

WHAT-IF COULD-BE

“My great dream is to finish with dreams,
but to believe I am dreaming.”¹ —Rosemarie Trockel

“The world is divided between on-lookers and non-lookers.
The latter are not sleepers.”² —Ruth Miller

If a complete retrospective of Rosemarie Trockel's work could be imagined, it would not take the form of a traditional museum exhibition, but rather that of the “big book” she once told me about: a catalogue of all her catalogues and all the critiques of her shows. This collection of her bodies of work would not be a catalogue raisonné for it would not be a reasoned study of each piece, of its provenance and exhibition and publication history. Such a marvel as Trockel's compendium would be more tower than book in form, and an unreasonable wild thing at that. (*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*—the title of a Goya etching, which served as an epigraph to a Trockel catalogue³—comes to mind.) Given that since 1983 Trockel has had more than 130 solo shows,⁴ that the accompanying catalogues usually include multiple contributors, and that each exhibition generated multiple reviews, physically producing such a volume would be a challenge if not an impossibility, yet its prospects, as with many Trockel concepts, are tantalizing, important, and inviting.

At the time of my conversation with Trockel, which was part of my research for a text that was written and published many years later (in a marvelous Trockel paradox, the decision not to publish the extensive interviews done over several years came with the permission to quote from them), I thought about the project as a metaphor or correlate for the scope, diversity, and indeed sheer abundance of the polymath artist's psychologically and politically charged, poly-

valent, polymorphous, polyglot work. Now I think of this astronomical collection as real (as well as a real dream)—something possible if boundless, something I would look forward to savoring in analog, digital, or some other form yet to be invented—and also surreal in the sense of Borges's endless library, a universe of utility as well as problematic overload, as he envisioned it in such stories as “The Tower of Babel,” “The Total Library,” and “The Book of Sand.”

With multiple perspectives tied to the occasions and contexts in which each catalogue was generated, and recognizing that Trockel designed most of these publications, this encyclopedic volume might also be likened to an archaeological study in which geological strata reveal time as well as substance, evidence of life and death, animal, vegetable, flora, fauna, and traces of material culture. It would in fact be a fertile “garden of forking paths” (Borges again), for a journey through Trockel's oeuvre necessarily proceeds with the acceptance of many dualities—the artist's approaches, directives, juxtapositions, palimpsests, voices—in short, choices of “both” rather than “either” or “or,” as in the title of (and words within) a 1990 woven-wool piece, *What-If Could-Be*, borrowed for the title of this essay. In a single work Trockel is likely to offer a multifocal view—conflating conceptual problems and material properties, notions of male and female, female and feminist, natural and constructed worlds, sciences and arts, everyday objects

It is not the moral presented at the end of the story—“Every opportunity for happiness will be lost on one who lacks the understanding to make use of it”—that interests Ferenczi, but the stunning moment midway through, in which a sausage resembling a Hussar’s moustache becomes part of a woman’s face. If Ferenczi reenvisions Hebel’s “Three Wishes” as a figuration of psychic introjection in which a sausage stands for the extension of the ego’s self-affection and with that the very possibility of what we come to know as love, Trockel’s *Three Free Wishes* concretizes an association between wishes and the flesh from which they arise and in which they manifest themselves.

Allusions to psychoanalytic concepts have long played an important part in Trockel’s art, and her works often seem to be aiming to stimulate associations by means of both their formal play with media and genres and their relation to titles rich with weird imagery and wit. When I suggest that we should recognize affinities between Ferenczi’s 1912 text and Trockel’s *Three Free Wishes*, I do so knowing that the links might seem to be merely of my own making. This is fitting. Trockel’s art seeks to draw its viewers into a kind of postsurrealist engagement of unconscious psychic processes as modes of seeing, feeling, and thinking proper to aesthetic experience in both the production and the reception of artworks as such.

In fact it was not *Three Free Wishes* but *Paranoia*, 2013, and *Interior Motive*, 2013, that first got me thinking about Ferenczi’s writings, and not introjection but its opposite, projection, which the works seemed to be thematizing. In Trockel’s art as in Ferenczi’s writings, the opposition of projection and introjection risks collapsing into identity. After its own fashion, Trockel’s art posits proximities and likenesses between our experiences before artworks and our experiences of paranoia, and of love.

Paranoia in particular appears to evoke the terms of Freud’s earliest elaboration of a psychoanalytic claim that “the purpose of paranoia is ... to fend off an idea that is incompatible with the ego, by projecting its substance into the external world.” Freud, and Ferenczi after him, insisted that projection must be recognized as “a psychical mechanism which is very commonly employed in normal life.” “Whenever an internal change occurs,” Freud writes, “we have the choice of assuming either an internal or an external cause. If something forces us away from the internal course of events, we naturally seize upon the external one.”³ As the paranoid cannot tolerate the notion that certain of his own ideas might be the cause of his internal discomforts, he finds himself again and again “forced away from the internal course of events” and comes to “abuse” the psychic mechanism of projection “for the purposes of defense”—that is, for the expulsion into the external world of ideas unbearable to the ego in its internal world. This idea is not mine. It is—it must be—the idea of another, another who has come to know something about me that I do not know, something that I can see that I know I do not know, or did not know, or do not believe, because this is not my idea, it is an idea that came to me from outside. But how has another come to have this idea about me, to deliver

it to me, to know this thing about me? In an extraordinary formulation concerning the nature of human expression, Freud posits that “normal projection” is at work when “our internal states [are] betrayed (by an expression of emotion) to other people” and we in turn feel ourselves (and our expressions of emotion) observed by those people. In this sense, every expression of emotion involves a projection, which is to say a making visible of an internal change as an external change. According to Freud, the projection in question is normal “so long as, in the process, we remain conscious of our internal change”—that is, so long as our feeling of being observed by other people, and our sense of their having gained knowledge of our internal states, are both supported by our awareness of having made evident a change in our internal state of which we, too, possess conscious knowledge. “If,” however, “we forget [this internal change], we are left with only the leg of the syllogism that leads outwards; and there we have paranoia, with its overvaluation of what people know about us and of what people have done to us. What do people know about us that we know nothing about, that we cannot admit?”

Trockel’s *Paranoia*—a black-and-white photographic image of a young male model, cropped at the neck and covered by a Perspex sheet onto which a white Acrystal cast of part of an oxtail has been mounted at shoulder height—hangs on the wall as something like a monument to projection and its abuse. In *Paranoia*, the slender ease of the young man’s upper-body posture gives little away, while his face remains unavailable to betray anything at all of his internal state as an expression of emotion. Instead the mounted-on cast of meat makes its presence felt as if materializing a metaphor for the projection into the external world of the substance of an idea unwelcome within the internal world. But whose idea? Are we to imagine the apparently dispassionate young man in the photograph possessed by a paranoia made palpable in the sculptural cast? (“What do people know about us that we know nothing about, that we cannot admit?”) Or, does Trockel’s *Paranoia* ask us rather to envision the black-and-white image as a figure for the external world and the cast Acrystal flesh mounted upon it as a motif for the objectification of a projection immanent to the making of the work?

Interior Motive, a white Acrystal cast of what seems to be a rack of ribs mounted on Perspex flush to the wall, with a similar cast of some other cut of meat resting on another plane of the same Perspex surface and protruding at an angle of perhaps thirty degrees from the wall below, makes the case for seeing projection as a procedure inherent in the production of the artwork as such, a mechanism that makes possible the presentation of the casts as figures for flesh that has left its place inside the body and now appears outside in a not merely formless state. The bent Perspex support plays a crucial role in this. Affixing one cast to the wall while carrying the other forward from it, the Perspex support emerges as a device for the display of the bright white casts as objects situated between painting and sculpture and inclined to arouse imaginings of violence done to each.

sofa piece, all these found objects are covered with a big plastic sheet.

Trockel's "copy me" instruction held for a second couch work with the same title, *Copy Me*, 2013, but this time fabricated in rusty steel and again protected by a sheet of plastic, perhaps for delivery, safekeeping in storage, or as a reference to the domestic practices of an earlier era, when plastic slipcovers were used as a second skin to protect upholstery from wear as well as from soil. The idea of returning to an idea or form many times over has been a constant in Trockel's work as she continually seeks another way that she has not tried before.

Trockel's ceramic sculptures feature prominently in the suite of works published in the portfolio in this edition of *Cahiers d'art*. They have been among the works in her most recent museum and gallery shows: "A Cosmos"—which, after originating at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (May 23–September 24, 2012), traveled to New York's New Museum (October 24, 2012–January 20, 2013) and London's Serpentine Gallery (February 13–April 7, 2013)—as well as the solo shows at Sprüth Magers, London (September 4–October 5, 2013), and the Gladstone Gallery, New York (November 9–December 21, 2013).

These new sculptures made of ceramic or Acrystal, a plaster-like material, continue to torque figurative elements; now, for example, in lieu of human limbs, Trockel casts cuts of meat in Acrystal; the resulting sculptures are treated with painterly surfaces and affixed to abstracted, curving, shelf-like Plexiglas supports. An armless modernist chair cast in Acrystal displays a surface of creamy, painterly expressionist modulations, and it wears a fitted plastic slipcover, seams neatly stitched. As different as these may appear from the latest wool works, those too take up new painterly concerns, treating the conventions of twentieth-century genres of abstraction—whether monochrome, "op," or "stripe" paintings—with fully charged, reverberating palettes. These are constructed emphasizing linear, horizontal strokes, each line a stretched horizontal length of yarn the full width of the canvas. As Roberta Smith wrote in her review of "A Cosmos," Trockel is "a subversive anti-painting painter and a dedicated, non-ideological feminist." Smith concludes: "At this point in her singular career, Ms. Trockel is at her freest and her most concentrated in her ceramics, and they are some of the best being made anywhere. The vision and magnanimity that brought her to this place is one of many narratives at large in the great chain of being that is this show."⁹

For whether Trockel is juxtaposing the made (by herself or others) and the found, as in "A Cosmos," or literally embodying in a work a multifocal view, there is never a one-point perspective, let alone perception, either for the artist or for her audiences. In *Eyes*: "They offer spectacles they do not use. Too bad to make them for their support", 1991, a pair of eyeglasses offers a simultaneity of opposing sights via paired lenses, one magnifying and the other reducing, and *Miss Wanderlust*, 2000,

shown in the exhibition "Fernweh" (Wanderlust, 2000) at Kunst auf der Zugspitze, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, consists of a figure of a woman resting on her knees so that she is looking out of the gridded windows ahead toward a valley beyond. She is holding one monocular tube up to each eye, but they are splayed in opposite directions, and thus her vision is not the seamless binocular unity of normative seeing. Looking askew, she is viewing different beyonds. (Behind her in the installation is one of Trockel's "moving walls," titled *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, 2002, from the movie of the same name.) Thus, *Miss Wanderlust* sees beyond the obvious, like Trockel herself, who restlessly observes what is often overlooked by others.

Other Trockel works in this vein include *The Art of Seeing*, 2008, in which the words of the title are collaged below a photograph on cardboard of a seascape with boat turned upside down, and "*Ich sehe rote Wolle*", *eingefärbtes Wachs*, 1985 ("I see red wool, tinted wax" 1985), 1992. One could say that the latter work embodies both "I" and "eye" (though the artist herself would not be linking the two as a phonetic pun) and could be read as a critical commentary on the artist's own practice and an example of the knowing humor that turns her work away from any didactic frame while stating the obvious. The sculpture consists of a ready-made glass eye of the sort used by doll makers. It is wrapped in red wool and partially visible peering through the strands; its component text label states, "I see red wool." The actual date of the making of this sculpture, 1992, differs from the 1985 date on its label (just as the eye is made of glass rather than the tinted wax referenced in the label).

In the early 1990s Trockel's "wool paintings," which had first brought her critical attention in the mid-1980s—positive, as she recalls, in the United States, though initially negative in Germany—continued to define how others saw her practice. In fact, during this period she was creating works in many mediums, including drawings, photographs, bronze sculptures of animals, videos such as *Tierfilme 1978–1990* (Animal Films 1978–1990), 1990, and a painting machine for which she solicited locks of hair from fifty-six artists (for brushes of the type she had made as a child, using her own hair affixed to a stick, though these were fabricated for Trockel at the renowned brush maker Da Vinci), so that each resulting sheet was a collective painting/drawing.¹⁰

Trockel remained known as the artist who knits, though she never did the knitting herself. The first of her wool pictures were made in 1984. They were modest in scale and were made to the artist's specifications by home weavers she had found through want ads. About a year later she began to have them industrially produced.¹¹ Some of her "paintings" incorporate text, and others display corporate logos, including those of the wool industry. Other works are sculptures in the form of garments such as sweaters, balaclavas, or "endless" stockings.¹² Trockel was prompted to take up this material by seeing exhibitions of art by women, especially a crocheted

work that she found awful, and being puzzled early on in her studies by women students who were knitting during seminars, she wondered what this could possibly mean in terms of their time and attention as well as what it might mean for their work. At the time, Trockel herself realized that this was a rather stupid activity, but for that reason among others she also thought it was something to think about and to question, and these concerns informed her later machine-knitted works.

Other prompts were her fascination with pattern, the endless line of thread, and questions of how a material could, in any case, be considered good or bad, especially an invention as ingenious and structurally complex as knitting. These interests set her apart from the Mülheimer Freiheit group, though in the early 1980s she at times took part in their activities. Trockel recalls finding colleagues who shared her concerns with the found and the made, language and image, including Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Cindy Sherman, whom she met in the mid-1980s. Trockel's earliest understandings (or misunderstandings) of art are associated with the German pharmaceutical company Bayer, world-famous for its aspirin, which is headquartered in Leverkusen, where she was raised. Her work *First Influenza*, 1995, with its Bayer cross logo (the brand name spelled out horizontally and vertically, intersecting at the letter Y) seems to be a play on "first influences" (that is, of her hometown art collection as well as its illuminated logo) and "first influenza," whose aches and pains might prompt a young sufferer to seek relief in the iconic hometown remedy, its logo imprinted on each tablet. Trockel recalls that the company "gave me my first contact with 'Pop Art.' When I was five years old, I witnessed the erection and illumination of the Bayer cross. It made a deep impression on me. ... Only later did I learn that it wasn't a public sculpture but rather the symbol for a chemical company."¹³

Other influences were of course her formal studies. Beginning in 1974 she attended the Fachhochschule für Kunst und Design (the former Werkkunstschule), where she completed her studies in 1978, having studied sculpture and painting, taken a course with the filmmaker Robert van Ackern, and mostly made drawings.

In 1988 Trockel exhibited the first of her works involving stoves or stove plates, which, like her knitted works, were hybrids of everyday objects and art-historical references. In "Projects: Rosemarie Trockel" at the Museum of Modern Art in 1988 (her first museum show in New York), she centrally sited within a room of drawings *Pennsylvania Station*, 1987, a two-part sculpture in the form of an abstracted steel stove and slatted boxcar. Within the latter rested a small mermaid-like figure, apparently burnt, invoking a fetish object or effigy. Though the work was titled after a famous New York City rail station (itself rebuilt after the original grand structure of 1910, designed by McKim, Mead & White, was demolished), references to the Holocaust's rail transports and

crematoria were unavoidable, as were those to post-World War II German art, namely the iconography and overwhelming presence of Joseph Beuys internationally and in particular as a teacher at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf. Trockel herself refused an invitation to join Beuys's class, admiring his work but not his authoritarian persona, though, as she said, "There was one Documenta where he had this school there and I participated."

Trockel soon began to exhibit her abstract, minimalist wall-hung stove-plate works—in which the ribbed, circular gray-black found objects were dispersed on white enameled-metal surfaces—as she continued to reanimate and see anew other subjects from the distaff side, or the pursuits traditionally associated with women, *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* (children, kitchen, church). Children had already been seen in her untitled 1988 work, including a photograph of them playing in the spray of a fire hydrant juxtaposed with a monochrome panel and also paired with a second, similarly constructed two-part panel, this one featuring an image of a family home, and would be seen in her later children's book *Löffel and Mirabelle*, accompanying her 1995 exhibition at Museum Haus Esters, Krefeld; in her video *Kinderspielplatz* (Playground), 1999; and in many other works. Church took the form of a model of the Cologne Cathedral, constructed of small sticks by a hobbyist or folk artist, which Trockel found in an antique shop and set into a cardboard box for an untitled work of 1990. She added to the side of the box the words "Daddy's striptease room," a reference to the nakedness of Christ. A cast-plaster angel from the cathedral was the source of her 1994 Frankfurt *Memorial to Persecuted Homosexuals*, for which she knocked off the angel's head and replaced it at a different angle so that the damage was evident, as was the impossibility of restoration. As Trockel said: "It's somehow a right image for me because there is no way to have this *Wiedergutmachung*. It means 'you can't make it right.'" In addition, the repositioned head no longer faced the scroll held by the angel; rather, when the work was sited, it looked toward the court that had not long before reversed the Nazi-era law deeming homosexuality illegal. A country church figures in a later Trockel video, which also features two children, *Zum Beispiel Balthasar 6 Jahre* (For Instance Balthasar 6 Years Old), 1996.

The engagement with the kitchen in Trockel's many stove and stove-plate works (including *Pennsylvania Station* and those in her 1991 exhibition at Samia Saouma in Paris) was continued in her "egg" (*Ei*) works, among them *Eirweiss* (egg white) prints, videos, curtains made of strings of eggshells, and installations that involved live chickens, Trockel's "Ideal Chicken Coop," and the collection of eggs each day.

For *Out of the Kitchen into the Fire*, 1993,¹⁴ the first of Trockel's videos shown as a projection, she prepared several eggs as props, replacing the contents of the raw eggs with black ink and resealing their shells. As the standing woman, back to the camera, squatted a bit to lay the egg, it fell to

the floor and, upon breaking, created a painting. From her several takes, each of which required a new egg, Trockel chose the accidental cruciform abstraction.

Trockel had earlier presented an animal, a woman animal as artist, in her exhibition at Paris's Galerie Piece Unique in 1991. The only piece in the gallery's one room—and accessed exclusively by peering through the street-side window of the gallery on rue Jacques Callot—was a 1991 Trockel sculpture of a life-size bronze seal suspended upside down from a hook, an untitled work but offering the subtitle *“Es gibt kein unglücklicheres Wesen unter der Sonne als einen Fetischisten, der sich nach einem Frauenschuh sehnt und mit dem ganzen Weib vorlieb nehmen muss K.K.: F.* (There is no unhappier being under the sun than a fetishist who longs for a woman's shoe and has to make do with the whole woman K.[arl] K.[raus]: F.[ackel]). The conflation of female and animal was amplified by the presence around the seal's “neck” of locks of artificial blond hair, a reference not only to endangered wildlife and the filaments of nets that serve as indiscriminate snares but also to the animal rights activist, actress, and iconic sex symbol Brigitte Bardot. Trockel would return to the subject of “BB” in Paris, Bardot's onetime hometown, for an exhibition at Galerie Anne de Villepoix. Among Trockel's many BB references in the show is the undeveloped film she shot with a still camera as she followed Bardot look-alikes on the streets of Paris (for an edition that took the form of a box containing canisters of the undeveloped film, titled *PARIS blond*, 1993). Another was an altered edition of a work by a different BB, Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), for which Trockel used a photograph of her BB, Bardot, on its cover, conjoining the two very different cultural touchstones, each important to her. In *Fan 1–3* (1993), three scanner prints on canvas, Trockel put herself in relation to BB. In the first of the *Fan* prints she is sitting in her sister's bedroom before a wall of fan photos of BB; each subsequent scanner print is progressively cropped so that, by the third, Trockel's face and Bardot's are the exclusive focus and are in alignment. Here, as in other works, Trockel reveals herself as a fan and an artist familiar with, and whose works are informed by, film history and pop culture.

Although Trockel may not have intended to make a German-English pun in the title of her 1992 sculpture *“Ich sehe rote Wolle”, eingefärbtes Wachs*, 1985, one can imagine that the artist was “seeing red” at the time, being more than a bit ticked off by a narrow view of her work. Of course that didn't stop her from creating other wool works (including the wool “paintings” that she continues to make to the present day, among them those referring to a century's genres of abstraction) as she continued to explore other mediums, including conceptual works, video, drawing, photography, printmaking, and ceramics as well as book works, designs for clothing, tableware, furnishings,¹⁵ and other investigations, including a silver dome of an inflatable tent that could be produced as a

temporary shelter. The tent, along with the beds and bedding therein, also designed by Trockel, served as the set for her video *Sleeping Pill*, 1999, which was one of the three video projections (all originally shot on film) included in her exhibition at the German Pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale.¹⁶

Trockel's individual exhibitions, while often introducing new bodies of work, have at the same time been, in their own way, retrospective in nature. This is as true for *Dessins*, at the Centre Pompidou in 2000, which included a retrospective of drawings and new drawings of “sleepers,” at the same time offering a sculptural, mixed-media assemblage within a camping tent (the sleepers and tent reminiscent of her show at the German Pavilion) and the first presentation of her video *Manus Spleen I*. Her exhibition “Spleen” at Dia:Chelsea in New York, which opened in 2002, introduced her “moving wall” sculptures on one side of each of the partition walls, its other faces serving as projection screens for her full series of *Manus* videos (*I–V*), and also featured a last-minute addition of a retrospective of her book-draft works. One of these “moving walls,” *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, had previously been shown in “Fernweh,” while another would serve as reference point for her Synagogue Stommeln Art Project, which played with the similarity between the pattern of her *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, 2002, shown at Dia, and that of the mosaic at the historic synagogue's entry. The synagogue at Stommeln is one of the few to have survived Kristallnacht and other Nazi pogroms, by virtue of its having been converted to a barn (the presence of a pig is part of the apocryphal story of its survival), and each year since 1990 an artist has been invited to make a work responsive to the building—to its immediate architectural frame as well as its historical context—so as to animate it in some way for the present and future. As Wilfried Dickhoff wrote of Trockel's piece, “the moving wall unfolds as an architectonic addendum that opens a space of memory.”¹⁷

Trockel's exhibitions are notable for her inclusive eye, the works of her own seen in retrospect, the surprises often added at the last moment to shift any singular reading of the pieces chosen, her sure handling of display and overall installation as well as individual works of art, and, most recently, the juxtapositions of her own works with those of others as well as found objects. The concept of the *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, a precursor of the museum in which artworks as well as botanical and zoological specimens were displayed, has been a thematic and actual factor in several of her shows since 2010. For example, in “Rosemarie Trockel: Deliquescence of the Mother” (Kunsthalle Zürich, 2010), *Copy Me*, Trockel's ceramic couch piece mentioned earlier, took pride of place at the entry, yet equally startling were her newest abstract monochrome knit “paintings,” the largest to date,¹⁸ photographs, and wall-hung abstract ceramic works, and especially the floor-to-ceiling vitrines with internal shelving that could be viewed from all sides, her own cabinets of curiosities, each offering a mini-retrospective of her works.



fig. 10: *Spiral Betty*, 2010. Neon, glass, crystal, cord, cable, plug, 150 × 35 × 10 cm

In “Post-Menopause” (Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany, 2005, and MAXXI: Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI Secolo, Rome, 2006), Trockel’s installation of open cubic shelving of her own design served as a cabinet for her various objects, a retrospective within a retrospective with intimations of her own vision of a *Wunderkammer*.¹⁹ She also exhibited many types of wool works, including several daybeds with shag-rug-like coverlets, “paintings” of woven plaid or made of superimposed long woolen lines used as abstract paint strokes or to evoke the linear patterns of an earlier era’s black-and-white television (*TV/SAG*, 2004). Trockel also used these woolen lines for the isolated, elongated letters that spell out *PARIIS*, a work that is striking not only by virtue of its being a concrete one-word visual poem but also because of the internal pair of *P*s that can be taken as an odd anagram or pun for “pairs” or as the evident misspelling of the work’s actual title, *Paris*, 2004. “Pairs” itself has been an ongoing Trockel theme, whether in the double neck of her *Schizo Pullover*, 1988, which she considered a self-portrait of sorts; the pairing of the real (painted goose eggs) and the reproduced (the repeat knitted pattern of the same painted goose eggs) in *Leben heisst Strumpfhosen stricken* (Living Means Knitting Tights), 1998; or in the photo series *Paare*, for which Trockel photographed couples who described themselves as being in love.

S P I R A L B E T T Y



fig. 11: *Spiral Betty*, 1988. Typesetting, graphite, plastic, and thread on paper, 26 × 18.9 cm

Noting the title of the show, “Post-Menopause,” one is reminded by contrast of Trockel’s 1993 video *Out of the Kitchen into the Fire*. “Post-Menopause” is a straightforward if also taboo statement, a marker of age, of the far side of biological fecundity, but it is no less an expression of the ongoing flow of creative forces and Trockel’s multiplicity of expressions.

Truly a *Wunderkammer* in theme and actuality, the exhibition “Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos,” curated in collaboration with the artist by Lynne Cooke, included Trockel’s own works in all mediums from 1972 (one drawing) to 2013 together with botanical and zoological specimens and works by other artists (some more usually categorized as “outsiders”), all of which take equal place in her view. While avoiding traditional museum taxonomies, the works in the exhibition—Trockel’s own and those of others, as well as found objects—are organized, as are the catalogue’s plates, in chapters, reflecting the types of works that might earlier have been in a cabinet of curiosities: “Chapter I. botany; Chapter II. zoology; Chapter II. (bis); Chapter III. textiles; Chapter IV. ceramics; Chapter V. books.” Nineteenth-century blown-glass sculptures of sea creatures by Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka are juxtaposed with Trockel’s 2012 *Lucky Devil*, a 77 cm acrylic cube atop which sits a very large crab specimen whose outstretched claws extend to the full width

of its support. Stacked within the cube are large squares of Trockel's knitted cloth, cut by the artist from her knitted pictures. Trockel's recent wool pictures, stretched and wall-hung like paintings on canvas, are now constructed of superimposed linear wool elements and are in kinship with Joyce Scott's entwined bundles, with which they are exhibited.

The artist's own botanical drawings are seen with eighteenth-century collages by Mary Delany as well as a book of engravings by Maria Sibylla Merian. Merian's tempera-on-parchment study of caterpillars encircled as if on a plate also is kin to Trockel's zoological works. This particular image is reminiscent of the first that Trockel had ever seen of a species of processionary caterpillar so poisonous that no other creatures will eat it, with an appetite that causes extreme damage to trees; the caterpillar also causes severe allergic reactions in humans who encounter it. She had first seen a photograph of some of these caterpillars on a plate. She also learned that despite their ugly characteristics they are known to travel following each other in elegant lines of up to three meters in length. Trockel used these as actors in her studio, transforming them into beautiful abstractions as she choreographed them for her video *Parade*, 1993.

The prompt for thinking again about Trockel's "big book" of many individual catalogues and the "slices" of a body of work each addressed within an exhibition, as well as the journal articles and magazines in which her work has appeared, was seeing the test layouts for the cover of this issue of *Cahiers d'Art* and conversations with publisher Staffan Ahrenberg and associate editor and creative director Anya Bondell. Ahrenberg notes that this, no. 1/2013, is actually the ninety-ninth appearance of *Cahiers d'art* since it commenced publication in 1926 (and produced various numbers during the course of any one year). Publication ceased in 1960, and it was relaunched with no. 1/2012 after Ahrenberg's acquisition of the publishing house, its archives, its backlist (including the Zervos Picasso catalogue raisonné), and its gallery. With this edition, Bondell spoke of a wish for an overview to introduce readers new to Trockel's three-decade career as well as to address those who had seen only parts of her oeuvre.

My own memories of Trockel's works and catalogues are vivid and began to flood in even before I agreed to write this essay. I was immediately struck by the difference between what it was possible for me to see and know from my base in New York in the 1980s and what I could see and know from 1990 onward, when I moved to Paris and gained greater access to her exhibitions. In fact, I soon recognized that spectators in the United States and Europe had very different, if always partial, views of Trockel's work until 1999, one could say, when the international art world came together at the Venice Biennale. In that watershed year, Trockel became the first woman to represent Germany in its national pavilion, and Ann Hamilton became the second to represent the United States (after Jenny Holzer in 1990).

Putting together a selected chronology of a body of work that itself became public in the past two decades—at least to this writer, and in a highly partial (in both senses of the word) view—seemed a reasonable alternative to a comprehensive overview. Would it be an annotated list of key works? Shows? Important catalogues? With footnotes to amplify context? The latter is a reminder that Trockel herself published *Footnotes*, a book of illustrated footnotes, which was set into the inside back cover of her 1993 artist's book *Jedes Tier ist eine Künstlerin* (Every Animal Is a [Female] Artist), the title itself a commentary on Joseph Beuys's "Everyone is an artist."

In fact by revisiting a selection of these shows it was possible to see how parts of her work revealed in each one were echoed in others and to think about how critically acclaimed and influential Trockel's work has become over the course of twenty-three years. (Among her most recent honors is receiving the 2014 Roswitha Haftmann Prize—the best-endowed art award in Europe.) Indeed, the notion of using the myriad forms and meanings of textiles in and as artworks, which was controversial at the outset of her career, has, at the time of this writing, fully entered the mainstream, the subject of no fewer than three large-scale museum survey exhibitions.²⁰

Trockel's recent traveling show, "A Cosmos," comes as close as any retrospective possibly could to revealing the wide-ranging, discriminating eye and mind of the artist. It does this in part by critically and precisely including works chosen by the artist with other objects so as to cross categorical boundaries and "[place] her in the company of others whom she regards as kindred spirits," as the catalogue states.²¹ The exhibition juxtaposes "her work with objects that range across eras and cultures, borrowed from the fields

Fig. 12: *First Influenza*, 1995.
Digital print on cardboard, 9.5 × 9.2 cm

Fig. 13: *Lucky Devil*, 2012.
Crab specimen, Perspex, textile, 90 × 77 × 77 cm

Fig. 14: Installation view of "Rosemarie Trockel. A Cosmos," Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, tiled room with, from left, *As far as possible*, 2012. Mixed media, 90 × 190 × 45 cm; *Replace Me*, 2009. Digital print, 32.5 × 40 cm; *Made in China*, 2012. Glazed ceramic, 26 × 54 × 33 cm

Fig. 15: *Out of the Kitchen into the Fire*, 1993.
Video, b/w, sound, 0:39 min

Fig. 16: *Untitled*, 2003. 90 aluminium plates, lacquer, 499 × 214 cm. Installation view, Synagoge Stommeln, Pulheim, Germany

of art history, botany, craft, and outsider art.”²² In all, these readily take their place in the same universe of diverse ideas, images, and materials that Trockel has found compelling and abundantly fruitful in her art of the past thirty years. As Fionn Meade astutely writes:

The cosmology of the German artist Rosemarie Trockel is a constantly shifting inventory, substituting iconographic, linguistic, and material transformations for the expected guises of identity and representation. Advertorial images and pop figures exist alongside typologies and taxonomies culled from history, the natural sciences, cinema, anthropology, and the artist's own hybrid index of drawings, collage, and moving images. And yet to Walt Whitman's biological envisioning of self and world, “I am large, I contain multitudes,” Trockel's incisive productivity might offer Emily Dickinson's rejoinder on creativity: “Don't you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to language?”²³

I imagine this *Cahiers d'Art* edition taking its place with the other publications and catalogues in Trockel's big book. The imagined future reader of her collected catalogues and the related commentaries to the shows would, of course, be accessing a second edition of the originals. And I would speculate that this imagined reader might come to the same conclusion that the fictive critic does in Borges's story “The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim,” given that his article about the (fictive) book *The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim* by Mir Bahadur Ali, a novel itself evidencing, as he says, the “hybridity” of popular culture and spiritual realms through its “detective mechanism” and “mystical undercurrents” and its prior critiques, is based on the second edition, “an illustrated edition he titled *The Conversation with the Man Called Al-Mu'tasim* and coyly subtitled *A Game with Shifting Mirrors*.” The critic notes, “I have not been able to come upon the first, which I suspect is greatly superior.”²⁴

JOAN SIMON

- ¹ Rosemarie Trockel, in *Dreams*, ed. Francesco Bonami and Hans Ulrich Obrist (Rome: Castelvetti Arte/Fondazione Sandretto re Reabudengo per l'Arte, 1999). This small paperback was published on the occasion of the 1999 Venice Biennale, to be handed out free during the press days, June 9–12, 1999. For this biennale, Trockel represented Germany in its national pavilion in the Giardini.
- ² One of several epigraphs chosen by Trockel for the two-volume catalogue produced to accompany her 1999 Venice Biennale exhibition, *Rosemarie Trockel: Biennale di Venezia* (New York: Nabe Press, 1999).
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Almost 110 of these solo exhibitions have been presented since 1991, including a show drawn from the collection of the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, which is still traveling internationally.
- ⁵ The sculpture *Spiral Betty*, 2010, appears on the cover of her recent museum catalogue *Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía; New York: Monacelli Press, 2012). A drawing of *Spiral Betty* also appears on the cover of one of her book drafts of 1988 and is included in "Chapter V. books" of *A Cosmos* (196).
- ⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Rosemarie Trockel are from conversations with the author during the mid- to late 1990s.
- ⁷ To cite one comparative example, from the *New York Times*, Michael Kimmelman wrote in 1991, reviewing Trockel's first US retrospective, co-organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and the University Art Museum, Berkeley, and curated by Elisabeth Sussman and Sidra Stich, respectively: "The retrospective makes clear the scope of the 38-year-old Ms. Trockel's ambition and the difficulty of her art. She emerges from it as someone whose work is still very uneven. Much of it speaks in a voice that is so oblique as to be unapproachable. At other times, she produces objects of didactic plainness. She is best known in this country for what looks to be from this show some of her least successful efforts—the knitted pictures, machine-manufactured images of intentional ugliness and banality, stretched like canvases on frames. Are they laments about mass production? Are they supposed to imply a discord between knitting as woman's work and painting as a man's occupation? Either way, they are unrevealing and simplistic." Michael Kimmelman, "Art View: Politics, Laced with a Dollop of Strangeness," *New York Times*, April 28, 1991. Six years later in the *Times*, Roberta Smith reviewed a show featuring Trockel's extensive video work and wrote: "In the wave of German artists that washed over Manhattan in the 1980's, Rosemarie Trockel, whose fifth solo exhibition in New York is at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea, was exceptional for being neither Neo-Expressionist nor male. The works for which she became known here seemed to celebrate this fact: they were Minimalist paintings made on knitting machines that insinuated notions of domesticity, everyday life and women's work into the sacred realm of high art. ... The knitted paintings were only the tip of the iceberg of Ms. Trockel's whimsical, elegant, politically astute art. Although the extent of her activities is still not well known in the United States, she turned out to be nearly as polymorphous as some of her male colleagues, although usually with a feminist twist." Roberta Smith, "Art Review: Finding Yarns in Video Imagery," *New York Times*, September 26, 1997.
- ⁸ "Rosemarie Trockel: Plastiken, 1982–1983," Monika Sprüth Galerie, Cologne, Germany; "Rosemarie Trockel," Galerie Philomene Magers, Bonn, Germany.
- ⁹ Roberta Smith, "Connecting Kindred Spirits: 'Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos,'" at the New Museum," *New York Times*, October 25, 2012.
- ¹⁰ In fact it was a show of her animal sculptures at Galerie Michael Werner, Cologne, in 1990 that suggested to Trockel the possibility of showing some of her animal films. Some of these had been shot from a television screen, others were produced from films borrowed from a scientific institute, and others were shot by Trockel in her home, of ants, for example, or her dog. She had previously thought of the moving-picture works as something apart from her art, though she was serious about their making even if as a sideline or a kind of hobby. She likened the videos also to drawings, her favorite medium at the time, a period when she was not at all interested in the idea of "video art" itself.
- ¹¹ The first wool pictures that Trockel exhibited were shown in 1985 at a specially sponsored booth at the Basel Art Fair. Also in 1985 they were included with her paintings, funerary vases, graphic work, and a two-part installation in the exhibition "Rosemarie Trockel: Skulpturen, Bilder, Zeichnungen," Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn, September 5–October 6, 1985.
- ¹² Trockel's "endless" stockings were in part prompted by a visit to the Bethel Therapy Center in Bielefeld, a center for people with physical and mental handicaps. There she saw a woman who couldn't stop knitting, and thought of her as knitting "endless" stockings.
- ¹³ Grace Marie Anderson, "Rosemarie Trockel: 'A Striptease in Wool'" (interview), advertorial for Absolut Vodka published in *Time*, December 27, 1999, 104.
- ¹⁴ Trockel often draws inspiration from other artworks or from her reading, going to libraries and museums, shopping in a sense for images and ideas that might inspire her concepts. One of her knitted works borrows from a famous image and statement (itself borrowed from Lenin) of El Lissitzky, with Trockel editing both. "El Lissitzky did this figure in Cologne at the World's Fair [1928], and he said, the real sentence was 'Every female cook must learn to rule the state,' something like that. And I took the process of learning away and changed it to just 'Every female cook should rule the state.'" For *Rose of Kasanlak*, Trockel substituted a rose in place of a hammer but kept the sickle (and also played on her own name for the label on this perfume bottle). In an untitled 1986 wool work, Trockel abstracted both hammer and sickle to create an overall pattern with the dense repeat of these symbols, which are now further abstracted and "drawn" within the weaving as linear elements.
- ¹⁵ Trockel designed a striped carpet, ceiling decorations, and porcelain coffee service for the Ladies Drawing Room for the German Embassy in Washington, DC, wrote Lisa Zeiger in "Everything but the Chick," *Nest 2* (Fall 1998): 124–29.
- ¹⁶ Both *Kinderspielplatz* and *Sleeping Pill* were shot in 35 mm; the untitled eye projection was shot in 16 mm. All were transferred to video for exhibition as projections.
- ¹⁷ "Rosemarie Trockel: Ohne Titel (Synagoge Stommeln)," <http://www.synagoge-stommeln.de/index.php?n1=2&n2=2&Direction=128>.
- ¹⁸ These large hand-knitted wool paintings measure 296 × 296 cm.
- ¹⁹ Trockel's designs for such cabinets to display a variety of her works for her exhibitions "Rosemarie Trockel: Deliquescence of the Mother" (2010) and "Post-Menopause" (2005) can be seen as early as her first solo museum exhibition, "Rosemarie Trockel: Skulpturen, Bilder, Zeichnungen," in 1985 at the Rheinisches Landesmuseum, Bonn, where in addition to showing her paintings and first knitted pictures, as well as the large *Totenvasen* (Funerary Vases) of 1984, she exhibited a two-part installation of 1985. One part consisted of a tall shelflike display stand, later destroyed, which contained craniums and vessel forms made of plaster. The tall structure was paired with a low plinth, on which were broken companion "vessels" to those seen on the shelving.
- ²⁰ "Textiles: Open Letter; Abstraktionen, Textilien, Kunst," Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach (June 23–November 10, 2013); travels to the Generali Foundation, Vienna (2014). "TEXTILES: OPEN LETTER, a two year research and exhibition project, was initiated by Rike Frank (Leipzig) and Grant Watson (London) and will be produced and realised in cooperation with Sabeth Buchmann (Vienna) and Leire Vergara (Bilbao). In a series of discussions, exhibitions, seminars and presentations TEXTILES: OPEN LETTER addresses the phenomenon of textiles in contemporary art and raises questions about its current meaning as material, technique, metaphor and medium." https://kulturstiftung.allianz.de/en/projects/visual_arts/textiles_open_letter/index.html.
- ²¹ "Decorum: Tapis et tapisseries d'artistes" (Decorum: Carpets and Tapestries by Artists), Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (October 11, 2013–February 9, 2014), organized by the exhibition's artistic director, Marc Camille Chaimowicz, who designed the exhibition in collaboration with the architect Christine Ilex Beinemeier. The ambient music ("furnishing music") serving as the exhibition's audio backdrop is a playlist proposed by aesthetic lecturer Jean-Philippe Antoine. <http://www.mam.paris.fr/en/expositions/decorum-exhibition>.
- ²² "Art and Textiles: Fabric as Material and Concept in Modern Art from Klimt to the Present," Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg (October 12, 2013–March 2, 2014). http://www.kunstmuseum-wolfsburg.de/533/Art_&_Textiles.
- ²³ "Fiber: Sculpture 1960–Present," curated by Janelle Porter, to open at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art (October 2014).
- ²⁴ Manuel Borja-Villel, Lisa Phillips, Julia Peyton Jones, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Robert Fleck, foreword to *Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos*, 10.
- ²⁵ Fionn Meade, "Rosemarie Trockel: As If Not," *Modern Painters*, July–August 2012, <http://cargocollective.com/fionnmeade/Rosemarie-Trockel-As-If-Not>.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, "The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim," in *Collected Fictions*, ed. and trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 2000), 27.