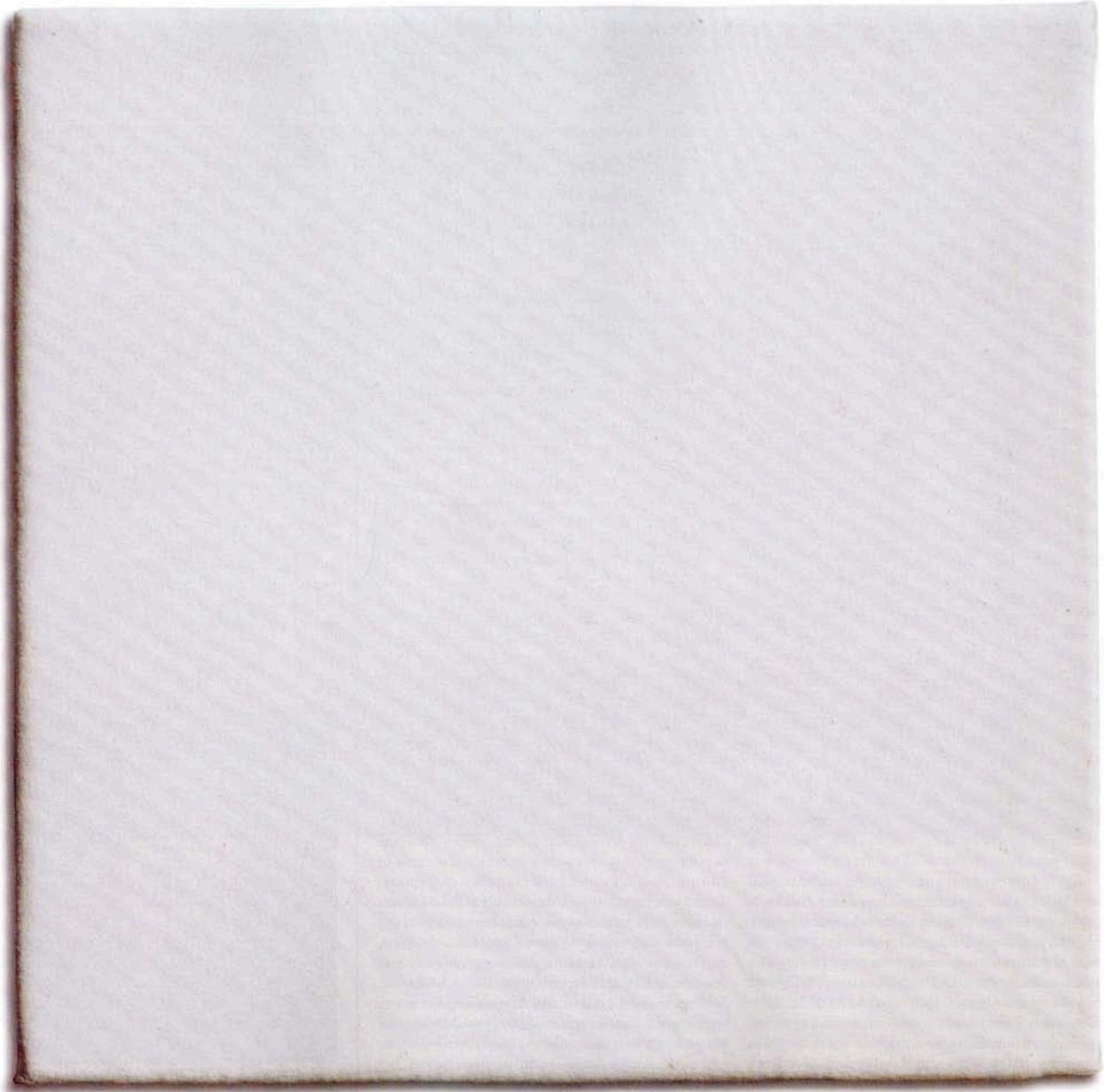


# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Lynne Cooke, "Reworked: Lynne Cooke on Rosemarie Trockel's *Untitled*, 1988," *Artforum*,  
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Opposite page: Rosemarie Trockel, *Untitled*, 1988, canvas on wool, 11 3/4 x 11 3/4".

Above: View of "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos," 2012, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. From left: *Untitled*, 1988; From a *French Magazine*, 2005; From a *French Magazine*, 2005. Photo: Joaquín Cortés and Román Lores.

CLOSE-UP

## Reworked

LYNNE COOKE ON ROSEMARIE TROCKEL'S *UNTITLED*, 1988

FACED WITH THE CHALLENGE of creating a "cosmos" that would embody her imaginary, Rosemarie Trockel recently assembled a shape-shifting corpus that encompasses virtually every art form now current—painting, sculpture, object making, video and drawings, artists' books and design. The combination brings to the fore certain concerns that have long shaped her thought: motifs and subjects from the realms of natural history, the creative expression of animal species as well as that of humans, and the representation and role of women in contemporary

culture.<sup>1</sup> The occasion for this challenge was the exhibition "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos," currently at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid, on which she and I collaborated to bring together some eighty of her own works with sixty by an assortment of fifteen other practitioners.<sup>2</sup> Within this wide-ranging and multivalent exhibition, curiously absent from Trockel's speculative universe are the machine-knit paintings that brought her widespread critical acclaim in the late 1980s. Always unique, often large-scale, their textured surfaces gen-

erated by repeated patterns of geometric motifs or logos (including the Playboy bunny, a hammer and sickle, and a swastika) or simply the label MADE IN WESTERN GERMANY, her trademark works were freighted with a mordant wit. For while they clearly put pressure on modernism's devaluation of the applied arts relative to painting and sculpture, they also called into question the essentialist stereotyping that marked certain strands of 1970s feminism, in which a "woman's touch"—craft, the handmade, a relationship to house and home—was prioritized.

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Rosemarie Trockel, *Less Sauvages Than Others*, 2012, three paintings made by an orangutan, food coloring, Perspex, each 31 1/2 x 31 1/2".

**Trockel's *Untitled* could be read as a gesture of passive-aggressive withholding, a refusal to deliver the expected.**

Recourse to modes of industrial fabrication and commercial design identified Trockel as part of a generation of artists—including Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, and Jenny Holzer, all of whom she exhibited with at the Monika Sprüth Gallery in Cologne under the rubric "Eau de Cologne"—who proved themselves to be feminists of a new order.

Never one to allow herself to be pinned down or easily classified, Trockel soon abandoned this type of production. But she never lost her fascination with the versatile material that has come to be regarded as a hallmark of her practice. Among her most recent wool works, a number of which are included in the present exhibition, are monumental handmade paintings from yarn so thick it must have been destined for Arctic wear. Typically laconic, the works' titles—*Kind of Blue*, *Menopause*, *Water*, *Sky*—enhance the irreverently comic note that ruffles their otherwise implacable surfaces. More recent still is another series, also featured in Trockel's singular cosmos, made by affixing parallel strands of yarn—mostly black, occasionally egg-yolk yellow or dirty white—across the canvas surface to resemble a monochrome field comprising "graphic" marks. The results recall, *inter alia*, the work of Agnes Martin, to whom Trockel paid homage years ago in the guise of a book jacket featuring a portrait of the American artist that she designed for the first in a series of pub-

lications she planned to release under the moniker "Most Needed Beauty."

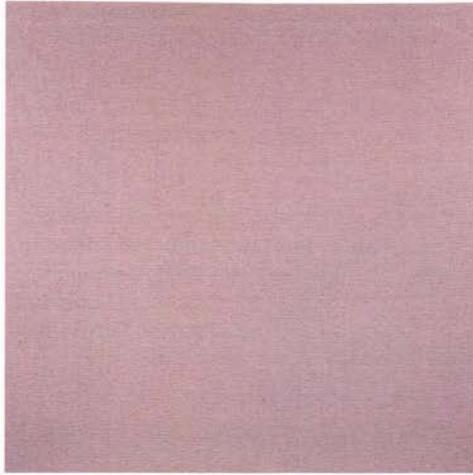
Closer inspection of this compelling instantiation of her speculative universe reveals, however, that Trockel has not altogether sidelined her early knit works in favor of her more recent forays with yarn. Among the few early works she has incorporated into the exhibition is a small work so unassumingly modest as to be almost nondescript: *Untitled*, 1988. The white monochrome surface of the painting, just under twelve inches square, was created with a loosely brushed coat of gesso. Just below the upper edge, a slight ridge running the full width of the support betrays the spectral presence of an interlining. Trockel has previously exhibited the work with a subtitle, *For those who do not like wool pictures, but are communists nonetheless*, which suggests that the undercover agent is a piece of knit fabric bearing a hammer-and-sickle motif. A tongue-in-cheek sop to those on the left who prefer their modernism pure, this barely perceptible infraction of the otherwise canonical modernist monochrome could be read as a form of subversion from within. Easily overlooked among its bolder, more forthright siblings when the knit paintings had their debuts in the late '80s, and seemingly unnoticed in the literature on Trockel's work to date, *Untitled* was nonetheless accorded a place within the extensive retrospective "Post-

Menopause" at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne in 2005. For this presentation, Trockel has encased the piece within an expensive Perspex box frame, thereby investing it with newfound stature. Evidencing the hand of the most skilled of craftspeople, the handsome frame bestows the aura of a precious artifact. As a stand-in for the otherwise absent machined-wool works in Trockel's selection, *Untitled* could be read as a gesture of passive-aggressive withholding, a refusal to deliver the expected. But so deftly does it assume the role of surrogate that it turns the tables on viewers who presume too much, who would dare second-guess this most protean of artists.

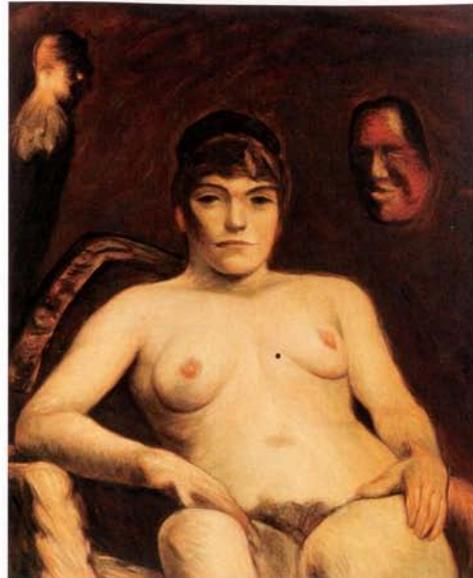
Within Trockel's multifaceted cosmos there are only two other works that, like *Untitled*, might readily be identified as paintings in conventional terms. *Less Sauvages Than Others*, 2012, is composed of three gestural abstract canvases, made by an orangutan, that Trockel acquired and then arranged to form a triptych. In presenting this work for her current show, she has once again introduced a Perspex frame, here encasing only the right-hand panel of the triptych. An interest in the creative expression of animals has been a staple of her practice for decades, with the monkey or ape specifically figuring as a kind of model of production and reproduction.<sup>3</sup> As Trockel declared in 1988, "The monkey interests me as an imitator of human beings, as an imitator full stop."<sup>4</sup> On this

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Above: Rosemarie Trockel, *Menopause*, 2005, wool, 116 1/2 x 116 1/2".



Right: Rosemarie Trockel, *Reborn with Spot*, 2011, oil on canvas, 30 x 24".

occasion she has appropriated the animal's painterly activity as her own, authoring the artifact and identifying it as a work within her oeuvre. With its (con)fusion of French and English, *Less Sawages Than Others* is a familiar title, one she has used on a number of occasions, albeit for works of very different kinds. Here it serves to introduce an additional and unsettling level of ambiguity: Does it comment on the expressive character of the paintings, does it refer to their maker, or does it hold some further significance?

The third work within the show that adheres directly to the conventions of traditional painting is *Reborn with Spot*, 2011. It is based on a reproduction of a painting by Toulouse-Lautrec that she has long known but never seen in actuality (though it is held in the collection of the Von der Heydt-Museum in Wuppertal, Germany, close to Cologne, where she has lived for decades). Commissioned from a Vietnamese company that specializes in the making of copies, the replica was so well executed that Trockel, after adding a beauty spot—a mole, near the nude's left breast—claimed it, too, as her own.

The changing, reusing, editing, and repetition of titles (sometimes for works in vastly different media, materials, techniques, and scales) is as common in Trockel's practice as the parallel strategies devised to reappraise, rework, and variously recontextualize objects she has both made and found. Taken together,

such interventions ensure that her works remain in a constant state of flux; mobility and metamorphosis are literal, not merely metaphorical, features of her approach to artmaking. While sleights of hand—rarely disclosed and thus often unnoticed by all but the most attentive among her audience—have long been among her preferred tactics, in place of the rhetorical gestures sometimes employed in earlier work, stealth and subterfuge now come to the fore. Often, too, there is a deprecating humor that paves the way for a sly sting in the tail. Heir to the institutional critique of the '60s, Trockel takes as given a probing address to the ideological implications inherent in the siting and presentation of artworks. She therefore continually reviews and rewrites aspects of her own past, highlighting the overlooked and putting a spin on the routinely recognized—as is abundantly demonstrated in her crafty interjection of *Untitled* into the intriguing ensemble of objects limning her cosmos. Yet, as always, she holds the lessons of institutional critique and feminist revisionism in careful balance with a second, equally weighty inheritance, one that is nowhere better encapsulated than in William Carlos Williams's celebrated remark: "No ideas but in things." □

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For notes, see page 538.