
The rose of Kasaïlik image perhaps connects the two artists in a further way. The modified perfume bottle has been placed, as just described, on a folded cloth with a regular, all-over pattern of sickles and roses. If Duchamp is saluted with the former, Trockel is identified with the latter, for her best-known pieces are hangings with logos woven in. These, too, are invariably impish. Made in Western Germany is a particularly handsome hanging, possibly self-referential in that its logo, densely and regularly repeated, is “Made in Western Germany” in bluish-green thread against a dark green background. Usually, of course, stickers declaring “Made in USA” or “Made in Japan” are not part of the products whose provenance they specify, but this weaving makes such marginal information its central meaning. The product consists of the information regarding its country of origin. But there is clearly something absurd in an industrial product whose usefulness is confined to such information. (Trockel is not to be imagined sitting before her loom: She designs the woven-works and has them fabricated, which could not more vehemently exclude reference to the hand; a work by her called Woven by Hand would surely be self-falsifying.) One assumes it was produced in “Western Germany” for export to a country that hardly can have much use for it, especially since the “weavers” appear not to have full command of English—“Western Germany” sounds like “Northern Dakota.” Or in fact it is exported not as an industrial product but as a work of art—I surmise from the catalogue information that it is in an American collection. It is in any case an image made of words, and as elegant as it is puzzling, as funny as it is serious, its handsomeness a means to communication rather than an object of aesthetic pleasure.

I enjoyed walking through Trockel’s show at the University Art Museum in Berkeley with its co-curator, Sidra Stich, though I found myself frequently disagreeing with what I felt were Stich’s somewhat heavy feminist readings of the work. For example, she is convinced that weaving is traditionally women’s work, and that some reference to this is woven into such works as Made in Western Germany. A great many of Trockel’s works are in fact woven and do in fact make for feminist points, but their being the product of a loom does not seem to me especially to contribute to this. There is, for example, Dress, made in 1986, which indeed is a feminine garment by a female artist, and woven of pure wool. It proclaims its essence by employing as its sole ornament the familiar pure-wool logo, that triple loop manufacturers use to proclaim the truth of their products—a sort of schematized ball of yarn. This garment has in fact two pure-wool logos, each quite large, and placed precisely where the weaver’s breasts would be, and an ambiguity of denotation gets immediately set up as to whether the logos refer to the cloth (why the two of them?) or to the female body under the garment. It is here, it seems to me, that the feminist text is to be located, rather than in the fact that women knit things more, as a general rule, than men do. The viewer, for different reasons depending upon wheth-
er male or female, is made slightly uncomfortable by the awkwardly placed logos and at the same time is amused by the treacheries of placement. In a way, the pure-wool logo becomes a sort of metonymy of the female breast and hence of the way men think of women in Trockel’s work. There is a woven-work of 1985/88 in which the pure-wool logo is repeated over and over in gold against red, making it seem a counterpart to Made in Western Germany, in that it appears to have made something marginal to the work itself its motif and raison d’être. Except that the pure-wool logo loses its purity here, for Trockel has had woven into the other half of the hanging the familiar bunny logo of the Playboy world—and there is a field of rabbits facing a field of schematized yarn-balls. The bunny logo sexualizes the wool one.

Sometimes the reference to breasts in Trockel’s work is actually frightening. An unmitigated piece from 1988 uses a waxwork replica of a store mannequin, a bust of a woman with salient breasts and a pretty but vacant head. She is set onto a sort of platform with two flitrions, the plate of each pointed toward a breast. It becomes an immediate image of torture, and a horrifying one at that: The woman does not even have arms with which to fend off the menacing irons. And yet Trockel could have written under the vulnerable organs, in the manner of Magritte, Ceci n’est pas un sein—“This is not a breast.” It is only the wax effigy of one. The wax would merely melt, and besides, these are only effigies of iron and they are in any case not plugged in. You can’t torture a statue! And yet the mind cannot think the woman out of the mannequin any more than it can dissociate the balls of yarn from the breasts in Dress. One has to see this as a woman threatened rather than as a sort of still life with two flitrions and a mannequin. What we certainly cannot do is agree with the catalogue, which writes that “ironing, the stereotypical ‘woman’s work’ of the laundress and the housewife, is here figured as an assault on the female body.” This converts a deep and unsettling work into a flat ideological slogan. Trockel is too nimble a visual thinker, too subtle an artistic activist, to be trapped into banality; She uses banality to ascend to works that, even when their theme is Woman, are sparkling, allusive, subtle and multi-layered. And at the same time each of her works has the power of a visual mystery. There is nothing wrong with art being political, only with political art having the single meaning of the political cartoon. One does not wish to walk through an exhibition like this with a sort of curatorial lexicon in hand, nailing down symbols, viz., “weaving = woman’s work,” “ironing = drudgery, usually performed by females.”

Consider, for example, an extraordinary work of 1986 that is a sort of glass display case—or perhaps an ornamental and reappropriated aquarium—on el-

Gently curved legs. In it we see seven ladel-like objects, uniform in size, suspended from that sort of overhead rack one finds in professional kitchens: what the French call a batterie de cuisine. The spoon ends of the ladles are scaphears cast in bronze, but are attached to the sort of prosaic handles that ladles usually have. In the lexicon just referred to, scaphears are supposed to mean vulvas; and though nobody, having made this identification explicit, goes on in the catalogue to say that cooking is women’s work, the bare sexual identification is pretty reductionist. In fact, the shells in question are conch shells, and could as easily symbolize the phallus as the vulva. Or, if we insist on sexual translations, the conch shell seems indissolubly male and female: The fact that we see them from underneath may mean that we have a certain female underside, just as Duchamp sought to bring out. This indeed is far closer, one feels, to this artist’s general attitude toward the sexes. She has, for example, employed in one of her works an African fetish that is at once vulval and phallic, as if to underscore our common humanity as well as our sexual differences. (She has woven pluses up one side and minuses the other of a pair of unisex longjohns, a kind of comical emblem of the unity and opposition of the sexes.) But once more this leaves the visual impact of her work out of consideration. It has the mysterious inconsistency of something dreamt. It conveys a sort of visual silence, as of a secret hidden, and insomuch as the hiddenness is the work, the approach is to feel rather than solve it.

The ladel work is called Untitled, but Trockel’s titles, when she does bestow them, do not usefully resolve questions. They add, if anything, to the mystery. One work, for example, is called Pennsylvania Station. It is composed of an abstract stove, reminiscent of the nonfunctional, furniturlike confections of the American artist Richard Artschwager, alongside what looks to be the packing case in which it came. So the two pieces—or components—seem to be united by juxtaposition in some sort of container-contained relationship. But there is a third component, at the bottom of the packing case—a sort of charred and overcooked mermaid. The carbonized monster bears an uncannily resemblance to the screaming figure in Edvard Munch’s celebrated image The Scream. Its mouth is open in a stifled cry, its hands are covering its ears. It is in some ways a frightening image and in some ways a comic one. Afte all, the idea of an overcooked mermaid raises the specter of culinary ineptitude in connection with a species it would not ordinarily occur to anyone to pop under the broiler. (Or should mermaids be poached?) Perhaps the mermaid, half-fish, half-human, is a symbol of our own bimorphic nature? Or is it all female, and martaized by the kitchen stove—woman’s work noch ein Mal? Whatever one offers by way of interpretation leaves unanswered what the various linked and warning meanings have to do with Pennsylvania Station.

New Yorkers, who got a taste of Trockel’s work in one of the Museum of Modern Art’s “Project” exhibitions, will, unfortunately, not get to see this show; After it closed on September 8 in Berkeley, it was to open at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago (September 28–November 10) and then at the Power Plant in Toronto (January 17–March 1, 1992). It is composed of seventy-five works, some more conceptually intriguing than others but each penetrated with the same spirit of political comedy and artistic intelligence; few can be classified under traditional rubrics, nor do many resemble one another as objects. The style is one of cognitive and moral address, but each has to be worked out on its own terms, though of course there are some inner resemblances—woven-works, for example, and as a subgenre, what one might think of as garments of the sexual wares: the dress, the longjohns, but also some improbably long stockings, some two-necked sweaters for couples who look for an outward symbol of the tightness of their relationship. And then there are hoods of the kind familiar from newspaper photographs of terrorists, with openings for eyes but not for mouths—balaclavas into which Trockel has woven various logos: the swastika, The Playboy bunny, the plus-and-minus signs. Some of these are displayed as sets, as if you can wear them for various occasions of terrorism or of play. And then, in a category of its own, is the Painting Machine of 1990, which looks like a loom, perhaps, but in fact has fifty-six brushes, each made of a lock of hair from an identifiable artist (Cindy Sherman, Martin Kippenberger, Alex Katz, etc.). These are suspended at one end, and when dipped into paint, make delicate calligraphic patterns of paper pulled through the mechanism. The contrast is vivid between the fierce ironwork of the contrivance and the brushes, emblems of touch and sensitivity, and the locks of hair, connecting sentimentality but put to some artistic use. And finally there is a whiff of politicized absurdity in a machine’s being put to the use of making art, in its own way. I suppose, a beating of swords into plowshares. Like everything, it dances with meaning.

What I most respond to in Trockel’s work is the sense that she knows all about us—knows us at our smallest and at our worst—and somehow conveys the sense that we are forgiven. This combination would once have been thought of as a womanly virtue, when the Blessed Virgin was thought of as the paradigm woman, and it is certainly comforting to see it in our generally unforgiving era, and to reflect that there are still morally gifted individuals who embody it. Trockel is tough, at times as acidic as Duchamp, at times as frightening as Beuys. But she is also kinder to those she accuses—as than either of them could possibly be.

EXCHANGE

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Klare's second mistake here is to assume that fuel-air explosive imitates nuclear explosive, which it doesn't. As I noted, Klare didn't take the trouble to find out that though, like nukes, fuel-air bombs have long-duration pressure pulses, the pressure is low and if you are in a bunker or armored vehicle the pressure coming through the vision slits would be insufficient to collapse your lungs. His "nuclear replacement" theory doesn't hold up.

I praised the Iraqi troops for having the good sense and courage to desert in large numbers. Klare seems to prefer to think of them only as victims, killed in numbers that might have reached 100,000 dead and 300,000 wounded—a number he cites from a Pentagon statement.

I was, and indeed remain, cautious about those figures, just as I was, and remain, cautious about very high estimates of direct civilian victims of the bombing, which I put at 4,500. This was a figure suggested by my brother Patrick, who spent much of the war and many months thereafter in Iraq as a reporter for The Independent. Patrick said that questioning of Iraqi villagers in the postwar period plus visits to hospitals suggested that military casualties might be far lower than imagined, with the Iraqi troops blessedly saving themselves from the follies of their leader and the might of the foe by desertion or surrender. As I remarked in the original column, prisoners of war from two Republican Guard divisions reported 100 and 1,000 casualties respectively.

One of my problems with the articles by Klare, Walker and Sambler was that the emphasis on high-tech military equipment obscures what has been killing, is killing and will continue to kill Iraqi civilians, namely the embargo, imposed long before the war began and continuing to this day, and also the assault on Iraq's infrastructure. Like most other people I made mistakes in forecasting how the war might go, but at least I did correctly stress the reduction of Iraq to pre-industrial status, also the smashing of the water and sewage infrastructure, which I called germ warfare.

The embargo, as maintained by the Bush Administration long after Iraq has quit Kuwait (and recently given an enthusiastic endorsement by The New York Times in its September 11 editorial "Keep the Cuffs on Iraq"), is killing people every day, shortening life expectancies, increasing infant mortality, finishing off sick people because drugs aren't available, gnawing away at an entire people because Iraq cannot resume any sort of productive export economy. It is against this, and not military technology, that outrage and political protest might most effectively be concentrated. Time and again people tend to forget what deadly things economic embargoes are. Ask any Nicaraguan. After a while, just because they don't go off with a big bang that supposedly wipes out all life on six football fields, embargoes take on the color of normalcy and people forget their appalling consequences, or the criminality of those imposing them.

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