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Semiotics of the Kitchen Introduction

Theme: Food, Domesticity and Labor

Focus: How artists turn domestic ritual into critique and new stories.

Overview

Today we look at three artists who use kitchens and tables to talk about power:

- **Mary Cassatt, *The Tea*** — a quiet visit in a crowded, elegant room.
- **Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*** — a performance of anger and frustration with kitchen roles.
- **Carrie Mae Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series*** — shows love, conflict, loneliness, friendship, and self-definition around a kitchen table.

Together they show how **hospitality, gesture, and tools** can move from polite ritual to protest and community.

Learning Objectives

- Read Cassatt's tea scene for space, gaze, and the roles of host and guest.
- Understand how Rosler turns kitchen tools into a language of critique.
- See how Ringgold uses a dinner table to tell stories and reclaim women's creative space.
- Reflect on whose labor becomes visible when domestic life is shown as art.

Activities

1. **Opening Reflection**

   Read Berger's line: *"To see is already to give something."*

Write: When we look at someone serving tea or cooking, what are we "giving" them with our attention? (Respect? Judgment? Curiosity?)

2. **Study 1 – Cassatt, *The Tea***

   Look closely at the painting.

   - How does the room feel: open or compressed?
   - Who seems more in control, the hostess or the guest?
   - Does the scene feel like comfort, pressure, or an awkward pause?

   Briefly discuss three possible readings:

   - A nice, traditional domestic ritual
   - A narrow life, with women confined to the home
   - A network of women's sociability and subtle power

3. **Study 2 – Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen***

   Watch the video.

   - Write three words for the mood (for example: angry, sarcastic, tense).
   - Choose one kitchen tool that stood out. How did Rosler use it differently from normal?

   Discuss: How does she turn ordinary tools into a **language of frustration and protest**?

4. **Study 3 – Weems, *The Kitchen Table Series***

   Look at several photographs from the series.

   - How does light shape who seems powerful or vulnerable?
   - How do posture and facial expression show love, argument, or solitude?
   - What roles does Weems take on at the table (partner, friend, mother, thinker)?

5. **Compare and Discuss**
    - How does Cassatt show **polite ritual and tension**?
    - How does Rosler show **anger and critique**?
    - Where do you see **care**? Where do you see **pressure** or **constraint**?
    - How does each artist link domestic space to identity and power?
    - Whose labor and voice becomes visible in each work?

6. **Class Reflection**

    Share one sentence:

    "In these works, the kitchen/dining room is not just for food but also for ___."

    (For example: storytelling, negotiation, friendship.)

Question

Compare how Cassatt, Rosler, and Weems use domestic scenes to show power and labor. What changes when hospitality and maintenance become art?

Key Idea

Kitchens and tables are not only places of service.

In the hands of artists, they become stages for **critique, memory, and new kinds of community**.

Cassatt Notes

Rosler Notes

ABC

CMW Questions