

WHO WILL BE IN IN 2023

Dora Budor on Rosemarie Trockel at MMK, Frankfurt/M.

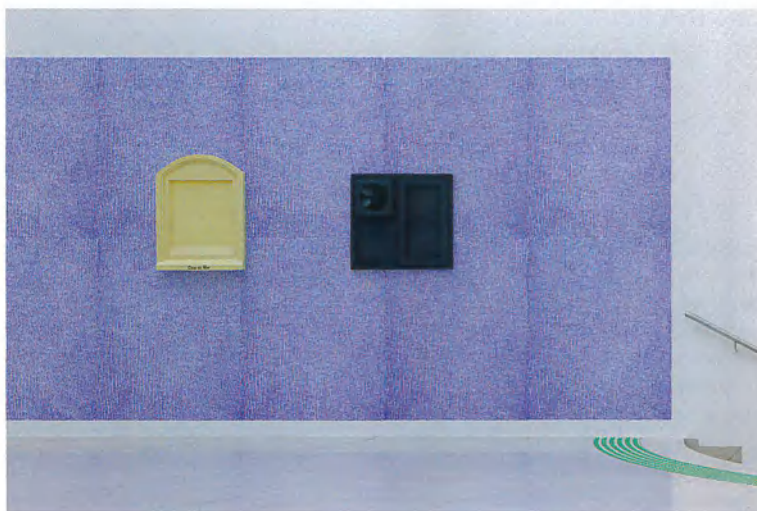
The complexity and depth of Rosemarie Trockel's work has challenged critics for decades. Intent on providing an unprecedented overview of the artist's oeuvre, the current retrospective at MMK brings together more than 200 works from over 50 years, with the newest works being created specifically for this exhibition. Curated by Susanne Pfeffer, the exhibition traces Trockel's dense network of references that materialize in a wealth of different media. In her attempt to find a thread or two in this tight web of propositions and juxtapositions, artist Dora Budor not only emphasizes continuities in Trockel's sustained feminist agenda but also examines how her sharp, uncompromising eye has broadened focus over time. In this show, many new works raise recurring questions, while some of the older ones take on a new meaning.

In the mid-1980s, when Rosemarie Trockel started to gain recognition, her intentional choice of stereotypically "female" materials and craft techniques as well as objects that denote housework struck an already passé and nostalgic chord. In Germany, the decade saw women leave unpaid housework in record numbers to join the salaried, although underpaid, white-collar labor force. Speaking to Jutta Koether at the time, Trockel suggested that "art about women's art is just as tedious as the art of men about men's art."¹ The complexity of such works must then lie somewhere beyond their ostensible materiality. The natural order of things is brought to interrogation by the manifestation of its seemingly unquestionable appearance: the work embodies what is normative but simultaneously scrutinizes why it is so.

Visitors entering the towering space on the ground floor of MMK encounter a blue silk screen pattern of knitted grids surrounding the triangular room. Differing from one another only slightly through their imperfect overlaps and

paint application, the grids permeate the space with a diaphanous vibration. In this installation, *Prisoner of Yourself* (1998), not a thread is left of Trockel's infamous yarn. The artist is condemned to reproduce the same pattern in its most scripted form – which, in this case, points to the institutional enclosure. The work clarifies a conundrum central to Trockel's pursuit, which correlates with her suspicion of stereotype: When does recognition via a so-called signature style become a burden to oneself? For all her evasion, Trockel is an artist with trademark works marked by the aforementioned female materiality: knitted pictures, minimalist stovetop constellations, series of glazed ceramics popularized by hobby pottery clubs, which were attended largely by women. Trockel's continued effort to defy the style for which she has received wide acclaim, despite occasional relapses, unveils a dialectical approach to producing art as a woman and an awareness of the situatedness of feminism in ideological formations. The approach is lodged in the inescapable bind where the projection by others forms the way one conceives of the self, and vice versa: "What is most painful," quips Trockel, "what is most tragic, is that women have intensified this alleged inferiority of the 'typically female.' The stumbling block lies, therefore, in the consciousness itself."² Opening one's consciousness necessarily influences one's practice, and the other way around.

In front of the knitted grid hang three smaller works. Each indicates distinct thresholds between the private and public realms while addressing their own enclosure: an opaque black window with a ventilation fan (*Challenge*, 2018), a blank street plaque with velvet lettering (*Dans la Rue*, 2019), and a closed medicine cabinet (*Cage*



"Rosemarie Trockel," MMK, Frankfurt/M., 2022–23, installation view

Doré, 2021). These openings into civic or domestic domains are crafted by coating ceramic casts with paint or glaze, which furnishes them with a referential, ideogrammatic appearance. In the selection of ceramics shown upstairs, a piece in the shape of an oversized pendant weighted by a chain also carries the title *Prisoner of Yourself* (2016). The works metamorphose, but the circumstances seem to persist. The adroitness of Trockel's artistic maneuvers – given that they can map out and point to traps – is that they are able to, somehow, defy control by others, eschewing easy categorization. Pointing this out happens either by placing things blatantly on display or by swerving from her distinguished trajectory and its affirmations (something which, when men do it, is acclaimed as a gesture of artistic virility and ingenuity). Such actions – which Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, similarly referring to the practice of Isa Genzken, pathologically termed as "her almost self-destructive desire for change and transformation"⁵ – can serve as an attempt to "denaturalize" the conditions in which one operates.

Thus, it is important to consider how Trockel's work is accommodated in this exhibition and how its presentation also gets disrupted. To a large extent, the show is organized

chronologically, from the bottom floors upward, and typologically, per series, which follows the artist's logic of succession and self-referentiality. Overall, the inclination toward what Jacques Derrida has termed "archive fever" – the need of museums to organize, classify, and preserve – works when it is self-reflexive, such as in the darkly painted rooms hosting monkey paintings, vitrines that encase botanical refuse which are situated in a natural history museum-like space, or the teal-blue room à la Musée de l'Orangerie, which augments the crumpled wall ceramics' likeness to Impressionist paintings. However, these strategies can also feel a bit overwhelming in their attempt to systematize and converge Trockel's oeuvre: we see repeatedly, for example, a plethora of diverse ceramics on large plinths and floor sections, and works that fill all open architectural spaces, including windows and alcoves. Despite the multiplicity of the materials and display strategies present in this retrospective, the most rousing dispositions are the ones that juxtapose varied works from different periods. The video works, for instance, function as a potent, continuing thread throughout the exhibition; in distinction to previous surveys of Trockel's work, at MMK the sizing as well as placement of



Rosemarie Trockel, "Continental Divide," 1994, film still

screens has a sculptural character, vivifying some surrounding iconic still works. *Continental Divide* (1994), which commands a room of its own, and *Ann de nuit* (1992), shown on a propped screen on the floor, both relentlessly probe the rankings and hierarchy at the core of the social system of art. While *Continental Divide* performs this through a lengthy and intimidating self-inquiry between the artist and her doppelgänger, *Ann de nuit* does so by erasing chalk from a Beuysian blackboard with screeching fingernails.

Also on the first floor, the video *Mr. Sun* (1991) hovers over a variety of well-known works as well as many quirky and less-known pieces such as *Kangaroo Admiring the Jaws of Beauty* (1983) and *A Famous Problem* (1992). Providing the soundtrack to footage of an old-fashioned Heiliger stove in *Mr. Sun*, Brigitte Bardot's sultry voice serenades the gallery. The black-and-white video is positioned adjacent to the real stovetops of *Untitled* (1992) and *Unplugged* (1994). After meandering over the grime-covered stovetop for a while, the footage reaches the oven's black void. With the increase in heat, the film exposure doubles, too. In accompaniment, the lyrics "Mister Sun, you have ways / of putting me into a daze" allude to love's intoxication en route to domestic subjugation.

Such self-annihilation is reminiscent of Chantal Akerman's first short, *Saute ma ville* (Blow up my town, 1968), in which the protagonist, 18-year-old Akerman, barricades herself in the kitchen before departing on a more self-destructive journey to implode the "feminine universe." Akerman's film dates from around the same period as Bardot's lullaby, which was written as the actress sojourned in Saint-Tropez. There, Bardot met her future husband, Mr. Gunter Sachs, a multi-millionaire German industrialist and playboy, who threw roses for her from an airplane and put on the biggest fireworks show in Bavaria. Mr. Sachs/Mr. Sun complained after their divorce that with Bardot, he "felt that the possibility of a nervous breakdown or even suicide was always hanging in the air."⁴ Bardot has transformed many times in the public eye: from an emancipated sex symbol to a suicidal depressive, a recluse, an animal activist, a far-right Marine Le Pen supporter, and aggressive critic of #MeToo.

For Trockel, this sort of figure who acts as a projection screen for a perplexing and politically divisive reality is a point of interest, functioning simultaneously as a manifestation and a detractor of public desire. Trockel's choices of other polarizing figures (Michel Houellebecq, Julian

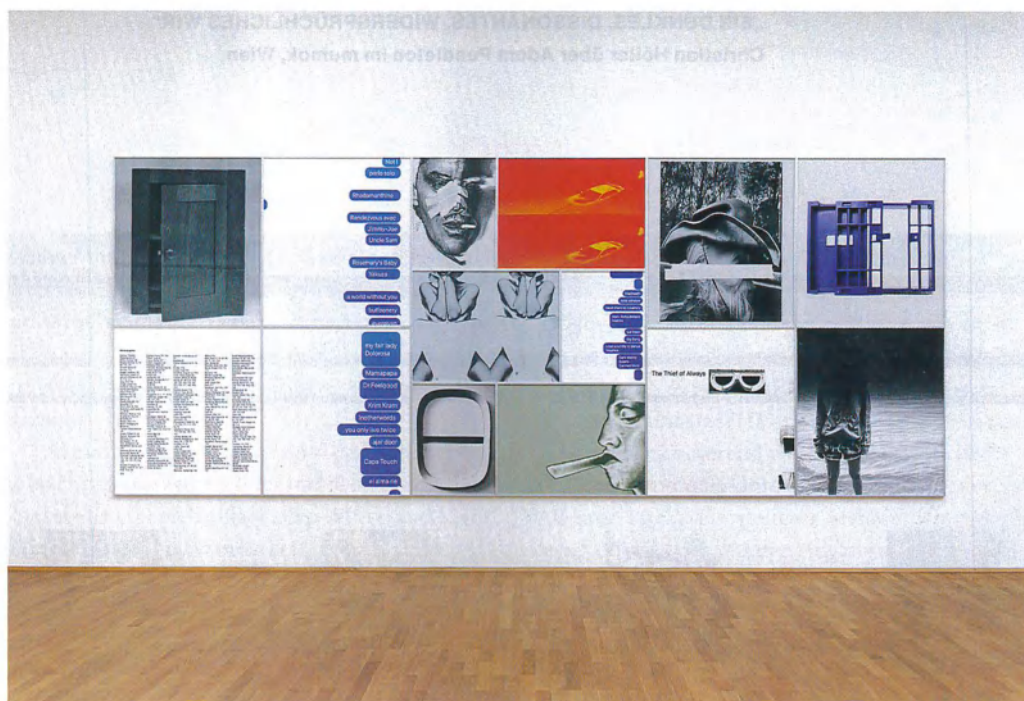
Assange) or right-wing politicians (Franz Josef Strauß, Vladimir Putin) affirm her interest in persons as models, which necessitate the viewer to bring their active reading to her work, as “there is no model for being a model.”⁵ Because the artworks are willfully labyrinthine, their intent is only to be realized through the viewer’s actively disassembling them. When one consults the work titles, the riddle only broadens, as these deflect interpretation to an even wider associative sphere.

What are we to make of this opacity? The alterity of the openings through which one usually perceives the outside takes, in *Zum schwarzen Ferkel 3* (2006), the form of kitchen graters that become large and armed mounted gates, shutters composed of casts taken from steaks, as in *Shutter* (2006 and 2010), or windows that turn impenetrable and opaque (*Neighbourhood*, 2022). As John Berger claims, more appropriate than the Albertian metaphor of the painting as the window on the world is that of “a safe let into the wall, a safe in which the visible has been deposited.”⁶ And Trockel’s work, probing the economy of knowledge and the value sphere of art, begins from the form of the safe, which becomes perhaps most evident in her *Book Drafts* (1982–97). Consisting of 139 pieces hung in a salon-style presentation, these *Drafts* capture the moments of creative impasse. Available only as covers, they invite us to imagine their content. *Book Drafts* presents a synthesis of Trockel’s themes and a lexicon of the social structure of art: one cover has “Private Sammlung” (Private Collection) typed above a black-and-white picture of two bullet holes in window glass, while a twin cover features “Private Sammlung” next to a vertical picture of a large grenade, alluding to the shared interests between the collecting and military-industrial circles of

Germany, which affirms a certain type of (male) art history. Further engaging with art historical bias, an invented magazine titled “Male-Tested” presents on its cover this magazine’s publisher, Isabelle Graw, smiling and holding up a men’s shirt, while another book with the words “Ich bin DAN GRAHAM” over a black-and-white picture of Trockel shows her sulking under a high diving platform, describing with irony the patriarchal givens.

On the third floor, more recent bodies of work address contemporary models of distribution, which also provide an update of the production technologies (outsourcing, moodboarding, commissioning) and global economy of image circulation in the 21st century. The large-scale mood-board-like *CLUSTER V – Subterranean Illumination* (2019) and *CLUSTER VI – Door Ajar* (2021) deliver parallel directions of artistic production today: cannibalistic reproduction of one’s own archive as if it were a product catalogue, and self-embodiment of the curatorial-industrial impulse – having to generate novel exhibitions at a fast pace according to similarity, topicality, and trendiness. New and existing works are remixed to tightly fit into *CLUSTER*’s grid, presenting it as a game, or as a blueprint of an exhibition plan, with potential show titles running down in a blue iMessage stream.

On the same floor, in what could be considered an indirect continuation of Trockel’s outsourcing of her knitted works to computerized machines and their operators, a whole room is dedicated to oil paintings (*Rush Hour*, *White Hope*, and others; all 2021) that the artist commissioned from commercial painters in China. Hand-painted after a mélange of iPhone photos as well as collaged and digitally manipulated images from



Rosemarie Trockel, "Cluster VI – Door Ajar," 2021

the internet, these objects speak clearly of their manufacturing. Subsequent to studio apprentices and small local manufacturers, the novel way of production consists of outsourcing most competitive art solutions globally, often to gig-economy workers and Chinese factories. Conditions of production and reproduction have always been present in Trockel's work; in this show, she addresses trying to fight off obsolescence and keep up with changing tastes and burgeoning demands, in which multitasking becomes the mode of production for the visual assembly line. This could be Trockel's way of updating the question from one of her most emblematic knitted paintings, *Who Will Be In* in '99 (1988) and letting us nervously grapple with how we feel about our own immediate future.

"Rosemarie Trockel," MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst,
Frankfurt/M., December 10, 2022–June 18, 2023.

Notes

- 1 Jutta Koether, "Interview with Rosemarie Trockel," *Flash Art*, no. 134 (February–March 1987): 40–42, at 42.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Isa Genzken: Fuck the Bauhaus. Architecture, Design, and Photography in Reverse" [2014], in *Isa Genzken*, ed. Lisa Lee, October Files 17 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 47.
- 4 "Brigitte Bardot," New Wave Film (website), <https://www.newwavefilm.com/french-new-wave-encyclopedia/brigitte-bardot.shtml>.
- 5 Artist's quote from "Rosemarie Trockel: Spleen," exh. brochure (New York: Dia Chelsea, October 16, 2002–January 11, 2004).
- 6 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), III.