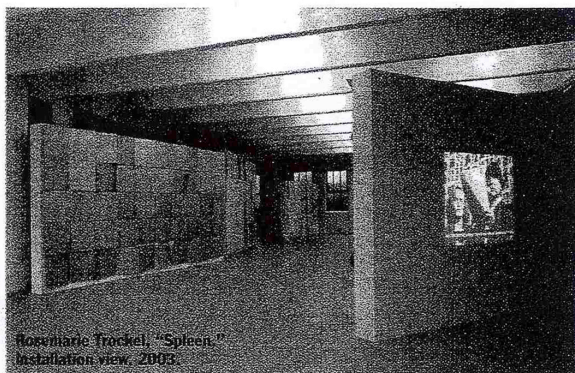


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Burton, Johanna, "Mother lode: Rosemarie Trockel undermines the myths of motherhood,"
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Mother lode

Rosemarie Trockel undermines the myths of motherhood By Johanna Burton



At first, the scene is familiar, even cliché: A gaggle of women gather at a baby shower, excitedly celebrating an upcoming birth. The mother-to-be is appropriately glowing; indeed, she's the most beautiful woman in the room, alluring and mysterious even while—or perhaps because—her globe of a belly indicates she's close to term. Bending down to blow out the candles on a heavily frosted, candlelit cake, she exhales and a loud POP! punctuates the sudden deflation of her ample tummy (which at that moment reveals itself to have been an inflated balloon). The event is met with a kind of stepped-up hilarity by the party goers, for whom the spontaneous de-conception appears to be part and parcel of a female ritual the likes of which we've never seen before.

This far-out, dreamlike spectacle appears (and repeats twice more) in Rosemarie Trockel's one-minute and 50-second video titled *Manu's Spleen 3*—just one component of her impressive full-floor exhibition, "Spleen," now at Dia Center for the Arts. The exhibition, which includes a series of monumental cantilevered walls, six video projections, and a collection of Trockel's plans for unrealized books and catalogs, walks the line between displaying and disrupting

cultural expectations. Coming of age as an artist in Germany in the 1980s, Trockel has opted to address the concerns of women through indirect strategies: Rather than bluntly interrogating gender hierarchies in the art world or in the world in general—as have Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, to name only a few such pioneers—Trockel prefers to construct sometimes indecipherable imagery that, nonetheless, alludes to feminism, women's art and politics.

Her best-known project—commonly referred to as her "knitted pictures"—was inspired by a male critic's flip comment that women couldn't make art but they could weave. Trockel produced a series of machine-woven compositions whose patterns were repeated commercial and political insignias—ranging from the *Playboy* bunny logo to the hammer and sickle. In this body of work—a feminist rendition of Minimalist and Pop aesthetics—the tension between lowly craft and high, cerebral art assumes a literally material form. Trockel takes a similar tack in the construction of the enormous partitions set up in Dia's warehouse-like space. At once dividing and expanding the gallery, the freestanding walls are shingled with interlocking metal plates, which, balanced rather than secured, tremble in response

to adjacent movement or the passage of air. These machine-perfect hybrid sculptures might refer to any number of artists—from Carl Andre to Richard Serra—though Trockel's are specifically designed to disrupt any notion of heroic materiality. They are at once monumental and fragile; one even sports an almost silly decorative fringe.

The reverse side of each wall functions as a screen onto which a different video is projected. The most riveting of them feature Manu, the young woman whose infectiously pleasurable yet "hysterical" pregnancy provokes all manner of questions regarding traditional assumptions about motherhood and (pro)creativity. In *Manu's Spleen 1*, she and two companions wander through a cemetery, smoking and chatting. Exhibiting no surprise after stumbling across an open shallow grave containing a seemingly dead occupant, Manu joins the corpse briefly, then rejoins her friends to continue their walk. As with the earlier "pregnancy," unexpected narrative twists are less jarring than is the complete ease with which Trockel turns heavy stereotypical tropes such as death and birth on their heads.

Manu's Spleen 4 exhibits a similar ironic reformulation of archetypal themes. Trockel's adaptation of German playwright Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* loosely follows his story, set during the Thirty Years' War, of a woman who is either a cunning profiteer, sacrificing her children's well-being to her own livelihood, or a desperate, misguided mother attempting to survive under perilous conditions. Trockel transposes a palimpsest of recent and historical feminine icons—Jackie O, Brigitte Bardot, Joan of Arc—onto Brecht's original script (which had purposefully asked loaded ethical questions, only to refuse clear-cut answers). In so doing, Trockel further complicates these political and moral conundrums.

Brecht himself envisioned an "epic" theater designed to shake the apathy out of numb viewers by highlighting the pervasive artificial constructions around them. To similar effect, Trockel bursts our bubble (and Manu's) again and again, leaving a series of stunning, if constantly elusive, questions—about birth, death and creativity—for us to ponder.

"Spleen" is on view at Dia Center for the Arts through