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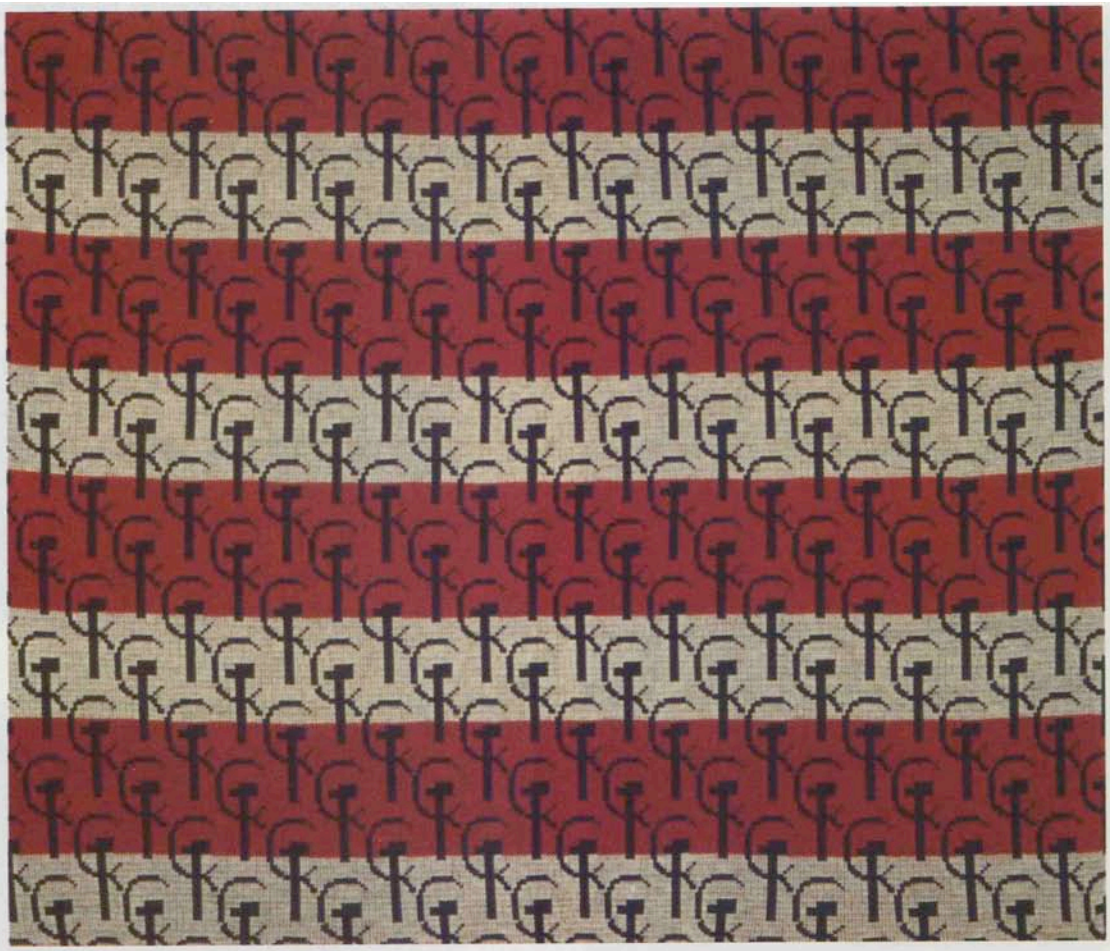

Rosemarie Trockel: Untitled (hammer-and-sickle flag), 1986, knitted wool, 59 by 51¼ inches.

Tales from the Dark Side

The German artist Rosemarie Trockel employs a protean range of forms—knitted panels, arrangements of objects, sculpture, photographic works—in an art that is consistently enigmatic and disturbing.

BY KEN JOHNSON

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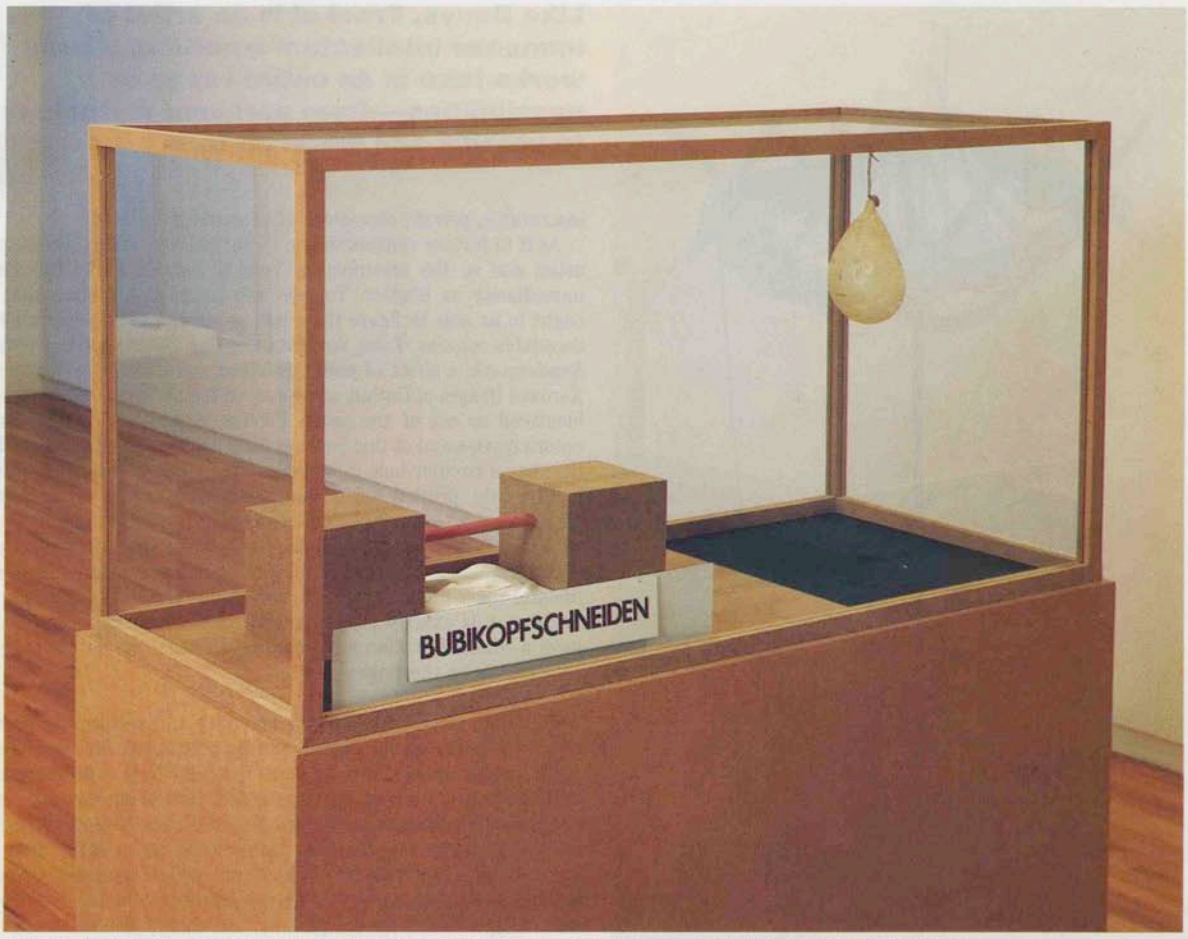

Untitled, 1988, wood, masonite, glass, plastic, rubber, pig bladder, cotton shirt, acrylic paint, 70½ by 63 by 27½ inches.

You could easily imagine a young American making a whole career out of those machine-knitted woolen panels that first drew attention on this side of the Atlantic to the German artist Rosemarie Trockel. Timed perfectly to coincide with the rise of Baudrillardism, they were suggestive at all the right levels: they simulated commercial products; they were insidiously political in using hammer and sickles, swastikas, Playboy bunnies or corporate logos as anonymously repeated pattern units; they were feminist in asserting a traditional, albeit now computerized, woman's craft; and they were ironic, Neo-Geo-like parodies of the gridlocked esthetics of modernism.

But Trockel wasted no time in serving notice that she would not be typecast. Her first solo exhibition in New York (one of the Projects series at the Museum of Modern Art [see *A.i.A.*, Apr. '88]) not only excluded the knits, but projected an entirely different sensibility from what you might have expected. A series of more than 80 diaristic doodles on throwaway pieces of paper and two sculptures featuring small, bizarre monsters made her seem more an Expressionist/Surrealist obsessed with matters of sexual and religious perversity than a cool postmodernist.

Most recently, in her first one-person show in a New York commercial gallery (Barbara Gladstone), Trockel showed even more facets of her oeuvre. There were six beautifully though not showily

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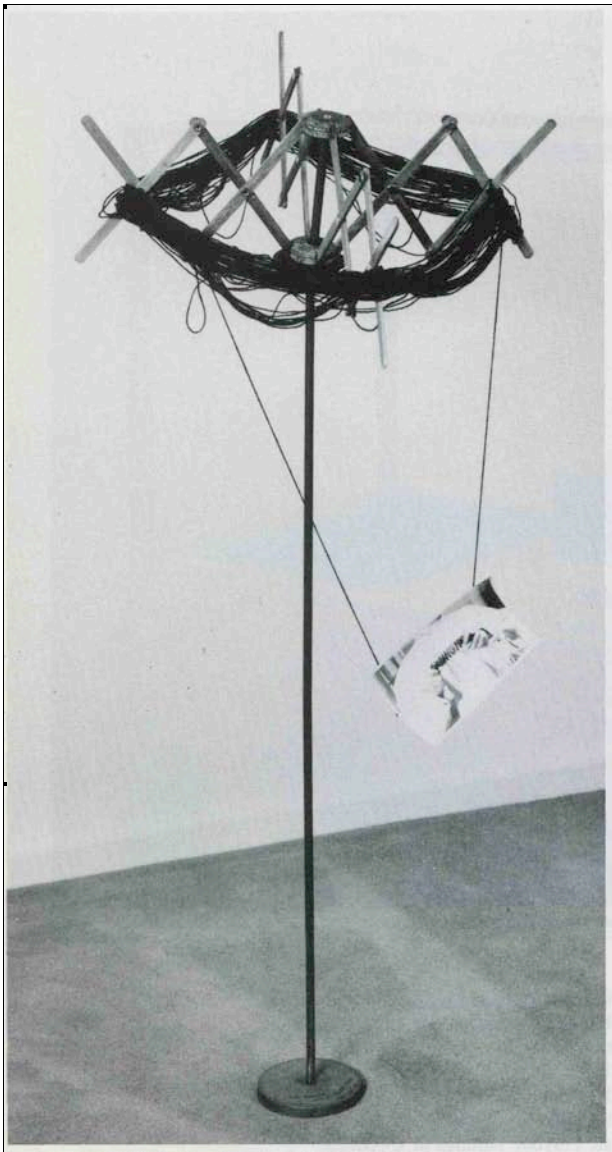

I'm Stumped, *1988, wood, steel, black-and-white photograph, 46 by 20 by 20 inches.*

Like Beuys, Trockel is an artist of immense intellectual ambition, whose works take in an entire range of possibilities—from personal mythology to politics and world history.

crafted, poetically enigmatic, glass-encased arrangements of found and fabricated objects, a pair of large-scale photographic works and one knitted piece. Here the influence of Beuys, which had been noted by several critics reviewing the MOMA show of drawings, became manifest. You see it partly in the use of the vitrine, a device inextricably linked to Beuys, but it is more profoundly evident in a refusal to be pigeonholed. Far from being a tunnel visionary, Trockel is an artist who adapts herself with remarkable versatility to any format or medium that suits her purposes, and again like Beuys, she is an artist of immense intellectual ambition, who always works to widen the embrace of her art, to take in the whole range of possibilities, from the big themes of world history and politics to the inscrutable, private obsessions of personal mythology.

As if to further compound uncertainty about exactly what kind of artist she is, the assemblages Trockel showed strike the viewer immediately as puzzles. You get the tantalizing feeling that you ought to be able to figure them out, as though they were riddles or decodable rebuses. Take, for instance, *Das Intus Legere durch die Sondergotik*: a sheet of paper unfolded accordion-wise displays six Xeroxed images of Gothic, stone-carved female heads, which may be identified as six of the seven Foolish Virgins of New Testament notoriety. One end of this paper is attached to a small cardboard box that has a circular hole in its lid and the name "Trockel" printed on it. The title, printed below that, seems to promise that Aquinas's "Intus Legere"—roughly, "complete or total understanding"—may be found "durch die Sondergotik"—"through the mannerist Gothic style." Standing in front of the box is a modern-day reliquary, a life-size silver finger (Trockel's) done in the Gothic style. As the hole in the box is exactly proportioned to accommodate the finger, you have a comic, Freudian pun equating spiritual revelation to sexual penetration by the finger/phallus.

Another piece that puns on sexuality and spirituality presents two similar antique coiled springs with a box for storing them. It's a baffling array until you learn (as I did from a gallery staffer) that the pair of springs was a patented, turn-of-the-century American invention that demonstrated the existence of God when, by a *screwing* motion (!), the one, representing the mind of God, was made to interpenetrate with the other, which represented human consciousness. Ironically, though, the interior of the box is patterned with Wittgenstein's famous phrase, "Ich kenne mich nicht aus" (I'm stumped), a nice commentary on the ways of faith.

The pun is indeed one of Trockel's favorite devices. It turns up in a slyly simple way in one untitled work, a simple white dress shirt hanging in a vertical glass vitrine. The shirt's seemingly innocent designer label reads "Justine Juliette/collection désir," and you may pause a few beats before getting the allusion to the heroines of de Sade, which thereby evokes ideas about erotic perversity and French fashion fetishism.

The pun can work in a more sinister way, too, as in what is perhaps the show's most viscerally powerful piece, which features a pair of strange antique weapons installed in a vitrine. Identical in shape if not in size (one's about four feet long, the other about three), each has a wooden handle attached to a thick iron shaft which ends in a cross. The members of the cross taper to menacing points, so the object might be either a mace or a kind of harpoon. Given that the cross is also a symbol of Christianity, and that its cruel business end lies on a thin pillow labeled "Vendetta," a darkly unsettling association between violence and the spiritually and politically aggressive expansionism of the West's primary orthodox religion is implied.

Two other vitrine works, however, submit less readily to such neat speculative deciphering. At the center of one is a plaster cast of a human leg, cut off below the knee and above the ankle. A silver bracelet encircles the leg near the ankle, and flanking it are two logs of similar size and shape. At one end of the case are some empty cardboard slipcovers for four volumes of an encyclopedia. These are

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straddled by a wooden bridge structure from which dangles a key. At the vitrine's other end, there's a square of foam rubber, on which is displayed a cutout of the familiar optical-trick image that reads as a duck from one viewpoint and a rabbit from the other.

You may be hard-pressed to make absolute sense out of such a disparate collection of objects, although here and there you will find flickering hints. There's the leg/limb or leg/log pun; the key may be for unlocking the knowledge of the encyclopedias, the volume numbers of which produce the date "1952," the year of Trockel's birth; the rabbit/duck may signal the ambiguity that pervades Trockel's art.

The other vitrine contains four major elements. At one end is an inflated white balloon, made from a pig's bladder, which has a simple cartoon face drawn on it. It hangs from the roof of the case above a black-painted floor which has been drilled with a small hole. In the case's other half is another Justine/Juliette shirt, this one neatly folded between two masonite cubes and under a length of dark-pink hose that connects the cubes. Finally, there's a sign printed with the word "*Bubikopfschneiden*," a term referring to a boy's-style haircut sported by liberated German women of the 1920s.

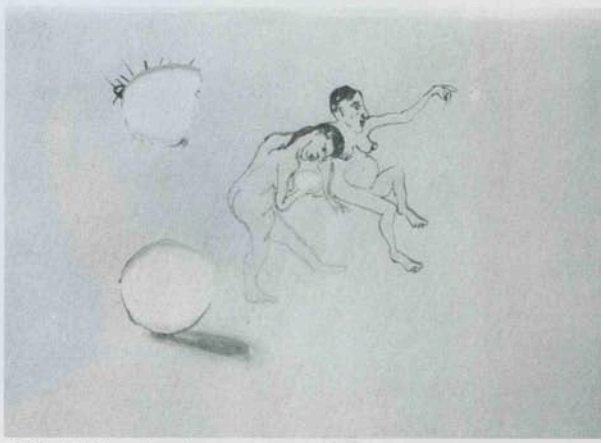
In this piece, a structure of oppositions is evident. The lighter-than-air volume of the bladder head contrasts with the dark floor and the form-crushing black hole below. And the boxed-in shirt, representing female masochism under the phallic thumb (the pink hose) of male domination is juxtaposed with the sign of feminist independence. But still an overall coherent meaning eludes one's grasp. Like dreams, these hermetic works tease the line between sense and nonsense, inviting and resisting interpretation and thwarting the analytical intellect's need for certainty.

But the word "*Bubikopfschneiden*" points up another reason that Trockel's work is puzzling. Not only is there a language barrier for those who don't read German, but beyond that, her work is so full of specific references to German history and culture that, in certain significant ways, it must remain opaque to Americans. Of course, this might be said about any encounter between a viewer and a foreign work of art; but it's particularly relevant to Trockel's work, in that she addresses the issue directly in her two photographic pieces.

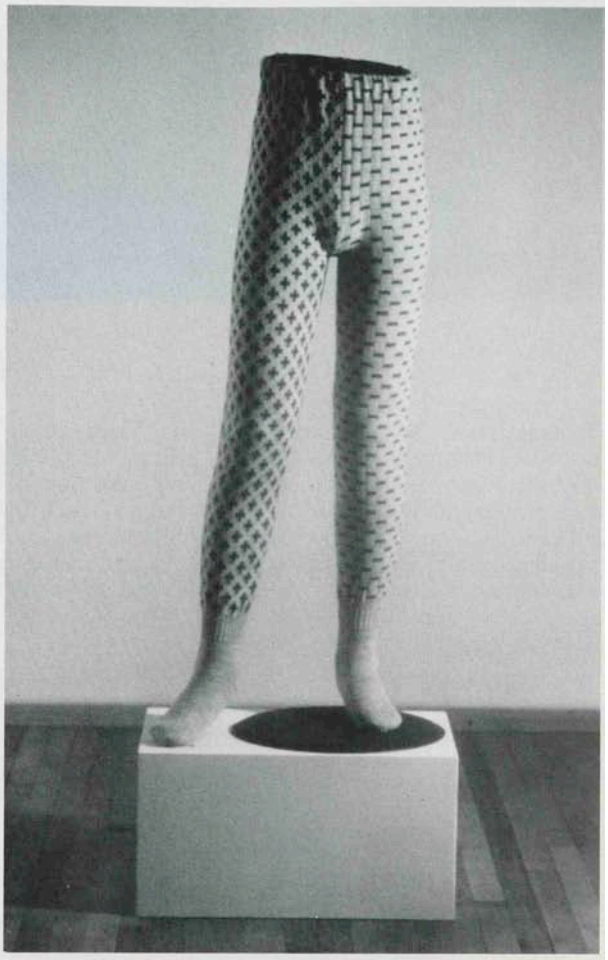
Each of these is divided in half, the right side showing a generic American image taken from the media. In one, it's an inner-city scene of children playing in the spray of an open fire hydrant; the other depicts a small, perfect suburban house. The pane of glass that covers the left half of each piece is coated with a wash of white paint. Thus, Trockel subtly satirizes a German's vision of America, a perception that sees stereotypes while remaining ignorant of the real complexities that are, in effect, invisible, as though hidden behind a storefront's whitewashed windows. It's a wonderfully economical metaphor about how people misperceive foreign cultures, about the all-too-human tendency to substitute simple, sometimes idealizing but usually prejudicial fantasies for awareness of the less easily accessible depths of the Other.

Taken in reverse, these photographic works also reflect how Trockel herself, as a foreign artist, has been misperceived by Americans. She was, at first, "the knit person," and the true formal range and conceptual depth of her art was unseen. Now the extraordinarily protean nature of her imagination has begun to be revealed; yet there is still that realm of uncertainty—the shadow side—that gives her work, no matter what shape it takes, its enchanting poetic resonance. □

Author: *Ken Johnson is an artist who writes on art.*



Untitled, 1986, watercolor on paper, 8¼ by 11⅛ inches.



Untitled, 1987, wool, fabric and mannequin, 48 by 21 by 15½ inches. All photos courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery.