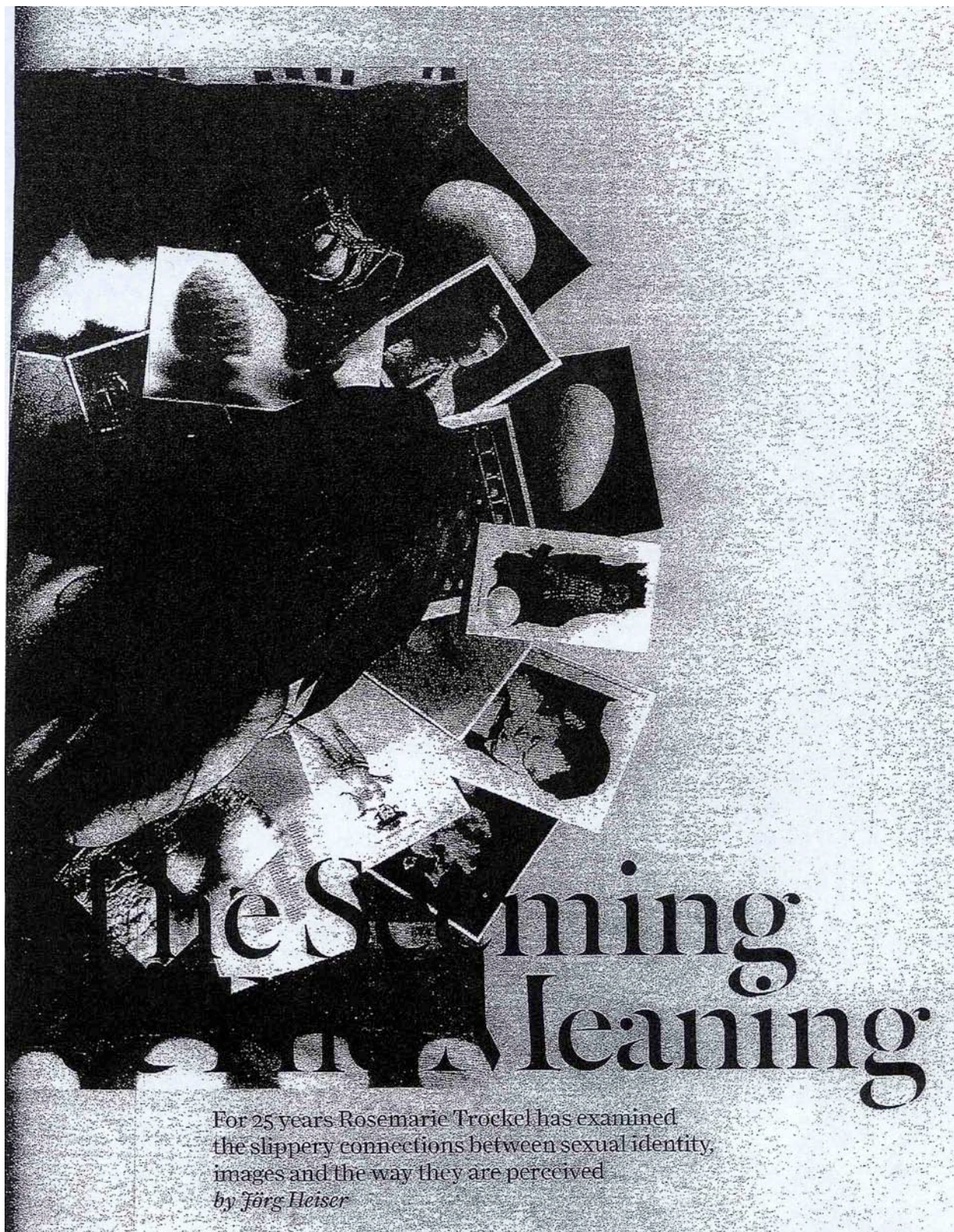


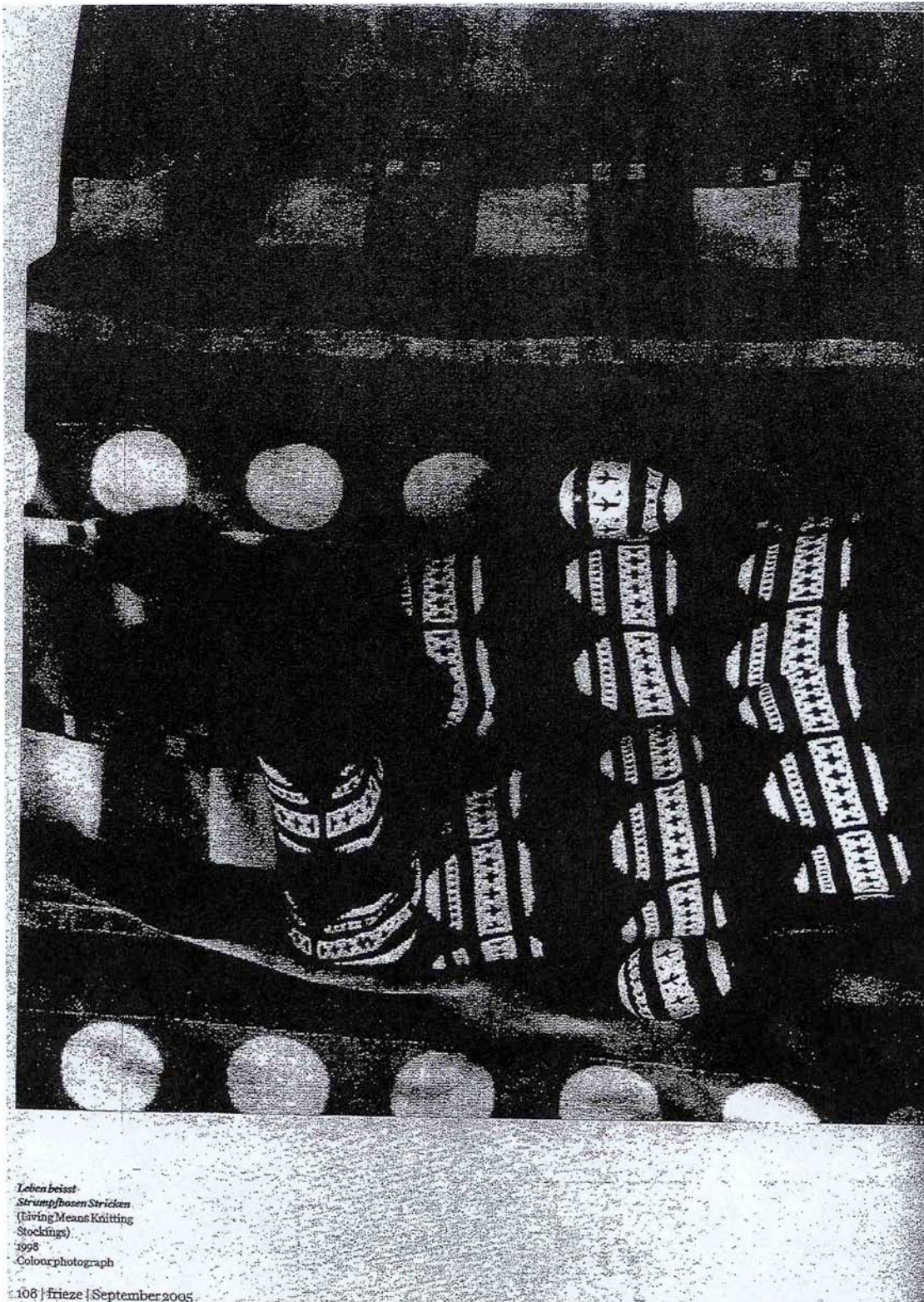
# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Heiser, Joerg, "The Seeming & The Meaning," *Frieze*, September 2005



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If there is one piece by Rosemarie Trockel that bundles the wildly different strands of more than 25 years of work into a fragmented whole – like a Rosetta Stone of her artistic language – it's *Pennsylvania Station* (1987). When I first saw its vibrantly schizoid flesh at the Basel art fair last year, it gave me the sort of rush you get from a sudden glimpse into the physics of things. It was like suddenly understanding why the Earth revolves around the sun.

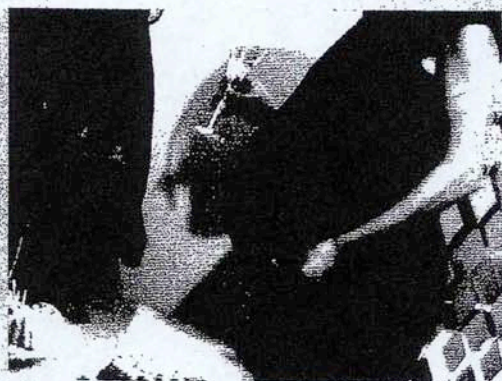
One of the reasons the piece radiates such energy is that its structure encapsulates a sense of discovery. It is typical of Trockel's work because it is *atypical*, co-joining her objects and her drawings, her Warholian–Duchampian leanings and her Beuysian ones, in a single, tense constellation. The piece comprises one of Trockel's 'stoves', a rough steel box topped with three hotplates, which stands on stainless steel files alongside a slatted, fork-lift-ready crate. It is surrounded by drawings on the wall: portraits of apes and weird animals and weird feelings, buzzing with delicate vigour like a cloud of steam released the moment the stove was lifted from the crate to reveal what is lying at the bottom of it, on a pane of glass – a little monster.

Lumping together the universalism of Geometric Abstraction and the particularity of kitchen life, Trockel's many versions of 'stoves' (Minimalist sculptures and wall-pieces comprising different combinations of hotplates) play on the clichéd yet drearily factual existence of both. But precisely in order to do so, they are usually fresh, clean and enamelled, without any monsters in sight. Encountering the monster in *Pennsylvania Station* is an

awkward discovery, as if something had gone wrong in its production, as if the irony that went into its creation couldn't – or didn't want to – integrate that dirty, repressed surplus.

The creature looks a bit like a shrunken head or a distorted reproduction of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1895) – its face frozen in grief, its wide eyes empty in its burnt monkey head, and its hands cradling its face – while from the waist down its body looks like a smoked eel. It's a painted plaster cast with hair stuck on, made after a replica of a piece from the collection of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris: a fake mermaid corpse created by stitching together the upper body of a monkey and the lower body of a fish, like an exhibit in an ex-sailor's private *Wunderkammer*. Trockel's version is the cast of a replica of a fake, and it lies at the bottom of the crate as if it were soaked in a pitch-black puddle of meaning – from freak to stillborn to pogrom. Placed next to the stove piece, the pristine if playful style of Trockel's trademark stoves is stained, and the sinister humour of the piece makes you reconsider the way you see these works. The title also redirects the reading of the triangle of stove, crate and creature – how something is created by neglecting the life of something else – towards an allegory of a concrete event: Pennsylvania Station was the name of the beautiful New York railway station that was demolished to build the bunker-like Madison Square Gardens. The trains were hidden from view, and the new station was named Penn Station. Reading these kinds of changes in the stratum of cities and places as an odd set of possibly monstrous psychological undercurrents is a familiar approach in Trockel's work. She has taken her urban environment – and the art scene – into artistic account from early in her career. (She lived in New York on and off during the 1980s.)

In Cologne in the early 1980s Trockel met Monika Sprüth, who had studied architecture and worked as a town planner. Sprüth founded a gallery that would create an alternative both to the *faux naïf* rock'n'roll machismo of Cologne's Neo-Expressionist painters' scene (with which the women had friendly social links nevertheless) and any suggestion of a 'women's art' retreat into an essentialist catalogue of attributes (using soft rather than hard forms and so on). Instead, Sprüth worked with artists including (along with Trockel), the New York school of media-conscious feminist artists such as Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and Cindy Sherman. When asked why their sporadically published magazine *Eau de Cologne* (printed in an *Interview*-inspired large format) featured only women, Sprüth remembers their reaction as 'Oops, no men, we hadn't noticed' – ridiculing the amnesia of the boys' network, who in turn hadn't noticed their men-only policy, while rejecting the stifling self-identification of being a victim of just that.



Manus Spleen  
2001  
Video still

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Trockel's engagement with the social implications of the art system continues to this day. She was very involved in protests against the demolition of Cologne's Josef-Haubrich Kunsthalle, a late Modernist building with a beautiful ornamental concrete facade. The curatorial direction of the institution had been left floundering over the years by Cologne city council, possibly to create another reason for terminating it. Trockel was involved in organizing a protest against the demolition, in which the actor Udo Kier – Hollywood's camp-Teutonic 'evil guy', having appeared in everything from *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) to *Dogville* (2003) to *Dracula 3000* (2004) – read out a speech written by the artist, stating that, even if the protest was too late to change anything, it was still worth protesting the fact that the decision couldn't now be reversed. Since then Trockel has co-founded an association for a new 'European Kunsthalle' called *Lochek Hole Inc.*, an ironic reference to the vacant site left after the demolition of the building, owing to the financial crisis that ensued. Such activities, dealing with the way history is created, are not peripheral to Trockel's work – they are integral to it.

The video *Manus Spleen 2* (2002) is part of a series of works around the character played by Manu Burkhardt, who can be seen as both a younger *alter ego* of the artist and an impersonation of a different persona altogether. In the first video of the series from 2000 (*Manus Spleen 1*) Manu walks around a cemetery with two friends and then lies down in an open grave next to a stranger (who is also alive), then gets up again and, to the accompaniment of a gentle melody, strolls off, as if this confrontation between life and death were simply the amusing gesture of a neo-Gothic hipster. In *Manus Spleen 3* (2001) we see her at the centre of a dreamy birthday party sequence, blowing out the candles on the cake and then – to cheers and champagne toasts – sticking a needle into a balloon under her skirt. It remains unclear whether by popping it she's simply ridiculing the prospect of becoming pregnant or, more generally, is enacting a ritual of distancing herself from being identified with, or reduced to, female fertility and reproduction. In *Manus Spleen 2* (2002) Manu stands next to Kier while he reads out a speech; this image is juxtaposed with shots of the beautiful ornamentation of the facade behind them in slow tracking shots. At one point during the speech a reference is made to the history of Cologne's art scene of the 1960s and '70s, the time of Fluxus and happenings, and to the way the planned demolition of the Kunsthalle also marks an ignorance of that local legacy. A naked man runs in a circle around Kier and Manu – itself echoing a form of protest from the 1970s. Finally Kier says '*das Kind ist in den Brunnen gefallen*' – 'the child has fallen into the well' – a proverb that roughly means 'too late to prevent it from happening'. I

cannot help but think of *Pennsylvania Station* again, the bizarre mermaid at the bottom of the grate, and how history seems, above all, a succession of different forms of neglect.

The video – shot in black and white (another obvious reference to 1960s and '70s political protest) – points to a fundamental paradox: active engagement marks the point where passive irony fails, yet at the same time protest is bound to fail as well without the pinch of ironic self-awareness that keeps it from assuming a posturing self-aggrandizement. It's no coincidence that this precarious instability seems to underlie all the 'Manu' videos. When it comes to social and existential engagement versus disengagement, the central character appears detached, cool, ironic or deadpan – lying down in an open grave and getting up again, letting a pregnant belly pop like a balloon, standing silent next to someone delivering a political speech. For the viewer Manu's detachment is frustrating to the point where you want to hold it against Trockel, as if it were the artist's own. Yet the point seems to be really that Trockel is admitting to being frustrated with the kind of ironic detachment with which she has been associated since the 1980s.

There is a drawing from about ten years ago that marks the point where irony turns in on itself. A woman dressed in a cowboy hat, a bustier, underpants and a holster belt also seems to be wearing high heels, yet in fact there is an egg under each of her heels – she's standing on tiptoe to avoid crushing them. She is also balancing an egg on top of her hat, and two eggs between her legs, while pointing a small gun at the viewer. In German *Eier* (eggs) is a colloquialism for testicles; so here she

**When asked why their magazine *Eau de Cologne* featured no men, Sprüth and Trockel replied 'Oops, we hadn't noticed' – ridiculing the amnesia of the old boys network.**



Above:  
*Continental Divide*  
1994  
Video still



Above:  
*Untitled*  
2000  
Acrylic on paper  
28x28cm

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**Trockel has made much work that explores the contradictions of Brigitte Bardot's public persona – from sex bomb, to animal rights protester and xenophobe.**

comes, *Die legendäre El-Ronny* – the legendary 'I-Ronny'. In other words: a woman's ironic, post-feminist assumption of female role models can make her feel like Calanthy Jane forced to do circus tricks. The symbolic display of female empowerment easily becomes a precarious stunt if the factual dependencies still prevail; and on another level, the 'egg' as a worn-out, tired symbol of fertility and reproduction becomes a joke that turns against the person who makes it. In this respect the drawing is a self-portrait: with a sardonic snort, it admits the fragility of irony-as-egg.

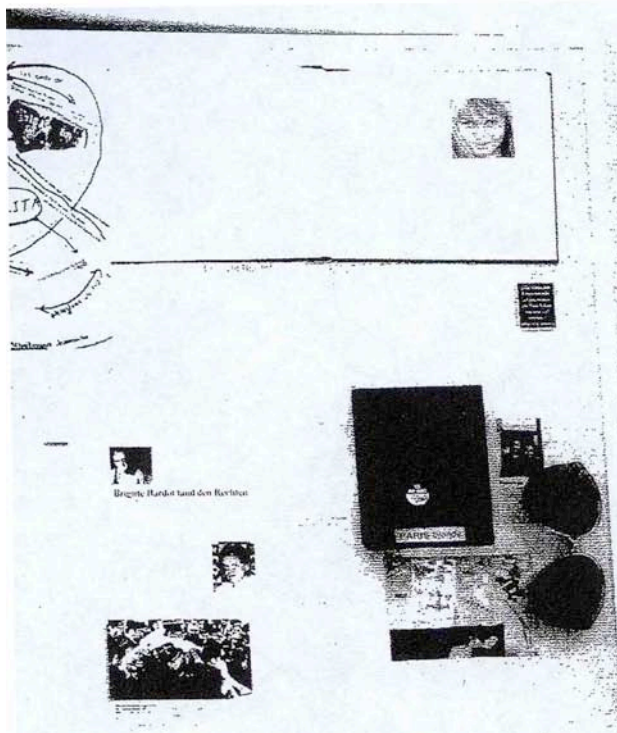
Generally speaking, Trockel's work – most visibly played out in a piece such as *Pennsylvania Station* – brings empowerment and disempowerment, ironic parody and the actual myth it appropriates, to a head. In her video *The Continental Divide* (1994) it's as if Snow White and her wicked stepmother, perpetually asking who's the most beautiful in the whole land, have become the same person. We see, looking down vertically, Trockel cross-examining herself (a double wearing the same blonde wig, slapping the seated *doppelgänger* (horizontal close-ups of the face show that both characters are actually played by Trockel herself). To the sound of Maurice Ravel's *Bohème* (1928) playing somewhere in the distance she tries to force the seated version of herself to 'reveal' the name of the best artist in the world. The hesitant 'culprit' continues to offer artists' names – including those of Stella, Richard Serra and Luc Tuymans (they are almost all male) – and gets punished for not mentioning the 'right name', which, it becomes clear after a while, can only be Trockel's own. When finally the 'culprit' says it, her 'persecutor' mockingly states she has 'hit the jackpot', before continuing to slap her as she nevertheless continues to mention the Sigmar Polkes and Gerhard Richters of this world. The curious mantra

of artists' names turns out to be the actual ranking of the 100 most 'important' artists of the year the video was made, according to the German monthly *Capital* – a listing in which Trockel appears somewhere in the top 30. So Trockel uses the actual listing and achieves two things at once by enacting it: she reveals the absurdity of trying to rank artistic validity and also reveals that such an activity provides the perfect battleground for the war between vanity and self-doubt, narcissist self-affirmation and paranoia on the parts of those listed or omitted.

When established artists express doubts about the 'format' of the retrospective being appropriate to the multi-faceted nature of their *oeuvre*, it can come across as somewhat precious. In Trockel's case, however (she is preparing a large retrospective of her work at Cologne's Museum Ludwig later this year), such doubt is central to her artistic approach. From year to year her approach has been a fertile reassessment, at times a negation and at other times an unexpected reaffirmation, of her earlier work. In the 1980s the knitted 'paintings' were her ticket to fame, her 'thing': tongue-in-cheek computerized knitting patterns using logos ranging from the *Playboy* bunny to the Woolmark logo to a swastika, hit the *Zeitgeist* nail on the head in an almost too perfect illustration of the Baudrillardian notion of a devaluing swirl of signs. The knitted pictures will be central to Trockel's Cologne show: on one level they are a play on the indifference of a pluralist model that absorbs all values, but on another they may expose the variety of knitted works as a system flexible enough to counter its more simplifying Postmodern readings. I'm thinking of works such as the untitled knitted 'painting' of 1989 comprising two speech bubbles: *Bitte tu mir nichts* – 'please don't hurt me' – one exclaims in letters that look handwritten, while the other reads *aber schnell* – 'but hurry up!' The ambivalence here – is it a child begging her parent not to smack her before being told to hurry up, or is it a woman who delivers both sentences, confronted with the prospect of sexual violence? – is accentuated by the fact that the speech bubbles are 'hanging' vertically from the top of the beige picture plane, hovering high in the sky over a low black horizon, as if they were exclaiming by invisible forces up above. It becomes clear that the exchange could just as well refer to how market forces co-define the (female) artist's work situation: 'please don't hurt me', 'but hurry up!'

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A lot of artists reject the idea that their current production may be a reaction to the critical reaction to earlier work, as if that would be an admission of too direct a dependence on market and media, yet Trockel readily states this is the case. This is not to construe her method as opportunistic but rather to draw a parallel between the way the identity of an artist's work builds over time and the way a person's identity develops – the echo-chambered ping-pong between individual, social environment and mass media.

There is a group of works that envision this process as women with bare feet, dressed in their underwear or casual pullovers, lying on their belly on a carpet or blanket and surrounded by attributes of their social and psychic situation. This vision is doubled by the way it's displayed: these are almost life-size photographs placed on the ground, the heads cut out and tilted upwards to 'imitate' spatially the actual position of a person lounging on the floor, head propped on elbows. *Living Means I Tried Everything* (2002) is the title of one of these pieces, in which the protagonist is looking at a list of possible sperm donors listed by the colour of their eyes and skin, surrounded by stuffed dead sparrows placed on the photograph – a cruel joke on the way the quest for the perfect match can kill off more playful, if flimsy, options. *Living Means Not Good Enough* (2002) makes clear the way one actively uses cultural artefacts to evaluate one's self and one's self-esteem. A lounging woman is surrounded by piles of books and magazines – actual piles placed on the photograph – including magazines such as *The Face*. Most of them, however, are actually made up by Trockel herself, with spoof covers such as the one with 'Ich bin Dan Graham' ('I am Dan Graham') spelt out in a large point size above a black and white shot of a young Trockel wearing a gold-buttoned blazer, standing next to the diving board of a Modernist swimming pool. Another one shows a picture of a gun-toting Brigitte Bardot, and the letters 'B.B./B.B. Mutter Courage'.

Trockel has made a lot of work that explores the history of Bardot's public persona – from postwar sex bomb to animal rights activist and xenophobic wife of an ultra-right-wing politician. As a teen idol from the 1950s on, she was the poster girl for that process of constructing an identity so vividly laid out in the 'Living Means' series. *Untitled* (1993) is a kind of sourcebook for Trockel's interest in Bardot, a vitrine filled with a carefully

constructed composition of gossip magazines, newspaper clips and even authentic fetish souvenirs (a pair of Bardot's sunglasses, a ballet shoe, a sun hat, a floral-patterned slip). There is a central element that is carefully constructed by Trockel: a sober book cover design combining, again, the famous initials BB with a black and white shot of the movie-star and the title 'Mother Courage': a reference to another famous BB – Bertold Brecht. Trockel sees Bardot 'as an interesting example of the contradictions and inconsistencies of engagement in our times.'

'Engagement' is the key word here: Brecht as the epitome of the politically engaged artist and Bardot as a woman who has 'embodied and subverted a certain type or image of woman and destroyed the myth that she promoted'.<sup>2</sup> Bardot's is, of course, a very contrary concept of being *engagé*, but that's where the comparison to Brecht's Mother Courage comes in – she is the embodiment of the contradiction between being opportunistic and resolutely determined. Trockel positions Brecht and Bardot as key figures at two ends of the spectrum of artistic engagement: 'While Brecht, in order to educate, points out the infamy of it all, Bardot simply is infamous.'<sup>3</sup> In the video *Manus Spleen 4* (2002) – a slapstick seven-minute theatre dramatization fusing *Mother Courage* with fragments of the stories of Joan of Arc and Jackie Kennedy – that spectrum is re-imagined in the form of Mother Courage's daughter Kattrin turning the dial of a radio, producing a sound-track as fragmented as a dream, from Bardot singing 'Contact' to John Lennon singing 'Imagine' to Brecht stating in front of the Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 that he had never been a member of a communist party.

Guilt and innocence, opportunism and determinism, are the two sides of that 'BB' medal, and to great effect Trockel has drawn a series of combined portraits of the two ('Untitled', 1993): her voluptuous lips and big eyes combined with his short hair, or his glasses and her long hair, or their eyes mingling and their lips touching in a superimposition that is as hilarious as it is haunting. The series recalls Man Ray's 1928 double exposure photograph of the *Marquise Casati* and the way the image of four eyes in one face makes you feel in the gaze of someone else, as if your own eyes were looking back at you in the same instant.

There is another work that connects Bardot not to Brecht but to an animal, encapsulating the weirdly contorted link between her love for baby seals and her guilt-ridden misanthropy and racism. It's a black, life-size bronze seal, hung head-down by its tail, its head weirdly curtained by a pendulous 'necklace' of blonde hair. The immediate association the object evokes is that, simply, of a hunter's trophy, while a more subtle undercurrent implies – owing to the hair – a seal fetish; kinky S/M stuff. The title of the piece supports that second thought, albeit with a slightly different twist: *Untitled (No One under the Sun Is More Miserable than the Man*.

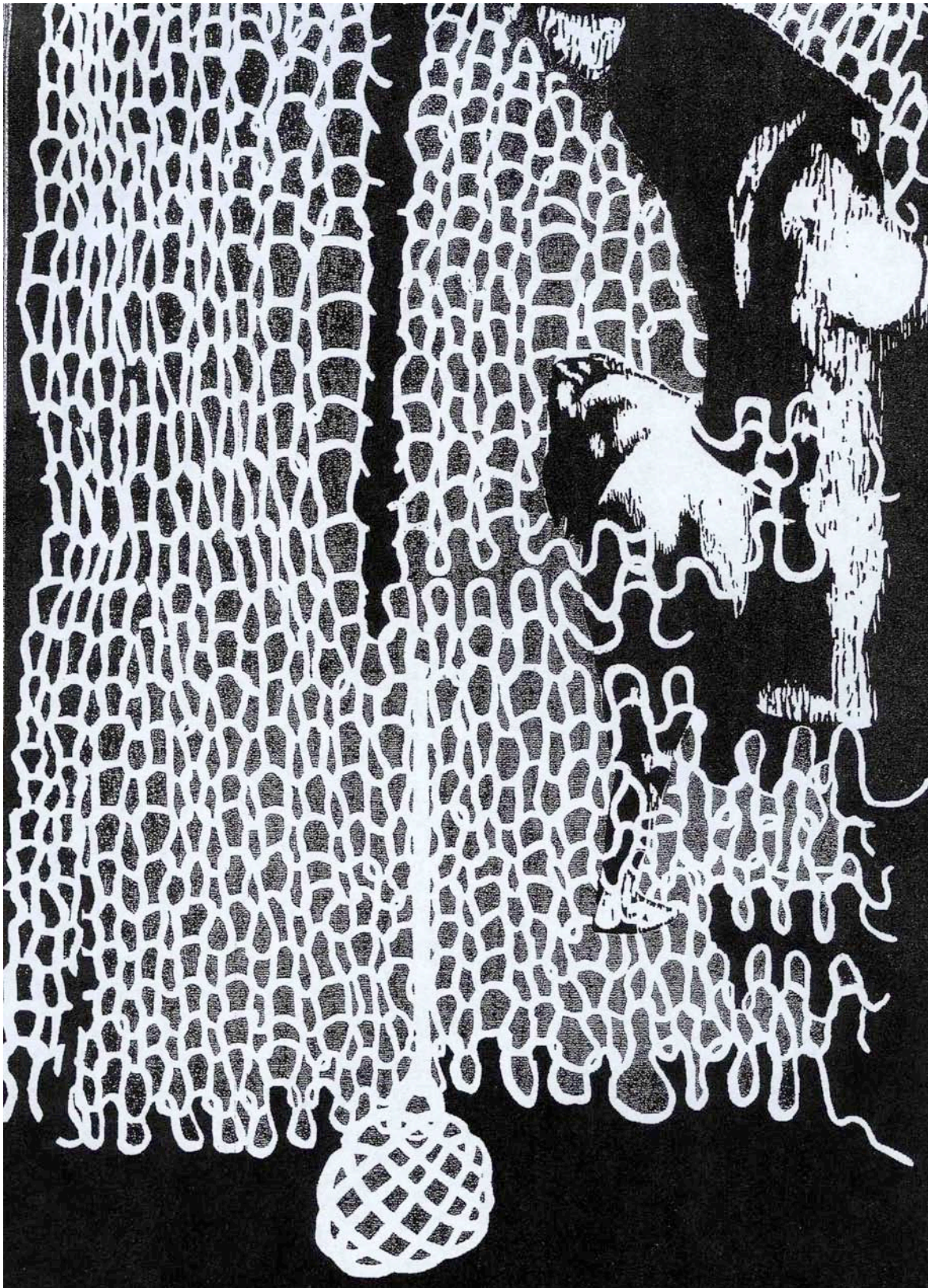
Untitled  
1993  
Mixed media  
164 x 206 x 63 cm

Untitled  
1993  
Pencil on paper  
33 x 24 cm



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**Trockel understands sexual difference as not just incidental to the image, but as central to the way we look at it.**

*Who Has a Fetish for a Lady's Shoe and Must Make Do with the Whole Woman* (1991). The quote in the parentheses is from the Viennese cultural critic Karl Kraus, famous for his sharp sarcasm and misogyny. The idea for the piece, Trockel said the year after its making, came to her in a dream, including the connection to Bardot. 'To connect animals to famous people: I welcome the moment of embarrassment implied in that.'<sup>4</sup>

That embarrassment is actually broader than this. Trockel has made a connection between animals – which are ubiquitous as subjects in her work – and not only a famous woman but women in general. She ironically countered Beuys' 'every human being is an artist' with the title of her 1993 publication *Jedes Tier ist eine Künstlerin* ('Every Animal is a Female Artist'), a rejection of Beuys' implicit assumption of art's masculine domination as universal (which Beuys did nothing to counter). Philosophers used animals to distinguish human consciousness, while racists 'need' to compare humans to animals to define their supposed inferiority. So Trockel is really killing two birds with one stone. So to speak, making the connection between animal rights and women's rights, not to claim that they are the same but to point out that the problem is not the distinction between them or the likening of any kind of animal to any kind of human being, but the value system implied by such a comparison (humans are like this or that animal, and can therefore be treated like shit etc.).

Trockel exemplified this with *Leichtes Unbehagen 1 + 2* (Slight Discontent 1 + 2, 1985), a spoof magazine comprising a simple cover with the title set in Helvetica as if it were a serious Bananas publication. Issue One featured an article, appropriated and typed word for word by Trockel, entitled 'The Treatment of Cattle for Slaughter during Transport'; Issue Two reported on 'Congo's art', a piece taken from German weekly *Der Spiegel*, telling the story of a Chimpanzee named Congo, who supposedly painted as well as Jackson Pollock. Here, obviously, the comparison is introduced to devalue Abstract Expressionism as just filthy rubbish. At Documenta X, Trockel, in collaboration with Carsten Höller, presented a counter-model to this kind of devaluation with *Haus für Menschen und Schweine* (House for Humans and Pigs, 1997). The piece introduced an equation of, and a distinction between, humans and pigs. The work allowed the animals to live a comparatively happy life in a garden on one side of a concrete Modernist building, the other side of which allowed viewers to watch them through a window (which was mirrored on the pigs' side, so they weren't disturbed by being watched). The two 'species' were allowed a similar amount of space, yet they remained separate.

It doesn't take much effort, bearing in mind Trockel's 'every animal is a female artist', to relate this all back to the monstrous little mermaid at the bottom of the crate. What is at stake? More than just equations between the myths that prevail about animals and the exotic, and the myths that prevail about women and art. After more than 25 years of work there remains a central question in Trockel's work that has to do with the connection between looking, language and sexual identity. How to make sense of this vibrant triangle without resorting to a fake conciliation of what is fuelled by precisely their irreconcilability? Jacqueline Rose provides an answer that she developed in regard to Sigmund Freud's footnote on an undated drawing attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, depicting an anatomically dissected couple having sex.<sup>5</sup> It's an odd image – what at first seems to be a purely scientific depiction of genitals interacting exposes weird details. The man looks curiously disgusted, his head surrounded by long 'female' undulating hair, while the woman lacks a head altogether; also their legs and feet seem the wrong way round, as if they were entangled in an – even acrobatically – impossible position from the Kama Sutra. Freud reads the 'failure' of the drawing not as coincidental to the otherwise supreme mastery of the artist but as related to the bisexuality present in the image. Rose expands Freud's remark, stating that 'there can be no work on the image, no challenge to its powers of illusion and address, which does not simultane-

ously challenge the fact of sexual difference.'<sup>6</sup> This 'work on the image', however, is a slippery business, as Leonardo's drawing exposes, as this work – by definition – cannot be controlled consciously (for the self-evidence of sexual difference would 'not be allowed to crumble', as Rose puts it'). Trockel's drawings, in particular, are clearly informed by that insight, with their quick and awkwardly eloquent lines, turning Leonardo's 'failure' into their virtue: 'The link between sexuality and the image', Rose continues, 'produces a particular dialogue which cannot be covered adequately by the familiar opposition between the formal operations of the image and a politics exerted from outside'.<sup>7</sup> Trockel truly has understood sexual difference as not just incidental to the image and the way we look at it, but as central, and has realized that nothing 'exerted from outside' can replace what happens when emphatic engagement and self-reflexive irony collide and 'allow sexual difference to crumble'. And so she continues her investigation of that which 'cannot be covered adequately', that which exceeds the work of art and simultaneously is its essence.

Joerg Heiser is co-editor of *frieze*.

Rosemarie Trockel's retrospective, 'Phantom der Freiheit' (Phantom of Freedom), opens at Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 28 October.

1 Rosemarie Trockel, Goetz Collection, Munich, 2002, p. 23

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Rosemarie Trockel, Kunsthalle Tübingen 1998, p. 13f.

5 Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, Verso, London, 1986,

p. 245ff., referring to Sigmund Freud, 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood' (1910), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, Hogarth Press, London 1955-74, Vol. 11, p. 70n

6 Ibid., p. 226

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., p. 231

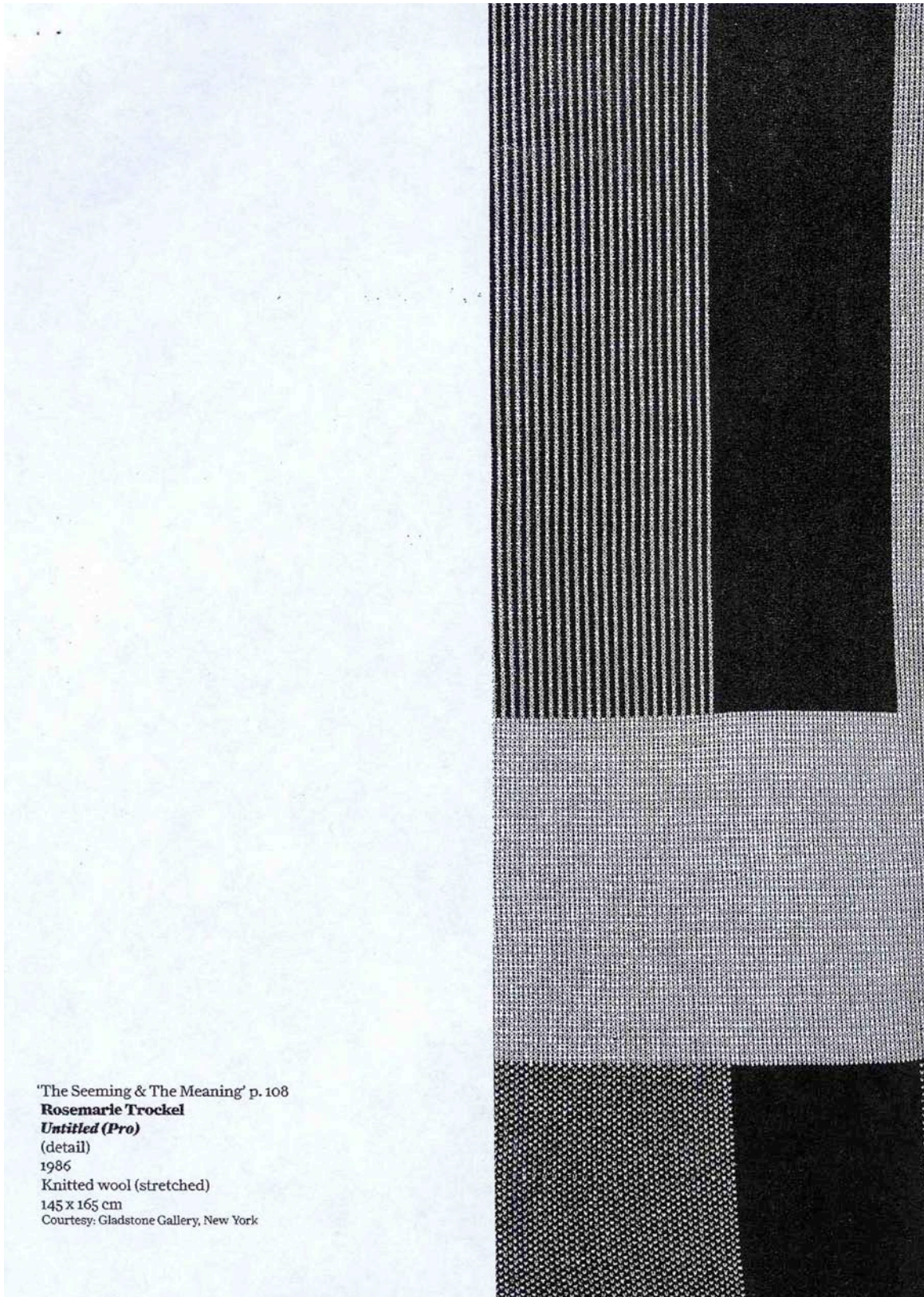
Opposite:  
*A Ship so Big, a Bridge  
Cringes*  
2004  
Woodcut on paper  
149x99 cm

Above:  
*Monster*  
1986  
Wool  
100x50 cm



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"The Seeming & The Meaning" p. 108  
**Rosemarie Trockel**  
***Untitled (Pro)***  
(detail)  
1986  
Knitted wool (stretched)  
145 x 165 cm  
Courtesy: Gladstone Gallery, New York

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