

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Whithers, Rachel, "Rosemarie Trockel," *ARTFORUM*, March 1999

## ROSEMARIE TROCKEL

WHITECHAPEL ART GALLERY, LONDON

### RACHEL WITHERS

British Euro-skeptics take note! Although the UK's traditional limp, naked lettuce is under siege by tasty foreign vinaigrette, and her lukewarm beers are losing ground to well-chilled Continental lagers, regional differences in the visual arts will not, I repeat not, be subject to European Community homogenization—and Rosemarie Trockel's Whitechapel retrospective proves the point. In Germany, Trockel is feted; there, practically every contemporary collection, large and small, contains her work as standard issue. In England, however, her success has failed to translate.

"Rosemarie Trockel: Bodies of Work 1986–1998" has left UK critics cold and visitors baffled. Surprisingly, this is Trockel's first major London exhibition (though a selection of her knitted "can-

vases" bearing logos such as the international woolmark and the Playboy bunny were shown at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in 1988). In principle, it's given London audiences a good chance to catch up on a significant international figure. In practice, presentational shortcomings (e.g., her video installations compete with one another for attention, the sound reproduction is often poor, and the German dialogue, apparently at Trockel's insistence, lacks subtitles) have exacerbated the communication problems.

This retrospective, organized in collaboration with Trockel, features various new works, including a series of large monochrome photos of naked couples embracing (*Untitled*, 1998). The images are, frankly (maybe deliberately), an utter turn-off, whiffing strongly of an Alex Comfort-style healthy-sex manual (minus, thank goodness, that awful man with the beard). *Untitled* serves to preface Trockel's 1998 video *Von guter Natur* (Of good nature), in which further healthy naked couples exchange, in German, the words of Sigmund Freud, Andy Warhol, Marguerite Duras, and Ingeborg Bachmann.

Installed nearby is a veritable orgy of eggs. Blown eggs strung up like beads. Egg wallpaper. Giant eggshells containing

the ash of burnt incense. A videoed egg "trying to get warm" (twirling around on an electric hot plate). A cocktail dress garnished with eggshells. Photos of whipped egg whites printed in negative, so that they are black. A "hen-centered" henhouse (maybe for a *poule de luxe*). And so on. The show's catalogue essayists whip themselves into a positive soufflé analyzing egg references and metaphors, only to decide that the ultimate rationale is that there isn't one: With Trockel, you can have your eggs any way you like.

Meandering, noncommittal, even inconsequential—this is the general tenor of the show. Various favorite Trockel themes recur: icons of glamour and "perfect" beauty; the inevitable knitting (as in *Yuume*, a 1997 video in which wool-clad models mimic the "casual intimacy" of trendy, Wolfgang Tillmans-style fashion photography); the domestic uncanny; the anthropomorphization of animals. There are also endless quotations, parodies, and references: to Josef Beuys, Arnulf Rainer, Marcel Broodthaers, Warhol, and so on.

Trockel's seeming refusal to "edit" all this stuff, to sort out the wheat from the chaff, is the sticking point. Her diverse stylistic and technical approaches produce qualities ranging from bland naïveté (for

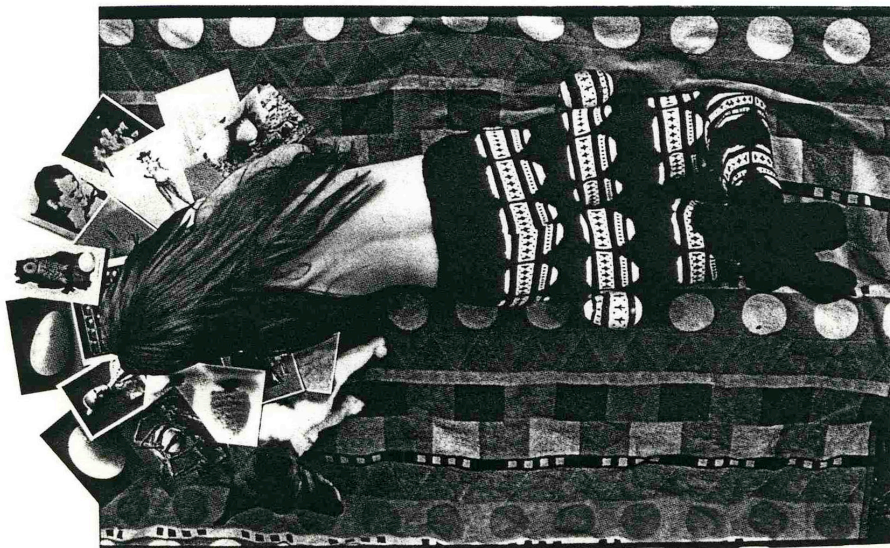
example, her whimsical animations with toe-tapping music, as in *Tweedle*, 1997) to arch critique (see her almost cruel installation exploring the cult of Brigitte Bardot, 1993). Well-resolved works like *Continental Divide*, the 1994 video in which the artist literally "beats up on herself," sit next to negligible scraps: the black egg whites, for example.

In the late '80s, Trockel's work was mainly interpreted in terms of feminist identity politics, Neo-Geo, and the critique of the commodity. Now, after Deleuze and Guattari's takeover bid, her oeuvre is claimed (in the catalogue) to have "no creator" and "no object or subject"; it "gives up trying to be a language of the self"; to experience it is to be "borne along by the chaotic flood of desires." In which case—to pose the problem crudely—why should there be a need to label works as "by Trockel" or indeed to have a Trockel retrospective? Trockel the author remains inscrutable, but omnipresent. These rather disingenuous accounts restate the problem of Trockel's naive-looking assemblies and juxtapositions, or her series of frustratingly artless, often clumsy drawings, without acknowledging the particular tradition within which it's possible for them to acquire meaning and high cultural (and, presumably, economic) value.

In a 1990 interview, Trockel provided the following potted manifesto: "Art exists. Art has its own life. Art has a place which it should never forsake. Art should not be corrupted but should *touch mankind*." This humanistic utopianism has a distinctly Beuysian ring. And Beuys, it has been suggested, is a tremendous irritant for Trockel: Her compact, pointed video *A la Motte*, 1993, in which a moth munches its way through someone's woolies, then (played backward) diligently reknits the damage, is apparently a send-up of his "every animal an artist" thesis.

Nonetheless, the continuing presence of the Beuysian legacy, of a (very late Romantic) faith in the artist's "vision" that discovers symbolic significance, artistic value, and ultimate coherence, across every shred he or she produces, is a condition of this oeuvre's credibility. Ultimately, for "eggs" we might read "fat," for "knitting," "felt"—without any irony in the mix. In the UK, though, artists are just not extended the same kind of faith: hence Trockel's bumpy cross-channel trip. □

"Rosemarie Trockel: Bodies of Work 1986–1998" travels to Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Mar. 13–May 23; and M.A.C. Galeries Contemporaines des Musées de Marseille, June 25–Oct. 3.



Rosemarie Trockel, *Leben heißt Strumpfhosen stricken* (Living means knitting tights), 1998, mixed media, ca. 55 1/4 x 33 1/4 x 7 1/4".