

AS IF NOT

LOOKING BACK TO
GO FORWARD WITH
ROSEMARIE TROCKEL
BY FIONN MEADE

THE COSMOLOGY OF GERMAN ARTIST

Rosemarie Trockel is a constantly shifting inventory, substituting iconographic, linguistic, and material transformations for the expected guises of identity and representation. Advertorial images and pop figures exist alongside typologies and taxonomies culled from history, the natural sciences, cinema, anthropology, and the artist's own hybrid index of drawings, collages, and moving images. And yet to Walt Whitman's biological envisioning of self and world, "I am large, I contain multitudes," Trockel's incisive productivity might offer Emily Dickinson's rejoinder on creativity: "Don't you know that 'No' is the wildest word we consign to language?"

As "Rosemarie Trockel: A Cosmos" opens at the Museo Centro de Arte Reina





Ohne Titel, 2011.
Mixed media, 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 36 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.

Sofia in Madrid this summer—it will travel to the New Museum this fall, where it will be her first New York museum exhibition in a decade—her last institutional show in New York continues to reverberate and give insight into an indelible approach to exhibition making, for Trockel repeatedly finds abundance in the wilderness of no. “Spleen,” presented in 2002 by the Dia Art Foundation in their former Chelsea venue (and organized by then curator Lynne Cooke, also the co-curator of “A Cosmos”), followed the character Manu through a series of five episodic videos projected onto separate freestanding sculptural walls. A provisional muse, Manu and her confines are a fitting cipher for stepping further into Trockel’s unique fashioning from out of negation.

On the reverse of each partition were hinged aluminum plates of black, orange, yellow, silver, and white that were flexible enough to respond to the movement of passing viewers. Providing a contour of hypersensitive vulnerability mixed with Minimalist cool (and a distant nod to Blinky Palermo’s painting installation *To the People of New York City*, 1977, in Dia’s collection), the walls’ paradoxically hard fragility bulwarked the looping videos and animated a tension between precise architectural framing and a parodic relationship to narrative, figure, and genre central to “Spleen” and Trockel’s oeuvre.

Tall and beautiful, Manu is easy to recall, walking nonchalantly through a graveyard with two hip companions in *Manu’s Spleen 1*, 2000, until she lies down next to an inert man’s body in an open grave that the trio happens upon. Her two friends move the body aside to make room for Manu. Rehearsing death and resurrection, the scene extends just long enough for Manu’s consorts to smoke a cigarette, take a cell phone call, and begin to feel the discomfiting elongation of time. As Manu finally awakes and is helped out of the shallow abyss, exiting the graveyard unscathed and seemingly a bit bored, her characteristic split between comic timing and uncanny melancholia asserts its grip.

Within “Spleen” Manu is a composite persona, role-playing gender, donning and discarding narrative expectations, and readily masking appearances (all strategies that extend to Trockel’s survey exhibitions at Kunsthalle Zurich, “Deliquescence of the Mother,” 2010, and the Wiels Contemporary Art Center in Brussels, “Flagrant Delight,” in 2012). Manu is a meme for Trockel’s long-standing, polymorphous use of media—which mutates to include sculpture, painting, video, drawing, collage, furniture, book design, and architectural-scale performative collaborations. To follow Manu’s splenic path is to run squarely into Trockel’s collapsing and reversing of character as a unifying dynamic and

analog for the larger practice: Manu is a proxy activist protesting the proposed demolition of the Cologne Kunstverein and Kunsthalle; Manu is a wealthy young woman raising a toast to her own pregnancy, only to pop the balloon beneath her dress to riotous laughter; and Manu is a gag performer holding a written placard up to an elephant asking the whereabouts of a Mr. Comes. Each Manu is resolutely partial, reacting to the fragility of the exhibition’s swaying, responsive architecture. Any cathartic release the spectator might desire from Manu—the spleen is traditionally held to be the seat of emotions and passion—is dispersed. This split nature of narrative, self, and figurative form culminates in *Manu’s Spleen 4*, 2002, in which Trockel parodies the infamous

TROCKEL REFUSES TO BE PERIODIZED AND THEREBY COMPLETED.

role of Mother Courage in a compressed six-and-a-half-minute pantomime of Bertolt Brecht’s 1939 antifascist play.

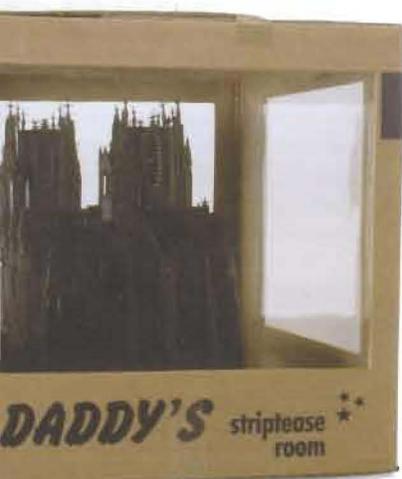
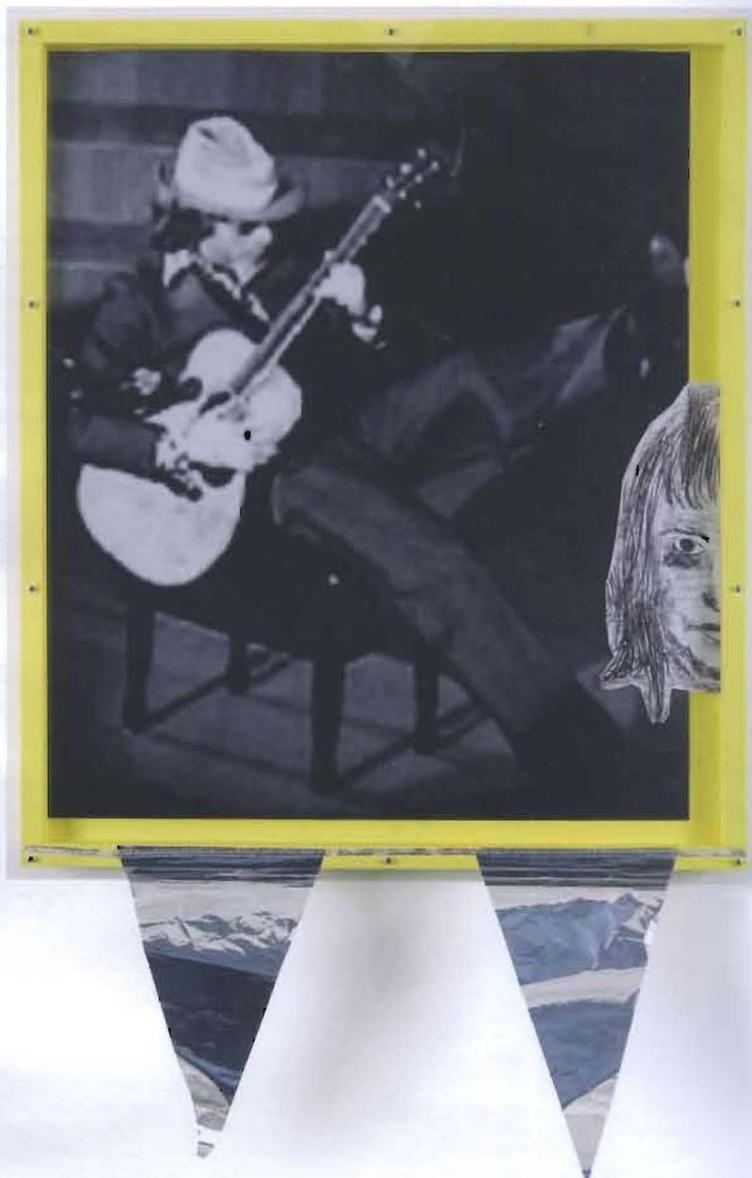
Modeled on a 1949 postwar performance by Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble, Trockel’s mise-en-scène adopts the neutrality of a soundstage to enfold a high-fashion Mother Courage/Manu constantly primping in the reflection of a frying pan—and occasionally dancing to music—while a cast of historical caricatures populate the rotating grist and grind of the scene: Jackie Onassis drags a phallic cannon about, obsessively burnishing its reflective shine; Joan of Arc tunes in to a boom-box collage of intermittent pop music and historical snippets culled from Vietnam-era speeches and McCarthyist interrogations; a pair of young male attendants with flaccid penises sewn to the outside of their flesh-colored costumes pull Mother Courage’s cart, and two Brigitte Bardot-like talking heads pantomime the role of commentators and chorus.

The sculptural framing of “Spleen” plays host to a constant upheaval and inversion of character and style. Enacting what philosopher Giorgio Agamben has termed “serious parody” in his 2007 book of essays, *Profanations*, Trockel simultaneously

invests in and mocks her own obsessions—most obviously in the risible conflation of BB from Bertolt Brecht and Brigitte Bardot (a hybrid reference that reappears elsewhere in Trockel’s repertoire). Elaborated from Italian literary critic Franco Fortini’s use of the same term to describe Pasolini’s writings and films, there is a constant “being beside itself” to Trockel’s work that goes to the metaphysical heart of parody. Prying apart and emptying out stylistic investments, critical prompts, and theoretical lines of inquiry in order that they be revitalized with a restless comic gravitas, Trockel’s is arguably the “para” practice par excellence of our time. As she offers in a rare interview with Cooke published to accompany “Spleen,” “the question of the model in terms of what engagement could mean these days is contradictory and ambiguous. It is also affected by our points of view. Models are a matter of one’s own work. There is no model for how to deal with a model. One is never on firm ground.”

Indeed, Trockel has been giving shape to this line of self-questioning and interrogation throughout her career via formal, material- and medium-specific partial investments. To briefly outline the etymology of parody as it relates here, *parodias* were once inserted in between the rhapsody or recitation of Greek drama. Performers would enter to ridicule and quickly overturn all that came before. Speaking beside the conventional text, serious parody therefore has its descendants in the entr’acte and intermezzo of theater and opera, relying upon and using preexisting styles and genre forms but without fidelity to them—contingent and yet morphing away. To quote Agamben, “unlike fiction, parody does not call into question the reality of its object; indeed, this object is so intolerably real for parody that it becomes necessary to keep it at a distance. To fiction’s ‘as if,’ parody opposes its drastic ‘this is too much’ (or ‘as if not’).”

Within Trockel’s “as if not” approach, there is one additional moment from “Spleen” to consider. Displayed in a small corner of the Dia exhibition was a vitrine presentation of book cover proposals shown for the first time. Subsequently termed drafts in Trockel’s most recent survey exhibitions, the book covers and proposals span decades of ideas that exist in unfinished form. Included in “Spleen” was a draft that featured a 1993 zine-like, spiral-bound blue cover showing a photo of Trockel as a teenager sitting in her older sister’s bedroom, celebrity photos from the 1950s and ’60s hanging on the wall behind. Titled *Ich kann über meine Filme nur lachen* (“My Films Just Make Me Laugh”) after a retrospective comment made by Bardot about her Hollywood days, the book blows up and fragments the faces, fracturing each into further isolation page after page. As the cover image exposes a self-



FROM TOP LEFT:
"Daddy's striptease room" installation
at Kunsthalle Zurich, 2010.

Daddy's striptease room,
1990. Mixed media,
19½ x 27½ x 19½ in.

"Deliquescence of the
Mother" at Kunsthalle
Zurich, 2010.

*Ich kann über meine
Filme nur lachen*
("My Films Just Make
Me Laugh"), 1993.

Deliquescence of the
Mother at Kunsthalle
Zurich, 2010.

aware, middle-class teenager adrift in the so-called *Wirtschaftswunder* or “economic miracle” of West Germany’s rapid rebuilding in the 1950s and early ’60s, it was accompanied by a card conveying in Trockel’s own words how the book’s distortion of the image was meant to “somehow lose the provincial, homemade, miserable atmosphere of the whole photo and situation.” Both ironic and heavy with pathos, the cover and caption bear out Trockel’s “as if not” approach to her own past.

In looking to the framing and deframing of the magisterial “Deliquescence of the Mother” at Kunsthalle Zurich, curated

here, with older works hemming in Trockel’s Wunderkammer-like constructions, they confronted the viewer like a tribe. The works looked back, refusing historical linearity in their apparition-like assembly: a swollen head sculpture, *Hydrocephalus / Wasserkopf II*, 1982, for example, sat before the sleek, black ceramic finish of a thirsty outstretched leg, mockingly titled *Geruchsskulptur 2* (“Aroma sculpture 2”), 2006, and elbowed in alongside a diminutive goblinlike creature, *Kiss My Aura*, 2008, hunkering below the overflowing hang of an unruly knitted work, *Untitled*, 1989. Archetypes of mother and father (masculine

the large-scale “knitted painting” series that preceded the vitrine interventions greedily absorbed all remaining surface light with densely patterned monochromatic gestures. By lining each room of the exhibition with work from former decades, Trockel insisted on a dialectical tacking between new work and uncanny returns from the past. Both familiar and unfamiliar, the gatherings of her pieces were made strange through proximity, compressed into a singular gesture that confronted the viewer as known, imprinted, and animistic, before being parceled into stylistic nuance and comic asides.

Filtered and atomized throughout the entire exhibition, the liquefaction of the mother is Trockel’s versioning of self. By literally and precisely marginalizing her own works, she refuses to be periodized and thereby completed, insisting instead upon boundary conditions that can be reconfigured and made cruel. Initially supine sculptural works like *Watching and Sleeping and Composing* and *I on my sofa*, both 2007, propped up more of Trockel’s eyeful encounters, just as over 20 collages (from an ongoing body of them begun in 2004) montaged bodies into a contortion of masked and stripped-bare gestures. Fragmented figures from video stills, photographs, and copies of past drawings alongside unique drawings worked their way into the painterly gestures of the recent collages. Contrasted with the tribal effrontery that was the vitrine’s comic yet haunting presence, the collages recall Trockel’s earliest vitrine sculptures but with renewed compression, speed, and conflation of reference. Much could be said of the Beuysian symbolism that ambiguously resides within these recent works, mixed with the fraternizing proximity of Martin Kippenberger’s displays, both integral parts of a yet to be fully traced genealogy of influence—not to mention the formative importance of Trockel’s publication and exhibition collaboration with Monika Sprüth, *Eau de Cologne*, 1985–93—but the specters are resolutely Trockel’s within these encapsulated gestures.

“It is the probity of the artist—feeling (herself) unable to push the ego to the point of representing that which is unnarratable—who then assumes parody as the very form and pattern of mystery,” Agamben writes. As “A Cosmos” readies itself to unfold in New York, the voices and images that arise from the memory of these past exhibitions reveal a dialectical approach that must be looked to and listened for elsewhere. For Trockel continues to clear and open up one of the most distinctive paths through the excess sampling and relativity of the contemporary. Retrospective gazes and staid desires for coherence have been absorbed into the work itself—into the very surfaces, structures, and shadows of its fiercest refusals and constant renewals. MP



by Beatrix Ruf, it is rather the “this is too much” side of Trockel’s sensibility that takes over through dissipation, liquefaction, and condensation. From the lockdown style of collages that ran the perimeter of one back room in the show—including such phantomlike images as *Mrs. Möni-paer*, *Mr. Schneider*, and *Ornament*, all 2006, and *Nobody Will Survive 2*, 2008—to the two oversized vitrine structures piercing two of the middle rooms of Kunsthalle’s long and narrow floor plan, the sound of muffled laughter cut through the impeccable sequencing, order, and transparent barriers of glass and Plexiglas. Trockel turned the retrospective gaze and desire for an overview inside out as works from each decade of her career and wide-ranging media stood close together in ethnographic-style vitrines.

Even as past works were “surveyed”

and feminine) were absorbed in the angular looking back of Trockel’s round-up, exposing the cultural codes and clichés that underscore our need for empathic identification while also giving heterogeneous form to the lack that arises in her regular diffusion of gender, ego, and character.

And so *Daddy’s Striptease Room*, 1990, a perversely labeled cardboard box housing a model of the Cologne Cathedral, occupies a large-scale vitrine with *Miss Wanderlust*, 2000, a rough-hewn nubile sculpture that kneels and peers out from the vitrine with binocular extensions in place of eyes. Likewise, the ceramic wall sculptures that adorned an entire room of the exhibition eschew the rules of representation, failing to return a stable reflection in their polished, mirrorlike platinum panels, offering instead the tiny deportations and tactile gleam of cracked surfaces. Similarly,