

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Bacchetta, Veronique. "Provocation and Poetic Enigma." *Parkett* 33. Page. 40-47. 1992.

VÉRONIQUE BACCHETTA

Rosemarie Trockel: *Provocation and Poetic Enigma*

Since the start of the '80s, Rosemarie Trockel has been rather close to a certain feminist fluidity that has played a decisive role in contemporary German creativity. In this context, through drawing, sculpture and painting, Trockel has elaborated a critically oriented oeuvre centered between two poles: sex and politics. Yet although, by and large, she treats the subject of women, her work is not in any case comparable to the feminist militancy that reigned in the '70s in such places as the United States and England. During that period, demands violently confronted the exclusive presence of men in artistic institutions. The fight against avant-gardism and established formalism was tied to political and social exigencies. Other, more essentialist women supplanted this struggle with innate—or more traditional—feminine qualities closely related to handicrafts, such as weaving and patchwork.

Today the situation has changed, as Trockel tells us: "Art about women's art is just as tedious as the art of men about men's art."¹ Indeed, the analysis by

women artists is now being made more from within the art market through a critical and political strategy calling into question the established power of the market and the media. Barbara Kruger, Sherrie Levine and Jenny Holzer, even if they are not exclusively devoted to this activity, are contributing to this movement. Trockel plays in this same register. But feminist demands and her critique do not overwhelm her preoccupations with an art at once conceptual and expressionistic, which derives in large part from Joseph Beuys and Sigmar Polke but which she shares with other artists of her generation—Thomas Schütte, Ludger Gerdes, Hubert Kiecol, Katharina Fritsch—who also avail themselves of the object and multiply media so that each work, in its autonomy, might elude the notion of a stylistic whole. Formally, Rosemarie Trockel's drawings are often compared to Beuys's, and like him, she re-uses in her sculptures everyday objects and fossils, or animal skeletons, which she often presents under glass. Rosemarie Trockel liberates herself from this influence—today omnipresent in Germany—by treating Beuys's iconographic repertoire ironically. She uses home appliances—an iron, a stove—to call into question the

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woman's place in society, in opposition to Beuys, who exclusively mythified woman as genetrix and symbol of fertility.

In Trockel's work, the use of different traditional means of expression (drawing, sculpture, painting) is liberated by the introduction of industrially produced objects or objects she has made herself. Thus, in *UNTITLED* (1988), an imposing pedestal supports the black bust of a feminine lingerie mannikin found in the streets of Cologne, whose breasts face two irons cast in white metal. This aggressive mix of incongruous, mute objects obviously comes close to certain ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, but comes even closer to Man Ray's *GIFT*, in which the iron is pierced with nails. The sexual connotation, of course, is clear. This defenseless mannikin, threatened by irons, bears witness to the condition of woman subjected to her traditional role, reduced to a passivity both social and sexual. The only trace of humor lies in the fact that the artist has chosen not to plug in the irons. The dual-

ity between the revolt against stereotypes imposed on women and the strangeness, whimsicality, and quaintness of this work make it at once a provocation and a poetic enigma. In 1985, at the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn, Trockel presented her knitted pictures for the first time. The earliest ones, small in format, give the impression, with their horizontal and vertical stripes, of sailor's sweaters. By 1986, however, the format expands and the abstract motifs are soon replaced by logos borrowed from the political and commercial sphere: the Swastika, the sickle and hammer, the charming *Playboy* bunny, and the label of quality for wool (Woolmark) all make their appearance and are multiplied until they completely and evenly fill up the format of their frames. For a little more irony, the motif "all over" is programmed on a computer and the canvas worked by industrial knitters. But once again there is conflict

between the "typically" female tasks and domains, such as decoration, and the masculine realm of commerce and politics.

Against handicrafts and archaic references Trockel pits the machine. Repetition and mechanical precision enable her, as in Andy Warhol's serigraphs, to level the political impact of these signs by likening them to simple motifs. But by taking her first abstract models from women's magazines specializing in knitting and "women's work"—models which metaphorically are real patterns—Trockel also alienates geometric painting. The choice of this knitted support, derisory and ideal for such decorative designs, casts an ironic

glance at painting as a major art, perfectly illustrating the intrusion of knitting onto the heroic terrain of abstraction, invaded by macho references to the relationship between paintbrush and canvas. Elsewhere, the hammer and sickle are transformed into an alignment of little signs, very straight and surrounded by flickering semicircles

that clash against a background of white and red horizontal stripes that aggressively recall the American flag and at the same time, through a simple displacement of context, deflate all the ideology and propaganda linked to these emblems.

The series of articles of clothing—sweaters, balaclavas, stockings, panty hose, and dresses—is again the occasion for several disfunctionings: not only do the political logos return to abstraction, and abstraction to the logo, but the clothing, the principal element of the realm of fashion, is raised to the level of art object. The fact, for example, of sprinkling *Playboy* bunnies over a balaclava, the garment that German terrorists Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof used as a mask, shows a recontextualization of certain signs in an antagonistic realm and charges the work with a very cynical and engaged feminist perspective. In the early '70s, the violence of



ROSEMARIE TROCKEL, *DAS INTUS LEGERE DURCH DIE SONDERGOTIK*, 1988, Silber, Pappe und Papier, 18 x 18 x 6 cm / *SILENT READING IN THE MANNERIST GOTHIC STYLE*, 1988, silver, cardboard and paper, 5 x 5 x 2 1/4", Edition: 15.

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ROSEMARIE TROCKEL, OHNE TITEL., 1988,
Holz, Glas, Hemd, Spinnweben, 200 x 50 x 30 cm / Wood, glass, shirt, cobweb, 78 3/4 x 19 1/2 x 11 3/8"

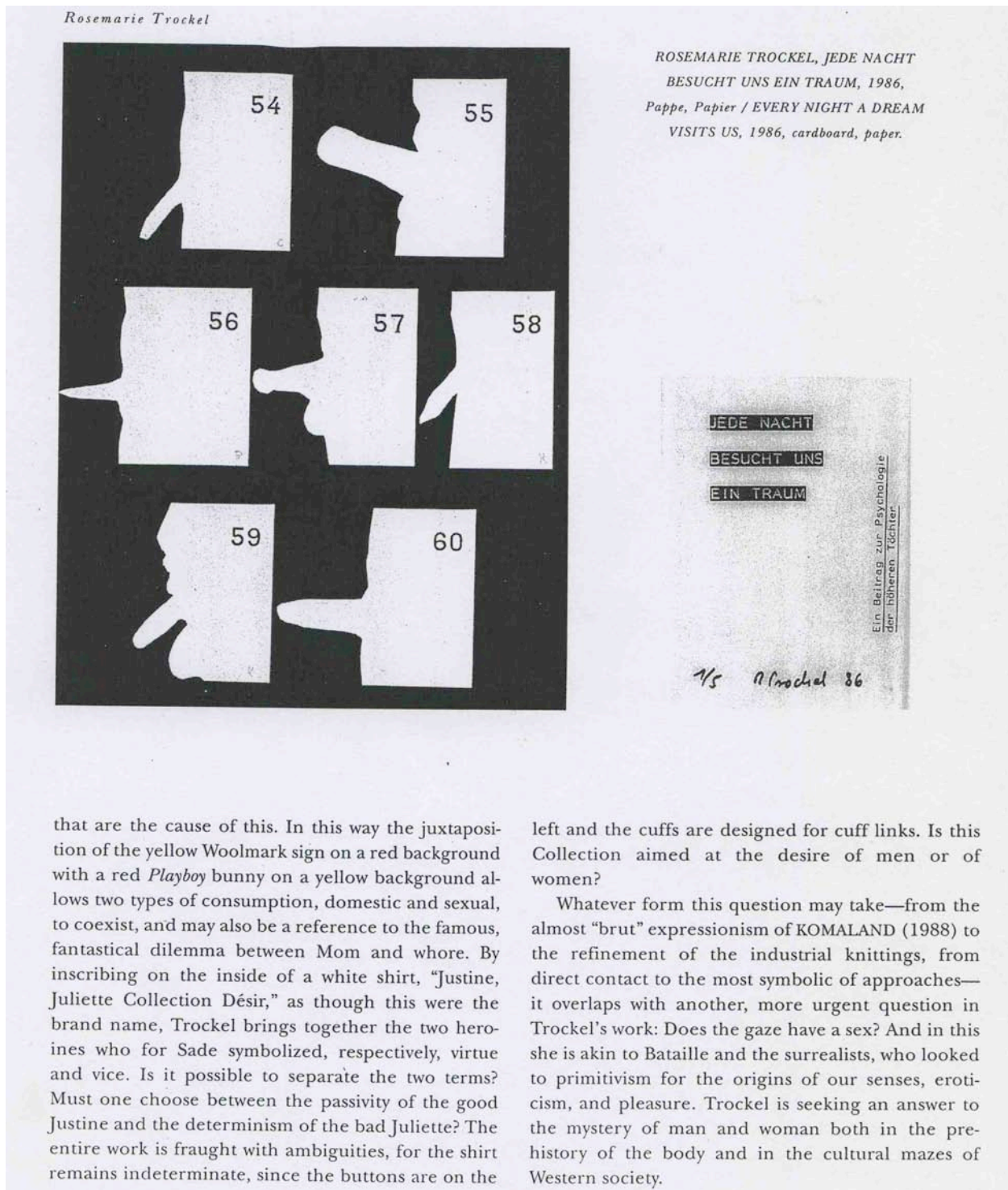
these women was understood as an awakening, a way of finally taking part in history, but also as proof of the impossibility of integrating oneself into overly traditional and sexist social schemas. Born, like this violence, of a questioning of freedom of action and thought, the awkwardly knitted COGITO ERGO SUM (1988) gives instead an impression of uncertainty. Its faltering appearance forces the spectator to wonder if women have ever been recognized to be thinking subjects and if they were really affected by that famous statement. Commenting on the balaclavas, Trockel fills us in: "The masks, for example, consist not only of what they say or intend to say, but also of what they exclude. They have absence as their subject."²⁾ These ski masks mask the mouth and let only the eyes show through; the person who wears one is mute, absent, passive. It is true that the entire history of psychoanalysis, especially Freudian, has considered woman as a kind of sub-man, an unfinished

being. This point of view has, of course, been much contested by numerous writers: by the psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, who in *Speculum de l'autre femme* re-examined all arguments from Plato to Freud and denounced their exclusion of women from intellectual, sexual, political, social, and cultural consciousness; by Simone de Beauvoir, who shed light on the separation between man as subject and woman as Other; and by Hélène Cixous, who has advanced arguments tending to assert a bisexuality common both to women and men.

Obviously it is not possible to tie Trockel's work to theoretical writings. But in many works she seeks indeed to define woman's place in Western society, opposing the models that reduce her to a being that finds pleasure only in passivity, and fulfillment in maturity. Trockel juxtaposes and mixes metaphorical references to both sexes, as much to denounce exclusion and sectarianism as to expose the contradictions

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Rosemarie Trockel

But perhaps there is no answer. In *SILENT READING IN THE MANNERIST GOTHIC STYLE* (1988), Trockel sets a metallic mold of her finger alongside photographic reproductions of medieval sculptures. By thus inserting her finger into the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, Trockel identifies with the Bridegroom, with the Judge who will separate the elect, who will know how to keep their lamps lighted, from the damned. But is this a sexualization of the Last Judgement? This question arises provocatively sometimes, as in the poster affiche, *UNTITLED (CAN TREES CRY?)* (1990), in which we see a naked couple marching down the street clothed only in large paper grape leaves, but also with more distancing and humor. The 1986 edition of *JEDE NACHT BESUCHT UNS EIN TRAUM* (Every Night a Dream Visits Us) offers us a selection of male sexual organs, erect and at rest. These silhouettes look as if they were taken from a medical journal. When we relate the title to the subtitle—*EIN BEITRAG ZUR PSYCHOLOGIE DER HÖHEREN TÖCHTER* (A Contribution to the Psychology of the Cultured Daughters)—we realize that Trockel is probably, like Freud, associating dream with sex and is giving "big girls" the choice of the object that will allow them to realize their desire. But if Trockel is broaching the Oedipal theme of the evolution of the libido in young girls, she is tempering this demythification with the ridiculous and comical aspect of these "portraits."

In certain more recent works Trockel allows herself even more lightness and self-mockery, as in the 1992 work, in which an eyeball is mounted on a ball of red wool. This odd cyclops accompanied by a label is displayed in a glass case as in an ethnographic

museum, and can only be associated with the artist's person, since one reads: "Ich sehe rote Wolle." (I see red wool.) It's possible that Trockel, often identified on the contemporary scene as the artist who knits pictures, is here taking a mocking step back from her own work, as well as from those who see only that aspect of it. This would seem all the more true as the date inscribed on the card is 1985, the year of her first knitted work. But, for all that, Trockel has not

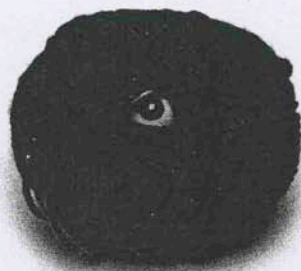
given up wool and knitting. The lifebuoy entitled *THE MYSTERY OF MALPICA* (1992) is entirely covered with a knitted sock. This replica, thus enveloped, loses its function to become a mere abstract sign whose softness and intimacy is deceptive, since the title suggests the drama of the sailors who mysteriously disappeared in the waters of Malpica. If she is still manipulating as much as before the formal, sexual, and social aspects of objects she takes from everyday life, she seems today to be broadening her choices to include subjects in which

the violence is always palpable, though in more "natural" or more primitive forms. This would seem to be the case with the animals in, for example, *CREATURE OF HABIT* (1: *DRUNKEN DOG*, 2: *DEER*, 3: *DACHSHUND*), from 1990, presented with a video composed of several sequences showing different animals, dated 1978–1990; or with the bronze seal hung by the tail in the Amelio Brachot gallery in Paris in late 1991/early 1992. One wonders if Trockel is not giving herself over to a personal "archaeology" of the role and representation of the victim in Western society.

(Translation from the French: Stephen Sartarelli)

- 1) Jutta Koether, "Interview with Rosemarie Trockel," *Flash Art*, No. 134, February-March, 1987, p. 42.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 40.

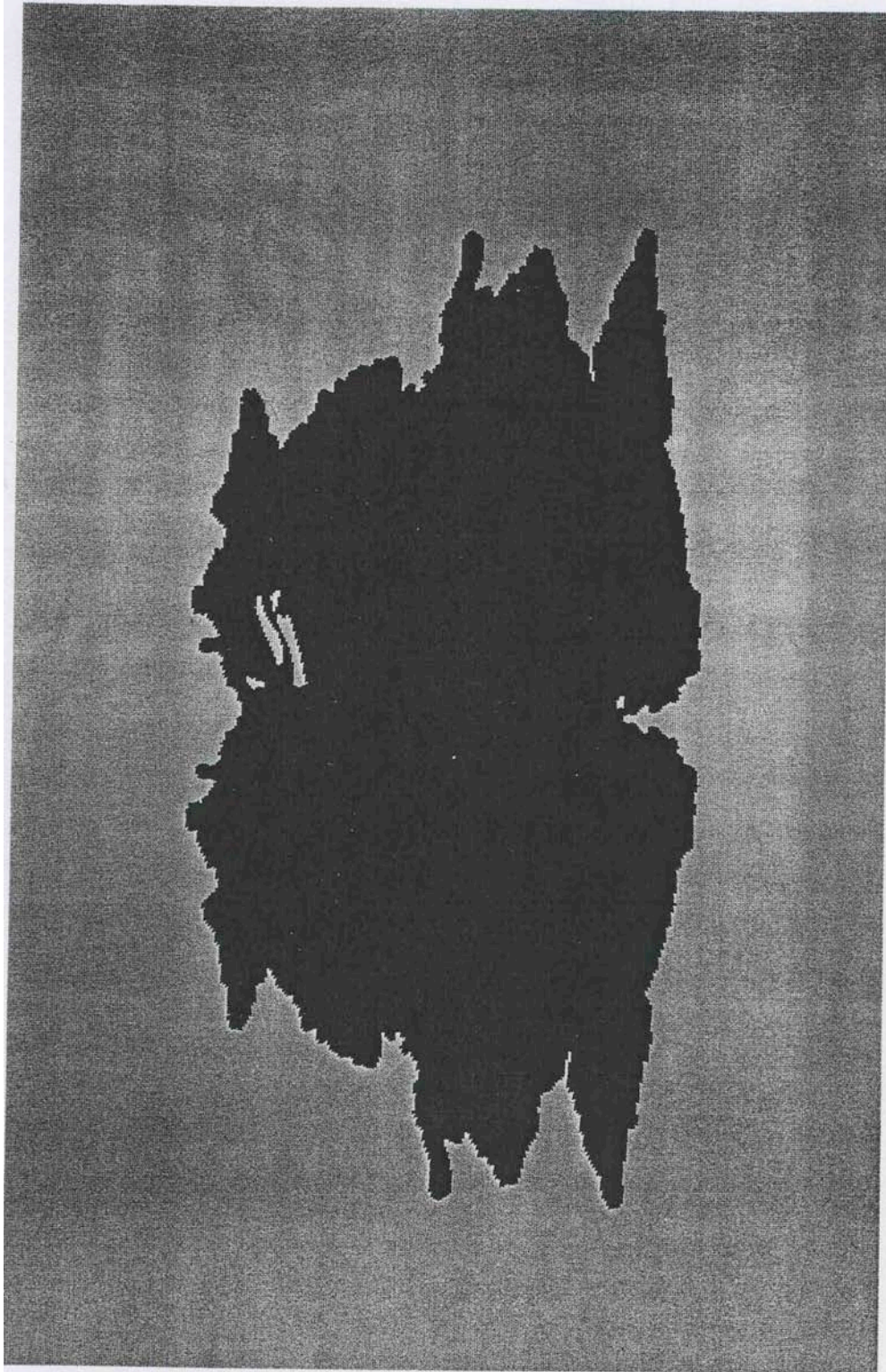
ROSEMARIE TROCKEL, *ICH SEHE ROTE WOLLE, EINGEFÄRBTES WACHS*, 1985, Wolle, Glas, Plastik / *I SEE RED WOOL, TINTED WAX*, 1985, wool, glass, plastic.



"Ich sehe rote Wolle"
eingefärbtes Wachs. 1985

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ROSEMARIE TROCKEL, OHNE TITEL., 1991, Wolle, 250 x 160 cm / Wool, 98½ x 63".

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