for Child the successful business-woman and television icon, the desires of the “master” of the house were always present, and he did not appear in the kitchen but, rather, had a more public role when the roast was ready to serve.

In contrast, during her video, Suzanne Lacy removes reference to the “master of the house,” brandishing the carving instruments herself in a moment of Lacy-as-chef before her metamorphosis. (See Image 15) She says (12:23):

The greatest pleasure of life is carving a whole roast at the table. It takes an expert to do this right, but we’ve taken care of this in advance, by partially boning the shank so that no one need ever know [raising carving

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81 Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which is Not One” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Edited by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (Columbia University Press, New York, 1997), 251. (originally published 1977)
knife and fork] as you flourish your instruments, that you are anything other than that expert.

Using kitchen humor, Lacy demonstrates that expectations of socially normative gendered behavior should be eliminated. Lacy continuously deconstructs women’s complex roles in the kitchen by showing herself as the roast itself and as empowered carver of the roast.

Lacy sits at the set table to eat the roast with a glass of wine like the finale of most episodes of *The French Chef*. However the artist once again starts to transform. (See Images 16 and 17) First Lacy turns into the lamb, slipping the lamb teeth into her mouth as she tries to cling to herself as chef, describing the “spicy robust wine” she is pairing with her menu. When the camera cuts to Lacy’s hand as she puts her wine glass down, and lamb teeth are exchanged for fangs and the beast begins breathing heavily once again. In an even toned voice-over Lacy states, using Julia Child’s signature French sign off “And now for the feast, bon appétit!” but on the screen the viewer watches as Lacy-as-beast raises her head and then dives in to the roast with a most unrefined enthusiasm. (See Image 18) Even as the title and credits roll over the screen for the final thirty seconds of the piece, Lacy continues to snarl and grunt as she eats the lamb, her gusto shaking the carefully set table with the Saudi Arabian *petit sirah* precariously swilling in the glass and the salt and pepper mills jostling.

Whereas Julia Child’s instructional tone during her television program is light and chatty, Lacy-as-Chef has a much more serious demeanor. As well as the jaunty flute and piano music that opened each episode of *The French Chef*, Child’s often sing-songy voice sets the tone and her kitchen humor in keeping is light. Lacy’s kitchen humor, in contrast is much darker and more pointed, and she uses musical cues to signify tone.
changes. At the beginning of Lacy’s video when she introduces the dish there is music played by flute or recorder that is quite light and breezy and then later in the piece when Lacy exchanges her lamb teeth for plastic fangs the music becomes darker and more menacing taking cue from horror movies, when the villain appears and music becomes dissonant often resulting from the “devil in music” a specific musical tritone.\(^{82}\)

Lacy has taken a quintessential feminine persona in Julia Child – homemaker, chef, gently guiding towards proper food etiquette – through a transformation from cooking show chef and hostess to snarling beast, illuminating the performance that is femininity and the learned cues and rituals of how to be a woman. By tipping the persona on its head, Lacy implicitly brings into focus the absurdity of other gender norms, expectations and roles. The video contrasts Chef Lacy as restrained and proper with Beast Lacy as uncontrolled and wild.

**Lacy and Gender Performativity**

Lacy’s kitchen humor actively questions how femininity is structured within society, and whether or not these structures are useful or appropriate. Though Judith Butler would not publish her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and The Subversion of Identity* until 1990, Lacy’s type of examination and satire of gender lead to Butler’s groundbreaking ideas about femininity and masculinity and the role of society in establishing and reinforcing those roles, the result being that in every way gender is a learned performance. As Butler wrote:

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The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories. The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original.\(^83\)

Butler and Lacy were both engaging with the need for change in social expectations and definitions of femininity, and the often dramatically narrow and prescriptive lens that accompanied these definitions. Both artist and philosopher would have in part been responding and to the canonical feminist ideas of Simone de Beauvoir from her book *The Second Sex*,\(^84\) who presented the concept that femininity is a learned practice:

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine.\(^85\)

This “civilization as a whole” that formulates woman is the driving force that Lacy rallies against. Through Lacy’s satire, Julia Child and other television personalities could easily be understood to reinforce the roles and rituals of the homemaker and thus the performance of the feminine.

**Humor and challenging the norm**

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\(^84\) See Butler engaging the parameters of de Beauvoir’s ideas about becoming gendered in *Gender Trouble*, 8-13. Also “If there is something right in de Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born but becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.” Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.

The humor in Julia Child’s cooking show complicates the simple reading that she was reinforcing social expectations. As Mary Douglas has written on the status of joke telling, and specifically ritual-based cultures, the joker:

… has a firm hold on his [sic] own position in the structure and the disruptive comments which he makes upon it are in a sense the comments of the social group upon itself. He merely expresses consensus.  

Although Douglas’ essay goes on to engage with the joker as ritual purifier, this kernel of her theory is one lens through which to consider kitchen humor. Lacy (as the joker) offers the artist the space to critique exclusive of outright rejection, a distinction that would allow a homemaker to see herself in both Julia Child’s gentle humor and Suzanne Lacy’s satire. Part Julia Child homemaker, part Suzanne Lacy activist, a balance was being forged that embraced (and participated in) the revolution while still valuing the history of women’s, and thus domestic, culture. It is complex and messy, but liberated.

Lacy’s artistic trajectory during the 1970s

Learn Where the Meat Comes From is part of a larger series of pieces Lacy made during this period called the Monster Series that involved lamb carcasses, entrails and the human body. While Learn Where the Meat Comes From has a feminist orientation, it is somewhat less obviously “activist” than many of Lacy’s other works which generally

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dealt in a more overt way with issues such as assault, rape, and poverty. The video comes across as less didactic because of Lacy’s use of humor.

The foundational ideas Lacy developed while a graduate student at Fresno State and CalArts\(^{88}\) (in both cases involved with Judy Chicago’s Feminist Art Program\(^{89}\)) have permeated her body of work, situating Lacy as an activist-performance-artist with a strong agenda in every piece. Her sociological approach, influenced by the writings of community-organizer Saul Alinsky,\(^{90}\) was also integral to Lacy’s successful use of kitchen humor. Lacy freed herself from boundaries associated with ‘traditional’ art production and illuminated that such freedom was in fact indicative of a new direction in art and a hard fought claim of subjectivity for women.\(^1\) \textit{Learn Where the Meat Comes From} is a strong case in point, as is the kitchen humor that makes such a big impact.\(^2\)

\(^{88}\) This includes studying with Judy Chicago and Allan Kaprow and Lacy’s involvement with Volunteers in Service Training to America (VISTA). The 2009 retrospective exhibition and symposium \textit{A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment} featuring the alumna of the program and writings of Moira Roth. Exhibition catalogue of the same name (Ed.) Laura Meyer. http://www.astudiooftheirown.org/index.html

\(^{89}\) The legacy of the Feminist Art Program is written about by Fields (2011), Roth (1990), Meyer (2009), and Jones (1996), and is credited as playing an important role in the birth of feminist art.


\(^{91}\) For more on postmodernism and the radical changes that accompany it: Michael Fried, \textit{Art and Objecthood}, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

\(^{92}\) Additional works Lacy performed during this period are insightful into her activist agenda and symbolic use of animal parts. These include \textit{Maps} (1973), \textit{Lamb Constructions} (1973), \textit{Construction of a Novel Frankenstein} (1975). \textit{Maps} is a performance work (or more accurately, a happening) that Lacy made during a class she took with Allan Kaprow in 1973. In this work Lacy had the other students don bloodstained, but pressed, lab coats, and gave them lamb organs wrapped in butcher paper, which they nailed in accurate locations to a wooden outline of a lamb on a wall recreating the animal. Then following a map, the participants ate lunch from brown paper bags in the cafeteria of a mental institution an hour away and finally the event culminated in a walk-through of an abandoned slaughterhouse where the lamb parts, now in paper bags, were tied to a fence in positions to reconstitute the complete animal. \textit{Lamb Constructions} was performed in 1973 at Womanspace Gallery and the opening of the LA Women’s Building. Then, Lacy too nailed the organs, innards, head and tail of a lamb to a sawhorse, recreating the carcass (See Image 19). However this time a man dressed in drag made sausage, beef kidneys swung from the ceiling and a black and white mouse ran up and down the string holding them, and young girls served the audience birthday cake on a long white runner functioning as a table for the audience.

\textit{Construction of a Novel Frankenstein} (1975), involved Lacy taking blood from her arm during a performance while wearing a white lab coat and deconstructing Mary Shelley’s \textit{Frankenstein}, exploring the
A very different type of work, Lacy’s 1972 performance *Car Renovation (Pink Jalopy)* explores a critical component to her later video art – the inclusion of humor, an element missing from the other works she made during the early to mid 1970s. Created for a class in the CalArts Feminist Art Program called Route 126, *Car Renovation (Pink Jalopy)* involved Lacy reclaiming a car that had been long abandoned on the side of the highway, and turning this symbol of masculinity into a humorously-feminized object of feminine desire.\(^{93}\) (See Image 20) Scholar Meiling Cheng examines *Car Renovation (Pink Jalopy)* in her book *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art*, recognizing that the piece functions on numerous levels, both symbolic and literal.

Static in its plasticity, Pink Jalopy is nevertheless enlivened by its allegorical performativity. Lacy and her participants paint the vehicle in pink, reappropriating a color that connotes lightweight, ladylike delicacy, and parodically en/gender their auto installation as female—or, at least, as feminine or female like. [...] With blatant humor, *Pink Jalopy* exhibits herself as a feminized article, stretching her body on the roadside, taking turns in seducing passersby, defying the debilitating forces of nature, and simply being splendid in her re-made self.\(^{94}\)

Most insightful in Cheng’s analysis of *Car Renovation (Pink Jalopy)* for this study however, is her description of the artifact itself as a sarcastic reference to the fairy tale rescue of the damsel in distress.\(^{95}\) The humor infused in the piece has a strongly tongue-in-cheek tone, and though different than that of *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*

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\(^{93}\) *Car Renovation* preceded the more well-known Carol “Pinky” Tuscadero in the television show *Happy Days*, in which Roz Kelley, who played “Pinky” was race car driver and girl friend to the Fonz. (Episodes #64-66, 1976-77)


\(^{95}\) Cheng. *Other Los Angeleses*, 96.
foreshadows the tone that Lacy brings to the later piece, and establishes in the lexicon of Lacy’s work, that even feminists can be funny.

*Learn Where the Meat Comes From* falls chronologically between the above described piece and an incredibly impactful performance work *Voices in the Desert*, Las Vegas, 1978. *Voices in the Desert* is indicative of Lacy’s renewed interest in lamb carcasses and underscores the objectification of females and the brutality perpetrated on them. In *Voices in the Desert* women were invited to write their experiences of rape on the walls of a small space constructed within a gallery, and then in the final installation phase three lamb carcasses were hung and “dressed” in Las Vegas inspired show-girl type lingerie with feathers and beads so that the carcasses looked very much like they were dancing. The references to pop culture are essential to this piece. Lacy connects the dots between sexuality, the socially contrived pressures of the performance of femininity96 and violence. During the performance, Lacy sat naked in the entrance of the space, and would put necklaces of beads over the heads of viewers as they entered the space through a three-foot high entrance, thus connecting them with the lambs. Described in *Artweek* by Jeff Kelley: “Like horrible puppets the carcasses were at once dancing and hanging by necks wrenched in the moment just before death.”97 The use of the beads and feathers directly and explicitly linked the women participants to the dangling lamb carcasses and made flesh the link between the performance of femininity and sexual violence perpetrated against women. The similarities with *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* are stationed firmly in Lacy’s continued misuse of the lamb carcasses. The

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96 Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1989) discusses the social implications of gender performativity, and the complex rules we, as a society, adhere to in regards to what it means to be feminine or masculine. 97 Jeff Kelley, “Rape and Respect in the Las Vegas” *Artweek* (20 May): 4. Look also to Nina Felshin, editor, *But Is It Art? the Spirit of Art As Activism*, (Seattle: Bay Press. 1994).
overwhelming difference between the works is the very macabre humor in *Voices in the Desert*. The fact that Lacy also dressed the intact lamb carcasses gave a stronger visual parallel to the flesh of a woman who might also imagine herself adorned with jewelry. The lamb bones the artist used in *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, devoid of flesh, creates a slightly less grisly connection between lamb and woman.

**The Mishandling of Meat: Viennese Actionism and American Feminism**

It is easy to say that food has a long and circuitous history in visual art, and the use or representation of meat specifically has resulted in many works that raise issues about human fragility, women, flesh, consumability, and a myriad of symbolic ideas. The involvement of meat, specifically lamb carcasses, was a hallmark of Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch’s performances beginning in the 1950s. What is unique to the 1970s is how some feminist artists engaged with meat in their works in a very visceral and personal way that involved and critiqued the pursuance of domestic ritual, as opposed to Nitsch whose target was Catholic ritual. Suzanne Lacy found interesting parallels between the lamb carcass and a woman’s body, playing out those parallels in numerous works from her *Monsters* series. As well as the performances of Nitsch, two American artists working similarly and contemporaneously with Lacy are Carolee Schneeman and Nina Sobell.

Hermann Nitsch’s handling, or rather, purposeful mishandling of meat is part of an historical conversation symbolically problematizing flesh⁹⁸ that became intrinsically linked to the Happenings in the United Stated during the 1960s. Nitsch’s performance

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actions (beginning in 1957 with the Orgien mysterien theatre, the Orgiastic Mystical Theatre\textsuperscript{99}) involving lamb and other animal carcasses created a scenario of “controlled violence” in his performances. The Viennese Actionists, and Hermann Nitsch in particular, performed pieces involving bodies, both animal and human, as their primary medium. Nitsch’s practice, associated with the Artaudian concept of the Theatre of Cruelty,\textsuperscript{100} often involved a searching or striving for a kind of purity. This striving would occur during the performance through transgressions of the body’s physical boundaries. Internal elements of the body, such as blood, would be used as artistic medium to bring attention to physical and psychological boundaries of the body.\textsuperscript{101} The Viennese Actionists’ practice was a “an art of extravagance, dissipation, spillage, and violence, in which repressed instinctual urges were released in spectacular scenes.”\textsuperscript{102} In the case of Nitsch, the Orgiastic Mystical Theatre performances functioned as a desublimation of violence. As Maggie Nelson has written in The Art of Cruelty, A Reckoning:

Nitsch’s work explicitly depends on the idea that there exists such a thing as sacred or sacrificial violence, and that this type of violence can provide a beneficial, cathartic outlet that diminishes rather than augments the proliferation of violence within any given society or group.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{100} Antonin Artaud, The Theater and Its Double. Translated by Mary C. Richard (New York: Grove Press, 1994).
Suzanne Lacy’s use of lamb carcasses in *Voices in the Desert* and her performances involving butchered animal parts indicate a strong connection to Nitsch’s harrowing approach to the fragility of humanity and the need for violent outlet. This also situates Lacy within the art historical conversation about meat, death and expression. Martha Rosler has written about the underlying role of language and metaphor throughout Lacy’s work in relation to that of Nitsch in her text from 1977, “The Public and The Private: Feminist Art in California.” Rosler writes:

Lacy works with metaphorically expressed oppositions. Her work is seen to differ from, say, the explosive orgies of the Viennese artist Hermann Nitsch in having a cognitive communicative pole. The rootedness of many of her concerns in language is apparent. In defining things by opposition she develops a substitution set using the concept “body.” … In using animal bodies as analogous for these entities, she turns the conceptual into the concrete.

This turning the conceptual into the concrete is one of the reasons Lacy’s work is so impactful. By associating the actual lamb carcass with the struggles women face in a patriarchal society, Lacy brings to the surface the horrors of oppression. By connecting animal carcasses and organs with the female body, Lacy engages the need for recognition of female subjectivity within a patriarchal society. This is a concept Julia Kristeva writes about in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) as being simultaneously jarring, intimate, and highly impactful. As Kristeva indicates, it is not simply the *handling* of animal carcasses as art that is culturally problematic, but what she refers to as the abject, which is undeniably seen in Lacy’s *mishandling* of the meat, resulting in a forced recognition of the female subject. As Kristeva writes:

104 It is important to note that while Nitsch consumed the animal carcasses he worked with, there is no indication that Lacy consumed the lamb carcasses.

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.106

Where Lacy heavily diverges from Nitsch and the Viennese Actionists is with Learn Where the Meat Comes From, a much sillier, if still dark episode of meat mishandling. Unlike Lacy, Nitsch’s very violent Orgiastic Mystical Theatre is something of an antithesis of the tone of kitchen humor. The ecstatic violence suggested in Lacy’s satire of Julia Child is much lighter and funnier than Nitsch’s very serious, ecstatic pouring of blood and stabbing of lamb carcasses.107

Carolee Schneeman presented a more joyful approach to actionism in her performance Meat Joy from 1964. Schneeman was a “feminist actionist”109 and the work involved people, raw chicken carcasses, raw fish and sausages among other props. The piece was a celebration of sexuality and the erotic that saw the performers dance, paint each other’s bodies, and caress each other with the meat. Schneeman’s work, along with that of Hermann Nitsch, has been described by Maggie Nelson as the artist’s attempt to “heal a split between a ‘repressed, cultural’ self and an ‘authentic, natural’ self through ritualistic acts of transgression.”110 Meat Joy, though it also included men, changed how people were conceptualizing and producing work about women’s sexuality, dramatically expanding the boundaries permissible for women artists to explore or in this case,

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110 Nelson. The Art of Cruelty. 103.
explode. Notable for the time, the performance was sex positive, validating women (and men) as sexual beings and emphasizing subjectivity through this sexual exploration.

Schneeman used the various types of meat as a way to play with the concept of materiality that was so often emphasized in performance art from this era. The choice of meat and specific kind of misuse employed in *Meat Joy* does not speak to domestic ritual or involve satire akin to Lacy’s videos. However, the pursuance of the ecstatic as a feminist process, which Schneeman has indicated was a driving component of her performance, can also be seen in Lacy’s satire in *Learn Where The Meat Comes From*. Lacy performs moments of ecstasy when she is in the throws of transformation from Lacy-as-chef to chef-as-snarling-beast. It is as though the chef-as-beast has unleashed a wild abandon: consuming the lamb (woman) flesh is the key to this sexual and gastronomic wildness.

It is almost impossible to extricate the sexual innuendo from the use of animal flesh in feminist artworks from this era. Lacy’s *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* participates in this due to the symbolic closeness of lamb flesh and the female body. Both Lacy and Schneeman engage with stereotypes about feminists as being humorless and sexless. Through *Meat Joy* Schneeman harnessed the representative power of sexuality and claimed it as a feminist process. In *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* Lacy did a very similar thing using kitchen humor to claim female subjectivity. Having occurred in 1964, *Meat Joy* opened the door to such abandon and innuendo with Schneeman shepherding younger feminist activists and artists towards such works. Schneeman’s

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performance engaged with the disruption/destruction of patriarchal structures and gender normativity and the piece nods to kitchen humor because of the voyeuristic looks into the activity of boudoir, however theatrical this case may be.\textsuperscript{112}

Similar to Suzanne Lacy in her mishandling of meat and use of satire, Nina Sobell employed kitchen humor through which to analyze socially prescribed gender roles in her artwork. Sobell’s satire (to go back to the introduction of this text) is “merciless, unrepentant, probing, and distressing to its targets.”\textsuperscript{113} Sobell made some startling video pieces in the 1970s, specifically \textit{Chicken on Foot} (1974) and \textit{Hey! Chicky!} (1978). \textit{Chicken on Foot} is a scathing glimpse into the traditionally female world of the domestic, reproduction, food and in this case, anger. The video frame is set around Nina Sobell’s leg as she sits on a chair, and then balances an egg on her knee. With a prepped chicken carcass on her foot, she then raises her foot and using her fist, smashes the egg on her knee, the egg yolk dripping over her bare leg. (See Images 21, 22) Action repeated. Over the eight minutes and fourteen seconds of video, Sobell smashes nine eggs on her knee, a challenge as her leg becomes more and more slippery with yolk. After the final egg, which Sobell smashes repeatedly, the artist starts to handle the chicken as though it were a very small child, clapping and whistling songs to it.\textsuperscript{114} This viewer

\textsuperscript{112} In the broader context, men were also making funny video art in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the pioneers working in video at this moment were male artists with whom Suzanne Lacy, Martha Rosler, and Lisa Steele would have been working in a kind of dialogue. For example, the themes of subjectivity and gender identity were central to the works of Vito Acconci (\textit{Two Track}, 1971, \textit{Undertone}, 1972), and Bruce Nauman (\textit{Flesh to White to Black to Flesh}, 1968). William Wegman and John Baldessari used humor in their videos from the 1970s as a form of critique and to emphasize absurdity and irony. Works include Wegman’s \textit{Stomach Song}, 1970, \textit{Crooked Finger/Crooked Stick}, 1972, and \textit{Rage and Depression}, 1972 and Baldessari’s \textit{I Am Making Art}, 1971, and \textit{Baldessari Sings Lewitt}, 1972.


\textsuperscript{114} Sobell also makes the chicken recite a little poem near the end of the video: “And every night remember me, On your platter neat as can be, All the chickens you have eaten, And the eggs that you have beaten. Say bye bye, Bye bye!”
cannot help but see this work as a reaction to the anxiety and stress of the feminine mystique politicized by Betty Friedan, as previously discussed in Chapter One. Sobell embodies the homemaker described by Friedan as being unfulfilled with domestic tasks. The egg’s shell, while strong enough to protect the unborn chick when carefully watched over by the mother hen, is fragile enough to be shattered in one hand when it is neglected or mishandled. The broken egg is thus symbolic of the woman’s need for change. The piece is a rejection of domesticity and the social isolation that domestic life can inflict on many women. The setting is not the kitchen itself, but Sobell’s reference to the domestic ritual of food preparation and (in regards to the eggs) the bearing and tending of small children places this work squarely in the realm of the kitchen.

Sobell’s 1978 video Hey! Chicky! at ten minutes ten seconds, is a much more disturbing piece in which the artist alternately plays with, dances with and caresses a raw chicken carcass which resembles a tiny human body. Unlike Chicken on Foot, Sobell’s face with crossed eyes and odd expressions as well as most of her body are visible. The artist mouths the words to music that is playing, rolls her eyes, and turns the chicken into a plaything. The piece has an odd tone of being lighthearted and silly but extremely disconcerting as well. For the first three minutes of the video Sobell removes the chicken from its plastic packaging, and then takes out the neck and giblets from inside of the bird. With humorous and overt reference to pornography, Sobell then uses the severed neck to repeatedly penetrate the body cavity of the bird, nauseatingly simulating intercourse. Action repeated with a slimy handful of giblets. Sobell’s video is a satire of pornographic film, not just through her actions but also in her very close framing and visual cropping. The flesh in this piece is reminiscent of a woman’s body but since it is a chicken, the
aesthetic connection is alarming and disgusting. At one point Sobell rubs the chicken on her naked torso and then puts parts of the raw chicken into her mouth. (See Image 23) The video ends with Sobell stuffing the chicken into a plastic purse and latching it closed. (See Images 24, 25)

The joy she exhibits in this process is very much like that of Lucille Ball when she played with the bread dough. There is a moment of childish delight as the artist squishes the chicken into the purse, which is made of hard plastic. It is a protective carry case that hides the chicken. The purse is another symbol of femininity that Sobell alters. As she jauntily swings it under her arm, who would ever imagine the purse to be concealing a chicken carcass and not the trappings of femininity? The more traditional lipstick, compact mirror, and wallet one might expect are exchanged for bacteria laden raw poultry. The meat, in its intended use, speaks to expected normalcy within domestic space, as chicken is ubiquitous on the North American dinner table. Sobell is the wild woman, her “uncontrol” a satire of what happens if domestic ritual is not performed appropriately, and gender normativity not observed. Sobell’s satire in both videos involves the conflict function of humor, as she takes on the absurdity of patriarchy through behavior that rejects of the dominant social order, but without a fear of reprisal since she is using humor.

Sobell’s work differs from Schneeman’s most dramatically in its scale. Meat Joy is large and epic in part due to the legendary quality that has stayed with it over forty years.115 By putting her body at the forefront of much of her work, Schneeman’s work is

recognized to be grounded in her self, both physically and psychologically. In contrast, both *Chicken on Foot* and *Hey! Chicky!* are intimate in scale and unimposing. In both pieces, Sobell’s close framing and absurd silliness makes it seem as though the unfolding scenes are witness to personal unleashing. Sobell performs a woman that is letting go of all social norms and expectations both with regard to her body and the constraints of domestic space. It is the sense of abandon that links Sobell’s and Schneeman’s works to that of Lacy. The wildness performed by these women brings to the surface the feminist ideal of throwing away boundaries imposed by a patriarchal society, and unabashedly being their own selves.

Without the context of second wave feminism, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From, Chicken on Foot, Hey! Chicky!* and *Meat Joy* do not carry the heavy punch they initially delivered. The radical aesthetics and statements that the artists made through their works are idealistic and uninhibited. Suzanne Lacy was driven to turn herself into a snarling animal, Nina Sobell crushed eggs on her body and partook in a crazed chicken dance, and Carolee Schneeman performed what became known as a famously notorious orgy of excess.

With this arsenal of information in mind, a final revisit to *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* is in order. Lacy’s cannibalistic imagery clearly makes evident her satire of Julia Child and implicitly, patriarchy. However the tongue-in-cheek silliness of the video also tells a story to which women who were homemakers could relate. The realities of domesticity oscillated for many people between satisfaction and the doldrums, resulting in a space ripe for kitchen humor. A space where women could laugh at themselves and

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perhaps their situations when necessary, and yet still feel validated in their circumstances or choices. Thus as Suzanne Lacy found Julia Child’s language about imagining oneself as a lamb so ridiculous as to warrant satire, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* lets the viewer imagine herself unleashing the beast within while at the same time embodying the chef and hostess. The complicated nature of personal identity and femininity is played out in the video. Lacy’s use of kitchen humor validates the multiplicities of an audience of women. *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* exists as a call to action for women in 1976 and plays out the complexities of kitchen humor and second wave feminism in this reading, more than forty years later.
Chapter Two Images


*Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, www.vdb.org School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*
Image 3: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, holding lamb ribs
*Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org) School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

Image 4: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, demonstrating lamb scapula
*Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org) School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

Image 7: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, holding a lamb head
Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, www.vdb.org School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Image 8: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, comparing leg bones
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Image 11: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, demonstrating deboning
*Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org) School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

Image 12: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, devolving into beast
*Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org) School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*
Image 13: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, lamb falls/is tossed off the counter by the artist. *Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, www.vdb.org School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

Image 14: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, Lacy as chef holds the roast for the audience to see. *Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, www.vdb.org School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*
Image 15: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, brandishing the carving tools
*Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org) School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

Image 16: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, conclusion and wine instruction
*Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org) School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

Image 18: Lacy, *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, Lacy-as-beast dives in to the roast

*Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, [www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org) School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*


Chapter Two Appendices

Appendix 1 – Selected Video and TV Transcripts

Transcript of Julia Child deboning from “Roast Leg of Lamb”, The French Chef: 2:17:
“Now it’s easy enough to get the butcher to take the hip bone out for you, but to get the leg bone is a little bit more of a problem. And there are two ways of taking it out, that’s where it lies. You can loosen it from inside of the meat and scrape the meat down and then when you get down to the knee joint inside to make a slit in the skin and then cut all around the bone there, cut out the uh, tendons and then pull the bone out, but it makes a hole in the side, and I like the meat left whole with no tears in it. And so, to get it out from inside, you have your bone attached, you cut all the meat away and then you scrape all the way down and cut and cut and cut, and then, you get down to the most difficult part which is at the knee joint right here where the skin is very, very thin.”

Transcript of Lacy deboning from Learn Where the Meat Comes From: 0:11 – 3:26:
[Demonstrating how to remove a bone, close-up of her arm in the leg of lamb] “Ok now we’re just making this last final cut this is the difficult part, cutting those tendons down there… think we got it. Now twist… there, got the bone out.”

11:10 [Voice over]: Ask your butcher to remove the fell and all fat from the whole six and a half pound leg. He will willingly remove the hip and [Lacy with fangs heavy breathing and snarling are louder than the voice over, she has hands all over the lamb] at the large end of the meat, but may balk at taking out the leg bone from inside the meat. If you have to do this yourself locate the ball joint end of the leg bone buried in the thick end of the meat [snarling Lacy-as-beast’s excitemt level has raised, she opens her arms and stands up e.g.: Look at this!] Cut around it to loosen the flesh, then scrape the flesh away down the length of the bone until you come to its opposite ball joint inside the meat and …. Now comes the most difficult part of the operation [Lacy-as-beast is rough handling the lamb, snarling loudly] releasing the bone from the tendons attaching it to the rear shank, being very careful not to pierce through the knee flesh.”
Appendix 2

*Mary’s Little Lamb*, by Sarah Josepha Hale

Mary had a little lamb,
whose fleece was white as snow.

And everywhere that Mary went,
the lamb was sure to go.

It followed her to school one day
which was against the rule.

It made the children laugh and play,
to see a lamb at school.

And so the teacher turned it out,
but still it lingered near,

And waited patiently about,
till Mary did appear.

"Why does the lamb love Mary so?"
the eager children cry.

"Why, Mary loves the lamb, you know."
the teacher did reply.
A woman, encircled by a beast, raises her arm to slay the monstrosity. In a dramatic image, St. Martha of Bethany is depicted “slaying the dragon of kitchen drudgery.”  

116 Her arm lifted above her head with a broom raised in the moment before whacking the dragon, the beast having curled itself around her lower half. St. Martha is haloed with green and black, a small basket or purse balanced delicately by its handle on her opposite wrist. St. Martha is quite lovely in the tradition of art deco: long, clean color blocks make up the composition. The dragon is a somewhat unwieldy blob of a creature, its open mouth showing peach-colored teeth, matching the skin tone of St. Martha’s featureless face and hands. Though the story depicted is of a saint, the image is from a different canon than the Bible; it was on the cover of the first edition of the authoritative *The Joy of Cooking*, self-published out of economic necessity in 1931 by its author Irma S. Rombauer. (See Image 1) This cookbook came into American homes during the first year of food riots resulting from the Great Depression, when adequate food and the symbol of a happy home went hand in hand. The cover of *The Joy of Cooking*, designed by Rombauer’s daughter Marion, foreshadows what Betty Friedan so aptly named the *feminine mystique* over thirty years later in 1963. Through this image the homemaker could see herself taking control and destroying the “drudgery” of her everyday life – promised in this case by the virtues and the “Joys” of the cookbook.  

117 Martha is the saint of servants and cooks, and the patron saint of cooking. In the biblical story told in Luke 10:38-42, New International Version, Jesus visits the house of Mary and Martha and while Mary sits and listens to Jesus, Martha does all the housework, and complains about it to Jesus. Jacobus de Voragine’s
The dragon being slayed by St. Martha on the cover of The Joy of Cooking could be seen as an embodiment of the drudgery depicted later as the feminine mystique. As Friedan wrote of the stereotyped norms that came to dominate the American suburban experience for women in the postwar era:

In the fifteen years after World War II, this mystique of feminine fulfillment became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture. Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife…

However, Friedan goes on to explain that a “problem with no name” was driving ambitions, intelligent, competent women to depression, anxiety, and a general feeling of dissatisfaction, because they were staying at home trying to fulfill the role of wife and mother and find personal satisfaction within the boundaries of domesticity. “Drudgery” as the image of St. Martha is subtitled, is a mild term for the feelings of ennui and loss of self experienced by many homemakers and was widely recognized as a problem faced by homemakers.119


118 Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, 3.

More than four decades later, another Martha, artist Martha Rosler took on the dragon of kitchen drudgery in her videos *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), *Vital Statistic of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977), *A Budding Gourmet* (1974) and *The East is Red and the West is Bending* (1977). In *Semiotics of the Kitchen* Rosler acts as the cooking show hostess, though not in the polished image of Julia Child with her string of pearls. In this piece the well-recognized monster of patriarchy has pushed Rosler to attack the feminine mystique through a demonstration of kitchen utensils and tools tinged with violence and anger, but with a twist.

Rosler’s humor is the key to the impact of *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. Returning to the definition of satire written by the Editorial Collective of *Heresies* Rosler’s use of satire is also vital to the effect of her work. Rosler is indeed “merciless, unrepentant and probing”\(^\text{120}\) in her satire both of Julia Child and her context in patriarchy and society. The video opens with Rosler holding a menu board in front of her with the title of the work on it, carrying the inferred message “What’s today’s special? *Semiotics of the Kitchen.*” (See Image 2) After twenty seconds the camera pulls out from the fixed shot to reveal the set and Rosler who is dressed in a black turtleneck shirt and black pants, the customary wardrobe of the theatrical stagehand (See Image 3). The viewer sees a small table with tools carefully arranged all over it, a cheap-looking refrigerator (the height of Rosler’s shoulders, not the current standard largess) and small stove behind the artist, pots hanging to her right on the edge of shelves that hold other kitchen supplies including a tea pot, pans, canisters, and a few books (one presumes cookbooks). It is a very compact kitchen.

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Though this definition was published a full decade after most of the work in this chapter was made, it speaks to the way satire was being used a strategy previous to its definition, as so very often the arts are at the cutting edge of philosophical experimentation and expression.
set. If this were a functioning kitchen, which it might be because of the cable-type
hardware fixed to the wall that is visible going into the stove and refrigerator, one
imagines a small apartment with a kitchen to one side, as opposed to the grand,
surburban, openness conveyed in Julia Child’s television kitchen on *The French Chef*,
whom Rosler is satirizing. The artist has referred to her character as the “antipodean Julia
Child,” being diametrically opposite to Child in every way from her choice of clothing,
and her handling of the props, to the emotional tone Rosler conveys. The set itself
establishes that positioning in the opening sequence.

The camera stops panning out as Rosler sets down the menu board and puts on a
smock-type apron that covers her from shoulders to below the waist, saying “apron” as
she does so. Unlike Julia Child’s apron, which is a skirt-front type, the apron worn by
Rosler is the costume of the character the artist is about to play, a simple difference that
brings certain economic class implications into her wardrobe (See Image 4). Julia Child’s
clothing on her television program was consistently a blouse, usually blue or orange,
open at the collar, and in the early years of the program the École des Trois Gourmandes
badge affixed to it. Child always wore a short apron over trousers or long skirt, often a
string of pearls, all resulting in a tone of professionalism. (See Image 5) Rosler has no
pearls, no fitted blouse or coiffed hair, and in contrast adorns herself with the
recognizable uniform of the kitchen, calling to mind the lunch-lady at a cafeteria counter

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121 Martha Rosler, “To argue for a video of representation. To argue for a video against the mythology of
everyday life” *Conceptual Art: a critical anthology*. Edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson. (The
122 In 1975 David Antin called out the important role of video art and the critique of television as indicative
123 Another observation that indicates the video was filmed in a small studio space or apartment is that
during the initial minute and seven seconds before Rosler starts to name her tools, faint voices can be
heard, a hallway conversation or possibly a radio or television broadcast.
more so than the sophisticated chef. The artist’s long hair is tucked in place with the apron and in the black-and-white video, the apron itself is a drab shade of gray. Rosler’s monotone suggests that the character in the video is fighting apathy or dullness in stark contrast to Child, whose voice was sing-songy and jovial, and gestures quite graceful. Rosler presents a homemaker who is the antithesis of such cheer: she generally stares ahead blankly, occasionally looking directly at the camera and thereby making eye contact with the viewer, without explaining her actions.

Over the six-minutes, nine seconds of video, Rosler methodically moves through the various kitchen tools alphabetically, saying only their names and offering a demonstration of how they work. The ritual performance of the words nods to an often text-based practice among Conceptual artists, where the significance of the spoken words change, sometimes even becoming meaningless sounds, as seen in John Baldessari’s 1971 video I Am Making Art. Baldessari’s video is 18 minutes and 46 seconds of the artist saying “I am making art” repeatedly, accompanied by simple, somewhat awkward gestures, a work that is actively about Conceptual art and involves the kind of absurdism also used by Rosler. The only words spoken in Semiotics of the Kitchen are the names of the tools and the last six letters of the alphabet: apron, bowl, chopper, dish, egg-beater, fork, grater, hamburger-press, icepick, juicer, knife, ladle, measuring implements, nut-cracker, opener, pan, quart bottle, rolling pin, spoon, tenderizer, U, V, W, X, Y, Z.

125 Research by this author has uncovered an article by Charlotte Brunsdon, “Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha, and Nigella” with mistakes about Semiotics of the Kitchen, including mis-transcription of the video, and describing the artist only with “hair hanging over her shoulders” – which happens in only the first thirty seconds of the work, that it calls to question whether or not the author has even seen the video, or is perhaps working from a second-hand description of it. I would expect the author, a well-published
By using the alphabet as an organizing principle, Rosler follows a structure that itself is evocative of a job well done, as referring to the “A to Z” of something means completeness. Additionally, by applying the configuration of the alphabet Rosler uses the most basic of organizing systems, the one familiar to young children as a way of naming and making sense of the world. Knowledge of “the ABCs” is a reference to education and literacy and is simultaneously a recognition of the high value placed on these elements of social order. The alphabet also has symbolic meaning as primary, as in important and first. Using the alphabet, Rosler critiques the “primary” role of woman in the home. In this case the “A to Z” is Rosler’s critique of all social implications of the kitchen and women’s resulting oppression. The organizing system of the alphabet, which usually suggests a linear order, when mapped against the simmering rage of Rosler’s character in Semiotics of the Kitchen, results in a jarring disconnect.

In contrast with her minimal and contained use of language, Rosler’s demonstrations are often violent and border on the absurd. With each word, the artist demonstrates an aggressive version of the intended use of the tool, for example the innocuous metal hamburger-press becomes a hand-sized snapper and biter, the wooden rolling pin is “rolled” with intensity at chest-height and becomes a veritable club that could break a sternum or crack a rib. The issue of domestic violence simmers under the surface throughout the video, with Rosler easily fitting into the role of the battered woman. There is an ambiguity about the role Rosler is playing, what would push her to see her own tools as weapons in this way?

Rosler demonstrates that each object was chosen for its symbolic significance, and does not simply represent its intended function, but rather has layered cultural associations. In a 1981 interview Rosler stated:

I was suggesting that the signs imposed on women are extremely diminishing. This woman is implicated in a system of extreme reduction with respect to herself as a self.

As the video progresses, the objects being demonstrated, the words being uttered, and the actions being performed are entwined and laden with implications about women’s subjectivity.

Like Suzanne Lacy’s misuse of meat in *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* and *Voices in the Desert*, here we see Martha Rosler misusing her tools. The artist changes the function of the kitchen tools and as a result changes their meaning: the apron is not for protecting clothing but for constraining the wearer, the wooden tenderizer is not for preparing meat but for smashing human flesh, the opener does not reveal the contents of a can but functions as an awkward contraption of noise pollution. Although the title of the work is *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, curator and scholar Helen Molesworth describes that semiotics is not up to the task of categorizing and defining the role the artist is presenting.

… [the artist] humorously skewered both the mass-media image of the smiling, middle-class, white housewife and theories of semiotics, suggesting that neither was able to provide an adequate account of the role of wife/mother/maintenance provider.

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127 Weinstock. “Interview With Martha Rosler,” 85. Rosler goes on to say: “The expression of anger is a step toward resistance and change and, as the women's liberation movement discovered, it's a step that can't be bypassed. Until you face your own anger, you can't get rid of it or channel it constructively.” (86)

The culinary objects are transformed into potential weapons and instruments of liberty. This embodies the embrace by feminists of the idea of turning tools into weapons. To quote the popular feminist folk singer Ani DiFranco, “Every tool is a weapon if you hold it right.”

For instance, Rosler picks up a large carving knife, shows it to the camera, saying ‘knife’ and then changes her grip, stabbing it through the air at chest height toward the camera, demonstrating not how it could be used to chop onions or carve a turkey but instead how it could be used to kill a person. (See Image 6 and, in contrast, Image 7, where Julia Child is using a large knife with one of its intended culinary purposes, here demonstrating how to carve a roast).

Clearly, Rosler’s action is reminiscent of the famous stabbing scene in the 1960 film Psycho, but instead of taking the role of the beautiful victim Marion Crane, Rosler assumes the role of the aggressor, the cross-dressing and crazed Norman Bates. (See Image 8) The dramatic scene in the film, made all the more suspenseful due to the musical score of dissonant string instruments by Bernard Herrmann, is easily recalled in full detail by Rosler’s simulated assault. In the film, the stabbing knife is seen aimed into the camera lens, creating the sensation that the viewer is the victim.

\[129\] Notably, this is not using the master’s tools as weapons – as Audre Lorde so rightfully claimed, the master’s tools cannot take down the master’s house. She questioned: What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable. Semiotics of the Kitchen does not engage Lorde’s questions about racism, but does engage matters of economic status, through Rosler’s use of a small kitchen and the specific objects in question – this is not a woman fulfilling the American dream of the high-tech kitchen in the suburban house. Significantly, in Rosler’s video, the artist uses the mistress’ tools, the eggbeater, the rolling pin, to take down the master’s house. Rosler attacks the control of patriarchy by redefining the function of the tools of sexual oppression. The objects so closely associated with domestic tasks as to render them ultimately feminine become powerfully aggressive in the hands of the artist.

\[130\] From the song “My I.Q.” in her album Puddle Dive (Righteous Babe Records, 1993).
Rosler as the antipodean Julia Child, stabs the imaginary victim, but is it an act of self defense against the men of patriarchy or is it an act against the obliging woman who conforms to patriarchy’s demands? Director Alfred Hitchcock created a scene that made the viewer imagine the horror; the death scene in *Psycho* ends with blood swirling down the shower drain, but the body of the victim is not actually shown mutilated. Rosler creates an analogous effect with her stabbing actions, requiring the viewer to imagine both the victim and the messy results within the small kitchen. Rosler’s choice to emulate this scene is fits neatly into her overall approach to *Semiotics of the Kitchen* in which aggression is mimicked, but not actually implemented.

Similarly, during the artist’s demonstration of a ladle (See Image 9) and then a spoon, Rosler feigns stirring something in a big pot and then flings the imaginary contents out of the pot, her fridge and kitchen walls becoming splattered with the imaginary, hot substance. When she says “measuring implements,” Rosler holds a metal one cup-sized measuring cup and measuring spoons and with the tablespoon she first simulates putting something into the cup and then, once again, flings the contents out of the cup and onto the floor and walls. One envisions the kitchen getting covered in food: soup dripping down the walls, flour and spices dusting the floor, making a messy paste of the liquid that was previously flung. Again in contrast, Julia Child does not fling any food – rather the opposite as can be seen, for instance, in her careful use of a ladle to pour just the right amount of batter into the middle of the crepe pan in the episode “French Crepes” of *The French Chef* (see Image 10).

At another point, Rosler demonstrates a metal nutcracker, with reference to the signified meaning of the object and word, as well as the obvious double entendre to male
genitals, robotically bringing the sides together on an imaginary nut that is tough to crack. Three times the tool makes almost no sound: then Rosler looks down at the tool and opens and closes it three more times, now with purposeful metallic clacking of one side of the tool against the other. While less overtly violent than the stabbing with the knife, fork or icepick seen earlier in the video, the inclusion of the nutcracker is notable because of the reference to the sensitive male genitalia. Though feminists have more routinely been called “ball busters,” a “nut cracker” is not a heavily veiled reference. Even Rosler’s demonstration of a pan is a violent action. Rosler holds a small cast iron frying pan at torso height and lunges it back and forth in front of herself, (see Image 11) in a movement reminiscent to one that would flip an item of food in a hot pan; however in this instance, the gesture is more like jabbing an imaginary individual in the chest with the blunt metal weapon. In comparison, when Julia Child flips something in a pan it is (for the most part) a controlled and precise action (see Image 12). By the time the artist says the word “tenderizer,” following it with several whacks of the wooden block that is the head of the tool against the table, these kitchen tools have taken on the guise of weapons – not only of destruction but also of torture. When the artist’s movements are not overtly violent, the demonstrations result in jarring sounds, the unharmonious clambering of metal on metal, and the overall sense that this is a kitchen in a state of controlled aggression.

Rosler ends the work by holding a carving knife in one hand and a carving fork in the other and uses them as extensions of her arms as she makes her body into the letters U, V, W, X and Y. For the letter Z, Rosler slashes the knife through the air to make a Z, and then says “zee” in a conclusive manner. The slashing of the Z is similar to the
trademark action of the fictional wily “fox” Zorro, who leaves his mark on many an enemy in this way. Zorro, the folk hero who defends the people from villains, is an interesting archetype for Rosler to emulate. She pointedly does not allude to Wonder Woman or other supernatural action heroes or heroines. Rather, by slashing a Z, Rosler allies herself with the narratives of Zorro, including class warfare and a ‘normal’ person who is both a recognized citizen and a disguised avenger of evil. Though only a few seconds of the total video work, Rosler’s intimation of Zorro enhances the idea that she is critiquing or fighting something through her actions: Rosler shows herself in that brief moment to be the hero of the homemaker who takes on the ‘villain’ of patriarchal gender roles and the oppression of women through the kitchen. Z, the last letter of the alphabet and the last word Rosler utters in the video is the final word, as it were, that the everyday homemaker is taking up arms against patriarchal gender roles and the accompanying oppression.

In this absurd satire of Julia Child, Rosler turns culinary tools into weapons, and through her actions embodies the dissatisfaction of being a homemaker. In the final few seconds of Semiotics of the Kitchen, right after the Z, Rosler crosses her arms over her chest, looks directly into the camera and gives a theatrical shrug (See Image 13). The shrug that follows the slashing of the Z suggests a reconsideration of the entire work. It is the shrug, as much as the slashing, that slays the dragon of kitchen drudgery in Semiotics of the Kitchen. Though Rosler’s actions are severe throughout the video, the artist shows the viewer that she recognizes the absurdity of the situation, or perhaps society’s indifference, in that shrug. The shrug, and accompanying facial expression with eyes wide and eyebrows lifted, is at once funny and validating of the humor throughout the
video. The shrug also acknowledges the viewer directly, a technique that reinforces the
viewer’s awareness of the video camera itself and the mediated artifice of video. Her
purposeful gestures, careful choice of words and tools, and resulting critique of the
domestic realm generate multiple roles (homemaker, television hostess, heroine of the
common folk), which result in a work that exemplifies feminist kitchen humor.

It is worth noting a comparison of shrugs between Rosler and Julia Child. There is
an episode of *The French Chef* in which Child gives an uncharacteristic shrug. It is at the
end of the episode “Croissants” when Child is sitting at her table set for a continental
breakfast of home made croissants, jam and café au lait. She says: “So you can really feel
that you’re having breakfast in Paris [shrug] without even making the trip.” The shrug
(See Image 14) is a self-conscious gesture that reinforced the very personable and
likeable qualities of Child. The chef recreates a typical French breakfast – though of
course it was chic by American standards at the time – and in doing so emphasizes that
her audience of predominantly middle class, American women could feel comfortable
with such a menu themselves. Child’s shrug dispels any sense of pretention or affectation
that her food could instill, and the local daily could easily substitute for *Le Figaro*,
Child’s newspaper of choice for her morning read. Julia Child’s shrug is very different in
nature than Rosler’s shrug which functions as a recognition of her absurd situation. Yet
the use of gesture, so full of nuance from both women, is insightful. Their shared use of
such a gesture addresses an unspoken physical language that is at once identifiable by a
wide variety of viewers, the shrug undoubtedly reading as a “well, why not?” from Julia
Child, and a “what else are you gonna do?” from Martha Rosler.
Close Visual Comparison of Rosler and Julia Child

A close reading of Child’s words and gestures is important to understand the techniques, nuances and humor of Rosler’s satire. This section will analyze use of kitchen tools, mishandling of food and the apron both in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and in episodes of *The French Chef*.

Kitchen Tools

Knives and cooking pans are fundamental tools of the chef and the different ways they are handled and used by Child and misused by Rosler emphasize the pent up frustration, and lurking oppression of domestic maintenance work. Rosler’s character demonstrates the tools so completely inappropriately as to elicit the laugh.

Unlike Lacy’s video, Rosler’s satire is not mapped against a specific episode of *The French Chef*, but rather the tone of the show. For example, when Rosler demonstrates a pan by jutting it forward violently, it is a gesture that is not *too* different from Child’s when she makes an omelet in “The Omelet Show” (Season 9, 1972), which involves quickly and repeatedly pulling the pan towards herself in order to turn the omelet over. Child’s expert handling of the pan is seen here as well as when she flips crepes in the episodes *French Crepes I and II* (Season 1, 1963). In each of these cases, the gesture is not a violent one, but it is so efficient that the delicate crepes flip perfectly in the air and land back in the pan. Since the food in the pan is being so proficiently handled, with Julia Child there is no sense of hostility. Rosler, in contrast, presents aggression almost exclusively through her stabbing, flinging and jutting. With these actions Rosler aims to keep the feminine mystique at bay, and like St. Martha on the
cover of the *Joy of Cooking*, use her domestic tools to slay the dragon of kitchen drudgery.

At the end of *Semiotics of the Kitchen* when Rosler holds a carving knife and fork in her hands above her head to make the letters W, X, Y and Z, the gestures are actually reminiscent of an episode of *The French Chef* called “Fish in Monk’s Clothing” (Season 7, 1970) (See Images 15 and 16). In this episode the show begins with a close-up of half of a swordfish on a chopping block, a huge fish to see in the scale of a personal kitchen. Child starts off the show with a big smile on her face and a mischievous look in her eyes. Not so unlike Rosler, Child’s handling of the carving tools in this episode is purposefully humorous. Her arms are down and out of the frame for the first few seconds, but then she raises them up in the air dramatically showing at least four alarmingly large tools including a cleaver, a serrated-edge knife that is the size of a small saw, and a rubber mallet. Child brings her tools down broad-side on the fish and exclaims: “I’m all ready to make Fish In Monk’s Clothing, today on The French Chef!” (0:12 – 0:21, leading to opening credit music). Child’s posture with tools in the air is very similar to that of Rosler making the letter W with the carving knife and fork near the end of *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. The similarity is remarkable since it is such an unnatural way to hold cooking tools. The posture would only be made in order to send a message – for Rosler the message is a rejection of the constraints of patriarchy, for Child the message is a joke about expected feminine behavior in the kitchen. Rosler shows the artist behaving in a way unthinkable for the chef, emphasizing that domestic maintenance work while full of
joy when performed by Julia Child, can be full of rage when performed by Martha Rosler.\textsuperscript{131}

**The Mishandling of Food**

As has been discussed, Rosler’s satire comes in large part because of her misuse of the kitchen tools, whereas Child also found humor in the occasional mishandling of tools (as described in “Fish in Monk’s Clothing”) and likewise delighted in the occasional mishandling of meat – very specifically poultry, as described in Chapter 1. This is seen in the episodes “To Roast a Chicken” and “Cooking Your Goose” and Child’s anthropomorphism of the plucked, headless chicken and goose carcasses, by having them “sit” together in a row, “wave” their featherless wings at the audience, (See Images 17, 18) and in her reference to all the chickens as “Miss” or “Madam.” Child brings a similar light-hearted humor to shows that involve especially large animals, such as the swordfish, and a huge thirty pound lobster she refers to as “Big Bertha” in an episode called “The Lobster Show.” During an episode called “Sole Bonne Femme” (Season 9, 1972) Child holds up a very large sole (a very long, broad fish) by the back of the head, and shakes it a bit so that it almost looks like it is swimming, and says “See how to turn this denizen of the deep into Sole Bonne Femme, today on The French Chef!” (0:15-0:20) (See Image 19), and on the “Roast Suckling Pig” episode Child referred to the meat as “Mr. Pig” and concluded with a light joke in her lilting voice: “As someone once said, I don’t know who it was, What an elaborate way to serve an apple! Ha ha!” (28:15)

\textsuperscript{131} As Rosler herself has stated “[a]n anti-Julia Child replaces the domesticated ‘meaning’ of tools with a lexicon of rage and frustration.” Video of the artist, Ubuweb, accessed Jan 8. 2013 http://www.ubu.com/film/rooler_semiotics.html
What differentiates the mishandling by Child from that of Martha Rosler is the lightness and \textit{joie de vivre} in Child’s performances and the dead-pan seriousness in Rosler’s video. Child’s lightness of humor is also evident in the titles of the television episodes. Although Child used utilitarian titles such as “The Potato Show,” “French Crepes I and II”, or “The Lobster Show”, there are some witty (or at least smile-inducing) examples as well, including “Cooking Your Goose,” “The Spinach Twins,” “Waiting for Gigot,” (Season 7, 1970), “Lamb Stew is French Too” (Season 2, 1964), “Operation Chicken” (Season 6, 1966) and “The Good Loaf” (Season 9, 1972). The title of “The Spinach Twins” (Season 6, 1970) becomes even more funny after viewing the episode, for the ‘twins’ in this case are Child and her good friend, chef Simone Beck, who could not be more different than Child in looks, voice or general demeanor. Beck was a petite woman, whose voice in “The Spinach Twins” is somewhat strict and school-marmish, without the musicality of Child’s. The humor of the way food in used in these titles is not “mishandling” in terms of Rosler’s feigned throwing of food but it carries a gentle poking of fun. Where Rosler used humor to bring attention to patriarchal oppression and prescribed gender normativity, Child used humor to put her audience at ease, make herself more relatable, and bring levity to cooking lessons that could seem intimidating to the uninitiated.

In addition to the purposeful mishandling of food above, Julia Child was known for making the occasional mistake or dropping food during \textit{The French Chef} resulting in spills on the stove or counter top. This is an element of her show made even more famous by impersonations of Child by Dan Ackroyd on \textit{Saturday Night Live} in 1978 and Meryl Streep in the film \textit{Julie and Julia} from 2009. Rosler brings this element of the messy
kitchen into her satire as well, such as when she feigns throwing food with her ladle, spoon, and measuring spoon. Rosler’s imagined mess is purposeful, the soup in her pot no longer food but a medium for the expression of her ennui. Rosler is unperturbed by the imaginary mess, continuing as if her purposeful flinging of food is an expected aspect of cooking. In comparison, when Julia Child actually did drop food on *The French Chef*, it was by accident and she made it a teaching point for her audience. In the most famous example of Child’s food dropping (made so when it was mimicked almost word for word by Meryl Streep in *Julie and Julia*, See Image 19 of Streep and Image 20 of Child), during “The Potato Show” (Season 1, 1963) Child tried to flip a pan full of mashed potatoes and failed, resulting in liquidy potatoes dropped onto the stovetop and into the burner. The dialogue from the episode is telling about Child’s state of mind as she takes on the flip:

(13:50-14:10) [looks at pan, shakes it a bit] I hope that’s…[camera close-up on pan] I’m going to try…[camera close-up on pan] I’m going to try to flip this over which is a rather daring thing to do, but you’ve got to get a little bit of a crust on the bottom of it.

(14:24-15:06) [picks up pan and shakes a little bit again] I’m going to see if that is flippable, well, I’m going to try it anyways [nervous smile] when you flip anything you really, you just have to have the courage of your convictions particularly if it’s sort of a loose mass like this.

[Flips: potato mixture breaks apart, falls out of pan onto stove top and element]

Well, that didn’t go very well. [Child scoops up dropped potato from the stove: an element is starting to smoke] See when I flipped it I didn’t, I didn’t have the courage to do it the way I should have [She puts some dropped mixture back into the pan.] but you can always pick it up and if you’re alone in the kitchen who is going to see?

In the popularized Meryl Streep impersonation, the episode of *The French Chef* ends at this point, but in actuality, the flipping happens at just about the halfway mark of the
episode. Visibly shaken by the dropped potato, Child wipes sweat from her face and neck with a towel in two instances (See Image 21) before the show ends – a highly unusual event – but she salvages her dish and in doing so and demonstrates her absolute professionalism. Child soldiers on through two more potato dishes, including another potato pancake. The chef’s determination and gumption come to the forefront as she cooks the second potato pancake. She says, “Now I’m going to flip this, by gum” and then she executes a perfect flip of a pan-sized potato pancake. “There. You see that was much easier because it had the crust on there which held together.” (25:24-25:36)

Successful and conclusive, Child moved on.

“The Potato Show” presents a more sensitive or perhaps fragile side of Julia Child than usual, made evident at a point in between the two flips when she comments that one would not want to grate potatoes in advance because they would turn brown. She says:

… and you don’t want that [turning brown] to happen. It probably wouldn’t hurt them too much, but it doesn’t look well, that would be bad psychologically for the cook I think. (19:42-19:54).

Where Child demonstrates good humor, determination, and a woman who is tired but not beaten by unexpected accidents in the kitchen, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* shows anger, aggression, and apathy. All of this reinforces Rosler’s unemotional and assertive performance of un-joy in comparison to Child’s joie de vivre.

**The Apron**

Rosler’s satire extends to every element of her performance. For example, she emphasizes her role in the kitchen as being different from other locations in the house at the beginning of the video by resolutely donning her apron on camera. In contrast, Julia
Child began each program already wearing her apron, well prepared with a handy dish-towel tucked into the waist. One is led to believe Child wears her cook’s ‘uniform’ with ease and by choice, and that any personal transformation that may occur with the donning of the apron, happens off camera. In contrast to Rosler, who clearly has roles other than that of a cook, it is hard to imagine Child not dressed in her apron, ready to cook. This seemingly minor difference of when the apron is donned strongly reinforces Rosler’s message regarding two key ideas connected to the feminine mystique: that women must juggle multiple roles within the structure of domestic maintenance work, most of which are not confined to the kitchen; and that the role of the family cook is an oppressive one.

Such a close reading of similar gestures made by Martha Rosler and Julia Child give added dimension to both Rosler’s satire and Child’s more gentle humor. The different results of their mishandling of food; the different significance of the apron; and the different messages of the shrug reinforce the complexity of gender performativity as demonstrated by these two very public women.

**The Un-joy of Cooking**

Rosler’s satire is about more than Julia Child or how kitchen tools should be used. Rosler’s satire is of the *joie de vivre* that Child presents in *The French Chef*. Child exuded a love of the kitchen and all things related to cuisine, including a satisfaction in creating meals that made her husband “look good.” Consider, that in the episode of *The French Chef* called “Saddle of Lamb” (Season 5, 1966) Child explains that partially deboning a saddle of lamb makes the carving easier, either by the wife, in advance in the privacy of the kitchen, or by the husband, publicly at the dinner table. She says, “This
really all depends on the master of the house [smiling] and if he loves to carve, it’s sort of a nice show-off piece.”132 This point is relevant, since it shows Child taking pleasure in her presumed role in supporting the status of her husband by means of her cooking. It was through such social instruction that Child played a part in perpetuating ascribed gender roles (woman as the private face of the family, man as the public one), in some contradiction with her actual empowered self as a business-woman and media personality.133

Martha Rosler folds these predetermined private and public roles into her satire, her flatness of expression drawing attention to the jovial nature of Child and the culturally ascribed role of a contented woman in the private kitchen. Rosler was both responding to Julia Child and to the socially constructed role of women described by Simone de Beauvoir when she so famously wrote that “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.”134 There is an academic, intellectual quality to many of Martha Rosler’s videos that expands the conversation begun by the important work of the French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous into that of structuralism and post-structuralism, specifically Louis Althusser’s text “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1971), Situationist Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle (1967), and less explicitly to Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1976).135

133 There was French ambivalence to Child, but also sexist interpretation of her style, as explained/quoted by Polan: “In a backhanded appreciation that would have made Child cringe, the restaurateur Guy Savoy declared that ‘she explains her recipes like a housewife, but she knows how to do it and she does it genuinely.’” Maia de la Baume, “A ‘French Chef’ Whose Appeal Doesn’t Translate Well in France,” New York Times, September 17, 2009, A6. Quoted in Polan, Julia Child’s The French Chef, 272-273.
135 Although Michel Foucault’s books would not be published until a few years after Rosler made Semiotics of the Kitchen, his ideas about the controlling function of surveillance (and self-surveillance) are
These canonical Marxist texts develop ideas of how society constructs itself and how the individual *self* is fashioned as a result. Rosler has made reference to Althusser’s ideas in at least one interview in regards to language and what she considers the limits of Althusser’s *Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus*. Rosler is quoted saying:

Anyway, did I say language is oppressive? It can be. Language can be an instrument of control, or of liberation. In doing work on oppression, it's handy to talk in instrumental terms. Yet some of my resistance to the idea of an “ideological apparatus” is that it seems to reduce things to a purely instrumental level. I don't think that language can be characterized as only one thing, such as oppressive. Language is the ocean of civilization; everything is enacted within it; it is both oppressive and emancipatory.  

In his work, Althusser argued that society is shaped by Ideological State Apparatuses: institutions such as organized religion, education, and the military, with additional focus on the economic power dynamics of a capitalist society. Althusser wrote of society’s molding of the individual:

… the school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches ‘know-how’, but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its ‘practice.’ All the agents of production, exploitation and repression, not to speak of the ‘professionals of ideology’ (Marx), must in one way or another be ‘steeped’ in this ideology in order to perform their tasks ‘conscientiously’ -- the tasks of the exploited (the proletarians), of the exploiters (the capitalists), of the exploiters’ auxiliaries (the managers), or of the high priests of the ruling ideology (its ‘functionaries’), etc.

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In the case of *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, the ruling ideology is of course patriarchy, and the persona Rosler takes on in her video is rebelling against the “*subjection to the ruling ideology.*”

One can assume that Rosler’s homemaker knows how to use the tools of the kitchen as they were intended, but that she purposefully misuses them in order to show her dissatisfaction with the requirement of “conscientiously” performing the task she has been taught to do. This is the seat of the humor, where the use of satire as rebellion becomes evident. During the complex and transformational time for white middle-class women in the 1950s and 1960s, making food for one’s family and maintaining the expected gender norms was very much in keeping with Althusser’s ideas about an individual being steeped in the ideological apparatus of the state. The home could be understood as being a support mechanism for the institution of marriage, and normative behavior fitting within parameters identified by the state. Yet *The French Chef* itself sometimes walked a fine line towards the recognition of a liberated woman via the striving for personal satisfaction.

Film and media historian Dana Polan for example, has written in about this in his comprehensive book about Julia Child and *The French Chef*:

> To be sure, the emphasis on an esthetics of food – in its preparation, in its presentation, and in its consumption – might have to do with a feminine mystique in which the housewife plays into her own entrapment by devoting her time to food for her family that not only taste good but looks good (and thereby visually radiates her love for them and confirms her assumption of her domestic mission). On the other hand, though, it also could break free of feminine-mystique familialism to tap into a growing concern for a personalized, individualized lifestyle in which independent women (and men, as we’ll soon see) could find joys in living for themselves.\(^{138}\)

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Polan’s take on Child is a recognition that *The French Chef* contributed to both the oppressive feminine mystique and a personal joy found through cooking. The housewife may value herself based on the perceived success of the presentation of her food, yet on the flip side, the personal satisfaction Julia Child exuded as a result of her cooking could also validate the special place the kitchen holds for many women. The “independent women” that Polan refers to raises a lingering question of how children fit into the feminine mystique, and who will look after the children. In her satirical performance, Martha Rosler embodies this complex and transitionary moment in time that both reinforced gender roles and saw women fighting for personal agency, the “self” of her persona struggling to make itself seen as an individual through deadpan humor.

Another work by Rosler that speaks more directly to the role of the state in the development of the self is her epic video *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, 1977. In this video Rosler further politicized the measuring piece *Fluxclinic* (1966) by Japanese Fluxus collective Hi Red Center. In *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained*, Rosler had her body measured, documented and compared to averages, with a voice-over that describes the case of Tommy Smith, who became stunted physically and academically when his mother went to work and his father took over most of the caregiving duties. (See Image 22) The work proceeded to show Rosler dressing in a white

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wedding gown, and separately in a little black dress (presumably her liberated self), the be-gowned Rosler returning to the chart of her measurements and the state imposed social order, and the liberated Rosler in the little black dress walking briskly out of the frame of the camera. (See Images 23, 24) The piece ends with a short montage of photographs of bodies being measured and Rosler’s voice listing many atrocities that are inflicted upon women’s bodies.

*Vital Statistics* engages not just with socially prescribed gender norms but also the “othering” of any non-white, “feminized” body through the scientific measuring and documenting of Rosler’s entire nude body, with Rosler’s voice-over monologue about misogynist and socially prescriptive behavior. The work is very dark in its tone, a somber and foreboding examination of how the State can, and does, validate or invalidate categories of people it finds worthy of citizenship – both literal and implied citizenship in the functioning of society. For example, the continued practice of state identification (such as a driver’s license) in requiring the bearer’s gender, age, height and weight be included on the document for presumed verification, and potential disparagement if the categories are found to be somehow inappropriately completed.\(^{140}\) The only glimmer of hope in this piece is the moment when Rosler, wearing the little black dress walks off screen, presumably to a life outside of surveillance and measurement, but perhaps also to the antithesis of a shared cultural image of success and happiness symbolized by the white wedding gown. The little black dress is as much a costume as the wedding gown, with Rosler embodying both the virginal (in the white) and the sexualized (in the black).

\(^{140}\) In recent years the issue of state identification has received increased media attention for transgender people whose stated gender may not fit their presented gender. As a result of social stigmatization and the delegitimizing of the person, legal challenges have been made, and won, by transgender people to have their identification photos represent their regular everyday appearance (not for example with wigs or makeup removed).
The mother/whore binary that is played out suggests that Rosler in the little black dress still has social limits applied to her, even if she is somehow more empowered by being able to leave. *Vital Statistics* is important within the body of work Rosler was making in the mid to late 1970s, and offers a dark portrait of a controlled society.

Guy Debord’s ideas about spectacle and media imagery are also helpful to this analysis. Rosler’s work both directly and indirectly engages with class and economic power and Debord’s text *Society of the Spectacle* would have been familiar to her. The framework put forward by Debord is translatable to Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* when patriarchy is understood to be a functioning component of American capitalist society. Debord wrote,

> The spectacle grasped in its totality is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, an additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society.

Rosler’s video is a condemnation of exactly this kind of unrealism that drives the real society, that then turn into socially normative behaviors. Rosler expounds upon this through the woman’s willingness to be adorned with the wedding dress with a long veil draping over her head resulting in a demure, virginal appearance, akin to Biblical paintings of the Virgin Mary in her pose. Rosler as the bride stands on display after the long series of measurements, her body and costume recognized as a pinnacle of idealized femininity, a woman on the threshold of marriage, presented as an object to be consumed.

Debord continued about the spectacle:

> In all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life.\(^{141}\)

The voyeurism central to Vital Statistics is Rosler’s scathing commentary of this model in which the spectacle is the unifying mode of communication. Rosler uses the video to satirize the production of a woman, the socially imposed checks and balances against which she is compared and judged. One can consider Julia Child, or the persona she projected in The French Chef, as the condition and the goal of the patriarchal system. The contrived world of television broadcast into the homes of Americans validated the role of woman as homemaker. As the talented and content homemaker, Child was the spectacle necessary to maintain the patriarchal order and was at the same time indicative of the success of patriarchy. Rosler satirized this pop culture phenomenon in Semiotics of the Kitchen. The spectacle that is television content and the specific spectacle provided by camera in the kitchen, even in an instructive situation, speaks to a public desire to feel intimate through the screen, to watch and adopt behaviors, for the social norm to be reassuringly reinforced from and in the safe confines of the private residence.142

Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (written in 1973, published in 1975) depicts the exploitive pleasures of scopophilia.143 By her account voyeurism underpins the visual style of mainstream film, identifying the “woman as image” and the “man as bearer of the look”144 and resulting in the dichotomy of passive

143 Mulvey defines scopophilia: Where voyeurism “…has associations with sadism” and as such “fits well with narrative,” “Fetishistic scopophilia, on the other hand, can exist outside linear time, as the erotic instinct is focused on the look alone.” (368)
144 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Screen, (1975). Of course, this conversation on the gaze continued after Mulvey’s article was published, for example with Mulvey’s own “Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” inspired by Duel in the Sun,” in Feminism and Film Theory, edited by Constance Penley (New York, Routledge, 1988), 69-79.; Doane, “Film and Masquerade” 74-87;
female and active male. Mulvey writes that a complex interaction of looks (from the camera, from the audience, and between actors on the screen) exist within narrative cinema and that “Going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself.” In *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* Martha Rosler turns the viewing traditions of scopophilia and voyeurism on their heads. Rosler actively addresses the audience through her confrontation of the positioning of the viewer and her demand for recognition of her selfhood. By engaging the frame of the camera, forcing an intimate space, and politicizing her own body and lived experience, Rosler problematizes the role of the viewer and critiques the television and film industries that generally treated women as objects. Mary Ann Doane, in response to Laura Mulvey’s article, examined additional possible situations in which a woman could be the bearer of the look, questioning whether the gaze itself could be from a female position. This is complex as society has often identified the active woman (read: non-passive) as trouble-maker, and as Doane so astutely observed “There is always a certain excessiveness, a difficulty associated with women who appropriate the gaze, who insist upon looking.” Such are Rosler and also Suzanne Lacy in their videos by taking the subject position: they demand change, and claim a here-to-fore denied position. As rabble-rousers, Rosler and Lacy both prove themselves, with wit and sincerity, to be trouble-makers.

Rosler picks up the idea of the pop culture spectacle in other works as well, for example in *A Budding Gourmet*, 1974, a video in which the artist equates gourmet food

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146 Doane, “Film and Masquerade,” 3-4.
with sophistication, education, and French (and other western European) cultures while weaving in stereotypes about the racial “other” (in this case Brazil), and people without money or education. Though this work has a subtler undercurrent of satire than is seen in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Rosler’s overt references to popular culture influences shape the video.

In *A Budding Gourmet* the artist sits at a table set for one. The small, round table with a tablecloth is backlit so everything is seen in profile. The artist has hair neatly tied back, and is wearing a shirt that appears to be high collared with long, puffy sleeves. Her clothing and posture demonstrate the demure housewife. (See Image 25) This scene is revisited throughout the piece, but the majority of the video involves shots of photographs from magazines of gourmet food and restaurants, apparently French and Brazilian people, and a hand written sign that says, “I wish to become a gourmet.”

Over the 17 minutes, 45 seconds, the artist gives a speech about personal and social betterment through gourmet cooking, and the “finer things” in life with references to the French cookbook *Larousse Gastronomique*, and the ever-popular *Life Magazine*, which was known for its glossy photographs of what Rosler refers to as “fearless” menus by which she suggests food that is complex to make, but also gourmet, international and sophisticated. The character in the video positions herself in an inferred social hierarchy, with French culture at the pinnacle of sophistication, herself an American, in the middle, and South American, specifically Brazilian cultures as more “natural” (5:50) understood to mean less civilized. In her monologue, Rosler extols that

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147 As Laura Shapiro writes in *Something From the Oven, Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* in regards to the 1950s, which set the stage for the broad appeal and influence in the kitchen: “*Life* ran a series of spectacular food stories throughout the decade, elaborately photographed and accompanied by recipes for a fearless range of dishes: Szechuan noodles, pressed duck, bouillabaisse, kidney-liver kebabs.” (29-30).
one of the benefits of living in America is the appropriation the “best things of all times and all places and make them our own.” (15:40) Rosler’s video reflects that the social value of the woman and the home, and by extension, the more public man, are symbolically inscribed in the food.\textsuperscript{148} For example, in \textit{A Budding Gourmet} Rosler says of preparing impressive dinners for guests:

\begin{quote}
Making my own tomato sauce and not skimping. I even bought \textit{Larousse Gastronomique} and other books to find out about French cooking, but I must say, some of it was a little scary, I mean, all that work, and what if it didn’t come out? Still, Len likes me to make a good appearance for company, to give them a pleasant time and show them we know the finer things: books, paintings, music, and of course we try to keep the house and car looking nice. (4:26-4:55)
\end{quote}

Later in reference to a \textit{Life Magazine} menu for serving a Brazilian dinner, she continues, giving credence to (and thus reinforcing) the private, feminine tasks of the kitchen and the public, masculine tasks of the table:

\begin{quote}
All this is a lot of work for me, but it’s worth it, and I get my husband to carve the pork while the guests help themselves to the rest like the book suggests. (8:37-8:47)
\end{quote}

The woman in \textit{A Budding Gourmet} bolsters her role in the domestic sphere through her words and actions. There is less overt engagement with the drudgery of domestic tasks than in \textit{Semiotics of the Kitchen}, however the tone of voice is bland, and the character in this piece behaves as if there is no other possible life on her radar.

Rosler’s satire is successful because it is “imminently sociological, without a point of view or an analysis, one cannot produce it. …satire takes aim at a chunk of the social or cultural order”\textsuperscript{149} the purposefulness of the satire and the cultural order that is

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\footnote{148 Also note: 11:20-11:35: “The best cooks are like magicians, chefs are like orchestra conductors. Taste, mastery and magic are things that need cultivation. Art is not an accident.”}
\end{footnotes}
being targeted combine to offer an alternative to simply bearing the emotional weight caused by the “dragon of kitchen drudgery.” Unlike Rosler’s character, Julia Child’s generosity of spirit, translated through the medium of television, showed viewers a person who delighted in what she was doing, reveling in the physicality of food preparation,\(^{150}\) the tasting and the tools, and the gastronomical enjoyment of the fruits of her labors. As well as having the discerning palate and talent of a gourmet, Child, with her love of eating fine food was also a gourmand. She reinforces this enjoyment through the closing shots of *The French Chef* as she sits at her table set with the food she has just prepared, pours a glass of wine and looks directly into the camera, a twinkle in her eye, and signs-off with her signature “Bon appétite!” The parting shot of *A Budding Gourmet* strikes a stark contrast. Rosler’s table is set with dishes, but no visible food. To her right there is a covered pot, a classic porcelain-coated Dutch oven of the type made by the Descoware (bought in the 1960s by Le Creuset, which then took over the market), and due to its high price, indicative of the lifestyle of the gourmet Rosler has spoken about throughout the video.

Descoware pots were made popular in the United States in large part by Julia Child since she used them in *The French Chef*, for example in season 2, episode 6 “Cassoulet” (See Image 26). This type of pot was frequently visible in Child’s kitchen even when she did not use one in the actual recipe, as reinforced through the inclusion of a Descoware pot on the range in the reconstruction of Child’s kitchen in the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. (See Image 27) Child was adamant that she not give endorsements to specific brands of products on the program.

\(^{150}\) Dana Polan discusses Child’s enjoyment of the physicality of food, and offers an in depth reading of Child’s place in television history in *Julia Child’s The French Chef* (Duke University Press, Durham), 2011.
and Descoware was not an official corporate sponsor or underwriter of *The French Chef*. However gifts of equipment from companies could appear on the program as long as there was no expectation that Child would mention the brand name. There is no evidence that the Descoware pots Child used on the show were gifts from the company, but it is undeniable that she popularized the brand in North America. In the bland and bleak set of *A Budding Gourmet* Rosler’s pot is left untouched and she sits with an empty plate, bowl and glass throughout the duration of the video. In the final few seconds of the video the shot slowly moves into a close-up of the artist’s unmoving, relatively vacant back-lit face. There is no twinkle in her eye, and though she wishes to be a gourmet, the joy of the gourmand is lost to this character.

In contrast with Julia Child’s television persona, Martha Rosler shows her viewers a striking heaviness and lack of *joie de vivre*, not sorrow so much as the emotional weight of oppression. Rosler keeps her face blank, with no trace of a smile, or even ardent rebellion in both *A Budding Gourmet* and *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. The overall impression is that the oppressed Rosler character has no joy. The very notion of the “joy” of cooking is clearly an antithesis to this quietly fuming character. Rosler’s satire especially in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, with her political agenda at the forefront, is the satire of the idea of experiencing joy in the domestic rituals of cooking.

Rosler chose well in making her satire of Julia Child and her effervescent joy, since Child represented much more than the food she cooked: she represented a kind of domestic perfection, and a television spectacle in Debord’s terms. The one element of the spectacle that Child does not fulfill is that of sexualized beauty, as Child was not

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151 Polan, *Julia Child’s The French Chef*. 133-135. Child’s desire to avoid making endorsements was so strong that masking tape was used to cover up brand names of products used on the show. (134)
beautiful and her unusual height gave her a very different presence than the stereotype of
the “perfect” housewife that June Cleaver represented. As Dana Polan has astutely
observed about the gendered implications of television and food preparation:

   Beyond the cooking show as a specific genre of instructional television in
the period, food was central to television’s representation of everyday life,
because success in its preparation signaled success in the domestic
American dream and in the feminine mystique that held that women’s
culinary perfection in the home setting was key to marital and familial
happiness and was, moreover, the foundation of one’s perfection as an
American woman.\(^{152}\)

In keeping with the correlation between success in food preparation and success in the
American dream, Rosler’s satire of Child’s joy is a satire that rejects that dream of post-
war America and domestic bliss. Child conveyed a joie de vivre that Rosler actively
opposed in her performance. Rosler’s satire is so extreme that she in fact, in almost no
way mimics Julia Child: she is funny because she takes the humor and joy out of the
scenario. Rosler portrays an active, arresting antithesis to joy that can only be termed un-
joy.\(^{153}\) The video could almost be called the *Un-Joy of Cooking*. Her absurd host is so
miserable that the cooking demonstration is not how to prepare food, but how to turn the
joy into apathy and aggression. Rosler does not actually make any movement to suggest
the eating of the food, unlike Child who reveled in her creations. Rosler’s demonstration
was of tools and gender only. Julia Child would scarcely be able to hold a straight face if
she were to perform in a similar manner. Rosler’s performance presents the complex
results of the un-joy of domesticity. If Child, a pop culture icon of the day, demonstrated
that one could (or should) experience joy in the quotidian rituals of cooking, how was a

\(^{152}\) Polan, *Julia Child’s The French Chef*, 70.

\(^{153}\) With a nod to Hélène Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa” in translation, the use of “un-think” (p. 882) as a
stridently political stance.
woman to respond if her self-hood was lost in the process? Rosler’s video asks: How could a woman feel joy in the face of patriarchal oppression and the feminine mystique? Her satire shows a woman who is undone and unfulfilled – the antipodean Julia Child who is oppressed by the very rituals that delight Child.

Martha Rosler, kitchen humor and absurdist theatre

The un-joy and satire that are central to *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and *A Budding Gourmet* drive from the tradition of absurdist theatre as much as to traditions within the visual arts, offering another way to consider Rosler’s humor. The artist has said in interviews that she was very interested in absurdist theatre in the 1950s and 1960s, including works by Brecht, Pirandello, and Beckett, who “showed me how you could dispense with excessive amusement in favor of language and gesture.”

Elements from that tradition can be traced in Rosler’s videos, specifically in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.

Martin Esslin’s influential text “The Theatre of the Absurd” (1960) introduced the eponymous concept and defined it. Esslin identified some of the driving characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd:

If the dialogue in these plays consists of meaningless clichés and the mechanical, circular repetition of stereotyped phrases – how many meaningless clichés and stereotyped phrases do we use in our day-to-day conversation?

And if people in these plays appear as mere marionettes, helpless puppets without any will of their own, passively at the mercy of blind fate and meaningless circumstance, do we, in fact, in our overorganized world, still possess any genuine initiative or power to decide our own destiny? The spectators of the Theatre of the Absurd are thus confronted with a grotesquely heightened picture of their own world: a world without faith,

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meaning, and genuine freedom of will. In this sense, the Theatre of the Absurd is the true theatre of our time.\textsuperscript{155}

Esslin explains the importance of language in the Theatre of the Absurd, the words both spoken and unspoken, and sometimes the jarring discontinuity between the spoken words and the actions associated. Both of these techniques ring true for Rosler’s video.

Esslin writes about the use of unorthodox dialogue in Adamov’s play \textit{Ping-Pong}:

Here, in order to bring out the full meaning of the play, the actors have to act against the dialogue rather than with it, the fervor of the delivery must stand in a dialectical contrast to the pointlessness of the meaning of the lines.\textsuperscript{156}

And further a discussion of unorthodox actions in works by Beckett and Ionesco:

In the Theatre of the Absurd, therefore, the real content of the play lies in the action. Language may be discarded altogether, as in Beckett’s \textit{Act Without Words} or in Ionesco’s \textit{The New Tenant}, in which the whole sense of the play is contained in the incessant arrival of more and more furniture so that the occupant of the room is, in the end, literally drowned in it.\textsuperscript{157}

The connection then to Rosler and \textit{Semiotics of the Kitchen} is seen in her sparse use of words, deadpan expression, and monotone voice in contrast to her aggressive gestures throughout, and her emotive shrug and facial expression at the end of the piece.\textsuperscript{158}

It is important to note that in the video Rosler does not actually wreck the kitchen or destroy anything with the kitchen implements, but instead mimics the actions of destruction. Rosler performs an individual that is simultaneously exploding the

\textsuperscript{155} Martin Esslin, “The Theatre of the Absurd,” \textit{The Tulane Drama Review} Vo. 4, No. 4 (May 1960): 5-6.

\textsuperscript{156} Esslin, “The Theatre of the Absurd,” 11.

\textsuperscript{157} Esslin, “The Theatre of the Absurd,” 12.

\textsuperscript{158} Rosler on feminist art (1977): “From the outset, a distinction between “women’s art” and “feminist art”: obviously not all women are feminists. Neither does one’s identification with the women artists’ movement imply any necessary commitment to feminism (which I see as necessitating a principled criticism of economic and social power relations and some commitment to collective action). Nor does even a conscious identification with feminism make one’s art necessarily “feminist.” Yet it is a sure bet that women artists’ work will be measured against some notion of feminism.” Martha Rosler “The Public and The Private: Feminist Art in California” \textit{Artforum} (September 1977): 66.
boundaries of the domestic sphere while physically staying within the walls of the home.

The kitchen in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is a space of limits and oppression.

Rosler’s critique of the gendered activities of the kitchen is a recognition that the norm of femininity as performed on television is false and narrow. Judith Butler argues in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) that the performance of gender identity is itself a learned thing, and writes as follows: (emphasis mine)

> If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.  

Butler’s identification of the problem of a “regulatory fiction” of gender identity can be seen in Rosler’s performance, as this is undoubtedly a woman who does not feel she fits into the role she is occupying. Rosler, in her deadpan rebellion against the kitchen is responding to the oppressive nature of a patriarchal society that enforces gender norms through learned customs. Though Butler’s conclusions imply the inevitability of socialized gender behavior, Rosler’s use of humor makes her rebellion socially permissible indicating that socialized norms could be counteracted.

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Mary Douglas identified the subversive nature of joke telling and the permissibility of socially inappropriate comments within the context of humor in her 1975 essay “Jokes.” Douglas’ explanation of a type of social “uncontrol” that is permitted through humor is exactly what the viewer sees in Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. As Douglas states:

> Whatever the joke, however remote its subject, the telling of it is potentially subversive. Since its form consists of a victorious tilting of uncontrol against control, it is an image of the leveling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones.

In *Semiotics of the Kitchen* the “victorious tilting of uncontrol against control” can be seen throughout the video, for example when Rosler demonstrates the hamburger-press. It is not a stretch to see the tool as a hand-puppet-mouth, but Rosler makes the hamburger-press into a menacing entity with metallic gnashing teeth. The size of the hamburger-press is close to that of a human jaw, its sound non-verbal but effective. Though Rosler herself does not snap and gnash, she channels her anger through her tool, the metal mouth standing in for her own. Here is the tilting of uncontrol against control, when the repressed Rosler could be imagined with a jaw full of snapping metal and a voice that is sharp and clanging. The terrifying, if ridiculous, image is a strong contrast to the simmering anger and physically controlled Rosler.

The combination of Rosler’s straight-faced performance can be understood using Butler and Douglas to both critique and subvert society. A woman could recognize herself in Rosler’s performance, allowing herself to laugh at a situation that may otherwise feel taboo or oppressive.

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Martha Rosler and Conceptual Art

Martha Rosler does not make any food in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, nor explain any specific recipe to her viewers; instead, her demonstration is of the ritual use of kitchen tools, taken to the extreme. The idea that one would need to demonstrate how to use (or mis-use) a spoon, for example, emphasizes that it is the *ritual of using the spoon* that is being demonstrated, stirring liquid in a pot, combining ingredients, measuring appropriate amounts rather than the ritual of preparing a soup, for instance. Yet these ritualized actions are refused by Rosler’s unorthodox and aggressive enactment of them. Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* clearly references the linguistic strategies of Conceptual art.\(^1\)

Lucy Lippard’s writing from the late 1960s and 1970s brought attention to the connections between Conceptual art and feminism. Lippard, with John Chandler, described some of the reasoning behind Conceptualism in “The Dematerialization of Art” (1967), recognizing the phenomenon that saw the art object lose prominence, and instead have the focus shift to “art as idea and as action.”\(^2\) Even more significantly though, is Lippard’s linking of Conceptual art and feminism. Lippard wrote:

> The inexpensive, ephemeral, unintimidating character of the Conceptual mediums themselves (video, performance, photography, narrative, text, actions) encouraged women to participate, to move through this crack in the art world’s walls. With the public introduction of younger women

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artists into Conceptual art, a number of new subjects and approaches appeared: narrative, role-playing, guise and disguise, body and beauty issues; a focus on fragmentation, interrelationships, autobiography, performance, daily life, and, of course, on feminist politics.\textsuperscript{164,165}

Though \textit{Semiotics of the Kitchen} is by far the better-known work, Rosler also wrote an entirely text-based script the same year called \textit{The Art of Cooking: A Mock Dialogue Between Julia Child and Craig Claiborne}. (See Appendix 1). The text functions as a companion piece to the video. Craig Claiborne wrote many cookbooks and was restaurant critic for \textit{The New York Times}. Along with Julia Child, Claiborne is credited with making French cuisine accessible to an American audience. The only publication of \textit{The Art of Cooking} was an excerpt published in 1975 in the San Diego-based \textit{Crawl Out Your Window: A Journal of Experimental Literature}. In this script Rosler used food to examine the definition of art,\textsuperscript{166} aligning herself with avant-garde and Conceptual artists who also worked in text-based pieces, such as those published in the poetry journal \textit{0 to 9} edited by Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer (issues spanned 1967-1969). The text of \textit{The Art of Cooking} begins with the setting:

\begin{quote}
(Scene, first dialogue: A bus depot. Wooden benches. A man and a woman wearing overcoats and with luggage at their feet sit facing each other.)
\end{quote}

\footnotesize
\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{164} Lippard, \textit{Six Years}, xi.
\textsuperscript{165} In keeping with the Lippard’s description then, women like Martha Rosler could find Conceptual art to be a possible framework through which to voice feminist politics. In her book \textit{Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966-1972} Lippard includes a list of nine women that made feminist Conceptual art in the early 1970s, including both Rosler and Lacy, validating their work in what became an authoritative text. The subject matter so central to feminist art – the subject position of the artist herself – received, at least partially, the recognition it deserved.
\textsuperscript{166} This is not Rosler’s only text-based work from this period, she also makes reference to “three postcard novels” she made in 1974-1975 that dealt with domesticity, food, public and private space. Rosler stated in an interview from 2006: “This piece was about the channeling of female creativity into an ephemeral form that encodes nurture, consumerism, and a certain kind of US imperialist appropriation of other cultures – in this case through cuisine.” Interview with M. Pachmanova’ “Mobile Fidelities,” \textit{n.paradoxa} online issue no.19 (May 2006): 99.
\end{quote}
Child and Claiborne are the two characters and the bus depot is a setting indicative of transitory ideas and a liminal, physical in-between space. Rosler’s interest in absurd theatre is once again evident, with Samuel Beckett’s 1953 play *Waiting For Godot* coming to mind as a logical influence, as Beckett’s play observes the two main characters Vladimir and Estragon go through an exercise in futility as they wait in vain for the arrival of someone named Godot.167

In this piece, Rosler uses Julia Child’s culinary pop culture iconic stature for her own artistic and political purposes, emphasizing the concept of art as explored through the language of food. Child speaks the first piece of dialogue in the text:

> Julia: Craig, my dear – you know, we all know that cooking in as an art, but how did it get to be one, I wonder? I mean, after all, most of what we think of as art hangs on the wall or sits out in the courtyard –

In *The Art of Cooking* the characters of Julia Child and Craig Claiborne have a somewhat confrontational dialogue, where Claiborne is portrayed as patronizing Child on occasion and Child responds with fitting defense. The two chefs discuss the language of art and its use for the “lower” arts of fine cuisine. The gendering of intellectual pursuits and the ascription of value to certain types of art enter the dialogue in combination with the historically male world of professional chefs.

> Julia: Now you mention sculpture, the blending of textures and colors, painting – But painting usually signifies a concern with representation, doesn’t it? (pauses) Well, perhaps the formalist outlook has been so strong these past hundred years that that can be overlooked.

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167 In 1981, five years after an excerpt of *The Art of Cooking* was published in *Crawl Out Your Window* Rosler referred to this text-based piece as: “a massive unfinished script called *The Art of Cooking*, a “dialogue” between Julia Child and Craig Claiborne. The central subject is “What is art?” What is art and what is artifice, what are taste and connoisseurship? The two cookbook people are differentiated by gender and by certain intraclass distinctions. Late in the dialogues, a housewife enters to break their interactions within class. The work is almost totally composed of quotations from cookbooks – “ideology speaks.” Weinstock, “Interview with Martha Rosler,” 83.
Craig: Julia, haven’t you ever heard of abstract art?

Julia: Now, Craig, you needn’t be patronizing. Just because we are going slowly, that doesn’t mean I’m ignorant. I just feel there’s more in metaphor than we usually notice, and if people are making claims for cooking as art and doing it on analogy with other arts, then we need to pay very close attention to the metaphors.

Craig: (smiling): Julia, dear, forgive the tease. I think you are a dear, sweet, cultivated lady and I never really meant to imply –

Julia: (slightly sharp): And you are such a suave, cosmopolitan, Southern gentleman, Craig. (smiles) Now as I was saying, painting often connotes representation, though currently it may not do so as strongly as it once did….

Rosler pulls from the knowledge that Child was cultivated and knew the art world, so could be representative of much more than cooking and the domestic sphere. While the script does not have the humor that is so critical in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, the piece is important to discuss since as this project shows, during the mid-to-late 1970s Julia Child was of interest to Rosler in a number of media. Throughout the script Child and Claiborne speak about formal qualities of art, the relationship between art, food and taste, and the metaphor of art for food. Rosler has the characters often quote directly from books about cooking for example:

Julia: The gourmet chef Dione Lucas also mentions painting. She cautions pupils that “good cooks have a reverence and respect for their tools, as any craftsman must. These are the implements by means of which a cook creates what amounts to works of culinary art… The complete kitchen should be thoroughly stocked with ingredients as well as tools. Just as an artist’s studio is equipped with a variety of paints, to be used with the brushes and canvas, so the cook’s studio – the kitchen – should contain a broad spectrum of the raw materials out of which dishes are created.”


This choice of quote by Rosler of course makes allusion to *Semiotics of the Kitchen*.

Rosler has Julia Child state that “good cooks must have a reverence and respect for their tools” a point she reinforces in the irreverent *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. If Rosler’s homemaker character is the “antipodean Julia Child” she would have to be irreverent, and by extension incapable of creating a “culinary work of art.”

The use of direct quoting in *The Art of Cooking* has a mixed effect: the script feels very much like a work in progress and the tone is somewhat didactic due to the formal language and choppy transitions. Simultaneously, the metaphorical use of the culinary texts is very impactful. The history of culinary writing and teaching combined with issues such as art versus craft and useful creation versus philosophical experimentation are highly pertinent to feminist art in the 1970s, when artists were often identified as either/or crafts-person or ‘high’ artist. In *The Art of Cooking* the symbolic use of food as art, and the media personae of Julia Child and Craig Claiborne merge to make this piece as much about a public reliance on the expertise of television personalities and the broad approval of a certain type of pop culture as it is about the definition of art.

**The satire of consumerism as a form of self-expression**

Rosler’s use of the preparation of food as metaphor for art, class and wealth can also be seen in the video *The East is Red, The West is Bending* (1977). In it, Rosler returns to satire for 19 minutes and 57 seconds. The scene once again is set up to look like an instructional television cooking program, though with a more personal, idiosyncratic style. Throughout the piece, Rosler explains how to use a wok and reads directly from the text of a West Bend Electric Wok instruction booklet. Building on her
earlier themes of gender oppression and subjectivity, the emphasis of this work deepens the understanding of the impact of pop culture on identity through cultural “othering” of Asia by the empirical West, and more fully critiques consumerism as a form of self-expression.

In this satirical video, the artist walks into the camera frame, her hair pulled into a bun, wearing large sunglasses, and a jacket that looks to be inspired by a stereotypical Western representation of pan-Asian clothing. Rosler’s jacket is light blue with a red trim and red Chinese frog closures, which are knob-and-loop closures made from ribbon. The set has a table with a large silver-colored wok and bottles of ingredients, as well as a book from which Rosler reads. Unidentified, possibly traditional Chinese music can be heard. Immediately upon entering, Rosler stands facing the camera, puts her hands together, and makes a brief bow. As the piece unfolds, Rosler keeps a straight face, but her voice is not dead-pan (as in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*) and she occasionally does something ridiculous, such as put the lid of the wok on her head to look like a traditional conical straw hat. (See Image 28) For example early in the piece Rosler states (00:45 – 00:55): “Part of the joy of discovering any cuisine lies in the atmosphere in which food is served, and the more culturally authentic the better.” At this point the artist lifts one foot to her waist, so that she is doing a yoga-type lotus stretch for a brief moment. Her actions are almost dismissive in their simplicity and as she reads the instructions, the words reveal an appropriation of “othered” Asian cultures, as well as an implied critique of consumerist behavior. Although Edward Said’s ground-breaking book *Orientalism* would not be published until 1978, contemporary analysis necessitates a nod to Said for the interpretation. Rosler’s cultural critique in *The East is Red and the West is Bending*
parallels many of Said’s theories about the problematic and patronizing representations of “the East” within European and American scholarship and culture.¹⁶⁹

Unlike *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, which involves no actual food, in *The East is Red and the West is Bending* Rosler demonstrates how to (somewhat) appropriately chop a carrot for cooking in a wok (4:13) and holds up various other ingredients such as fresh ginger and a bowl of unidentified ingredients she simply calls “seasonings” (4:22) (See Image 29). While still not a traditional cooking show, the appearance of some food, most of which is seen in packages, is a pointed separation from *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. *The East is Red and the West is Bending* emphasizes the role of popular culture and consumerism in identity-formation instead of being focused entirely on the oppressive gender role performed in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. Part of the instructions in *The East is Red and the West is Bending* include how to use a cleaver, which Rosler then also demonstrates, but without the aggression seen in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*; the large cleaver in this video is handled in a much more blasé manner and only a carrot is chopped (4:52). The simmering rage of Rosler in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* is replaced by the Rosler character who equates personal value with material and cultural consumption; Rosler’s satirical critique of such problematic social behavior is evident in her “aping” of a pan-Asian culture and her discussion of the West Bend Wok.

At seven minutes into the piece Rosler introduces the West Bend Wok itself, bringing a bright red enameled, electric wok onto her table and contrasts it with the more simple steel wok she has been thus far demonstrating. Rosler plays on the “redness” of the wok as being indicative of “the other” of communism, red for Russia, red for China

and the cultural revolution there. There are a few brief moments in the video when Rosler does not read directly from the instruction book and looks to the camera in what appear to be more off the cuff remarks. For example she says:

It’s crafted of durable aluminum for rapid and smooth heat distribution. It’s lined with fired-on, no-stick finish that resists scratching and is stick-free for easy cleaning. It’s good looking too and it stays good looking. Colorful, genuine porcelain on the base and matching acrylic on the cover resists staining, won’t fade, and are automatic dishwasher safe. Add up these features and they’re a lot better than this [picks up steel wok] really, I mean it, I promise you. This is much prettier too. (07:07-07:41)

The artist again dons an apron in this video, though since the video is in color, the white apron with blue flowers stands out as chirpy and distinctively Western against the more traditionally Asian inspired clothing worn by the artist. The apron is telling, once again, but in a different manner. Rosler has to wrestle herself into the apron, unlike in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, and through her transformation into the American cook by the putting on of the apron there is not a sense of constriction. The apron here emphasizes a woman trying to wear the garb of multiple cultures at once. In *The East is Red and the West is Bending*, the pages Rosler reads are visible to the viewer (though not the words themselves) and she often has to bend down to read, possibly due to her sunglasses which may have made the text more difficult to see. The artificiality of the scenario and the staged quality of the work reinforces the medium of video itself and brings the viewer’s attention to their own reception. It is Rosler reminding the viewer of the contrived performance that makes up much of society. The role Rosler plays in *The East is Red and the West is Bending* is not a woman grappling with her selfhood per se, but is instead about the mainstream culturally insensitive and assigned value based on consumption of material goods and cultural traditions.
The video relies on pointed satire, as seen in how Rosler reads the instruction manual, her choice of costume, the equation of cultures with consumable objects, and a general tone that is clearly supposed to be indicative of a “pan-Asian” stereotype achieved through capitalism.\(^\text{170}\) Once again Rosler engages with questions about the role of women in the kitchen, yet with an emphasis on cultural imperialism, as made clear in the following excerpt:

Now what I want you to know is the fun of Oriental cooking. [Brings out basket full of packaged products she holds up one at a time and then puts on the table] Think of all the things you can buy to turn yourself into… Japanese person, Chinese person… I don’t think it has anything to do with imperialism, don’t believe those communists. Really, it has nothing to do with imperialism. It has to do with your sensitivity and your taste [table is covered with small jars and packages now]. But, in order to do that [opens up electric wok and holds off lid for a moment] clean, clean, clean, read all instructions before using appliance, always use heat control and cord supplied with the appliance…\(^\text{171}\) (14:00 – 15:10)

This repetition of the word ‘clean’ is Rosler’s explicit identification of kitchen rituals as maintenance labor and her satirizing of them to highlight how they are oppressive to women. It also speaks to what Lippard referred to as “the preoccupation with repetition and the introduction of daily life and work routines” within Conceptual art, as a technique artists used to change the perceptions of art.\(^\text{172}\) By using the recognized spectacle of the television cooking show, Rosler reminds the viewer of the influence of pop culture – here through the West Bend Wok and the cultural imperialism associated with this object – in the formation of subjectivity. Her performance is a détournement of


\(^{171}\) Conclusion of the The East is Red and the West is Bending: 18:39-19:24: “We have improved on the clever idea of the wok and moved it out of stagnation. We have even added a flat bottom to make it more like a real pot and we invented a wooden tool combining the best features of spoon and spatula and having a modern look to it. The primitive wok is cheap and hard to care for, needing to be wiped and dried. The West Bend Wok represents the marriage of American know-how with the honest, authentic, simplicity of the mysterious east.”

\(^{172}\) Lippard, Six Years, xv.
a culturally accepted approach to both selling and consuming through television. She has taken the accepted form of communication that is television and, through her satirical performance, turned the very meaning of television itself on its head, implicating viewers in the appropriation she is critiquing. Rosler satirically encourages women to embrace cultural imperialism through the latest kitchen appliance, adorning themselves with it as they would a new hat.

A pervasive issue addressed by Rosler in *The East is Red and the West is Bending* is the inherent racism of some second wave feminism. Much of the feminist movement in the 1960s was ignorant of the role of whiteness and the economic station of middle class women as constituents for the moment. Women of color and women living in poverty were often not acknowledged within the lexicon of second wave feminism. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* is a perfect example of this intrinsic racism, as her book spoke to women who were homemakers living in the suburbs – a position available almost exclusively to white, middle-class women upon the book’s publication in 1964. In *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) bell hooks identified the endemic nature of racism in American culture and criticized the feminist movement specifically for the omission of the voices of women of color. She wrote:

> American women have been socialized, even brainwashed, to accept a version of American history that was created to uphold and maintain racial imperialism in the form of white supremacy and sexual imperialism in the form of patriarchy. One measure of the success of such indoctrination is that we perpetuate both consciously and unconsciously the very evils that oppress us.\(^{173}\)

Continuing, in regards to university-educated, white women who were the vocal advocates and activists of second wave feminism, hooks stated:

They revealed they had not changed, had not undone the sexist and racist brainwashing that had taught them to regard women unlike themselves as Others. Consequently, the Sisterhood they talked about has not become a reality. bell hooks’ writing about the role of black women and feminism is not meant to translate directly to the misconception of pan-Asian cultures that Martha Rosler’s video satirized. However, hooks’ identification of racial imperialism within America perpetuated by white feminists is a foundational element within Rosler’s work. *The East is Red and the West is Bending* is as much about racism in American culture as it is about patriarchy. Rosler’s character is insensitive and inherently racist through her cultural consumption. Rosler’s satire is an acknowledgement of the privilege of whiteness and economic stability, her character is critical of the limits of feminism as well as that of consumer culture and patriarchy.

**Artistic and social influences and the choice of the domestic as a site of resistance**

Martha Rosler’s connection to the work being made by Conceptual artists sets her apart from other feminist artists making work in the 1970s. Where Suzanne Lacy was influenced by community organizing and consciousness raising, both of which became integral to her artistic practice, Martha Rosler brought a more scholarly and theoretical approach to her work. Both artists’ work often asks the question, “What is art?” while simultaneously addressing feminist issues that have roots in an activist agenda. As Lucy Lippard so accurately pointed out (1980):

> At its most provocative and constructive, feminism questions all the precepts of art as we know it. (It is no accident that “revisionist” art history also emerged around 1970, with feminists sharing its front line.) In

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174 hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman*, 121.
this sense, then, focusing on feminism's contribution to 1970s art is a red herring. The goal of feminism is to change the character of art.\textsuperscript{175}

There is no separation of art from politics in Rosler’s work. The indeterminate nature of Conceptual art, according to Lippard, was itself an open door for feminist artists.\textsuperscript{176} The element of absurdity and importance of language use in Rosler’s work show her strong connections to Conceptual art. One need only to look to video works by John Baldessari, Vito Acconci and Sol Lewitt to see similar techniques used in tonality and monotony of voice and a shared interest in words and language.\textsuperscript{177}

Helen Molesworth explains the troubling trend of the marginalization of feminist conceptual artists in her article “House Work and Art Work” (2000). In the article, Molesworth identifies activities that she terms “maintenance” work (as opposed to domestic labor), after the series Maintenance Art Performances (1973-1974) by Mierle Laderman Ukeles that included Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks, Maintenance Inside in which Ukeles washed and scrubbed the floor of the Wadsworth Athenaeum for four hours. Ukeles wrote a Maintenance Art Manifesto in 1969 that identifies the problematic dichotomy that exists between what she terms Development (involving for example, “Pure individual creation”) and Maintenance (involving by contrast, “Keep the dust off the pure individual creation”).\textsuperscript{178} Molesworth uses Ukeles’ work as a framework through which to reexamine the significance of some feminist art from the 1970s as Conceptual


\textsuperscript{176} Lippard. \textit{Six Years}. x-xv.


\textsuperscript{178} Ukeles, as quoted in Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work”, \textit{October}, Vol. 92 (Spring, 2000): 78.
art and to consider why feminist artists’ work have often not been considered Conceptual.

She writes that:

Ukeles’ manifesto insists that ideals of modernity (progress, change, individual creation) are dependent on the denigrated and boring labor of maintenance (activities that make things possible – cooking, cleaning, shopping, child rearing, and so forth).

Ukeles’ work brings into high relief the question of social valuing of the public role of the male bread-winner over the private role of the female home-maker. Molesworth looks to Carole Pateman’s 1988 book *The Sexual Contract*¹⁷⁹ and concludes “one legacy of feminist criticism is to establish that it is the private sphere that can help us to rearticulate the public sphere, as opposed to the other way around.”¹⁸⁰ Thus, instead of using the lens of the public world to consider the implications of society on private life, the actions in the domestic realm are used as the lens into broader public occurrences and trends.

Molesworth takes this further when she examines why many female artists from the 1970s have not been considered by scholars to be within the domain of Minimalism and Conceptual art. Molesworth writes about these artists, explicitly including Martha Rosler:

Their omission was caused not by active suppression but rather a fundamental *misrecognition* of the terms and strategies they employed. The overtly domestic/maintenance content of such works was read as being equivalent to their meaning. Therefore, little or no attention was paid to these works’ engagement with the Duchampian legacy of art’s investigation of its own meaning, value, and institutionality. What has not been fully appreciated are the ways in which this usually “degraded”

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¹⁷⁹ Molesworth quoting political philosopher Carole Pateman: “the public sphere is always assumed to throw light onto the private sphere, rather than vice versa. On the contrary, an understanding of modern patriarchy requires that the employment contract is illuminated by the structure of domestic relations.” In other words, one legacy of feminist criticism is to establish that it is the private sphere that can help us to rearticulate the public sphere, as opposed to the other way around.” (83). (Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988), 144.)

¹⁸⁰ Molesworth “House Work,” 83.
content actually *permits* an engagement with questions of value and institutionality that critique the conditions of everyday life as well as art.\textsuperscript{181}

This misrecognition has plagued art historical analysis of feminist art. By singling out the existence of a Duchampian legacy that artists including Martha Rosler have taken up, Molesworth elevated the conversation about the art to an existing discourse: these artists are not “just” feminist or activist, but engage conceptual notions on the highest level. Although Molesworth’s points are very accurate, it is important to note that Martha Rosler’s art and critical writing have been favorably reviewed and commented upon from very early in her career.\textsuperscript{182} Molesworth’s ideas in regards to Conceptualism demonstrate that Rosler’s focus on the quotidian and the rituals performed in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* function as a satire that made visible Betty Friedan’s feminine mystique while also critiquing the meaning of art and expanding that meaning.

### Video and Mediated Experience

The formal techniques that Rosler used connect the work to other artists often credited with “fathering” video art and Conceptual art more broadly. The repetitive

\textsuperscript{181} Molesworth “House Work”, 81-82.

nature of Rosler’s performance and monotonous, even somewhat robotic (read: technological) voice are methods also used by other video artists during this period with very different agendas. As a result of these techniques the viewer gains a heightened awareness of the video camera itself, the artist’s positioning in regards to the camera, and the general artifice of video. The frame of the camera, the type of shots used, the set, the editing all come into greater focus. Rosler uses such specific methods to legitimize video art as a political and activist medium. Just as the Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s brought the viewer’s attention to the medium of paint and the frame of the canvas, so too is the medium of video problematized. The role of the viewer changes when the experience of the work is mediated by the awareness of the technology itself. The artifice of video raises questions about authenticity that are not necessarily right on the surface in other media. Rosler has written about her use of a flattened voice as a purposeful method in her video work to bring attention to the mediated experience of video and a cultural lulling that often occurs around watching things on a screen. This cultural lulling results in inattention to broad social problems such as the oppressive nature of patriarchy, racist cultural imperialism and economic disparity. Rosler wrote in 1999:

Tactically I tend to use a wretched pacing and a bent space; the immovable shot or, conversely, the unexpected edit, pointing to the mediating agencies of photography and speech; long shots rather than close ups, to deny psychological intent; contradictory utterances; and, in acting, flattened affect, histrionics, or staginess. Although video is simply one medium among several that are effective in confronting real issues of culture, video based on TV has this special virtue; it has little difficulty in lending itself to the kind of “crude thinking,” as Brecht used this phrase,

183 Also of interest in this regard is David Antin, “Television: Video’s Frightful Parent.” *Artforum.* (December 1975).
184 Rosler has also identified Straub-Huillet influence: “Video is a very tiny thing; you have to move carefully. I think my video has been influenced by the Straub-Huillet films, though. At least I felt a strong sympathy when I saw them, but I don’t think I use film as they do. I’m not sure when I saw their work, but I’d be willing to admit either influence or similarity.” Weinstock. “Interview,” 93.
that seems necessary to penetrate the waking daydreams that hold us in
thrall. The clarification of vision is a first step toward reasonably and
humanely changing the world.\textsuperscript{185}

\textbf{Video and Intimate space}

Of the formal qualities that make these videos interesting to consider within the
realm of a canon of women’s art is both Rosler’s and Lacy’s use of physically intimate
space. The use of intimate space as a strategy, both formal and political, has a history in
the imperfect canon of art history as Griselda Pollock discusses in her book \textit{Vision and
Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art} (1988). In her examination of
paintings by Impressionists Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, Pollock establishes that
both artists used compression, proximity, and shallow pictorial space, and by doing so
made what she refers to as a connection between “the social space of the represented and
the pictorial space of the representation.”\textsuperscript{186} Pollock explores the division of public and
private space in the work of these two painters, and the specific role of the female
spectator,\textsuperscript{187} ultimately coming to the conclusion that spaces of femininity are distinct
both socially and artistically.

If, then, there exists an established history of women artists employing intimate
space in their work, Lacy’s video \textit{Learn Where the Meat Comes From} and Rosler’s
videos \textit{Semiotics of the Kitchen, A Budding Gourmet,} and \textit{The East is Red and the West is
Bending} can be understood to be a continuation of this history. By involving narrative
and the compressed visual field, the artists created a ‘space of femininity’ indicative of

\textsuperscript{185} Rosler, “To argue for a video of representation,” 369.
\textsuperscript{187} Pollock, \textit{Vision and Difference}, 85.
their place and time, in many ways representative of feminist ideas that question female objectivity. This use of space demonstrates the complexity, historical resonance, and political agency within Lacy’s and Rosler’s videos. They both embrace the concept of a radicalized female body utilized by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s.

By bringing the viewer’s attention to the medium of video, Rosler effectively raises the point that her performance is contrived and that perhaps all performances of femininity are similarly artificial. In this frame, the society one lives in shapes their understanding of the gendered self and, as a result, women are enculturated to behave and think of themselves in certain ways. While this could be a despair-inducing idea, Rosler softens the impact of the blow with her humor. With an aim to change society, the overarching message in these videos is evident: they are feminist calls to action. The locus of the kitchen as a site of resistance speaks to women’s shared experiences of the patriarchal structure through domestic tasks. Returning once more to the image of the dragon of kitchen drudgery, it is evident that in the face of such a monster a glimmer of hope exists in kitchen humor and satire: a dainty purse balanced on the wrist of the dragon slayer or an exaggerated shrug as the concluding gesture of the irreverent and antipodean Julia Child.

Chapter Three Images


Image 8: Film still from Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, 1960

Image 9: Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, using a ladle to fling imaginary pot contents
*Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Electric Arts Intermix (EAI), www.eai.org New York.*


Image 13: Rosler’s shrug at the end of *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Electric Arts Intermix (EAI), www.eai.org New York.


Image 18: Julia Child *The French Chef*, “Sole Bonne Femme”, 1971-72, shaking a sole

Image 19: Meryl Streep as Child in *Julie and Julia*, the moment before Child flips the potato pancake.
Image 20: Julia Child from “The Potato Show”

Image 21: Julia Child wipes perspiration from her face in “The Potato Show”


Image 26: Child, *The French Chef*, (Season 2, Episode 6) “Cassoulet” (Note the pot)

Image 27: Julia Child’s kitchen as installed at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History (http://americanhistory.si.edu/kitchen/tools01_01_l.htm)


Excerpts From *THE ART OF COOKING: A MOCK DIALOGUE BETWEEN JULIA CHILD AND CRAIG CLAIBORNE*  
by MARTHA ROSLER

(Scene, first dialogue: A bus depot. Wooden benches. A man and a woman wearing overcoats and with luggage at their feet sit facing each other.)

Julia: Craig, my dear--you know, we all know that cooking is an art, but how did it get to be one, I wonder? I mean, after all, most of what we think of as art hangs on the wall or sits out in the courtyard--

Craig: Well, Julia, I know what you mean, yet obviously there are arts that do not do that. Aside from cooking, there are music, the theatre, dance--

Julia: Yes, Craig, but those haven't any use: I mean, how serious are we about cooking as art? It gets used up rather quickly, you know....

Craig: Yes, I do know--"Cooking is an ephemeral art. The painter, the sculptor, the musician may create enduring works, but even the most talented chef knows that his masterpieces will quickly disappear. 'A bite or two, a little gulp, and a beautiful work of thought and love is no more,' as the British author Sybil Ryall notes."

Julia: Yes, I see what you mean. But I am a bit confused still. You talk about masterpieces and talent and beautiful work, but isn't cooking primarily a matter of taste?

Craig: Yes, of course, but isn't art a matter of taste as well?

Julia: Yes, but--this is confusing--Are they the same kind of taste?

Craig: Julia, I'm sure--"Classic French cooking is a fine art, as surely as painting and sculpture are. Its great works, such as poule d'arlequin and filet de boeuf Richelieu, are masterpieces designed to enchant both the palate and the eye. And the classic French cuisine implies as well the careful planning of a menu to insure a felicitous blend of textures, colors, and flavors; it means sparkling crystal, gleaming silver, and immaculate napery. When all these come together, it is one of the glories of the civilized world.""
Julia: Now you mention sculpture, the blending of textures and colors, painting—But painting usually signifies a concern with representation, doesn't it? (pauses) Well, perhaps the formalist outlook has been so strong these past hundred years that that can be overlooked.

Craig: Julia, haven't you ever heard of abstract art?

Julia: Now, Craig, you needn't be patronizing. Just because we are going slowly, that doesn't mean I'm ignorant. I just feel there's more in metaphor that we usually notice, and if people are making claims for cooking as art and doing it on analogy with other arts, then we need to pay very close attention to the metaphors.

Craig: (smiling): Julia, dear, forgive the tease. I think you are a dear, sweet, cultivated lady and I never really meant to imply--

Julia (slightly sharp): And you are such a suave, cosmopolitan Southern gentleman, Craig. (smiles) Now as I was saying, painting often connotes representation, though currently it may not do so as strongly as it once did. But many comparisons between painting and cooking were made before abstract art came into vogue. In "Pleasures of The Table," published in 1902—a very popular book—the epicure George Ellwanger repeatedly compares painting and cooking. To take just one instance, he says that "the French have been to cooking what the Dutch and Flemish schools have been to painting—cookery with the one and painting with the other having attained their highest excellence. Rubens, Rembrandt, Teniers, Jordaens, Ruysdael, Snyders, Aertsen, and Cuyp may be paralleled in another branch of art by Caravaggio, Vatel, Beauville, Robert Laguiping, Véry, Francocotelli, and Ude. But as in painting during its earlier stages Flanders and the Netherlands owed much to the Roman and Venetian schools, so in cookery the French are vastly indebted to their predecessors and former masters the Italians, who, if less distinguished colourists, were not to be desoiled as draughtsmen, and who by instinct not as skilled in the chiaroscuro of sauces, were most dexterous in creating bread-stuffs and pastry."3

Craig: I hardly know what to make of "the chiaroscuro of sauces" and the reference to draughtsmen. That is itself a poetic metaphor, it seems. I suppose when he mentions chiaroscuro he more likely means a contrast of tastes in the sauces with the substance in the dish rather than an actual contrast of dark and light colors. Draughtsmanship, on the other hand, may be a reference to how the dish looks. And 'colourists' can be either. The man's ideas are half-baked.

Julia: The gourmet chef Dione Lucas also mentions painting. She cautions pupils that "good cooks have a reverence and respect for their..."
Chapter Four.
Coming Full Circle: Kitchen Bitching and the Bitchin’ Kitchen

Women’s place is in the kitchen bitchin.

- Dilys Laing, 1967

A final chapter is needed to answer the question: What does kitchen humor look like on contemporary television? How has feminism and video art impacted the visual vocabulary and cultural consciousness of a younger generation of feminist performers? How has this translated to feminist humor in contemporary popular culture? One answer is *Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen* (2010-2013), a television cooking show staring Nadia Giosia that relied heavily on Riot Grrrl feminism, punk aesthetics and a highly self aware performer. Riot Grrrl feminism, a movement in the 1990s, was seen as giving voice to many young women who used their creative output (predominantly zines and music) to validate their subjectivity and establish a new, sex positive voice within feminism. Demonstrating a combination of influences from feminist cultural producers and pop culture, and using witty dialogue Giosia relishes the joy of cooking while simultaneously rejecting many gender norms. For example, Giosia unapologetically claims her sexuality and love of cooking on *Bitchin’ Kitchen* while frequently making overtly feminist statements. Giosia, inspired by Riot Grrrl feminism more than second wave feminism, makes the kitchen her glamorous, punk rock stage of food and humor.

With her tattoos, and mash-up of 1950s and rock-star styled costumes, Giosia shows how pop culture, gender expectations, feminism and humor have changed since *The French Chef* and *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. While both Rosler and Giosia used the kitchen and cooking tasks as a platform to promote their ideas Rosler made politically
strident statements about society through a rejection of the kitchen, and Giosia makes her political commentary intermingled with a joyous embrace of the kitchen. Indicative of the times, Giosia’s messaging about socially prescribed gender roles can be somewhat contradictory with her actions, a characteristic of contemporary feminism that is relatively common in popular culture.\footnote{For example, Amy Schumer – a comedian many people are championing for her feminist humor. (For example see Ms. Magazine blog “5 Reasons We Love Amy Schumer’s Feminism” by Julia Robins, Aug. 17, 2015, http://msmagazine.com/blog/2015/08/17/5-reasons-we-love-amy-schumers-feminism/#card_2233_4.) In response to a GQ photospread from July 2015 in which Schumer was photographed playing out a sex scene with robots from Star Wars, blogger Heather Cocks at GoFugYourself.com raised the question of who is controlling the joke and the sexual objectification of women, “Can’t Amy Schumer be the funniest person in the galaxy without fellating a light sabre? Please? Her sketches are incisive and insightful. Is this?” http://www.gofugyourself.com/fug-or-funny-the-cover-amy-schumer-on-gq-07-2015}

Giosia’s kitchen humor relies on accepted norms established by predecessors such as Child and second wave feminism. Giosia’s kitchen humor is satirical though often more tongue-in-cheek. There are many elements that read as critique of popular culture, societal expectations for women, and even the handling of food itself.

In this chapter, critical analyses of Nadia Giosia’s Bitchin’ Kitchen will be made in three major areas. The first looks at Giosia’s humorous mishandling of food and the consumption of food (for eating and sex) and looks back to some of the ideas established around Suzanne Lacy and Learn Where the Meat Comes From. The second element looks at Giosia’s joy in cooking and performance as a feminist in comparison to Martha Rosler’s absolute un-joy in Semiotics of the Kitchen. Giosia’s type of humor and accepted expectations of feminism both derive from and differ from those of Rosler. The third comparative analysis will involve direct comparisons with Julia Child and The French Chef. While Giosia makes overt reference to Child throughout her program, a final analysis looks to how Giosia also often employs postmodern strategies of self-awareness,
irony and “meta” commentary/references that position both the performer and the television program within a broader cultural context.

The title, *Nadia G’s Bitchin’ Kitchen*, is the proactive claiming of a more common – if dated – phrase “kitchen bitchin’” which succinctly denigrated the social standing, subject matter, and physical place of women in the kitchen with their frivolous “bitchin’.” In the tradition of oppressed groups claiming derogatory terms and redefining them to be empowering, Giosia’s kitchen is *bitchin’* meaning *awesome*. There is of course a feminist slant to the way Giosia uses bitchin’ since the word bitch itself has been claimed by feminists, for example *Bitch* magazine, whose first issue appeared in 1996 coinciding with the heyday of the Riot Grrrl movement. However, while *bitch* carries with it a relatively aggressive, activist feminist agenda, the etymology of *bitchin’* has a history associated with the more laid back surfing culture. The title of the show *Bitchin’ Kitchen* shows the ubiquitous nature of the word, but nods to a certain edginess at the same time.

Using comedy, Giosia unapologetically claims her sexuality and love of cooking, a combination that makes this show feminist. She *owns* the kitchen, as is reinforced by her support cast – all male “beef cakes” Hans, Panos the Meat Guy, and Yeheskel the Spice Agent, who offer their comedic advice, and are secondary to Giosia herself. As the poet Dilys Laing summed up in her pithy verse “Women’s place is in the kitchen / bitchin’” there is an unequivocal connection in the broad cultural conscious of North

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190 A classic example of the dated and sexist response to women’s artistic production in connection with kitchen bitching is seen in Edgar Robinson’s poetry review: “Four Lady Poets” *The Complete Poems* by Marianne Moore; *The Collected Poems* by Dilys Laing; *O the Chimneys* by Nelly Sachs; *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* by Adrienne Rich, *Chicago Review* Vol. 21, No. 3, (Dec. 1969): 110-116. While dismissive of the works by these “Lady Poets” this is the one poem that Robinson actually likes by Laing. Robinson writes: “What we have in Dilys Laing is small song that is true and unpretentious, at its best. A nice woman, with some talent for words – no more.” (113-114)
Americans that when women get together, especially in the kitchen, the expected outcome is insignificant and negative. Here Giosia turns that notion on its head, and makes the kitchen her glamorous, feminist arena.

The three minute introduction to each episode of *Bitchin’ Kitchen* shows close-up shots of Giosia putting on glossy black high heeled shoes, a multi-fingered ring that reads *bitchin*, tightening a large black bow on the back of her apron⁹¹ and applying red lipstick while using a large meat cleaver as a mirror. (See Images 1, 2, 3) Giosia wears these trappings of the 1950s housewife but scales them up, with her tongue firmly in cheek, a sexually assertive and slightly dangerous undertone driving the humor she brings to the performance. Giosia is humorous in part due to her mishandling of the cleaver and the glint in her eye as she smiles cheekily at the camera. Though the tool mishandling may be reminiscent of Rosler’s also humorous mishandling, unlike Rosler who epitomized the unjoy of cooking, Giosia clearly relishes the joy of cooking.

Due to her campy costuming and the type of exaggerated slang she uses, it is quite obvious that “Nadia G.” is a character, more overtly so than Julia Child, who was not performing a persona. The exaggerations are often what makes her character amusing and provide an interesting comment on contemporary feminist pop culture. The “drab” clothing common to second wave feminism as worn by both Rosler and Lacy is given a contemporary make-over in *Bitchin’ Kitchen*. Giosia’s costumes invariably involve a slinky dress with a bright-print apron, stiletto heels, and a lot of chunky silver jewelry, often evocative of motorcycle biker gang rings and hardware. Giosia’s aesthetic is a mix of the highly sexualized, highly feminized image that popular culture loves to propagate.

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⁹¹ A veiled reference to a corset and in contemporary pop culture that accompanies “racy” sexual imagery.
combined with a tougher look supported by metal in both fabric and jewelry. Giosia’s voice is relatively low, and she frequently uses it to put on a “faux” voice of intimidation. In this interpretation, stiletto heels and silver knuckles have a similar effect of confident aggression. Giosia’s snarls and eyebrow raises add to this image – her often-heavy eye makeup usually accompanied by glossy, high-color lipstick makes for a glammed-up, rock and roll aesthetic unusual for a cooking show host (who usually is more neutral). While many cooking show hosts have been much more sexualized than Julia Child ever was the combination Giosia presents is unique.

**Why Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen?**

There are seemingly endless cooking shows currently on television that have been influenced by Julia Child’s pioneering on *The French Chef*. The status of the kitchen in television has changed, and the element of celebrity goes hand in hand with a society obsessed with food culture. With her tattoos, matching nail polish and lipstick, and combination of 1950s and punk-styled costumes, Giosia shows how pop culture, gender expectations, feminism and humor have changed since the beginning of Julia Child’s show in 1963. Giosia, a chef and comedian, became famous for her cooking show, wrote a best selling cookbook *The Bitchin’ Kitchen Cookbook: Rock Your Kitchen and Let the

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192 Nigella Lawson being an obvious example of this, in her cooking program *Nigella Bites*, 1999-2001 (followed by additional cooking shows), also known for cook books including *How to Be a Domestic Goddess* (2000): both titles and her performances on her show tying the making and consumption of food with sex and sexual consumption.


194 Lipstick feminism: is it real? Or derogatory? The claim that women could be empowered in part by an embrace of traditional feminine beauty ideals, such as wearing makeup and high heels, and use of overt sexuality as a powerful tool to emphasize a personal agency as opposed to being oppressed by a societal expectation. This term became popular most notably in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with a notable difference to Riot Grrrl feminism, a more cohesive movement with self-empowerment at its core.
Boys Clean Up the Mess (2009), and has had subsequent television series, Bite This With Nadia G. (2014 – 2015), and an online kitchen-remodeling series, Sick Kitchens. Giosia also has a significant online presence through her website bitchlifestyle.tv that includes sketches and musical comedy pieces, and the ongoing development of the persona of Nadia G, which shows Giosia to be a very media-savvy cultural producer. As a third wave feminist, Giosia is very different than her predecessors associated with second wave feminism. Where second wave feminists were often seen as being judgmental towards women who embraced a traditional feminine aesthetic, third wave feminists are generally understood to be more open-minded about difference in this regard. As scholar R. Claire Snyder-Hall has explored in her article “Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of “Choice” ”:

Because third-wave feminism insists that each woman must decide for herself how to negotiate the often contradictory desires for both gender equality and sexual liberation, it sometimes seems to uncritically endorse behaviors that appear problematic. Despite media caricatures, however, the third-wave approach actually exhibits not a thoughtless endorsement of “choice,” but a deep respect for pluralism and self-determination.196

What makes third wave feminism complicated in regards to the more clear-cut ideals of second wave feminism is the assumption of “thoughtless endorsement” of problematic behaviors, such as the sexualized image Giosia herself presents. In fact, third wave

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feminism necessitates a nuanced and sensitive reading of the pluralism and emphasis of choice that is so embraced by many younger feminists.\(^{197}\)

Aesthetically, Giosia’s kitchen set could not be more different than that in the videos made by Rosler or Lacy, with her episode-specific color changes ranging from hot pink to acid green, and the heavy use of metallic accessories such as chainmail dish towels and plastic baby dolls spray painted silver. Her show is slick and often silly. Giosia’s aesthetic shares influence from music videos and the color-saturated visual culture of contemporary society.

In a striking comparison to second wave feminism, the Riot Grrrl movement was driven by the American punk music scene in the early 1990s and the exchange of DIY zines made by young women. Lead in large part by the band Bikini Kill, lead singer Kathleen Hanna wrote a manifesto calling for solidarity among girls, to be actively, politically engaged with feminism, and to control their own identities in part through artistic production.\(^{198}\) Published in the Bikini Kill zine ca.1991, Hanna’s manifesto is grounded in punk music, but is reminiscent of Cixous’ 1976 call for women to be the subject of their own artistic production, to write themselves with underlying themes of insurgence, liberation and rupture. As Cixous wrote:

Write, let no one hold you back, let nothing stop you: not man; not the imbecilic capitalist machinery, in which publishing houses are the crafty

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\(^{197}\) For example, as defined by R. Claire Snyder-Hall: “Third-wave feminism strives to be inclusive and respectful of the wide variety of choices women make as they attempt to balance equality and desire. Third-wave feminism is pluralistic and begins with the assumptions that women do not share a common gender identity or set of experiences and that they often interpret similar experiences differently. It seeks to avoid exclusions based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and so forth. It recognizes that women in different subject positions have different perspectives.” Snyder-Hall, R. Claire. “Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of “Choice”.” Perspectives on Politics, Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2010): 259

obsequious relayers of imperatives handed down by an economy that works against us and off our backs; and not yourself. Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don’t like the true texts of women – female-sexed texts. That kind scares them.199

This quote is included as a reminder of the lyrical quality of Cixous’ writing in her article that became viewed as a manifesto for creative women, and could almost be heard as a punk-anthem itself. Hanna’s Riot Grrrl manifesto is also a validation of selfhood and retrospectively is recognized as a totem of the riot grrrl movement.200 The links between the two feminist movements are significant since the historical precedence gives additional levity to the Riot Grrrls. Hanna wrote under the heading Riot Grrrl is…:

BECAUSE we want and need to encourage and be encouraged, in the face of all our own insecurities, in the face of beer guts boy rock that tells us we can’t play our instruments, in the face of “authorities” who say our bands/zines/etc are the worst in the U.S. and who attribute any validation/success of our work to girl bandwagon hype.

BECAUSE we don’t wanna assimilate to someone else’s (Boy) standards of what is or isn’t “good” music or punk rock or “good” writing AND

THUS need to create forums where we can recreate, destroy and define our own visions.

BECAUSE we are unwilling to falter under claims that we are reactionary “reverse sexists” and not the true punk soul crusaders that WE KNOW we really are.

BECAUSE we know that life is much more than physical survival and are patently aware that the punk rock “you can do anything” idea is crucial to the coming angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours.201 (See complete manifesto, Appendix 1)

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200 See Darms (2013). Notable that Hanna’s papers are included in the Riot Grrrl Collection at the NYU Fales Library.
While both second wave feminists of the 1970s and Riot Grrrls actively worked towards gender equality,\textsuperscript{202} the tone of the Riot Grrrl manifesto was markedly different from those of the 1960s and brought a decidedly punk aesthetic to the movement. As scholars Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo have written about the movement, during its peak in 1998:

Riot Grrrls are loud, and through zines, music and spoken word, express themselves honestly and straightforwardly. Riot Grrrl does not shy away from difficult issues and often addresses painful topics such as rape and abuse. Riot Grrrl is a call to action, to “Revolutionize Girl-Style Now.” At a time in their lives when girls are taught to be silent, Riot Grrrl demands that they scream.\textsuperscript{203}

… Because the feminism of Riot Grrrl is self-determined and grassroots, its greatest power is that it gives girls room to decide for themselves who they are.\textsuperscript{204}

Riot Grrrl feminism is among the key influences in pop culture that made the character Nadia G. possible. Without this movement and the broader acceptance of the many versions of “girl power” in the last decade, Giosia would not have found a place for her show on a major television channel. Though unique in her performances, Giosia has a broad appeal that speaks to the impact of earlier feminist activists. With the punk influence, an unabashedly sexual aesthetic, an approach that is very much “in your face,” and satirical language and monologues, Giosia and her \textit{Bitchin’ Kitchen} are indicative of how kitchen humor has changed.

\textsuperscript{202} The Riot Grrrl movement has been criticised for being not being racially inclusive, and being essentially driven by and for white women. This has been examined by Mimi Thi Nguyen in her articles: “Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival.” “Punk Anteriors: Genealogy, Performance, Theory” Special Issue, edited by Beth Stinson and Fiona I.B. Ngô, \textit{Women & Performance}, 22:2-3 (July-November 2012): 173-196.

\textsuperscript{203} Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo. “Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from within” \textit{Signs}, Vol. 23, No. 3, Feminisms and Youth Cultures (Spring, 1998): 810

\textsuperscript{204} Rosenberg and Garofalo. “Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from within,” 811.
Giosia and Lacy: The Mishandling of Food

Just as Suzanne Lacy was funny in part because she became the snarling beast in *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, Giosia is funny in part due to her melodramatic response to the food she makes. Looking to Lacy’s mishandling of food as a cornerstone of her kitchen humor, a similar tactic is found in Giosia’s performances. Where Lacy slowly devolved into a beast in her desire to consume the lamb carcass, Giosia stages what can only be called “food love” dream sequences in her program. Giosia’s take on the desire to consume both sexually and through ingestion are played out in two examples, the Burger Love Dream Sequence, from an episode called “Break Up Bonanza” (S1, E2) and the Chocolate Soufflé Marriage from “Proposal For a Proposal” (S2, E2). A third fantasy segment in the form of a music video called “Flavor of the Weak” from the episode “*(Dysfunctional) Family Pizza Night* (S2, E6) has a slightly different message but also involves the mishandling of food.

The mishandling of food for Giosia does not usually involve a mess or a disordered kitchen. Instead the food will stand in for a person or idea. The mishandling involves costumes and storylines, reminiscent of Nina Sobell’s treatment of the chicken carcass as a baby and stuffing it into her purse, Giosia uses kitchen humor in her absurd food fantasies. Mishandling of food does not presume grotesque results, but the use of food as *not* food. Mishandling involves giving the food new and inappropriate meaning.

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205 As well as being a chef and comedian, Giosia is also the lead singer of a punk band called The Menstruators that is influenced by Riot Grrrl bands, including having songs with titles such as *Bleed, Slut Anthem*, and *Princess Hollywood*. The aggression underlying this approach to feminism comes into Giosia’s performances in *Bitchin’ Kitchen* where Giosia’s costumes include a silver knuckle-ring that says *bitchin*, and she handles mixing spoons and ladles with a smack into her palm. Giosia occasionally brings a theatrical aggression into her performances for example through this type of costume, which is based on a weapon and gang-type street fighting.
Each example exists as a performance within the performance, where Giosia in the kitchen will look dreamily off camera and the scene will be replaced with the pre-recorded segment.

**Burger Love**

In the Burger Love Dream Sequence, Giosia has just finished making a Hawaiian burger and says to the camera: “This burger is too much, I need some alone time, alright?” (16:51-18:54). She then takes a bite of the huge burger, and the image fades to a sequence of Giosia running in a meadow, hair down and flying in the breeze, wearing a “casual” type of short dress, but still with an edgy leopard print. (See Images 4, 5) Giosia holds her burger in one hand, gives it a kiss, smiles, and acts out over exaggerated romance, by pointing and laughing with the burger, as if she is in conversation with it. The image then switches to Giosia wearing a black leather jacket, helmet and big black goggles, riding an implied but not visible motorcycle, with the Hawaiian burger perched on her shoulder. (See Image 6) Giosia smiles over her shoulder at burger at they ride together, in this case Giosia firmly in the ‘masculine’ role of the biker, with the Hawaiian burger riding behind. The scene then cuts again this time to a boudoir, where Giosia and the burger lounge on a green upholstered piece of furniture. (See Image 7) Giosia wears a black satin slip and is stroking the burger. The camera pans out and “they” move under the sheets while fireworks are exploding behind them. At 17:17 the scene comes back to Giosia in the kitchen and she whispers, “I love you burger.” Realizing the dream is over Giosia shakes her head to snap back to reality.
Throughout the Burger Love Dream Sequence Giosia does not eat the burger, but plays out clichés from romantic movies, creating a storyline about a romance that culminates in coitus. The “carefree” running through a bucolic meadow, the “wild child” riding a motorcycle, the burger perched on her shoulder filling in for the passenger who would have their arms around the waist of the driver, and the suggested sex scene, where again Giosia wears the trappings of “high” femininity, and the viewer understands that sex is successful (meaning orgasmic) through the fireworks exploding around them.

The entire dream sequence is all the more farcical since it falls within the “Break Up Bonanza” episode, where Giosia’s menu is themed around the theoretical chef ending a romantic relationship with their dinner guest. The extreme absurdity in Giosia’s mishandling of food in this episode implicitly refers to the tradition of absurd humor used by both Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler. The obvious conclusion seems to be that Giosia fantasizes about a romantic tryst with a Hawaiian burger instead of with an actual person.

Though over the top in campiness, in the Burger Love Dream Sequence Giosia plays out many ideals and stereotypes about gender, and in doing so exemplifies the performative nature of gender. This harkens back to Rosler’s performance in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, and the “regulatory fiction” that defines gender roles. Giosia uses kitchen humor to playfully confuse the expected frames of femininity. She is at times almost a caricature of femininity, but always read through a lens of humor. The Burger Love Dream Sequence cannot be anything except satire when the audience sees Giosia running

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206 *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and *Bitchin’ Kitchen* differ dramatically in the aesthetic, as Rosler’s video had a stark and DIY feel and Giosia’s television show has slick high production values. The regulatory fiction each woman addresses should thus be seen through an appropriate lens – generally the television industry reinforces regulatory fiction, and even in the case of Giosia there is contradictory messaging.
through a meadow into the “arms” of her burger. The entire dream sequence is a joke about fictionalized romantic love, and thus heteronormative behavior. As Giosia’s performance teeters towards the absurd, the dream sequences raise questions about the weave of the social fabric. Gosia uses familiar structures from television, such as the dream sequence, to repeatedly bring to the viewer’s attention the ridiculous nature of normative gender expectations as often portrayed on television – she is working from within the system. This is impactful because of how the social laws are then questioned. Coming back to Eco’s ideas about humor and social laws, he wrote:

> Humor does not pretend, like carnival, to lead us beyond our own limits. It gives us the feeling, or better, the picture of the structure of our own limits. It is never off limits, it undermines limits from inside. It does not fish for an impossible freedom, yet it is a true movement of freedom. Humor does not promise us liberation: on the contrary, it warns us about the impossibility of global liberation, reminding us of the presence of a law that we no longer have reason to obey. In doing so it undermines the law. It makes us feel the uneasiness of living under a law – any law.\(^{207}\)

By flouting both the theme of her own show and using a recognized structure for her absurdity, Giosia questions the need to obey the social laws of gender conformity. Not only are the stereotypes around romance and sex shown to be ridiculous, but so is the accepted notion that women should not have appetites, let alone aim to satiate their appetites. In this way, Giosia highlights and legitimizes her personal appetites, validating her individual, liberated self.

**Chocolate Soufflé Marriage**

A second example of Giosia’s absurd mishandling of food is another dream sequence that follows a similar transition as Burger Love; in this case it is Chocolate

Soufflé Marriage. In the episode “Proposal For a Proposal” Giosia has just taken a baking sheet of small soufflés out of the oven, the dessert course for a dinner that is supposed to precede a marriage proposal. Giosia puts one of the soufflés onto plate, takes a bite and says:

Wow, so light and fluffy. With our molten chocolately center contrasted with crispy bits of smoked salt. Never mind a partner, I’m marrying this soufflé! 18:54-19:21

She then picks up the plate with soufflé on it and whispers “I love you.” To the sound of wedding bells Giosia looks off into the distance and the image cuts to a scene of the chef and the soufflé standing on the steps of a church, the implication being that they have just been married. Giosia wears a fuchsia and black tuxedo, smoky eye makeup and has her hair pinned up in a bun showing that one side of her head is shaved. In her hand, she holds the soufflé, which has a tiny lace veil attached to it. Giosia waves to an unseen audience and purple confetti is thrown in the air. To sounds of cheering and the flashes of cameras Giosia gestures to herself and the soufflé and mouths: “We’re married, I know…!” The image then cuts to Giosia dancing with the soufflé and kissing it. (See Image 8) Giosia smiles at the cameras, and wipes tears from her eyes as the dream ends.

The voyeuristic positioning of the viewer is reinforced in this dream sequence due to the inferred paparazzi. As with the close up camera shots of her stiletto-clad feet, Giosia frequently engages with Freudian fetishistic imagery. In this case, the Chocolate Soufflé Marriage dream occurs at a moment when a “private” ceremony has become public – Giosia and the soufflé are on the outside of large doors, emerging from a church-like institution and proclaiming to be married. The private ceremony (behind the doors) is not the emphasis of the dream, it is the public gazing on the newly married couple that is
Giosia’s fantasy. The pleasure derived from looking and being looked at is the focus here. By so directly engaging with scopophilia via the camera flashes and the actual camera recording the footage, Giosia reinforces that the pinnacle of success is the social validation that occurs through public documentation. The kitchen humor of the dream sequence is undermined by an adherence to socially normative behavior and desire to be the object of voyeuristic pleasure.

The awkward nature of Giosia’s feminism is brought to the surface in this dream sequence, as one on hand she is challenging heteronormative assumptions, and on the other she is performing the woman-as-object to be looked at. Parallels between the mass consumption and impact television, and the mass consumption and impact of cinema show, as Laura Mulvey wrote, that the technology can function simultaneously for and against women’s liberation. Mulvey states: “the cinema doubled as a major means of women’s oppression through image and as a means of liberation through transformation and reinvention of its forms and conventions.”

In this dream sequence, Giosia again plays up “stereotypical” or even Hollywood film-based ideas of marriage, or specifically of a wedding. Giosia, in the fuchsia tuxedo is gender bending, her role a combination of the tuxedoed groom and the gowned bride, however in this case the bride is also the soufflé since it wears the veil. It is a very savvy prop choice – a small piece of lace attached to the soufflé stands in for all the trappings of the traditional wedding including the frilly feminine bride in white. In a sweepingly positive statement about LGBTQ rights in American society in the Giosia-soufflé wedding, both are brides. It is almost possible to miss this significant fact since there is no mention of the word “bride” or “groom”

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throughout the dream sequence. Imagine for example, that Giosia had been wearing the white veil and the soufflé had been ‘dressed’ in a top hat and a bow tie – the result would have been a representation of a heterosexual wedding. What makes this even more socially progressive is that Giosia does not use any gender pronouns in the dream sequence, and thus it can easily fit as a same-sex marriage fantasy or a Giosia-as-groom fantasy, both of which redefine gender expectations. The context of this is being a cooking television show (an ideological space that traditionally has reinforced expected gender roles) reinforces the satire.

Giosia’s absurd performance of the Chocolate Soufflé Marriage feeds off of one of the socially acceptable appetite for women: chocolate. As a ‘forbidden’ food, chocolate stands in for sexual desire, but is also connected to the commodification of sex (the idea of ‘buying’ sex/affection with chocolates). Giosia offers a twist on the myth that chocolate will act as an aphrodisiac or that women will lose control of their sexual inhibitions as a result of ‘indulging’ in it. Although Giosia takes a bite of the soufflé when she’s in the kitchen, in the dream there is no ingestion of the soufflé or bite missing from it, and the fantasy is not of sexual satiation but instead demonstrates a more restrained dream of romance.

Unlike Suzanne Lacy’s approach in *Learn Where the Meat Comes From* for Giosia the *romantic* story line plays an important part of both of these dream sequences, with expected gender roles being both adhered to and bent. In Burger Love Giosia begins as the frolicking, feminine woman in the meadow bounding into the ‘arms’ of her love, the Hawaiian Burger. The story line of the dream follows a well-trodden path to “wild” behavior, with Giosia clad in black leather on the motorcycle, culminating in intercourse.
In contrast, the romantic storyline of Chocolate Soufflé Marriage is the joyous moment after the couple has emerged from the church ceremony, culminating in a chaste kiss from Giosia to her soufflé bride. The romantic wedding storyline is always associated with a feminine fantasy, the idea that every little girl dreams about what her wedding will be like. Giosia both performs this (the joy, the confetti, the paparazzi flashbulbs documenting the event) and turns it on its head by putting the bridal veil on the soufflé. In keeping with the Burger Love Dream Sequence, Chocolate Soufflé Marriage is more than a satire of a wedding; it is a satire of the idea that a heteronormative marriage represents success in Being A Woman, especially since traditionally marriage is often seen as a step towards procreation, the ultimate indicator of achievement for a woman in a heteronormative role of homemaker and wife.

In a similar fashion to Burger Love, the content of Chocolate Soufflé Marriage is at odds with the theme of the episode, which is a marriage proposal. Giosia’s dream sequence functions as a satirical performance of a marriage, eschewing the most important component – another person. In the progression of the meal Giosia has made the dessert the culminating event readying the recipient for the marriage proposal. Giosia’s digression at this stage of the episode thus calls into question her take on the institution of marriage.

“Flavor of the Weak”

Following the format of the pre-recorded dream sequence, Goisia once again humorously mishandles food in “Flavor of the Weak” from the episode “(Dysfunctional) Family Pizza Night” (S2, E1), in this case throwing sticky chocolate onto her support
cast. Giosia often incorporates her own music into her show and in “Flavor of the Weak” Giosia’s dream sequence is a fantasy of a music video. In this episode Giosia has just finished a monologue about sacrificing one’s own dreams in order to support those of one’s children, when she says “But remember, you’ll always have your fantasies… and chocolate” (17:32) and then the camera cuts to a rock concert with a crowd of women pushed right up against the stage and we see Giosia as lead singer of a glam-punk rock band. Over the next five seconds quick edits are made back to Giosia in the kitchen chopping chocolate and mixing it into a fondue, with a very brief shot of her holding a chocolate covered mixing spoon as a microphone. As Giosia starts to sing, the fantasy switches back to the rock concert, and Giosia clad in leather and metal, gyrates around the microphone stand as she sings:

Little girl, oh you look so fine, oh you look so sticky sweet
When you walk away, yeah
Sunrise, and Baby you get tired of me,
Keep in mind you’re the flavor of the weak

The camera then pans back over the crowd where Panos, Hans and Yeheskel are now in the front row dancing and looking up at Giosia as if overwhelmed by desire. Giosia starts to sing again, with slight changes to the lyrics: “Little boy, you look so fine, you look so sticky sweet…” The change from “girl” to “boy” providing equal opportunity for sexual objectification in the song.

After another edit, Giosia is suddenly holding the metal bowl of chocolate fondue and the wooden spoon, which she licks. (See Image 9) This is the point of when the food is mishandled, as she then tosses the chocolate fondue all over her three sidekicks who respond with enthusiasm bordering on the ecstatic. (See Image 10) Giosia’s mishandling of food is different than that of Lacy, but still functions appropriately, since the food is
not being eaten. By throwing the chocolate fondue onto her male support cast Giosia is humorously establishing a sexual dominance over them. Yeheskel, for example, rips his shirt and rubs the chocolate sauce on his face all the while keeping eyes focused on Giosia. The very idea that this rock singer on a stage would be holding a metal bowl of chocolate fondue is obviously absurd, and yet in the context of Bitchin’ Kitchen the scenario works since Giosia’s humor and language is that of food. As a result her sexually aggressive action of throwing the sticky sweet sauce onto her “beef cake” sidekicks plays in to the gender bending and power dynamics that are continually part of the show. The fantasy Giosia plays out here is as much satire of the glamorized rock star as it is satire of the domestic setting of the kitchen, each made incongruous through Giosia’s mixing of imagery from the two separate scenarios. The fantasy ends (18:45) and the shot is back to Giosia in the kitchen, singing “Yeaahh!” into her spoon-microphone and dropping it back into the bowl, as if she were still the singer dropping the mike on stage. Without missing a beat, Giosia goes into an explanation of how to make the fondue.

As a fantasy, “Flavor of the Weak” involves kitchen humor because of the combination of Giosia as the rock vixen and the misplaced tools of the kitchen, but again there is contradictory messaging that speaks to her perturbed form of feminism. The title itself is not actually indicated on the show, and as a result, it sounds as though she is singing: “keep in mind you’re the flavor of the week.” If this were the case the reference would be to a short-lived romantic interest, however, by using the homophone “weak” in the written title of the song, a completely different interpretation of her lyrics results, with some reference to the “you” of the song being a guilty pleasure, as in the eating of
chocolate fondue that is a “weakness” for women. The “you” of the song is described like the dessert, and is consumable the same way. This is once more where feminism plays a complex role for Giosia and *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, since though she is the glamorous rock star in the fantasy and the host of the cooking show, women are still positioned as weak or objectified.

Giosia’s absurd dream sequences brings into focus that as a society expected normative gender behavior is, like her costumed satire, performative. The kitchen humor in *Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen* is informed by the work of musicians just as much as it is informed by cooking programs and the influential Julia Child. Unlike the work of Rosler and Lacy, however, Giosia’s program does not have the striving message of revolution behind it that was inherent with the second wave feminist works. What does come across in many facets of her performances is the influence of Riot Grrrl feminism, specifically in the styling and the musical elements of *Bitchin’ Kitchen*. It would be disingenuous to try to separate Giosia’s television show from her other creative work, for example Giosia’s website bitchinlifestyle.tv which is a combination of video clips from *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, cooking advice, music videos and blog-style commentary. Though the website is not the focus of this chapter, it is worth noting that videos by Giosia’s punk band The Menstruators appear regularly on it. The band has songs with titles such as *Bleed, Slut Anthem*, and *Princess Hollywood* all of which celebrate a woman-centric sexuality and comment on the normative expectations of North American society, and activist songs such as the 2016 “Is he white? Is he bright? He's got d*ck, so he must be right.” which is part of a compilation the band put together called *Brock Turner Mixtape* in protest to the lenient sentencing of a rapist in a high profile criminal case in the summer of 2016. This
type of activism also has roots in the Riot Grrrl movement, in which zines such as *Girl Germs* (no.3) became a place for young women to write about rape and sexual harassment from both intimate experiences and in support of victims. In August of 2015 Giosia organized the Riott Grill Festival in Los Angeles, an event that brought together punk music, comedy and food to celebrate LGBT rights, and was headlined by Babes in Toyland, an all-girl punk band known for being part of the Riot Grrrl movement.\(^{209}\) Although *Flavor of the Weak* is funny and much lighter in tone and, significantly, made for the television show, the attitude of the music is in keeping with that of The Menstruators and Riot Grrrl feminism.

**The Host and the Roast Bitchin’ Style**

Julia Child’s method of identifying on her own body where a cut of meat would occur if she were the animal, and the subsequent satire by Suzanne Lacy sets a precedent for how the same events unfold on *Bitchin’ Kitchen*. However, unlike Lacy’s satire where the *host* becomes the roast, in the case of Nadia Giosia, one of her sidekicks, Panos the Meat Guy, becomes the sexualized object.\(^{210}\) In the “Breakup Bonanza” episode (the same episode as the Burger Love dream sequence) Panos explains why a certain cut of beef is called “ground chuck” and demonstrates where the cuts of beef would be on himself, transforming himself (à la Julia Child), into the consumable meat. During his description of the meat, he points to his own shoulder and then touches his neck and says,

\(^{209}\) “Punk + Food + Comedy + LGBT Rights” “Riot Grill is the first festival of its kind: a female-fronted fest that brings together punk music, hard-hitting comedy, and delectable grub in celebration of LGBT rights. It’s not just a concert; it’s a revolution.” (http://www.theregenttheater.com/event/897161-riot-grill-fest-babes-in-los-angeles/)

\(^{210}\) The three support characters on the show Panos (note: he is not “the Butcher.” He has a more casual title), Yeheeskel, and Hans all function, to a certain extent as ‘eye candy’ – Panos and Hans especially as they are less clothed. While Hans is a caricature of a “beef cake” with his oiled skin and minimal speaking, Panos supposedly offers advice about meat, with a varying degree of success.
“Chuck comes from the shoulder and the neck of the beef.” In this case Panos’ gesture turns into a hand flick off the bottom of his chin, a decidedly macho gesture, sometimes called the Chin Flick which in some cultures can interpreted as an insult, like “Get Lost” or “Fuck You.”\footnote{Panos follows this gesture with a ‘rant’ about staying committed in a relationship, having everything be “perfect enough” having a wife who nags him, and then crying in the cold room to a fish. Then a woman comes in with long dark hair and floral dress, yells at him in another language (presumably Greek), and leaves. It is an exaggerated story line of the sweet man who marries the shrew.} (See Images 11, 12) The technique again raises questions about consumption: what is being offered to the audience, the food or the man? The blending of appetites for eating and for sex are problematized. The format of the program also comes into focus as a result of Panos’ performance, as he is a secondary character to Giosia’s host. The kitchen humor here is that the role of the consumable object, traditionally the woman on display, has been turned on its head and is now being fulfilled by the man. His position unlike that of Julia Child or Suzanne Lacy is not of the host, but the subordinate role of the support cast member, the clownish sidekick.

In Season 2, Episode 4 *Bitchin’ Bootycamp Extreme!* Panos again turns himself into meat, this time a turkey. As Giosia is introducing the menu at the very beginning of the episode, the camera cuts to Panos at the butcher’s counter and instead of responding to her introduction with a pithy remark (as per usual), he has become the turkey. Although there has been no costume change Panos becomes very bird-like and clucks to the camera, making bird-like movements. 00:53 (See Image 13). Later in the same episode Giosia calls on Panos to talk about turkey legs, which he does briefly, but again the boundary of meat versus man gets blurred. After Panos’ semi-informational clip about the nutritional statistics of turkey legs, the camera cuts back to Giosa in the kitchen browning turkey legs in a large skillet. As she cooks, Giosa says “Thanks Panos. Miili,
look at the color on those legs” in reference to the drumsticks that are browning. The camera, however, cuts back to Panos who lifts his knee up above the counter, and since he is wearing shorts exposes his own leg. Panos says with a big smile, “Oh thanks, Nads. A little self tanner goes a long way, huh?” (See Image 14). The effect is laugh-inducing because it is somewhat jarring: the idea that Panos the Meat Guy would wear shorts to ‘work’ is not in keeping with the traditional image of the butcher in all white, which Panos fulfills only from the waist up. While on the show Giosia herself often wears short dresses and always wears high heels – her legs regularly on display, she is the expert in both cooking and sexual display. It is clearly meant to be funny that Panos would put his legs on display as the action feminizes Panos, and is supposed to read as ridiculous. Panos’ response to Giosia and his actions are awkward since not only has Panos misinterpreted Giosia’s comment as being about him (instead of the meat she is cooking), even the way he reveals his leg is awkward; he is unpracticed at this mode of sexual display.

Panos’ turkey leg display strongly conjures images from the feminist video pieces of the 1970s: Suzanne Lacy’s bent leg mimicking the lamb leg in Learn Where the Meat Comes From, and Nina Sobell smashing the raw eggs on her knee in Hey! Chicky! In each case the action is understood to be farcical because of the absurdity of the scenario – the mild-mannered cooking show host becomes the beast, the woman smashes a symbol of fertility against her own body in protest, and a man takes on the trappings of sexualized feminine display.

In juxtaposition to Panos, Giosia appears all the more experienced at physical display. Though the camera points at Panos for this moment, it is of course Giosia whose
body is the most available for consumption due to the frequent cropping and close-ups. Each episode involves close shots of her feet, her hands, her jewelry, a wry smile. Panos’ awkward offering of himself for visual consumption speaks to the traditional consumptive and voyeuristic male gaze that has so shaped Hollywood film and North American visual culture more broadly. Panos’ objectification does not suggest a female gaze however. The turkey leg scene is humorous because it reminds the viewer of different, successful sexual objectification. This episode makes evident that even though the boundaries of consumability have expanded to include Panos, the main “dish” as it were is still Giosia. These references are important since they act to remind the viewer that even though Panos may be sexually objectified in this episode, the women – Giosia and her audience, are still “the flavor of the weak.”

On *Bitchin’ Kitchen* an underlying joke is that everyone on camera is presented as available for visual sexual consumption. (See Image 15) Identifying Giosia as simply the sexualized object would be dismissive of the established sex positive feminism as explored by Carolee Schneeman and by the Riot Grrrl bands and their zines such as Tammy Rae Carland’s *I (Heart) Amy Carter* (1992), and Nomy Lamm’s *I’m So Fucking Beautiful no.2* (1994). With her costuming and self-aware performances Giosia presents herself as the sex positive subject, but this is sometimes negated by the visual cropping that regularly occurs in the show. The difficulty emerges because Giosia functions as both subject and object to be looked. The visual consumption also extends to Giosia’s support cast. The sexualization is not only seen with Panos who turns himself into the meat, but also Hans, while occasionally making some reference to healthy eating in order to build a stronger body is usually understood to be relatively vacant, and is always
shown wearing only a speedo, his body oiled and posing to emphasize his muscles.

Yeheskel, the Spice Agent is also available, though he plays into the romantic storyline akin to Chocolate Soufflé Marriage. He is made non-threatening because he is presented as he the cultural “other” (emphasized by Giosia’s purposeful mispronunciation of his name) and in this same episode as Panos’ Chin Flick and Giosia’s Chocolate Soufflé Marriage, Yeheskel offers himself as consumable in a mock-advertisement for his website: SnuggleYeheskel.com – the emphasis here on ‘snuggle’ as a non-threatening romantic act, as opposed to the more sexualized Hans or Panos.212

Clearly Bitchin’ Kitchen is not using the host as the roast politically the way Suzanne Lacy did in Learn Where the Meat Comes From, but the regular distortion of normative behavior reinforces the changes in gender expectations that are accepted within a pop culture format. Bitchin’ Kitchen is a comedy cooking program, not a piece of activist video art, and yet the political ideals expounded upon by Lacy of female subjectivity and empowerment are the backbone of the show.

The Joy and Un-Joy of Cooking: A Feminist in an Imperfect Society

Unlike either Learn Where the Meat Comes From or Semiotics of the Kitchen, Giosia generally does not rely on symbolic actions or utterances to promote her political ideals. Giosia’s format for her feminist messages are often mock-serious monologues, for example, in the very first episode of the series Giosia “rants” about the media portrayal of women. She takes a moment in between singing the praises of roasted garlic and spicing a dish of stew to have a “conversation” with the viewer (a common trope throughout

212 Also: in Season 2, Episode 5, Girls Night In: Panos wants a career change to Hans’ role on the show. Cuts to “demo” tape of him performing the “beef cake” role, followed by Giosia commenting that he “forgot his six-pack.” 5:03-5:09
In this case, Giosia, looking right into the camera says:

> It really ticks me off the way women are portrayed in the media, I know, I know, this sounds like a feminist rant, but … It is. At some point it’s just plain insulting, we’re supposed to be rail thin yet have lots of babies, be neurotic enough to constantly obsess about crow’s feet, yet relaxed enough to orgasm simply by sniffing a frigging shampoo bottle.

Kitchen humor comes into these “serious” monologues, for example in Giosia’s reference to the scent of shampoo resulting in orgasm, a direct reference to a long-running series of commercials for a Clairol shampoo called Herbal Essences that feature performances of women ecstatically washing their hair. This is worth noting, since Giosia frequently makes current pop-culture references and assumes her audience is media literate. More significantly though, the humorous “rant” colored by righteous indignation is Giosia spelling out the need for women to be treated as subjects, and claiming her own subjectivity. As Cixous wrote, the beautiful and laughing Medusa is threatening because of her subjectivity, a mantel Giosia takes up in her performances.

Though Giosia’s monologue seems sincere, it is complicated and feels somewhat paradoxical when, as soon as she stops speaking the camera cuts directly from her face to a close-up of her feet clad in strappy black, crystal studded stiletto heels. This objectification of Giosia functions as a stark contrast to the subjective role she demands in her monologue, and plays in to the discomfort popular media has when women demand to be acknowledged as subjects. It also reinforces the perceived “danger” of the laughing Medusa as disruptive to the frames of patriarchy – Giosia is the empowered feminist during her monologue, but then retreats to the sexualized object in the follow up shot. While stiletto heels are sometimes associated with sado-masochism
and the power and violence associated, it is not such a neat connection in *Bitchin’ Kitchen*.\textsuperscript{213} The image of Giosia’s cropped feet, in many ways indicative of Freud’s discussion of the foot fetish\textsuperscript{214}, occurs at various points in the episodes – sometimes following a monologue, serving to reinforce the power of the trappings of violence, but sometimes completely unrelated to the previous content. As a result, the foot shot remains unfixed in its effect.

In virtually every episode of *Bitchin’ Kitchen* Giosia simultaneously embraces and rejects gender normative stereotypes, for example by wearing clothing that objectify her youth and physical beauty yet purposefully eating food messily and with gusto, (See Image 18) an act often considered socially inappropriate and in opposition to the feminine beauty ideal which has traditionally valued a lack of appetite in women. As feminist scholar Abigail Dennis has written,

> Women’s eating has been the focus of social and cultural attention to a far greater degree than masculine eating habits, and the female appetite – or, more accurately, the demonstrable lack of it – has long functioned as a crucial signifier of adherence to a traditional ideology of femininity that contributes to women’s voluntary self-attenuation.\textsuperscript{215}

The social significance of messy eating and the appetite for food continues to be problematic for women. It is fitting then that for second wave feminist artists such as Schneeman there was the celebration of women’s corporeal pleasures including eating. Messy eating speaks to uncontrol and undisciplined bodies within a society that aims to


regulate the body; a regulation that feminism directly opposes.\textsuperscript{216} This is a case in point of Giosia’s disdain for the patriarchal framework. Looking again to Eco, Giosia’s actions are often funny because she emphasizes that the social frame does not fit, and assumptions about gender identity are often absurd. Giosia’s kitchen humor rings true because she speaks to the inconsistencies experienced by many women between reality and social expectation.

As well as giving mock serious monologues, Giosia sometimes makes feminism itself the focus of her humor. This works because Giosia demonstrates herself to be the subject of her own work, in many ways the picture of the successful woman: smart, young, beautiful, successful, and famous (the element of \textit{smart} being key to this scenario). Giosia is comfortable enough with her political and social activist ideals that she can make the core of these values – the women’s movement and second wave feminism – part of her humor. For example, in the episode “Girls Night In” (Season 2, Episode 5) the show opens with Giosia wearing a red-lined black hooded cloak. The set lights are dim, and quiet “new-age” acoustic guitar music can be heard. Looking directly into the camera Giosia says: “Today on Bitchin’ Kitchen, we’re delving deep into the postmodern feminist plight. I call this episode Mother Moonlight shave no more!” (00:00 – 00:19) After which Giosia lifts her fist in the classic pose of the revolutionary. (See Image 19) Suddenly, the lights come up and Giosia throws off her cloak revealing a flowing dress in ocean hues and loads of sparkly crystals that, in combination with how she has parted her long hair in the middle, is reminiscent of 1970s fashion. Giosia then

\textsuperscript{216} Holmes, Mary. “Social Theory of the Body” in (Ed.) Anthony Elliott. New York: Routledge Companion to Social Theory, 2010: 102-116. See also: Mikhail Bakhtin grotesque body (1965 \textit{Rabelais and His World})
says: “Ah. Now that most guys have changed the channel, we’re throwing a girls only pajama party you nerds!”

This satirical introduction highlights quite a few stereotypes about second wave feminism, including the very serious and earnest tone, the occult-inspired cloak, the red-lining a nod to the fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood (a classic tale claimed by many feminists to be about the transition of girl to woman, and child-like innocence to sexual maturity). Giosia’s mock title of “Mother Moonlight shave no more” is a parody of the stereotype that feminists assemble around the lunar cycle, utilize goddess imagery, and do not shave their bodies as a symbol of resistance against patriarchy. The joke continues after Giosia has physically tossed off the mantle of second wave feminism, when she makes her intentions clear: to use stereotypes of second wave feminism to ‘scare away’ the majority of the male viewers. Of course, this kind of humor works because of the success of second wave feminism as fought for by artists such as Lacy and Rosler.

*Bitchin’ Kitchen* epitomizes a moment in contemporary feminism in which the so-called ‘traditions’ of the second wave movement can be satirized while these traditions are simultaneously the basis of the success of the performer: Nadia Giosia and her gender bending performances represent kitchen humor as it has developed over four decades.

**The Nuts Pun**

There are some elements that carried the same meaning in the 1970s as in the 2000s, demonstrated when both Rosler’s and Giosia’s humor tipped into the realm of uncontrol due to the misuse of objects and the reframing of gender expectations. A concrete point of comparison between *Semiotics of the Kitchen* and *Bitchin’ Kitchen* that
stands out is a double entendre used by both women. Where Rosler memorably demonstrated a “nut cracker” in her video, Giosia makes a “nuts” reference of her own. In the episode “Proposal for a Proposal” Giosia faces the camera for a tête-à-tête with her audience, in this case advising the presumably-male viewer on what kind of engagement ring they should offer during a marriage proposal. The chef has been toasting almonds on the stove for a pesto, and she turns away from the stove to the camera. With wooden spoon in her hand, and a characteristic snarl in her voice, Giosia says:

> See, in the first year of a relationship, you could propose with a freakin’ twisty tie and get away with it. …. Simple math boys, I’d say half a carat on that ring for every year you wait. Watch them nuts.

Of course, the nuts are both the almonds toasting in the pan (which she has explained can burn easily), but also a reference to male genitals. As she says “Watch them nuts” Giosia slaps a wooden spoon into her hand. The “whack” of the spoon bringing to mind the disciplinarian, with the spoon as punishing paddle. (See Images 20, 21) While no overt threat is uttered, the look on Giosia’s face, the tone of her voice, and the misuse of the spoon come together to theatrically and humorously suggest aggression. Giosia takes an authoritative stance in this monologue, but then once again as soon as she finishes speaking, the camera cuts to Giosia’s feet, clad in silver stiletto high heels, and she is again the passive object. (See Image 22) As seen in the Chocolate Soufflé Marriage component of this episode, Giosia voices some contradictory opinions about the social institution of marriage, as with this pun where she simultaneously emasculates the very proposer she is speaking to.

This brings back Martha Rosler, since *Semiotics of the Kitchen* involved such an aggressive performance through the transformation of tools into weapons. In *Bitchin’*
Rosler’s concluding shrug asking “what if” or “why not” has been replaced with Giosia’s strident claiming of the space and the tools. If a reference to emasculation was part of Rosler’s humor with the inclusion of the nut cracker, it was play-acting: there is no suggestion of a specifically male audience for the video, in fact it is much more likely that it was aimed at the woman Rosler was representing, the woman who felt constrained and oppressed within the kitchen. Where Rosler’s oppressed woman desired aggressive action but was ultimately limited in the kitchen, Giosia – though similarly staying within the space of the kitchen – exudes control in part because of her humorous references to aggression. In Bitchin’ Kitchen the frame of patriarchy that gendered the kitchen for many feminists and made it a symbolic prison has been turned on its head. Bitchin’ Kitchen is funny because Giosia does not fit neatly into normative expectations, and takes on commonly held social beliefs about the gendered activities of food preparation and consumption.

Julia Child and Nadia Giosia

Media taglines describing Giosia frequently invoke Julia Child with a twist, for example, she is referred to as “the Punk-Rock Julia Child”217 “Julia Child of the Net Generation”218 and in a mélange of cultural influences including cooking, punk music and comedy: “Imagine if you will: Julia Child mixed with Carol Burnett and a dollop of Pat


218 Bitchin Kitchen began as a web series in 2007, considered as much a comedy program as a cooking show, won nextMedia’s Interactive award for the ‘Hottest Emerging Digital Brand in Canada,’ and the 2007 Wave Award for favorite mobile comedy series. http://andrewzimmern.com/2012/04/06/5-qs-nadia-g/ (May 4, 2015)
Benatar. There you have it: Nadia G.”219 This type of reference demonstrates that Julia
Child’s name is such a part of common lexicon that readers will understand the reference
to excellence in cooking as well as an extraordinary level of media success.220

Although The French Chef and Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen are markedly
different in format, Giosia regularly nods to Julia Child in Bitchin’ Kitchen when she is
about to eat the dish she has made and says “bon appétit to me!”221 – an overt reference to
Child’s well known closing line “I’m Julia Child, bon appétit!” Without naming Child,
Giosia evokes her influence, and as a result the respectability and success of The French
Chef. Child’s use of “bon appétit” became so well known that the reference is one most
of Giosia’s viewers would be familiar. Additionally Bitchin’ Kitchen aired (and runs in
repeats) on The Cooking Channel in the United States and on the Food Network Canada,
channels dedicated to a format Child pioneered, and it is safe for Giosia to assume that
shared knowledge of her audience. Of course, for Julia Child “bon appétit” was directed
at the viewer who would presumably make the dish Child had just demonstrated and the
chef was offering an enjoyable meal – the message was extended to another person, and
carried with it a recognition of a level of sophistication that many Americans at the time
would have associated with French culture and cooking.

220 Looking back to Rosler and Lacy, as well as what is perceived as a feminist backlash to Julia Child, this viewer wonders why there wasn’t instead an embrace of Child as a feminist herself. Wouldn’t harnessing her image in that way have been even more revolutionary?!
Occasionally Giosia will say “bon appétit!” more directly to the viewer just before taking a bite of a dish, (S3, E1, “Office Lunches”, S3, E6 “Dude Food”), but it has much less impact on her program than “bon appétit to me!” which carries markedly different connotations. For Giosia, “bon appétit to me!” is said with a cheeky grin, the chef enjoying the fruits of her labor, the self-congratulatory note existing as a clever undercut of social norms in which women cook but do not eat. This is even more emphasized in Season 2, Episode 4 “Bitchin’ Bootcamp Exteeeme!” when after cooking a turkey leg Giosia says: “I’m gonna grab me a leg, and bon appétit to me.” She then smiles at the camera, points to herself and mouths the words “Not you, me” while pointing at the piece of meat. Again in Season 3, Episode 4 “Bucket List Dishes” Giosia picks up a pulled-pork sandwich she has just made and, looking right into the camera she says “bon appétit… to ME.” There is a me-ness to this that is indicative of a lack of social generosity. Giosia is not unusual in this way but it would be unthinkable for Child and the “greatest generation” that she came from, where etiquette and hosting had clear social rules and involved a high level of respect. Giosia in contrast, performs with a twinge of entitlement that can bring some doubt to how genuine her feminist statements are.

However, this teasing also fits into Giosia’s rapport with the audience, a component to her success as carefully crafted as was Child’s hugely successful relate-ability to her audience.

Giosia is not satirizing Julia Child when she says “bon appétit to me!” but it is an acknowledgement of the frequent kitchen humor she employs throughout her performances. Giosia makes this type of sly joke with relative frequency on Bitchin’

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222 This is supported by the cookbooks of the era, which emphasize how and when certain foods should be served, how guests should be greeted, who should do the carving, etc.
*Kitchen.* She will often say something that is self-congratulatory in a way that acknowledges the limits of the framework of the television program while simultaneously paying homage to the format and her predecessors – this is in many ways what makes Giosia’s performances so indicative of the state of current feminism. *Bitchin’ Kitchen* functions the way kitchens always do for women: as both a site of oppression and a site of resistance.

On each episode of *The French Chef*, Julia Child almost always focused on a single dish, which she carefully prepared over the length of the program. While extremely personable in her performances, Child’s program undoubtedly had an educational focus, from the careful description of ingredients, the explanation of tools used, to food preparation, plating and serving, and wine pairing. Throughout an episode, Child would explain the provenance of the dish, specifically detail the techniques that made things French, and offer ideas for the most economical use of all parts of the ingredients (such as saving poultry bones to make soup stock). Child’s intention was easy to understand: she wanted to teach French cooking techniques with the aim that her audience would be able recreate the dish on their own.

In contrast, on *Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen* Giosia presents a menu for an entire meal, including at least three dishes in every episode. This is a cooking and scripted comedy show, so the effect is very different than *The French Chef*. There is as much attention paid to Giosia’s performance of her persona and the ‘advice’ she gives the audience as the food itself. She gives very brief explanation of ingredients, tools and preparation, almost like a highlights version of a longer program. In keeping with the norms of a scripted sitcom or movie, *Bitchin’ Kitchen* has a distinct musical soundtrack,
indicative of her MTV generation audience, usually rockabilly-punk guitar played by Montreal musician Bloodshot Bill. The soundtrack will often change to emphasize advice given by Giosia, usually an ironic (if formulaic) shift to a traditional Italian polka or sappy romantic instrumental. In contrast, *The French Chef* has no soundtrack, the only music occurs at the opening and closing of the program.

Unlike *The French Chef*, which was made with multiple takes but had the effect of a single long unedited take (a mode in keeping with the stylistic trend seen in Rosler and Lacy’s video art), in *Bitchin’ Kitchen* there are many obvious edits between the shots, which has the result of reinforcing the artifice that is television. Giosia’s program has the slick, fast paced and purely fabricated nature of a music video, and the show is unapologetically more entertainment than education. Child’s casual banter, slightly unorthodox voice, and accessible style made her easily relatable. Her cooking may have been perfect, but she was definitely human in her occasional mistake and general demeanor. Giosia, in contrast, has the stylistic hard edges epitomized by her perfect glossy manicures more so than the success of the food she cooks. As a result Giosia’s kitchen humor is all the more important for her audience to be able to identify with her as a real person, poking fun at the artifice that makes up *Bitchin’ Kitchen*.

**Side by Side comparison: Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen and The French Chef Season One, Episode One**

Since the premier episode of a series sets the tone for the program a few additional components are worth looking at for their broader implications about each performer and changes in culturally normative behaviors. The first episode of *The French Chef*, which aired February 11, 1963, was named for the dish being prepared: “Boeuf
Boeuf bourguignon.” The choice of this dish and title are fitting as it is distinctly French, but recognizable and not too difficult. The opening shot is of Child’s hands using a towel to take a covered pot on the stovetop and Child’s voice is heard:

Boeuf bourguignon, French beef stew in red wine. We’re going to serve it with braised onions and mushrooms and a wine dark sauce. It’s a perfectly delicious dish. (0:11-0:29)

In what would become a classic Child–type of description, she goes on to refer to the stew itself as being “wine dark,” a phrase borrowed from a common description of the sea in Greek mythology. This reference, reminiscent of classical texts such as the Iliad, would be recognized for its poetic musicality, and thus situated Child’s program, or at least the food she was preparing within the realm of the well-established culture of old Europe, a much-desired connection for many Americans in the 1960s. The associations of the “wine dark” reference speak to Child’s image as a sophisticated woman of the world, the food elevated yet attainable.

In contrast, the first episode of Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen, which aired November 4, 2010, is titled “Deflate Your Mate,” an indication of an irreverent tone from the outset of the show. The title sets up the social significance of eating lower calorie foods, with an emphasis that the cooking is for someone else who needs to lose weight, not the viewer themselves (though that could be intuited as well). Notably, Giosia’s use of gender neutral terms “mate” and “spouse” are part of the makeup of the show from its earliest episode. Giosia does make references to cooking for one’s “rotund Romeo” inferring a heterosexual woman cooking for her male spouse, but never goes as far as to spell out an assumed audience of women.
Giosia’s show is on the whole more casual and jokey than Child’s, as indicated when, after cooking the main dish of pepper-crusted tuna steaks with homemade teriyaki and a side of creamy wasabi “smashed” potatoes, Giosia holds up the plated meal and samples it standing at the kitchen counter. At her first bite of tuna, Giosia look right into the camera and says: “wasabi just punches you in the teeth, but in a good way, you know.” (8:50) This type of statement fits into the ideas about kitchen humor as seen in both Lacy’s and Rosler’s videos. Giosia’s somewhat aggressive humor comes into the choices of set decoration (for example the liberal use of silver spray painted baby-doll heads around the kitchen) as well as language.

Giosia and the *Bitchin’ Kitchen* are actively defiant of traditions and norms associated with femininity, the kitchen and even the very format of a cooking program. Similar to the episode “Proposal for a Proposal” in which Giosia fantasizes about marrying a chocolate soufflé instead of a person, “Deflate Your Mate” also has a strongly irreverent element. Though the theme of the episode is low-calorie food, her final dish is a decadent Pot au Chocolat. Giosia humorously wonders how this dessert could possibly be fat free for the viewer’s overweight mate, makes a sound like a drum roll and then says: “They don’t get any!” (18:00) Immediately followed by Giosia singing and dancing in a celebratory style. Not only does Giosia mock the established format of her program by making a dessert and rubbing it in the face of the dieter, her humor is all the more complicated because she is thin, young, and beautiful.²²³ By gloating that she is ‘allowed’ the dessert, Giosia’s dance functions as an inherent validation of the social

²²³ In comparison *French Chef*, S1, E1: 9:11-9:22 Shows how to use a garlic press: “Here’s the garlic press, you just put the whole garlic in there and go errrk [presses garlic over the pot, her hands are not coiffed with nail polish a la NG, but an older woman’s hands, knuckley, spotted, strong using the tool]. That’s awfully easy and then you don’t get it over your hands.”
worth of youth and beauty. This is somewhat akin to Rosler’s and Lacy’s satirical performances of Julia Child while both artists were young and thin in comparison to Child’s middle age and more ‘matronly’ appearance. While Rosler, Lacy and Giosia in many ways present a high degree of self-awareness in their work, this component of youth and beauty is often glossed over, or used to make someone else the butt of the joke.

There are many parallel dishes that both Giosia and Child featured in their shows, but a comparison of just a few will highlight the differences between the two chefs. Attention has already been given to Giosia’s Chocolate Soufflé Marriage, but the actual cooking instruction of this dish deserves some attention. As is her modus operandi, Giosia is flippant about the complexity of the dish and she offers a minimum of direction to the viewer, giving the actual making of the soufflé less than five minutes in the episode. It is common that French cuisine is not even identified as such in many contemporary cooking shows, and can be simply rolled into a menu, underlining the success of Child’s aim to demystify French cuisine for Americans. In keeping with the demystification established by Child and Giosia’s general tone, she says “now don’t be intimidated by soufflé, it maybe sounds all fancy but in fact it’s super easy to do. Ch-ch-ch-check it.” (13:10)

A soufflé is one of the most technical dishes Giosia makes on Bitchin’ Kitchen, and as a result she does give a few specific tips on technique. For example when Giosia describes how to make egg whites into meringues for the soufflé, she suggests substituting white vinegar for cream of tartar, using a common kitchen staple instead of a specialty item. She does not spell out why the substitution works, or the various merits of each ingredient. She simply says: “Let’s make some meringues. To our six egg whites
add half a teaspoon of white vinegar. This replaces cream of tartar, da ding!” (13:40) As she says “da ding” Giosia points to her head and there is a simultaneous cartoon-inspired ‘ding’ sound effect, bringing the viewer’s attention to her bright idea.

Giosia’s kitchen humor works in this scene since the “ding” gives a “why didn’t I think of that?” quality to her ingredient substitution, a way of reminding the viewer that one does not always need specialty items that recipes call for. Although Giosia doesn’t explain this in detail, it aids in the demystification of the complicated dish at hand. Adding to the humor, the “ding” itself is the familiar sound of a kitchen timer going off, often signifying that a dish in the oven has finished cooking. By pointing to her head and saying “da ding” along with the sound effect, Giosia insinuates it is her idea that is well cooked.

Once she has beaten the egg whites sufficiently, a task shown in a high-speed segment that reinforces the cartoon-like quality of Giosia’s actions, she explains how to mix the meringues into a separate mixture of melted chocolate and egg yolks. As she pours the stiff egg whites into the bowl she says:

Now delicately fold in the meringues. You just want to fold it about ten, fifteen times, don’t go all crazy and deflate the meringues. … See this is what it’s supposed to look like, all streaky with little bits of meringue. This is what makes a soufflé light, so don’t freak out.

As Giosia explains folding the mixture ten or fifteen times there are a few “whoosh” sounds, and then a quick edit showing more mixed version as she describes the “streaky” appearance. The chocolate soufflé gets more specific technical attention than most dishes on the Bitchin’ Kitchen, but due to the high-speed demonstration and fast edits the actual instruction is still relatively minimal. However, by incorporating these visual techniques and the sound effects Giosia reminds her viewer of the artifice that makes up television.
In comparison in the *French Chef* during season four, episode one “Chocolate Soufflé” Child spends an entire episode on this dish, and gives her audience three separate pep talks to embolden their cooking confidence. As the episode opens Child is taping two signs to her oven door, in which a pot covered in foil is visible. The signs say OCCUPIED and DO NOT DISTURB. (See Image 23) Child says with her classic, jovial style: “This is a maximum security oven. It’s not to be opened for twenty-five minutes or everyone will be court marshaled. There’s a *soufflé* in it.” (See Image 24) (0:00 - 00:24). This introduction is a perfect example of Julia Child’s style of kitchen humor with her mock-serious tone contrasting with her obvious enjoyment of this joke – as if anyone would actually ever put a DO NOT DISTURB sign on their oven door! How very droll.

After the introduction music, Child further explains that:

I don’t dare open my maximum-security oven because I’ve got a chocolate *soufflé* in it. And in about twenty-five minutes it should come out all puffed with pride, and so should I, I hope. (00:47-00:58)

In so saying, Child highlights the complexity of the dish and the careful attention to detail needed in order to make it, and as well the validation of the chef if such a dish is successful. Although there is no farcical dream sequence in *The French Chef*, Child discusses chocolate soufflé in a tone that is as close to the ecstatic as is seen on her program. In her first pep talk she says:

I’ve never run into anyone who just doesn’t *adore* chocolate soufflé. [Child’s eyebrow raises dramatically] But a lot of people are just scared to death to make it. Well I don’t think anyone should be scared to make anything cause there isn’t any trick at all to making a soufflé as you’re going to see. And besides a chocolate soufflé is such a nice dessert to have up your sleeve, that’s one of the best tricks of all.” [smiles knowingly, laughs a bit]²²⁴ (00:59 – 1:22)

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²²⁴ At this stage of the episode Child holds a recipe card for reference, which is unusual for her.
Giving the audience a pep talk is not entirely unusual for Child (consider her famous “courage of your conviction” phrase), but her focused encouragement not to be scared to take on a soufflé speaks to the common notion that a soufflé is a notoriously difficult dessert to make. In the second pep talk she details the type of pan to use and how to trouble-shoot the need for specific types of tools, giving this segment about the pan and how to prepare it a full five and a half minutes – more than the total instruction time for the chocolate soufflé on Bitchin’ Kitchen. Child concludes the episode with the third pep talk, ending the show with the final boost of confidence:

    So let’s take a look at this terrifying monster, this mystery soufflé, and what is it, after all. Well, it’s melted chocolate. We’ve done that before. It’s white sauce, we’ve done that. As a matter of fact, I’ve news for you. You’ve known how to make a chocolate soufflé all along! So that’s all for today. On The French Chef this is Julia Child. Bon appétit! (28:12-28:37)

By referring to the chocolate soufflé jokingly as a terrifying monster, and a mystery she acknowledges the insecurities many home chefs would have around cooking such a technical dish, yet, like many good teachers reminds her audience that they have already mastered the components and have the capabilities to be successful with this dish.

The demonstrations given by the two chefs are quite different in style and substance, but evidently there is something about this dish that elicits Giosia and Child to make their special appreciation for chocolate soufflé evident. Child’s kitchen humor is a controlled humor, as demonstrated by the military references to maximum security and a court-martial, and Giosia’s kitchen humor is much more the uncontrol of humor in her chocolate soufflé marriage, as well as the cartoonish quality of the sound effects. As seen in Douglas, the uncontrol of humor is potentially subversive, and thus the status quo is brought into question. Furthermore, as explored in Eco, when the status quo comes into
doubt through humor, the social frame becomes less reliable. If Giosia can fantasize about marrying a chocolate soufflé instead of a person, bringing to light the ridiculous nature of gender expectations, what else could be re-imagined through her humor?

Another dish made by both Giosia and Child that demonstrated their different approaches to kitchen humor is what Giosia refers to as “Beef and roasted veggie stew” and Child calls, in the classic French tradition, “Pot-Au-Feu.” Giosia makes the stew in season one, episode three of Bitchin’ Kitchen, “Recession Recipes” (Apr 15, 2010), an episode dedicated to cooking on a budget. In keeping with the format of Bitchin’ Kitchen, Giosia begins to prepare the stew with no detailed descriptions. There is a quick montage of her peeling carrots and chopping them into large pieces, followed by other vegetables but without explanation or identification of the vegetables, except to say “Now, chop your veggies until they’re pretty much uniform in size, this way they roast evenly.”

(11:34).

After cooking the beef for the stew, which Giosia has identified as being some of the thriftiest cuts of beef to buy, she says:

Next, deglaze the pan with half a cup of red wine. Whenever you’re cooking with wine, always make sure to use a wine you’d actually drink. Then again this is a broke-ass episode, so that doesn’t say much for the wine now, does it. Just use whatever you’re drinking as long as it’s not NyQuil, uh?” (12:40-13:27)

As this quote demonstrates, the audience is as much fair game to be made fun of as Giosia herself is. While much of Giosia’s kitchen humor is aimed at herself in keeping with the traditions of women’s humor, it is on the whole more acerbic than Julia

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Child’s – more along the lines of the kitchen humor demonstrated by Suzanne Lacy in *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*. Gioia’s use of language is crass and her jokes sometimes funny because they are tasteless, as the reference to drinking NyQuil (a nighttime cold medicine with sedative effects) instead of wine speaks to the abuse of alcohol which is found in both, and the level of economic and social desperation that would push a person to abuse NyQuil in this way. This type of joke is not the kind of humor traditionally associated with women and performing the feminine: it is crass and macabre, and the contrast of Gioia’s glamorous, feminine façade makes it all the more humorous and pointedly satirical. Akin to how Panos displays his leg, the telling of the joke in contrast with the person doing the telling is gender bending. The joke is so ridiculous in the context of *Bitchin’ Kitchen* that Gioia can easily transition into the next segment of the show. The socially inappropriate nature of the joke is allowable in this context because of status of Gioia as a joke teller, as explained by Douglas, and the humor has the result of “the leveling of hierarchy”\(^\text{226}\) in this case established expectations of feminine decorum.

When Gioia finishes making the stew, she again makes a blunt joke about not having money that contrasts the image of Gioia as the highly-polished television star with a person who drinks NyQuil recreationally because that’s the only substance they can afford to buy. Gioia says:

Nothing beats comfort food when you’re broke. Except maybe not being poor. [looks at camera, shrugs] Whatever.

The result of this type of joke is that the emphasis of the episode is the viewer who has no money, and not the thriftiness of the menu Gioia prepares.

When Julia Child makes “Pot Au Feu” on *The French Chef* (S8, E2, 1971) she also makes reference to the economy of the stewing beef, and involves kitchen humor, but it is friendly and mild in comparison to Giosia’s more biting humor. Child’s delight in working with large and unwieldy ingredients comes through again in her introduction to this episode. The first shot of the episode is of a startlingly large pile of meat, followed by a large basket of whole vegetables. Child introduces this opening shot in her sing-songy voice:

A mountain of meat, and a garden of fresh vegetables, and ggrrrreeeaaat big bones [as she says this the camera pans out and Child is visible as she raises very large raw meat bones up into the air, one in each hand] they’re all going to go into Pot Au Feu, French boiled beef dinner, today on *The French Chef*.

From the onset of the episode Child’s kitchen humor is evident. By holding the large bones up at shoulder level she contrasts the size of the bones with her own body, a playful introduction to a recipe that could otherwise intimidate the viewer. (See Image 25) Although Child does not call this a “recession” recipe, she does emphasize the frugality of the dish due to the cheaper cuts of meat used for stewing. In contrast to Giosia, Child never makes a joke about the viewer being poor. She extols the virtue of the cheaper cuts of meat in such a way that she highlights the sensible nature of a person who thinks economically about their purchases. Child says:

…it’s a marvelous recipe, because it’s delicious to eat yet it uses the cheapest cuts of meat, and as a matter of fact, the cheap cuts of meat are much the best for boiling. (0:47)

Child’s distinctive humor is seen further along in the episode when she discusses making the broth for the stew, an extremely time-intensive process of eight hours.
However instead of suggesting her audience should slave over the stove for that amount of time, Child says, it:

doesn’t mean you have to sit and watch this pot for eight hours, you could go out and play a snappy game of croquet and go to the movies and come back again as long as you have regulated it to the very slow simmer.  

Child’s somewhat off-hand comment, seen through a lens of forty years, speaks to her idea of leisure time, and even in contemporary society the idea of going to the movies suggests a person without a care – as if the stock simmering on the stove for eight hours was a simple afterthought. Child’s humor in this comment is whimsical, as the image of her playing “a snappy game of croquet” is a delightful contrast to the usual image of her in the kitchen. One could imagine Child would make an excellent participant in a croquet game, again endearing herself to her viewers.

There are other steps within Child’s preparation of Pot Au Feu that contrast dramatically with Giosia’s preparation of Beef and roasted veggie stew, for example Giosia roasts all of the vegetables together in a single pan, but Child cooks them separately in four different pans on the stove top. This type of simplification in the cooking process by Giosia speaks to the format of the scripted comedy that makes up *Bitchin’ Kitchen*. While Child pioneered the instructional cooking show, by the time *Bitchin’ Kitchen* began it had become so well recognized that the instructional element has become much less important than the entertainment and novelty of the performer.

\[^{227}\] In regards to stock, Giosia just pours some in from a glass jug – no explanation of whether it is homemade or store bought. One assumes store bought since she calls it “organic beef stock” (13:28) and she does not make it on the show, but offers no tips on how to choose a good one. Giosia then makes more stock (adds raw bones) but does not clarify why. Simmers two hours. A small but significant difference as we will see, since Child emphasizes homemade stock is crucial to the recipe, though time-consuming process.
While the two episodes “Recession Recipes” and “Pot Au Feu” underline the contrast in the format and style of each program, they are also exemplary of the contrast between the aesthetic Giosia and Child employ in their programs. There is a simplicity and attainability to Child’s wardrobe and jewelry in comparison to that of Giosia. Child’s image is professional but practical, sometimes bordering on utilitarian, without nail polish or obvious make-up. Giosia is on the whole more costumed in appearance, with clothing and accessories that would be more of a hamper than a help in the kitchen. In fact, at the end of the “Recession Recipes” episode thanks are given in the credits to Betsey Johnson, a couture fashion designer.

In each episode of *Bitchin’ Kitchen* Giosia’s nail polish color perfectly matches her clothing and the set: for example in “Recession Recipes” it is lime green, in “Deflate Your Mate” the accent color is hot pink. While Giosia wears oversized silver rings, she notably does not wear a wedding ring, unlike Child’s trim but unadorned fingernails, and simple wedding band. (See Images 26, 27) These small details about the costume choices of Giosia and Child are in fact very indicative of the overall tone of each program. *The French Chef* is well put together and neat, with understated elegance seen in Child’s stud pearl earrings and the minimal set decorations such as pots hung on the wall. In *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, the colorful, hard gloss of Giosia’s nail polish, a recognized symbol of femininity, is a motif of the entire show. *Bitchin’ Kitchen* is itself carefully manicured and glamorous, yet can be jarring and punk inspired while still maintaining the trappings of femininity.

In all of the examples from *Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen* Giosia’s humor, gender bending, and feminist statements indicate changes in popular culture from the days when
The French Chef first aired. However the inconsistencies in Giosia’s messaging can prove problematic for feminism, and shows that contemporary feminism is still perturbed. In the face of an era when women are being chased back into the home, and gender inequality in the workforce continues, the narrow traditional role of woman as beautiful homemaker that Giosia exemplifies can be seen to fit within the culturally conservative shift in North American culture. And yet as this chapter has explained, Giosia cannot be minimized to such a stereotypical television role. Is this contradiction where the humor lies? This is kitchen humor in contemporary feminism.

While Nadia G. might be campy, her type of rebellion in the kitchen is no longer seen as a revolutionary tactic. The combination of feminism, food, and kitchen humor has changed from the politically necessary activist stance of the 1970s to the mainstream and a commonly accepted cultural stance in 2016.

228 Lucy Lippard: “It is useless to try to pin down a specific formal contribution made by feminism because feminist and/or women's art is neither a style nor a movement, much as this may distress those who would like to see it safely ensconced in the categories and chronology of the past. It consists of many styles and individual expressions and for the most part succeeds in bypassing the star system. At its most provocative and constructive, feminism questions all the precepts of art as we know it. (It is no accident that “revisionist” art history also emerged around 1970, with feminists sharing its front line.) In this sense, then, focusing on feminism's contribution to 1970s art is a red herring. The goal of feminism is to change the character of art.”
Chapter Four Images

Image 1: *Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen* introduction image: applying red lipstick while using a large meat cleaver as a mirror

Image 2: *Bitchin’ Kitchen* introduction image, putting on a “Bitchin” knuckle ring
Image 3: *Bitchin’ Kitchen* introduction image: Giosia slaps a ladle into her hand

Image 4: Nadia Giosia, *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, Burger Love Dream Sequence, S1, E2
Image 7: Giosia, *Bitchin’ Kitchen* Burger Love Dream Sequence, S1, E2

Image 8: Giosia, *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, Chocolate Soufflé Marriage S2, E2
Image 9: *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, “Flavor Of The Weak”, S2, E1

Image 10: *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, “Flavor Of The Weak”, S2, E1
Image 11: *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, Panos the Meat Guy using his shoulder to demonstrate a cut of beef, S1, E2

Image 12: *Bitchin’ Kitchen* Panos the Meat Guy using his neck to demonstrate a cut of beef (followed by the chin flick) S1, E2
Image 13: *Bitchin’ Kitchen* Panos the Meat Guy clucking like a turkey, S2, E4

Image 14: *Bitchin’ Kitchen* Panos the Meat Guy displays his leg
Image 15: Introduction image to *Bitchin’ Kitchen*: Yeheskel the Spice Agent, Panos the Meat Guy, and Hans

Image 16: *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, Giosia’s feminist “rant” S1, E1
Image 17: *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, foot shot following “rant” S1, E1

Image 18: *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, Giosis eat messy, S2, E2
Image 19: Bitchin’ Kitchen, Giosia’s pseudo feminist costume in S2, E5 “Girls Night In”

Image 20: Bitchin’ Kitchen, Giosia slaps a wooden spoon into her hand, S2, E2
Image 21: *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, Giosia gives engagement ring advice, S2, E2

Image 22: *Bitchin’ Kitchen*, post monologue foot shot S2, E2
Image 23: *The French Chef*, Julia Child’s humor in the chocolate soufflé episode

Image 24: *The French Chef*, Julia Child’s humor in the chocolate soufflé episode
Image 25: The French Chef, “Pot Au Feu” Julia Child holds up the bones, S8, E2

Image 26: Bitchin’ Kitchen, S1, E1, “Deflate Your Mate.” Giosia has a perfect manicure, lots of jewelry, no wedding band
Image 27: Julia Child, *The French Chef*, S8, E2, “Pot Au Feu” hands are unadorned except for wedding band
Appendix 1

Kathleen Hanna, “Riot Grrrl is……” Bikini Kill 2, ca. 1991

Riot Grrrl is……

BECAUSE we girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US, that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways.

BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other’s work so that we can share strategies and criticisms-applaud each other.

BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings.

BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out what we are doing — impacts, reflections, perpetuations, or DISRUPTIONS the status quo.

BECAUSE we recognize fantasies of Instant Macho Gun Revolution as impractical lies meant to keep us simply dreaming instead of becoming our dreams AND THUS seek to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit christian capitalist way of doing things.

BECAUSE we want and need to encourage and be encouraged, in the face of all our own insecurities in the face of beingpunkrock that tells us we can’t play our instruments, in the face of “authorities” who say our bands/zines/etc are the worst in the U.S. and who attribute any validation/success of our work to girl bandwagon hype.

BECAUSE we don’t wanna assimilate to someone else’s (boy) standards of what is or isn’t “good” music or punk rock or “good” writing AND THUS need to create forums where we can recreate, destroy and define our own visions.

BECAUSE we are unwilling to fall under claims that we are reactionary “reverse chauvinists” and not the true punkrockgirlreaders that WE KNOW we really are.

BECAUSE we know that life is much more than physical survival and are patently aware that the punk rock “you can do anything” idea is crucial to the coming angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours.

BECAUSE we are interested in creating non-hierarchical ways of being and making music, friends, and scenes based on communication/understanding, instead of competition/good/bad categorizations.

BECAUSE doing/reading/sewing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, ableism, classism, sexism, ableism, classism, sexism, and capitalism and heterosexism figures in our own lives.

BECAUSE we are fostering and supporting girl scenes and girl artists of all kinds as integral to this process.

BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits or being cool according to traditional standards.

BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl-Gang, Girl-Bad, Girl-Weak.

BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousies and self-defeating girlytype behaviors.

BECAUSE we are malsubmitted behaviors (like fucking boys without condoms, drinking to excess, ignoring treasurite girlfriends, belittling ourselves and other girls, etc...) would not be so easy if we lived in communities where we felt loved and wanted and valued.

BECAUSE i believe with my whole heart and body that girls constitute a revolution in soul force that can and will change the world for real.

**riot grrrl**

*free weekly mini-zine*

please distribute freely
Conclusion.  
The Dragon Continues to Rear Its Head

The ultimate rationale for this dissertation has been the recognition of the problem of the frame of patriarchy and the validation of the use of kitchen humor to address this problem. The video works by Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler and the cooking programs starring Julia Child and Nadia Giosia all grapple with the complicated role women have within a society in which women can be both the host and the roast. Kitchen humor has been developed as a way to express this complicated multiplicity.

These artists and performers have unabashedly feminist personas in front of the camera and all use humor politically. The conversation initiated in second wave feminism by Julia Child and by artists Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler is taken in a new direction in the contemporary popular culture seen in Nadia Giosia’s work. The trajectory of kitchen humor beginning with post-war pop culture, moving through 1970s video art, and ending with contemporary popular culture shows kitchen humor to be a considerable element in feminist visual culture. The lens of kitchen humor should be considered as a framework for looking at the numerous other feminist video artists working in the 1970s that have yet to be properly studied as well as raise questions about other periods in art history.

Sarah M. Evans has written in her article “Women’s Liberation: Seeing the Revolution” (2015) that the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s included a significant amount of work addressing intersectionality by the activists on the ground, though it is so often considered entirely a movement of white middle-class women, as typified by Betty Friedan’s writing. The framework of kitchen humor, when taken into its broader implications would be logical to use for such an historical analysis. Bringing the
conversation into more contemporary cultural producers would also engage intersectionality around feminism, the kitchen, and American pop culture.

The analyses throughout this dissertation have relied on the understanding of kitchen humor as having a multi-faceted definition made up of the perturbed relationship women have with the domestic sphere as both a site of oppression and a site of resistance; the performance of domestic rituals; and the use of humor to bring attention to the problems of socially prescribed gender normativity. The political nature of satire has also figured heavily in this humor as a way for the artists and performers to take on some of the most complex factors that make up normative gender behavior. As the women studied here looked for additional tactics to support their messages of gender equality, satire was used to emphasize the absurdity of feminine norms.

Centering the works around food and the kitchen, the artists and performers all engaged with consumption, be it visual, sexual or through ingestion of the delectable, objectified woman. This consumption is very closely linked to Friedan’s feminine mystique and Rosler’s performance of Un-Joy as resulting from the drudgery of maintenance labor. Lacy and Rosler both undertook feminist political action in their videos through the mishandling of meat and maintenance tools, a tactic simultaneously embraced and disregarded by Giosia.

In a return to Umberto Eco, the humor is poignant and effective in these women’s work in large part because of how they challenge the social framing that is so problematic for gender identity. Lacy, Rosler, Child and Giosia use feminist kitchen humor with a high degree of impact towards larger change within a system of inappropriate frames.
Each woman subverts gender normativity and social expectations around appropriate behavior within the kitchen, making their performances funny.

Within the growing body of writing about feminist art there has existed a gap around what I have called “kitchen humor.” While each of the women studied are recognized for their work, the humor and quotidian nature of the topics they explored have gone undocumented. Within feminist discourse there is the need for a fully developed concept of kitchen humor that engages with the quotidian, is about embodiment, and is grounded in components that build from feminist theory.229

The importance of kitchen humor is that it gives language through which to articulate and thus validate women’s experiences as both the host and the roast as the artists Suzanne Lacy and Martha Rosler demonstrate, and complicated in television by Julia Child and Nadia Giosia. Kitchen humor includes both the “fundamental absurdity of oppression”230 as discussed by Walker, and the protest of oppression through maintenance activities. Molesworth’s claim that “one legacy of feminist criticism is to establish that it is the private sphere that can help us to rearticulate the public sphere”231 rings true for the analyses of the artworks and television programs here, as the validation of women’s activities within the private sphere have too long been denigrated and belittled as insignificant to the broader world, when in fact the opposite is true.

This “fundamental absurdity of oppression” is what makes it possible to laugh in the face of the social frame. As Julia Child performed the “chicken sisters” and Suzanne Lacy as both the host and the roast, women can find personal agency in celebrating the

229 The concept of kitchen humor grows from post-structuralist and feminist theorists including Molesworth, Butler, Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous, Foucault, Althusser, Pollock, Friedan, the Heresies Editorial Collective, Debord, and Douglas.
230 Walker, A Very Serious Thing, 12.
traditions that the kitchen has offered to them and simultaneously in resisting societal pressure to conform to a given ideal of femininity. Through kitchen humor women have attempted to “slay the dragon of domestic drudgery,” fantasized about marrying a chocolate soufflé, used satire to make their voices heard, and celebrated the contemporary feminist environment that supports women in being the complicated, multifaceted, subjects of their own lives.

Although the many works examined here have shown women to be the subjects of their own work, the final chapter about Nadia G.’s Bitchin Kitchen shows that the state of feminism within popular culture is perturbed. The fact that Giosia herself can articulate a strong feminist message and also become a sexualized object speaks to the ongoing need for the recognition and articulation of women as subjects.

A full eighty-five years after The Joy of Cooking came out with its cover image of St. Martha slaying the dragon of kitchen drudgery, and over forty years since Martha Rosler made an attempt to slay the dragon with Semiotics of the Kitchen it is evident that this dragon, the lurking menace that is patriarchy, still remains alive and thriving. We need kitchen humor to help us recognize that even if the frame of patriarchy has been altered since the 1970’s, Nadia G.’s Bitchin’ Kitchen shows that the frame remains ill-fitting. For feminist artists and art historians there remains a challenge to transform society and explode such stifling frames and to replaced them with social parameters that recognize women as subjects of their own lives.
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