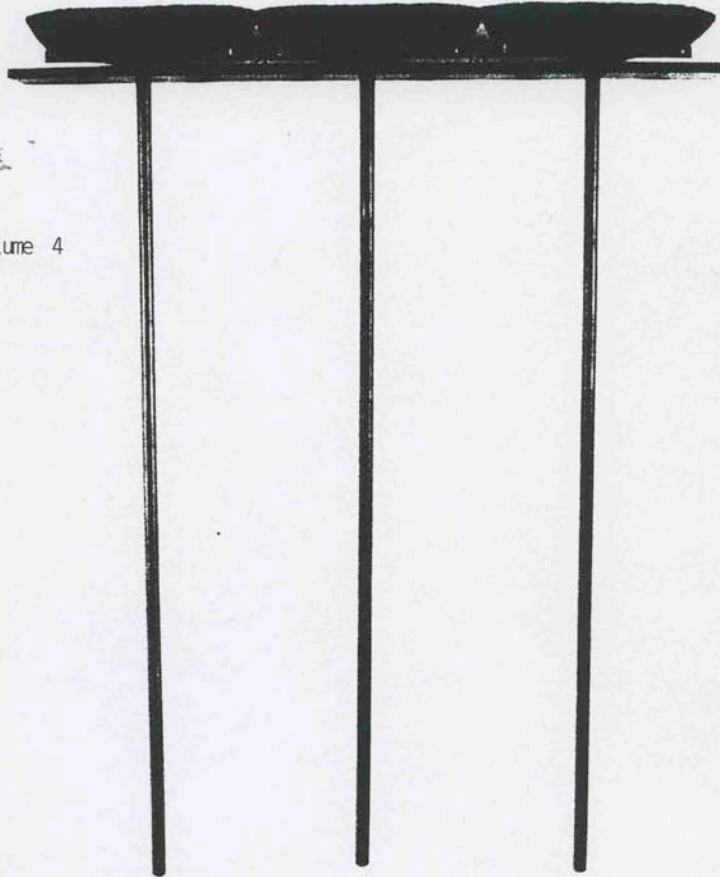


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The Savage Mind

German conceptualist Rosemarie Trockel weaves her way between art and life



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ROSEMARIE TROCKEL'S work is far removed from that of neo-Expressionist painters and sculptors such as Anselm Kiefer, Jörg Immendorff, and Georg Baselitz, who emerged during the early '80s as exemplars of Germany's revitalized art scene. The first major survey of Trockel's work, now on tour in North American museums, reveals that far from building on art's capacity to polemicize, her aesthetic charts a territory of ambiguous, constantly shifting perspectives. In this sense her work aptly embodies the fusion of sense and intellect described by Claude Lévi-Strauss as "the savage mind."

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Trockel's wide-ranging

oeuvre, which includes knitted paintings, clothing multiples, vitrine sculptures, and freestanding sculptural objects, is its ability to confound and blur absolute definitions into a vocabulary of amoralistic positives and negatives. This distanced vantage on reality—the chief characteristic of the savage mind—is described by the artist as "looking at things outside of time."

Trockel first gained recognition for knitting corporate and political logos on fabric panels and articles of clothing. The artist maintains that her knit pieces "actually began as my reaction to feminist art—I was so unhappy with the shows of feminist art I saw in the '70s. In the universities every woman seemed to

be knitting. And so I chose to knit, to try to rehabilitate this debased medium." This idea of rehabilitation, central to so much of her art, led Trockel to expand the scale and scope of her knitted works. Using computer-based drawing programs and industrial looms, she borrowed or adapted highly familiar trademarks and logos from commerce or politics and knitted them into patterned bolts of fabric, which she then mounted on stretchers and displayed as paintings. Returning to the ideas of function associated with knitting, she applied her techniques to the fabrication of clothing multiples.

Christopher French

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Unlike a number of young American artists who came to prominence during the '80s, Trockel does not quote consumer logos or political symbols merely to exploit the rapidly diminishing shock value of appropriation; rather, her knitted logos, whether featuring Playboy bunny or swastika, are always effectively translated into their new medium. Not surprisingly, while Trockel's logos rejuvenate what had traditionally been understood as woman's work, they also effectively terrorize many of the male-dominated hierarchies of Modernism. Fields of contrasting plus and minus symbols, presented as a diptych painting in *Untitled (Plus-Minus)*, disturbingly echo the trans-

formation of representation into repetition as practiced by Andy Warhol. Knitted into the fabric of leggings, the same symbols blur gender into sexlessness, provoking a confusion between art and life.

Trockel often uses vitrines to present objects almost as if they were archaeological discoveries: in many of her works, unexpected juxtapositions of objects create overtones of impending violence or sensual eroticism, which are in turn interrupted by a host of subtle or overt distancing devices.

In one of her untitled works, a man's shirt, subtly altered by a collar monogram that reads "Justine/Juliette, COLLECTION

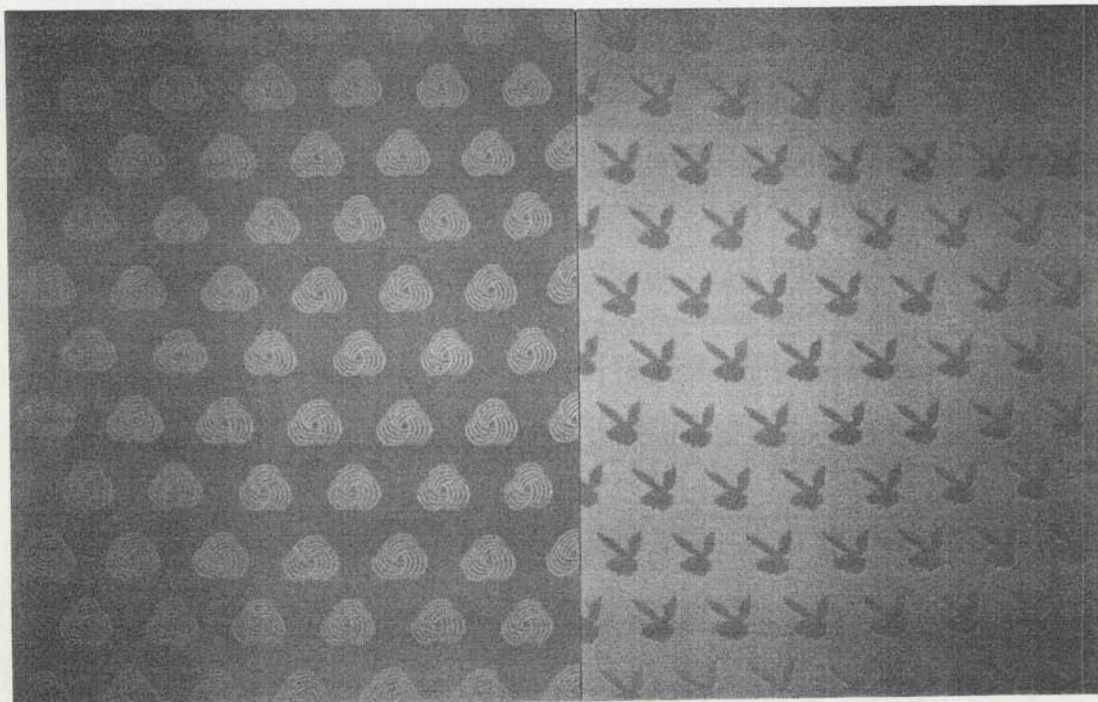
DÉSIR," shares a vitrine with a small spider, which has spun its life-sustaining web in one corner of the case. Trockel traces the impetus for this piece to a trip to France, where she first encountered the writing of Sade:

At that time I visited a town that was covered with spiderwebs: they were everywhere. So I conceived an idea that related this town of spiderwebs to Sade. My idea was to put the two figures of Justine and Juliette—one the feminist part, the other embodying a more traditional feminine behavior—together in one male object. The object I decided upon was this kind of white business shirt, which is complemented by the small spider living with it.

A more recent example of this fusion of art and life, of product and process, is Trockel's 1990 *Painting Machine*, which subjects one of the hallmarks of individual identity—human hair—to a rigorous structure of standardized mass production. Trockel collected hair samples from 56 fellow artists, mounted them on paintbrush handles, and devised a motorized loom to make the brushes "paint." Presenting the now motor-



Left: *Untitled*, 1987, wood and fiber, ca. 50 x 39 x 6".
Right: Trockel with her work at the Boston ICA retrospective.
Below: *Untitled*, 1988, machine-knit wool.



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less painting machine along with the paintings it has produced, Trockel announces, "I include both the record and the object; both are important, but the process exists elsewhere. This is very important to me as a combination of the objective and the personal within the arena of individual expression." Removing the motor, she effectively castrates the machine's creative function, making this one of her most unsettling evocations.

HER INSISTENCE on blending art and life has occasionally produced unexpected results. In 1986 Trockel was invited to participate in an international exhibition organized in Bulgaria. After discovering that one of the Communist country's chief exports to the West was rosewater, she conceived her con-

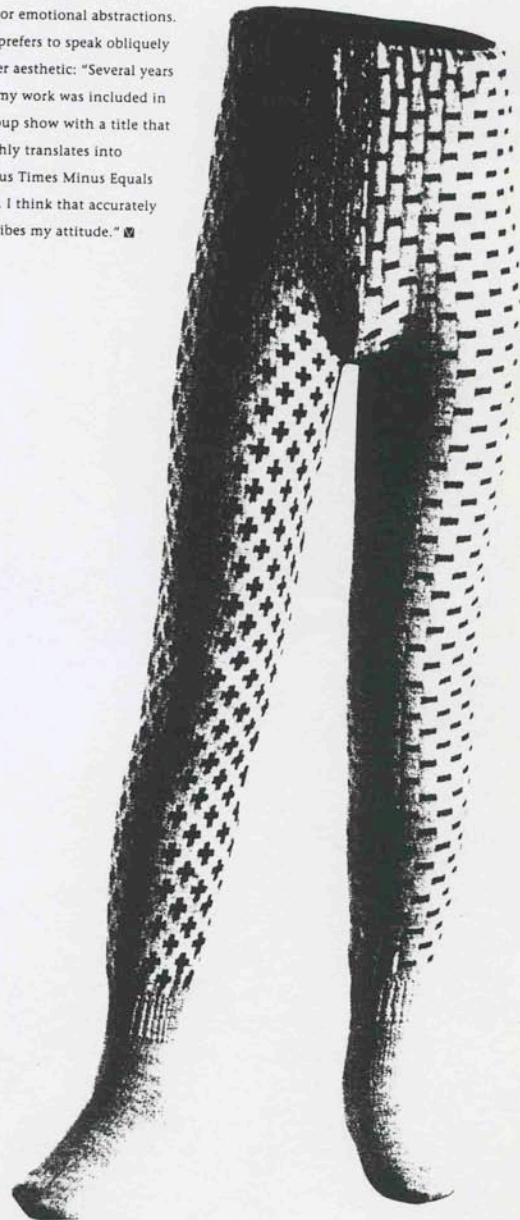
tribution, *Rose of Kasanlak*, as an alliterative alteration of the hammer-and-sickle symbol. However, her work, as well as the work of other German artists, was suddenly barred from the exhibition without explanation. As she describes it, the symbol she had created was an inadvertent reconstruction of an underground symbol of protest for a woman murdered by the Bulgarian state. Matter-of-factly acknowledging the importance of this jarring confluence of art and realpolitik, Trockel believes that "as disturbing as this event was at the time, this conjunction of art and real life is what I'm after."

Working in a variety of styles, "including some that are additive and expressive, and some that are minimal and subtractive," Trockel believes that it is not important to have a sig-

nature style. She is careful to distinguish between personal and impersonal motivations behind her editions and her unique sculptures and knit paintings: "The editions refer to how closely related the ideas of clothing and art have become, while works like *Untitled (Endless Stockings)*—although objects of clothing—are based on personal experience." Her equation between object and viewer, head and heart, conjoins tactile objects in open-ended intellectual or emotional abstractions. She prefers to speak obliquely of her aesthetic: "Several years ago my work was included in a group show with a title that roughly translates into 'Minus Times Minus Equals Plus'. I think that accurately describes my attitude." ■

"Rosemarie Trockel" was co-organized by Sidra Stich and Elisabeth Sussman for the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and the University Art Museum, Berkeley. The exhibition is on view in Berkeley from June 12 through Sept. 8. It will then travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (Sept. 28-Nov. 10), The Power Plant, Toronto (Jan. 17-March 1, 1992), and the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid (March 30-May 17, 1992).

Right: *Untitled*, 1987, machine-knit wool, wood, mannequin.
Below: Trockel with *Untitled*, 1986, glass, bronze, and iron.



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