

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Loreck, Hanne, "Storia Universale? Rosemarie Trockel's Works on Paper," *Art On Paper*, May-June 1999

Storia universale? Rosemarie Trockel's Works on Paper

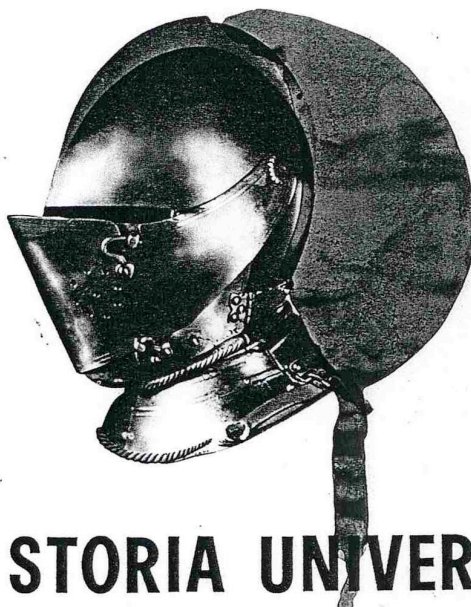
by Hanne Loreck

Rosemarie Trockel's *A House for Pigs and People* was the big hit at Documenta X, (1997). Children were not the only ones to press their noses against the one-way glass behind which a small herd of organically raised pigs went about their business, undisturbed by the hustle and bustle of spectators. What do Trockel's works on paper have in common with such highly controversial "social sculptures"? At first sight, nothing at all. Yet from the beginning of her career, the artist, who was born in 1952, has produced some 1,000 draw-

ings, which must be viewed in light of her broader interest in formative processes and symbolic systems in art and society, in hegemonies and the question of who or what determines a dominant morality.

Trockel is the artist selected for the German Pavilion at this year's Venice Biennale. She is the third woman in the 1990s, after Katharina Fritsch and Katharina Sieverding, to perform this representative function for Germany. One of the most internationally respected German artists, Trockel, who studied at the Werkkunstschule in Cologne from

Rosemarie Trockel, *Storia universale*. watercolor on found book page (14.2x 24.5 cm). 1988. All photographs courtesy Galerie Monika Sprüth, Cologne.



STORIA UNIVERSALE

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Loreck, Hanne, "Storia Universale? Rosemarie Trockel's Works on Paper," *Art On Paper*, May-June 1999

Rosemarie Trockel. *Untitled*. acrylic on paper (29.5x20 cm). 1984.

1974 to 1978 and has lived in that city ever since, is, of course, not unknown to the American public. A small selection of her work was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1988, followed in 1991 by a one-woman show that traveled from Boston to Berkeley and Chicago.² Still, her drawings are not that well known in the United States, where they have been little exhibited.

Trockel's numerous drawings represent an extremely significant component of her work, but cannot be viewed in isolation from her paintings, installations, videos, and sculptures. Among these, Trockel is perhaps best known for her knitted works—knitted pictures, collections of cap masks, and "psycho-sweaters" (1986–93)—and her minimalistically defamiliarized (kitchen) stove objects made from enameled steel and real hot plates (1987–97). Trockel's "drawings" do not conform to the classic definition of a freehand drawing, though as authors writing about her work have repeatedly emphasized, she spent almost all of her time as a student drawing. She once chose the less categorical term "works on paper," which I would like (mostly) to adopt here, since they encompass a wide range of tools and techniques, in which infinite combinations are possible. Her materials include pencil, ballpoint and felt-tip pen, ink, charcoal, watercolor, and acrylic, as well as collage, photography, and, increasingly of late, photocopy. Often she uses ruled or graph-paper writing pads, handmade watercolor paper, or printed pages cut out of books. In many of her early works she shellacked the surface, creating an unusual ground with a velum-like transparency, against which the colors appear especially brilliant. Then there are her editions, executed in screenprint or photogravure, techniques that exploit the ability of machines to create a perfect mimesis.³

Trockel's works on paper from the first half of the 1980s are expressive and figurative, recalling both thematically and stylistically the paintings of the 80s *Neue Wilden* artists (Salomé, Rainer Fetting, and Walter Dahn, for example) of Berlin and the Rhineland. Early sheets depict monkeys, (female) bodies, and body parts, including heads, which along with such elements as vases or skulls and individual words yield combinatory imagery with metaphorical overtones—fools, devils, screaming people, hydrocephalic figures, long noses, specters, or ski masks suggesting those used by the German Red Army Faction terrorists. Other works are more ornamental, comprising geometric and floral motifs and signs. Whether abstract or figurative, or whether or not they include actual words, these still pre-conceptual drawings recall language in the



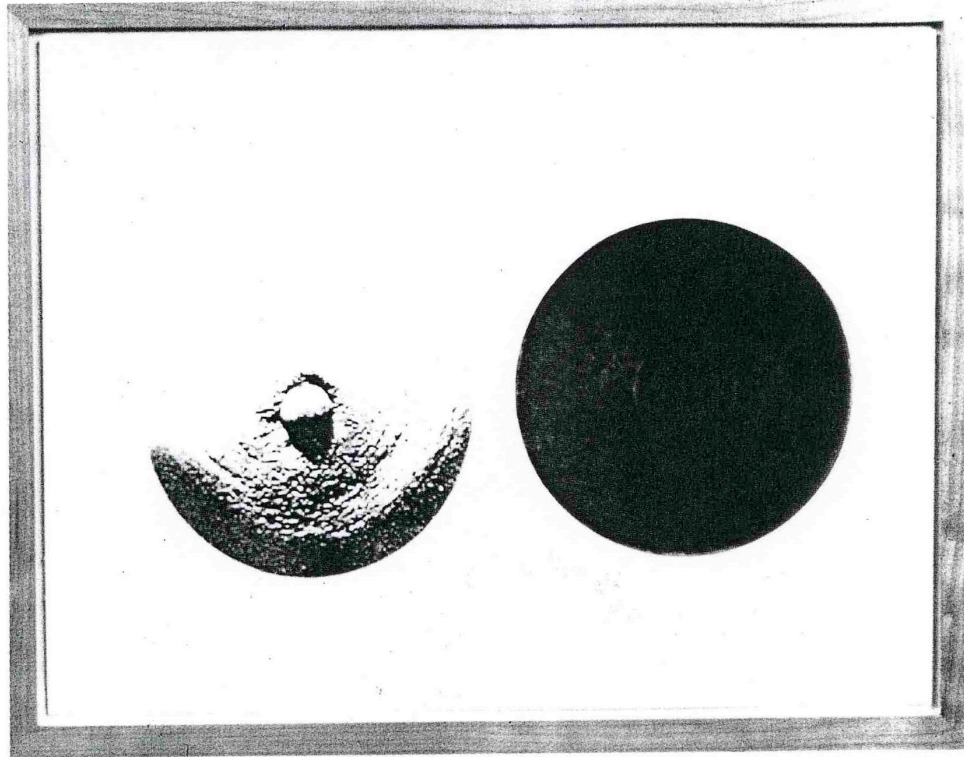
relationship they pose between syntax and signs, graphemes and text, and in their similarity to rhetorical figures like hyperbole, metonymy, and metaphor. In conjunction with the large-format, machine-knitted pictures of the international "pure wool" logo, Playboy Bunnies, and hammer-and-sickles, in 1986, she began to produce works on paper called *Musterzeichnungen* [pattern drawings], in which trivial logos and "iconograms" bewilderingly appear side by side with abstract modernist allover designs or the politically explosive swastika—as if they all carry equal weight.

In 1988 Trockel produced various versions of Kasimir Malevich's black square, the quintessential icon of abstraction and the spiritual in art (*and Tell of Time*, 1988), which found their way into the famous knitted picture *Cogito, ergo sum* (1988). A page cut out of a book and labeled STORIA UNIVERSALE (1988) features a medieval helmet, to the back of which Trockel has appended a blood-red watercolor sickle. Taken together, these works highlight a central theme in Trockel's oeuvre that has become clearer over time: her objective is to anchor the supposed universality of everyday pictorial signs and written characters on the one hand, and the history of art and culture with its legendary masters and canonical works on the other, in a social space that can never be "pure," timeless humanistic, or gender-neutral. Trockel's choice of

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Loreck, Hanne, "Storia Universale? Rosemarie Trockel's Works on Paper," *Art On Paper*, May-June 1999

Rosemarie
Trockel. *Untitled*.
photogravure and
photocopy (29.5x
39 cm). 1993.



knitting, for example, raises the gender issue in its transposition to the realm of "high art" an ornamental craft that is more commonly associated with the sphere of traditionally female activities. In Trockel's work the standardized vocabulary of industry and the international (trade)marks of consumption come together with the desire (and its related economy) for the uniqueness of the artistic gesture and for the original work of art. Can *Cogito, ergo sum* still be great philosophy when knitted? Can the knitted *Black Square* still be a great work of art?

Trockel, however, understands feminist art as a set of (parodistic) strategies that recognize more than one "victim," rather than as a reference to some kind of essentialist notion of "the feminine." After all, the artists that have most influenced her include not only Joseph Beuys, protagonist of "social sculpture" (himself an obsessive draftsman), the inventors of "capitalist realism" Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, and Pop strategist Andy Warhol but also the ironic and semantic Marcel Duchamp, who was already critiquing the gendered nature of artist, object, and beholder at the beginning of this century. A 1993 untitled work on paper by Trockel can function as a key to unlock the more than 50 objects, panel paintings, videos, and drawings that comprise her *Stove Series*

(1987-97). The 1993 work, in photogravure and photocopy, features a black-and-white image of Duchamp's original pink foam-rubber breast, which Trockel has divorced from its black velvet bed and placed next to a circular hot plate of almost identical size. In 1947, Duchamp had suggested "prière de toucher" [please touch]. So the contrary message of Trockel's piece might be that a man should watch his fingers around stoves, which have always been considered a female domain. This would, however, be too simplistic. Trockel complicates matters in her juxtaposition of breast and hot plate, introducing the corporeal factor of nutrition, and perhaps also of pleasure and excretion, into a geometric vocabulary. A 1989 untitled charcoal of similar theme shows a naked figure from behind, crouching over its perfectly formed hot-plate excrement—doubly ironic in its allusion to Minimalism, with its incorporeal, industrial structures. What are the social circumstances that determine meaning, Trockel seems to ask: who participates, and how? Is there anything really very self-evident in a family participating in daily meals prepared by the wife? Or dinner guests enjoying the husband's culinary talents?

Trockel's tendency to appropriate artists like Duchamp has been referred to as aping,⁴ a term

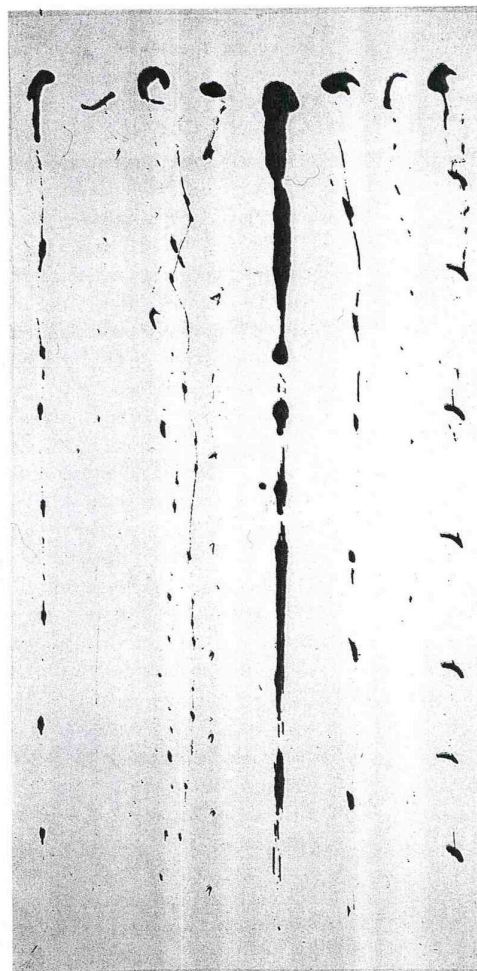
GLADSTONE GALLERY

Loreck, Hanne, "Storia Universale? Rosemarie Trockel's Works on Paper," *Art On Paper*, May-June 1999

(Right)
Rosemarie
Trockel, from *56
Pinselstriche* [*56
Brushstrokes*].
Chinese ink on
Japanese paper
(140x70 cm).
1990.

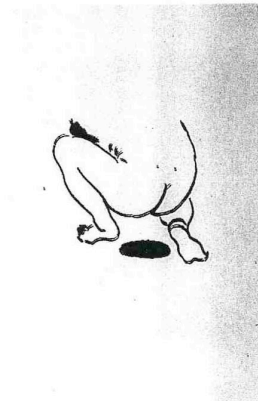
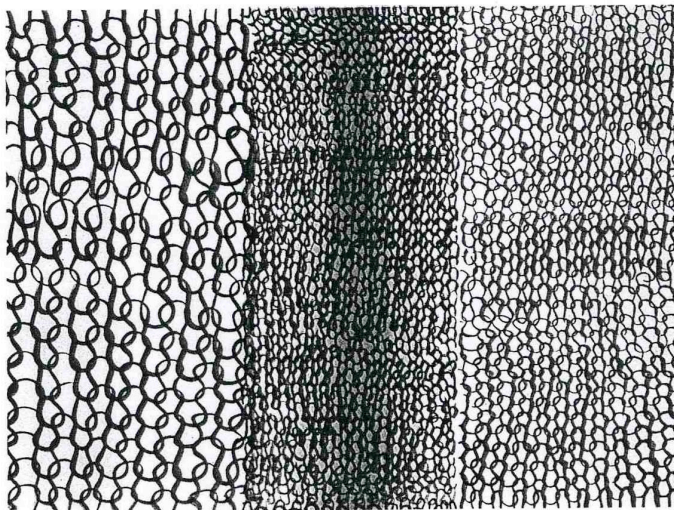
that describes her marking of the ironic dimensions of the re/production of art that connoisseurship demands (and a connoisseur is, as the final syllable of the term reveals, male). What remains of a "master's uniqueness," so sought after by the connoisseur, if a painting machine can produce, via a mechanically guided brush, a completely artificial trace, an "inimitable style" just as convincing as that made by the human hand? In 1990 Trockel created seven panels, *Untitled (Drawing Machine and 7 Drawings)*, each containing eight delicate vertical lines in classical materials (Chinese ink on Japanese paper). It was not freehand drawing, however, that produced the lines; instead, Trockel constructed a huge machine with brushes attached that were made of famous artists' hair—a red-gold or black lock, for example, from the likes of Vito Acconci, Georg Baselitz, and herself (as well as others), who thus are "portrayed," as well, in the resulting lines. (This complex procedure might also be a mischievous reference to the interconnection between art and capital. Red sable brushes are traditional drawing implements, and the fur for the best brushes, at least, is traded in the commodities market.) A counterpart for the parallel-line "portraits" may be found in Trockel's 1996 works in acrylic on paper. Here subtle fields of color that look like knitting, chromatically graded vertical stripes made of painted "handspun" threads, speak more of the concentration and discipline of mundane work than of the flash of genius that inspires a "great artist."

In recent years, Trockel has grouped her older and current drawings and photos according to



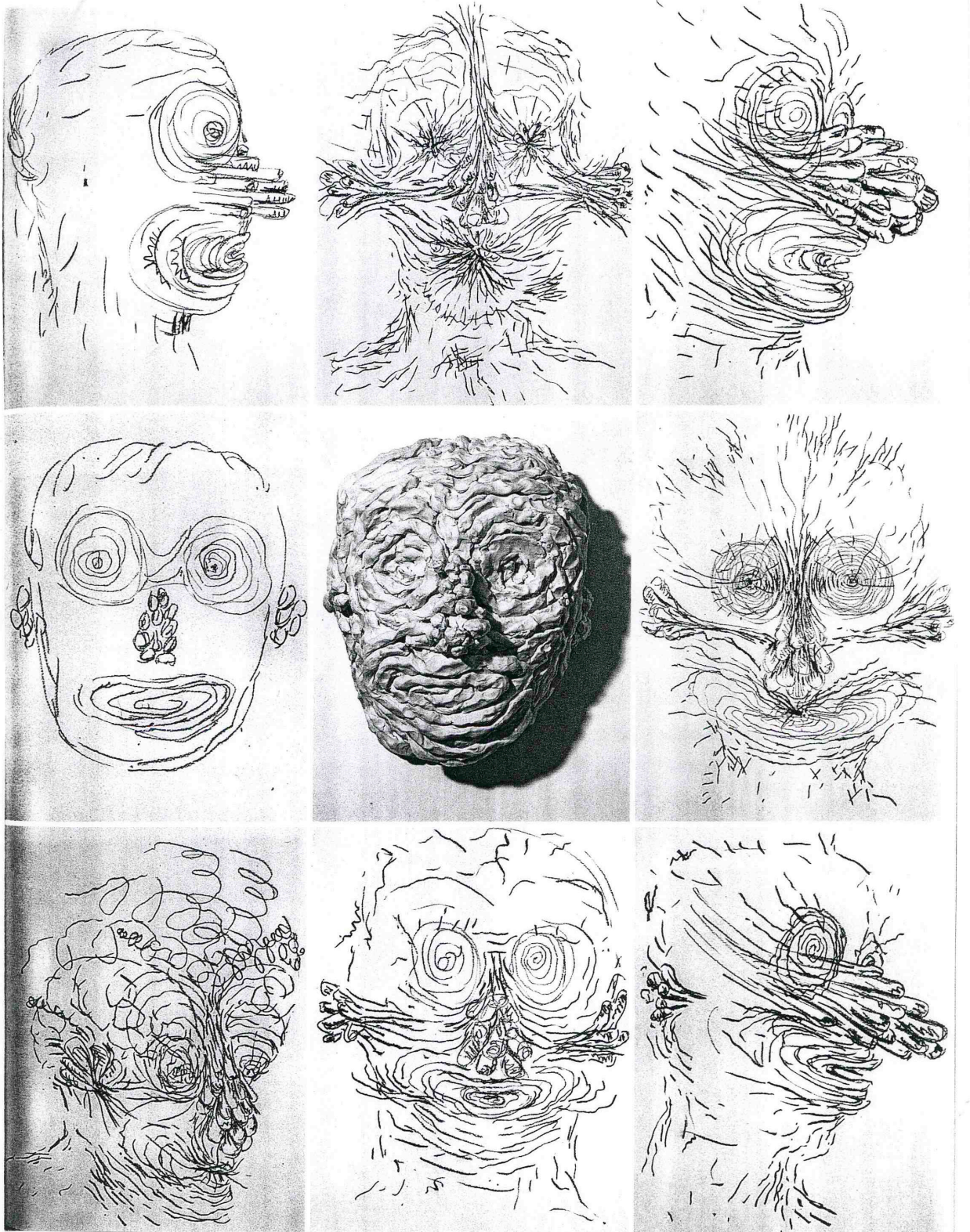
(Right)
Rosemarie
Trockel, *Untitled*,
acrylic on paper
(56.5x76 cm).
1996.

(Far Right)
Untitled, charcoal
on paper (30x21
cm). 1989.



GLADSTONE GALLERY

Loreck, Hanne, "Storia Universale? Rosemarie Trockel's Works on Paper," *Art On Paper*, May-June 1999



GLADSTONE GALLERY

Loreck, Hanne, "Storia Universale? Rosemarie Trockel's Works on Paper," *Art On Paper*, May-June 1999

(Opposite page)
Rosemarie
Trockel, *Mutter*
[*Mother*], 9-part
piece with plaster
head and 8 draw-
ings in charcoal,
1995.

theme and without regard to chronology. One of her central themes now is the portrait genre, within which such groupings are common: *Gudrun* (1966–97), for example, or the two groups *Untitled (Jackie)* (1993–94) and *Untitled (Women + Couples)* (1966–97). Not surprisingly, in such works as her large series of Family Portraits (1995) Trockel disappoints any expectation of family resemblance or biographical "truth." Instead of presenting a physiognomic genealogy, she treats her faces in a highly artificial manner, using "amateurish" styles—the type of drawings, for example, made in psychotherapeutic exercises to interpret syndromes rooted in the family: a faceless, flat portrait of her father in dull colors, her mother's visage with spiral-shaped eyeholes or a puckered radial mouth in charcoal (*Untitled [Mutter]*, 1995), her sister's head with just a spot of color created by dabbing on paint with a cotton ball.... Where the Mannerist Arcimboldo made faces out of flowers or fruits or animals, Trockel makes drawings out of lines that are not necessarily related to the image she is creating: markings taken from the natural sciences, for example, or even from other art. Her gestures are never really of her own invention, but appropriated in order to be exaggerated into a kind of hyper-originality. Trockel's exaggerations serve to estrange that which is most apparently familiar. Honing the intellect and the senses, she establishes a program of non-identity in which she constantly queries, from changing perspectives, the borderline areas of so-called art and its functions. Even the privileging of the "human" is subject to interrogation, as the artist has expanded her critical view of gender difference to include a critique of the anthropocentric standpoint of research, philosophy, and morality. Animals or plants appear as vehicles for the transference of human attitudes and qualities: a poodle with a curly "feminine" hairdo or a knowingly human gaze (*Untitled [Poodle + Woman]*, 1988–96), graphic investigations of such figures as Brigitte Bardot (Lolita, film star, sex symbol, and politically controversial animal-rights activist). In one the actress appears with a beard, in others with an animal snout or enormous puffy lips (*Untitled [B. B.]*, 1993). In one four-part work the half-length Cibachrome portrait of a young woman with a swollen, beaten-up face before a sky of cirrus clouds is juxtaposed with the same face in black and white and accompanied by two fine botanical drawings of a shriveled poppy capsule, which appears to be releasing its seeds to the four winds.

The proximity of language and visuality is central to Trockel's project. A single line can change everything as sharply as a word, and hatching can

make literally graspable a structural analogy between text and texture or fabric. Trockel's appropriational decisions are always significant: which images she chooses to borrow, and what techniques and materials she chooses to use. The same motif may take on a different meaning as a Cibachrome, a black-and-white photograph, or a drawing. If photography is still viewed with some suspicion in the museum world, even more so photocopy, which Trockel may "only" be using—some critics might contend—in order to obtain a well-known drawing as the basis for her adaptation.

Why all this borrowing and manipulation? Why the close attention to the meaning-producing differences in art? If works of art were ever considered unadulterated expressions of "human culture," or even "humanity as such," Trockel's defamiliarizations make it clear that this was merely a pretext to surround oneself with pleasant, harmless things, and to enhance one's personal leisure time. In her choice of themes, her distanced stylistic and formal citations, she emphasizes that modes of representation are always historically and socially charged. This means that they are always entangled in preexisting images, nomenclature, and value, which have already structured and conventionalized our perceptions before we even open our eyes. Trockel's drawings, like all her work, imbricate images, language, and reception, but in a manner so complex and unspectacular, even so cheerfully allusive, that they have achieved, perhaps, the most consistently disconcerting effect.

¹*Ein Haus für Schweine und Menschen* was produced in collaboration with Carsten Höller; see Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel, *Ein Haus für Schweine und Menschen (A House for Pigs and People)* (Cologne, 1997).

²Sidra Stich, ed., *Rosemarie Trockel*, with essays by Sidra Stich and Elizabeth Sussman, exh. cat. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art; Berkeley: University Art Museum), published in conjunction with Prestel, Munich, 1991.

³A catalogue raisonné of Trockel's prints and multiples is in progress at Helga Maria Klosterfelde Edition in Hamburg.

⁴Mario Diacono, "Rosemarie Trockel. Eine Küche für die obdachlose Malerei," in *Rosemarie Trockel. Herde*, ed. Gerhard Theewen (Cologne, 1997), p. 13.

(Translated by Pamela Selwyn)

Hanne Loreck is an art historian, critic, and curator living in Berlin. She teaches contemporary art at Humboldt University, Berlin.