

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Daniel Marcus, "Rosemarie Trockel," *Art in America*, February 2013, p. 99.



View of "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos," 2012, at the New Museum.

ROSEMARIE TROCKEL

NEW YORK — New Museum

Since the late 1970s, Rosemarie Trockel, a German artist based in Cologne, has consistently defied expectations about what she and, by association, *art* should do and be. She is as prolific as she is uncategorizable, creating work that spans video, sculpture, drawing, photography, textiles, installations and a small library's worth of "book drafts" (mock-ups of nonexistent tomes). It is therefore no easy task to summarize the contents and themes of the survey exhibition "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos," which filled three floors of the New Museum with hundreds of artworks and objects, representing all areas of the artist's practice from roughly 1980 to the present. On the surface, Trockel's concerns belong squarely within the field of Post-Minimalist "process" art, but in her hands process is inseparable from a deep-seated anarchism—the refusal of taxonomy, hierarchy and legibility in favor of tactics of dispersion, evasion and deception.

The anarchist's universe is flat: it is not *the* cosmos but *a* cosmos, a horizontal constellation of star systems in place of a galactic totality. When Trockel and curator Lynne Cooke (formerly of Madrid's Museo Reina Sofia) first broached the idea of a major retrospective, they agreed that the exhibition would feature other voices alongside

Trockel's—a strategy New Museum exhibitions director Massimiliano Gioni has dubbed "a choral solo show." Notable in this chorus are a host of nonartists and "outsiders," including Spanish explorer José Celestino Mutis, Bostonian doll-maker and photographer Morton Bartlett and naïf artist James Castle. Assemblages by Castle took pride of place on the New Museum's second floor, arranged alongside Trockel's work with no clear lines of demarcation. This may seem a reiteration of the exhibition-as-*Wunderkammer* model, with the artist claiming the status of cultural historian and naturalist (as exemplified by the work of Mark Dion, for instance), but Trockel's cosmos has nothing to do with science, or even knowledge; her practice aims for the opposite: the art of *not* being governed (to borrow a phrase from Michel Foucault), or categorized, or even understood as art.

"Try first just to look and not to think," Trockel urged the *New York Times's* Randy Kennedy during a preview walkthrough. She might have added: "look very, very closely," since many of the exhibition's "aha!" moments derived from the artist's nearly invisible gestures and subtle manipulations. On the opening day, for example, Trockel discovered a dead moth in the New Museum's

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galleries, which she quickly added to one of her works (a velvet canvas) on the second floor, drawing a connection between this work and her 1993 one-minute video featuring a moth, titled *À la Motte*. Trockel delights in such micro-interventions, often tinkering with the exhibition checklist until the last moment, and her subversion of viewers' expectations generates more questions than answers. In a room devoted to Trockel's recent work in ceramic, for example, visitors may have found themselves wondering about the inclusion of *Replace Me* (2011), a sculpture that appears to be two long midcentury leather couches, clad in plastic sheeting and a wool blanket. Despite appearances, the artist had painstakingly cast the couches in ceramic—I don't know how she did it, but the replica is uncannily precise, so much so that even attentive spectators could miss the gesture entirely.

Look closely, then, but to what end? What makes Trockel such a challenging artist (in the best sense of the term) is her steadfast refusal to ascribe a *purpose* to looking—this goes even for her most "traditional" works: on floor three, visitors encountered an assortment of Trockel's recent wool "canvases," including several knit monochromes nearly 10 feet square, plus a bevy of smaller pieces, such as the sunny *Belle Époque* (2011) and the cool-toned *Comfort Zone* (2012). While echoing canvases by Agnes Martin and Barnett Newman, these works have none of the pop and shimmer of oil paint; to my eyes, they look a bit like enormous wearables, and forthrightly so. Aping the conventions of art, her work might just as well be something else (a sweater, a couch), or the product of someone else's hand. If there is a secret to her work's remarkable longevity, and a lesson for artists today, it is this: when all faith in art's historical mission has been exhausted, the anarchist's evasions and sideways maneuvers offer a rare kind of strength. There is power in powerlessness, Trockel suggests, and refuge in a horizontal world.

[*The exhibition premiered at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, May 23–Sept. 24, 2012, and travels to the Serpentine Gallery, London, Feb. 13–Apr. 7.*]

—Daniel Marcus