

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Goodeve Nichols Thyrsa. "To tame the wild profusion of existing things." *Artforum*. Pp. 120-121. September 1991.

To tame the wild profusion of existing things

THYRSA NICHOLS GOODEVE

To listen carefully is to preserve. But to preserve is to burn, for understanding means creating.

—Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other*

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a "certain Chinese encyclopedia" in which it is written that "animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies." In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.

—Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*

Found footage of various moments in "nature," some shot by the artist herself, Rosemarie Trockel's *Tierfilme 1978-90* (Animal films 1978-90) are an important—and mercurial—intervention in the space of her retrospective. Rainy and under- or over-exposed, these 43 separate film fragments do not form a whole, but neither are they unconnected. Somehow—listening as well as observing—one can "hear" moments of supreme wonder, beauty, loss emerging across the boundaries of culture and nature, silently presented here in a 45-minute continuous loop without explanation beyond the titles of each frame, which have not been translated into English. Images of growth, aggression, conflict, lyricism, exploitation, habit, and mere existence, they show no progression from one state of being to another; no hierarchy built on an order that moves from infantile primitive beginning to civilized, adult maturation. Evolution, narrative—not here. Instead, evolution as circuitous, brought about through edited juxtaposition and ellipses. A zapping pulsation; moments torn fast from context ("Uhh, that was so short!" laments one spectator). Fragile, memory-infected fragments spun lyrically together, reframed, placed in slow motion on a weblike video master: *Das Haustier*, "the house pet," a spider tangling in its web in a determined encounter with an unwieldy corner of newsprint. The fragment of print culture wavers and pulls against the invisible thread. The spider disappears behind the paper, is consumed and covered, until its fuzzy legs emerge triumphantly

from around the paper's edge. Spider, paper, web hover, hesitate. Such are the moments of Trockel's animal films.

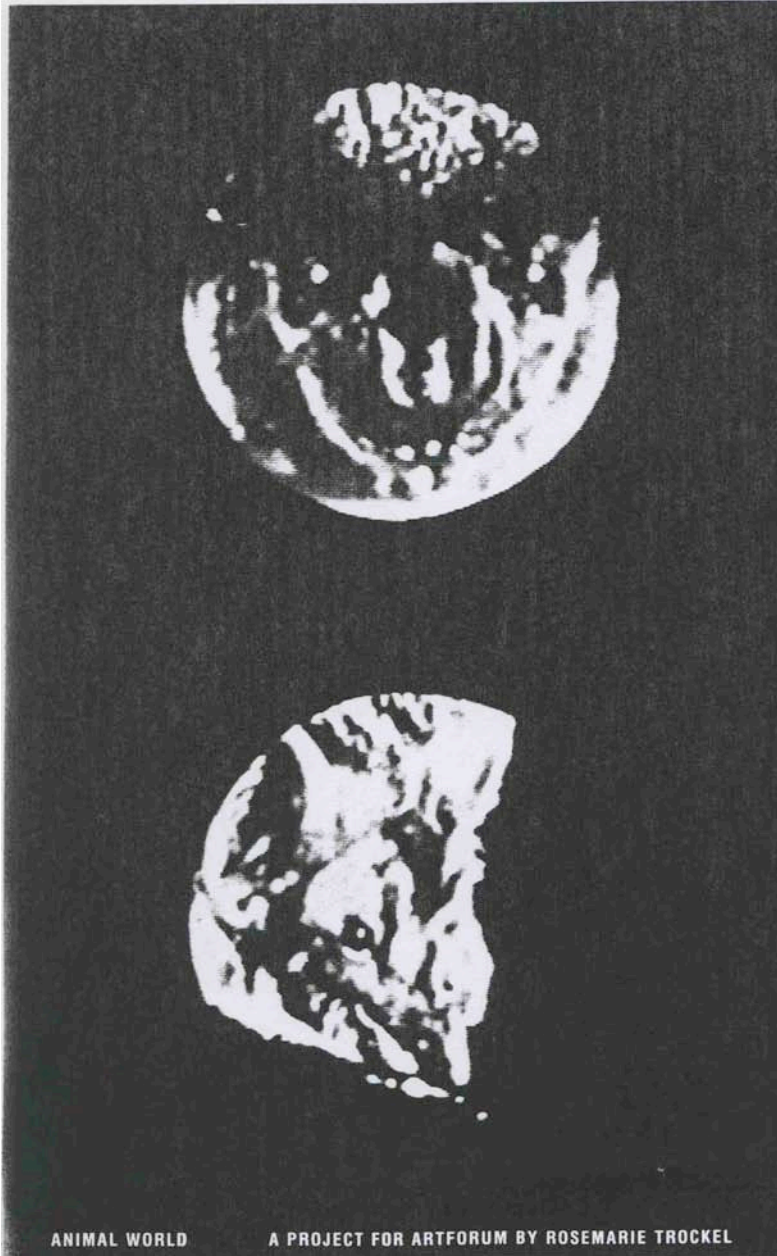
A certain logic begins the video piece. The first segment, entitled *Die Ringeltaube* (The wood pigeon) was filmed from the outside of a fence through which one sees two children throwing what looks to be a large dead bird. The wires of the fence locate, punctuate, and interfere with the vision of their toss game. The camera pans back and forth, dividing the throwers (children) from the thrown (bird). The bird—the focus of the camera—is abstracted by zooms and slow motion. The image ends in abstraction: enlarged and enframed feathers stuck monstrously into the metal edges of the fence. From this, the video loop moves through various taxonomies—insects, mammals, vertebrates, birds, primates, etc.—as well as the interfaces between nature and culture, animal and human behavior, ending with what might be someone's old home video of a baby and a chimp, dressed in twin outfits, walking hand in hand. The white baby human species pulls and tugs on the hand of the dark baby primate species, who stumbles behind, led wherever the determined human baby will go.

Animals in Trockel's videowork are seen as pickled, fossilized, hunted, maimed, or estheticized into moments of almost machinelike brilliance (for example, a close-up of a bee just whirring in suspended motion). Strange couplings of animal-human appear: a mermaid floats by; the Woltman, hairy eyes upturned, gazes at the viewer for just a moment. Fast motion produces an egg's maturation into a chicken in milliseconds. One has just seen the production of another kind of fowl—*Das Brathuhn* (The roast chicken), legs and head chopped off a lifeless body in preparation for human consumption. *Spieltier* (Play animal) and *Das Herrentier* (The gentleman animal) conjoin the monkey and the human in the sort of virulent racial discourse that monkeys have often inspired.¹ The "play animals" are a baby and a chimp who share a high chair and attempt to deal with an odd tool—a pencil. The "gentleman animal" is primate as artist—French beret, smock, and all—sitting at his easel producing images of Abstract Expressionism. The sequence ends with a close-up of the chimpanzee's concentrated expression, the camera searching for signs of "genius" at work.

A memory album? A story about the relation between culture and its photographic impulse to name and, thereby, to transform nature into knowledge? A particular kind of zoo, the cropped edges of the frames carrying the caged associations of the animals on view? Or a late-20th-century European woman's filmically surreal and semistrange ethnographic vision? As Elisabeth Sussman points out in her catalogue essay, Trockel consistently links the "primitive" with the mundane in her work. This leads Sussman to suggest James Clifford's term

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"ethnographic surrealism" as "a useful approach to Trockel's leitmotifs and her manner of juxtaposition and classification."³ For Clifford, who used the term to apply to a specific cultural moment in France between the two world wars, ethnographic surrealism and surrealist ethnography were utopian constructs that made a mockery of institutional definitions of both art and science.⁴

We might speak of Trockel's "ethnographic surrealism" as equally disruptive and destabilizing, and of her *Tierfilme* as providing an order of listening diametrically opposed to the conventional hierarchical schemata of the museological/zoological vision. Consider *Flieger* (Fliers), in which large webfoot frog creatures fly magically through the air in slow motion, rising and falling at various angles. The pulsing of the black and white video, mixing with the slow motion, pushes the wonder of their movement into abstraction, into a geometry of shapes and framing that *isn't* about a violation—cutting, caging—of the animal but an expression of its life-movement. Or *Wirbellier* (Vertebrate animal), wherein a frog with huge, preposterous, popping eyes clears its nose and face with a move of its "hand," rubs its feet over its stomach, and in an amazing finale crosses its back legs and poses as it finishes its ritual cleaning activities.

Carrying this fuzzy, memory-infested loop of strange and wild animal moments through and out of Trockel's exhibition, one looks back over one's shoulder and sees again those weird, frozen "Creatures of Habit," 1990, three bronze animal corpses, estheticized and mournful. The frame is broken; order has somehow been questioned. A boundary of looking and knowing has been transgressed. And one continues to wonder about the order of things, the way museums, zoos, taxonomies, and medical practices organize and hierarchize knowledge, asking us to observe, not listen, suffocating life forms into frozen stillness. One wonders:

How are love, power, and science intertwined in the constructions of nature in the late twentieth century?..What forms does love of nature take in particular historical contexts? For whom and at what cost? In what specific places, out of which social and intellectual histories, and with what tools is nature constructed as an object of erotic and intellectual desire? How do the terrible marks of gender and race enable and constrain love and knowledge in particular cultural traditions, including the modern natural sciences? Who may contest for what the body of nature will be?

That silence of Trockel's objects. The frame breaking—look over your shoulder. Look at the floor. Listen carefully to the silent pulsings of the video images, pauses, elliptical juxtapositions. Preserve. Burn. Create. Understand. □

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1. See Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, New York and London: Routledge, 1989.
2. Elisabeth Sussman, "The Body's Inventory—the Exotic and Mundane in Rosemarie Trockel's Art," in *Rosemarie Trockel*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Sidra Stich, Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1991, pp. 23 and *passim*.
3. See James Clifford, "Ethnographic Surrealism," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1988, p. 147.
4. Haraway, p. 1.