

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Jordan Kantor, "Rosemarie Trockel," *Artforum*, January 2013, p. 199.



Left: View of "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos," 2012–13. Left, suspended: Günter Weseler, *Objekt für Atemtraining* (Object for Breathing Exercises), 1969. On table: Nine untitled and undated works by James Castle. Photo: Benoit Pailley. Right, from top: View of "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos," 2012–13. Foreground: Rosemarie Trockel, *Geruchsskulptur 2* (Scent Sculpture 2), 2006. Background: Morton Bartlett, *Untitled* (Ballerina), 1950–60. Photo: Benoit Pailley. American lobster (*Homarus americanus*), specimen.



Rosemarie Trockel

NEW MUSEUM, NEW YORK
Jordan Kantor

IN AN ESPECIALLY COMPELLING SIGHT LINE offered by "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos," one can simultaneously take in a humongous preserved lobster, a sleek, jet-engine-like aluminum sculpture by the somewhat-forgotten Parisian artist Ruth Francken, and three modest gestural abstractions painted by an orangutan named Tilda. While ostensibly conjoined under the rubric of "natural history"—one of the four thematic orders of things that Trockel and curator Lynne Cooke used to organize the exhibition—this heterogeneous group buzzes with an innate feeling of kinship so convincing it makes rational taxonomy seem entirely beside the point. Although these objects are, respectively, a preserved specimen of nature, an artwork by a historical figure, and a new piece by Trockel (who acquired the three paintings, framed one in a Perspex box, and assembled them into a triptych titled *Less sauvage than others*, 2012), they present themselves as if they have always belonged together, perfectly. This exhilarating exhibition, which originated at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and is currently on view at the New Museum (where Massimiliano Gioni and Jenny Moore assisted in coordination), is full of such moments of unlikely correspondence and surprising harmony. Filling three floors of the institution, it mixes—in roughly equal quantity—a selection of mostly recent artworks by Trockel with a panoply of other objects, and flies on the combined strength of Trockel's own work and the

choices she makes to contextualize it. Her sensibility alone provides the ground on which relations between seemingly incongruous objects can be drawn, and the pitch-perfect clarity of this sensibility creates a mind-expanding "cosmos" that seems both complete and novel.

Heterogeneity has characterized Trockel's practice from the beginning, and over the past three decades, the Cologne-based artist has chosen whatever means have best suited her ends. Whether probing the cultural categories that organize and proscribe social behavior, interrogating the ideological distinctions between art, craft, and artifact, or expanding our understanding of the production and replication of knowledge, her art has taken myriad forms as part of its basic program. This mutability has been manifest in Trockel's radical material fluidity—she works in sculpture, textiles, ceramics, photography, video, installation, painting, drawing, and book design (to name only those artistic mediums on view here)—but also in her sustained interest in collaboration and other alternate modes of artistic production. Thus the spirit of experimentation, generosity, and critique that frames Trockel's choice to adapt the invitation for a major international solo museum show to further radicalize ideas of difference and correspondence seems a logical extension of her larger artistic aims.

"A Cosmos" not only eschews the autographic, triumphant, self-aggrandizing ethos that characterizes so many monographic museum exhibitions today but aptly epitomizes the spirit of an artistic project that has always exemplified a quieter, if certainly no less determined, position. By sharing the stage with other works with which she feels, in Cooke's words, "elective affinities," Trockel teases things out of the traditional exhibition format and reveals possibilities that normally remain hidden beneath a naturalized surface of cultural habit. Most overtly, she refuses to limit the content of her show to properly "artistic" practice, pairing her art with objects by makers who do not self-identify as artists. Indeed, the show is chock-full of work made by "outsider" artists, anonymous illustrators, and naturalist glassblowers (not to mention apes).

Trockel trains her viewer's attention on other exhibition conventions as well, by, for example, altering the lighting and wall color throughout the show, varying display containers (pedestals, tabletops, vitrines), and deviating from the normative presentation of framed pieces by hanging works at various heights. Nodding to the conventions of both contemporary art spaces and a historical lineage of museological organization and display—from the *Wunderkammer* to the natural-history museum—Trockel thus provides an additional lens through which to consider her own hierarchy-challenging practice, all the while recontextualizing the exhibition at hand.

Such ardent self-reflexivity aside, the primary pleasures of "A Cosmos" come from the specific correspondences drawn between individual works in the show, as the three oversize vitrines installed at the heart of the exhibition's second floor attest. Here, Trockel created mini-installations in which her elective affinities crystallize. Each is anchored by works from the margins of the orthodox art world: Morton Bartlett, the Boston businessman who secretly created a surrogate "family" in half-scale sculptures of children in the 1950s and '60s; James Castle, the profoundly deaf self-taught artist who made drawings and assemblages of found paper, string, soot, and saliva; and the lesser-known architect-turned-artist Günter Weseler, who creates abstract, animatronic sculptures.

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The juxtapositions of Trockel's work with that of these other figures inevitably create wholes greater than the sum of their parts. For example, in the central vitrine, Bartlett's uncanny polychrome plaster *Untitled* (Ballerina), 1950–60, paired with a recent print of a period photograph Bartlett took of his sculpture, amplifies the sublimated eroticism of Trockel's own *Geruchsskulptur 2* (Scent

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From left: View of "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos," 2012–13. From left: Rosemarie Trockel, *Made in China*, 2008; Rosemarie Trockel, *Made in China*, 2008; Rosemarie Trockel, *Magma*, 2008; Rosemarie Trockel, *Less savage than others*, 2007; Rosemarie Trockel, *Louvre 1*, 2009; Rosemarie Trockel, untitled, 2006; Rosemarie Trockel, *Shutter 1 (a)*, 2006. Photo: Benoit Pailley. Rosemarie Trockel, *Mosquito Fighter*, 2004, silicone, approx. 46 x 10 x 1". View of "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos," 2012–13. From left: Judith Scott, untitled, 1995; Rosemarie Trockel, *Time Cuts Us into Pieces*, 2012. Photo: Benoit Pailley.



Sculpture 2), 2006, a surrealist composition of a disembodied black ceramic leg lying next to a tumbler of whiskey on a tabletop. The idea of a fetish as surrogate and instrument of sexual pleasure suggested here is further complicated by the proximity of Trockel's *Mosquito Fighter*, 2004, a pretzeled arabesque form made of silicone that evokes a woven basket, a hand fan, and a bullwhip in equal measure. Lastly, two copies of Francken's 1971 catalogue *Sculpture-objets-tableaux* refract the whole ensemble through ideas of reproduction and doubling, while simultaneously drawing the viewer's attention back to that artist's other objects displayed across the room. The sheer range of associations evoked by this combination creates an affecting intellectual and emotional maze, and the meanings of the individual objects are multiplied by their mutual influence. Rather than conform to the parameters of the already known, the emotive logic of these connections demands that new lines be drawn to accommodate it. If such collisions leave their viewers with more questions than answers, they nevertheless embody the razor-sharp conviction behind Trockel's approach, which transcends mere selection and arrangement to create a new aesthetic.

The sense of probing—and of being propelled by the promise of open meanings rather than satisfied by the resolution of closed propositions—also pervades the large collection of Trockel's "book drafts" displayed on the fourth floor. This installation of 156 individual works on paper, dating between 1971 and 2005, provides a kind of vertical core sample of the artist's career, read through one of her lesser-known activities. Maquettes for books, most of which were not realized, these works on paper exemplify (among many other things) Trockel's interest in appropriation, collage, and the frisson of conjoined words and images. The physical modesty of each individual example is inversely proportional to the diverse interests revealed by the group as a whole. The collection is almost like an exhibition within an exhibition, and it is truly inspiring to think that this entire, far-reaching world of curiosities and competencies emerged from the desk of a single artist. A select group of Trockel's ceramics rounded

out the fourth floor—the only section of the exhibition not shared with other artists. Picking up chronologically where the book drafts left off, these nineteen works, made between 2006 and 2012, range from small material investigations to larger-than-life-size architectural interventions. A selection of some of the best of her recent work, they reveal Trockel's interest in the play between form and formlessness, as well as the vagaries of surface and finish inherent in this medium. Much of the visual pleasure here comes from experiencing the formal subtleties of Trockel's particular use of ceramic at vastly different scales: enjoying the contrast, for example, between the immersive, platinum-glazed surface of *Grater 2*, 2006, and the intimate yet no less captivating nooks and crannies of *General 1*, 2008, a small, biomorphic shape, featuring an evocative purple void ringed with a silver necklace.

The exhibition's last remaining section was filled with new wool paintings, redolent of the works undoubtedly most familiar to Trockel's viewers. These large-scale pieces, mostly from 2011 and 2012, continue the artist's ongoing use of various monochrome and striped patterning to explore process-based abstraction and the ontology of painting. Whereas many of her best-known paintings from the '80s and '90s engaged questions of the ready-made, mechanical reproduction, and labor in art through the use of machined woolsens, these new works add nuance to this conversation by foregrounding their distinctive, handmade qualities and introducing a new, explosive palette. However, the delicate and repetitive process of wrapping the colored spun wool in clean, straight lines around shallow Perspex supports is complicated by the paintings' juxtaposition with a selection of six works by the self-taught artist Judith Scott. Paired with Scott's evocative, tangled, irregularly bound objects, the Trockels seem archly ordered, disciplined, and surprisingly hard, further refracting discussions of process, craft, and artistic drive at the critical heart of Trockel's textile practices. Rather than seeming connected by the material category "wool," which gives the floor its theme, they offer contrasting models of order and gestalt. On another level, as with

Trockel's ceramics, there is much to be said for appreciating all these wool works from a formal and material perspective: The sheer beauty of the hand-dyed fibers' absorption of light seems as vital a part of their artistic position as any ostensible critique of agency, facture, or modes of production. Indeed, reading Trockel's new works through Scott's made clear that the elective affinities running throughout the show may, in the end, have more to do with a sense of obsessive intensity, material meticulousness, and individual points of view than with particular narrative themes.

As much as "A Cosmos" is held together by Trockel's unmistakable and compelling artistic sensibility, it foregrounds and celebrates diversity in all forms as well. By privileging the polyvocal as opposed to the monologic, the collaborative as opposed to the authored, questions as opposed to answers, the show not only offers a much-needed antidote to the worst tendencies of our current and still hyperbolically individualistic art world but also provides an important precedent for a different, more appealing type of artistic production. Trockel's work has always embodied such qualities. Almost twenty years ago, the artist Jutta Koether wrote an essay detailing how Trockel characterized a vital model of artmaking and artistic identity as an alternative to the dominant modes of the go-go '80s. And although Koether's analysis was specifically framed in terms of attitudes and identities offered to women artists in Germany at the time, that swaggering, immodest context seems only to have globalized in the intervening years. Indeed, the quiet resistance and modeled difference already present in Trockel's early work, which have always made her an artist's artist, have renewed urgency and relevance for all makers everywhere today. In this sense, this exhibition's strength may not lie in fully embodying Trockel's singular artistic vision—though we can be thankful that it does—but in the crucial ways in which it demonstrates an attitude and a methodology for attending to the world's diversity, in art and beyond. □

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