

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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ROSEMARIE TROCKEL

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GALLERY

"You want to provoke me? You virtually ask for this." Thundering verbal abuse, the interrogator kicks her victim to the floor. "You are getting on my nerves, darling. You better watch it. Get up. Let's try it again. Tell me the name of the best artist."

"Sylvie Fleury? You make my blood boil." "Johns? You damn fool. You are playing with fire." "Koons? You are risking your life, darling. Do you conspire against me? We are not playing. It's real. You must be suffering from delusions of grandeur. Be a nice girl and we try this whole thing again. Who is the best artist?"

"Trockel? You hit the jackpot. You hit the jackpot. Like crazy!" Even the "truth" that the interrogator is determined to coerce from and beat into her victim brings no end to this nightmarish ordeal. "Again. The best. The best artist." "Kabakov? I'm lost. I'm really lost. I give up," the interrogator exclaims in disgust as the scene fades to the concluding strains of Ravel's *Bolero*.

It's helpful to know that the script for Rosemarie Trockel's video, *Continental Divide*, 1994, from which the above excerpts are selected, is based on an article that appeared in the German magazine *Focus*, ranking the best 100 artists in the world. (In 1994, Ilya Kabakov was rated number one, Trockel number 30.) Much of the slapstick that drives the plot of the video derives from Trockel playing the part of both the aggressive interrogator and the passive victim, and yet, ostensibly, she is neither.

The antagonist's abusive dialogue sounds as if it were lifted from a scenario about domestic violence, while the victim evinces the demoralizing effects associated with battered-wife syndrome. If we consider the antagonist and protagonist as flip sides of a polarized female subject caught somewhere between the symbolic order and feminine *jouissance*, then Trockel's sado-masochistic charade is emblematic of Lacan's master-slave discourse. We could also read Trockel's farcical skit as a metaphor for and critique of the artist's submission to the market and ranking systems that evaluate artistic merit in terms of volume of sales and number of museum shows.

From this blossoms a blasphemous humor that flirts with social "truths" and pretends to devour the sacred cow of self-expression, while leaving the viewer wondering about the exact nature of the defense that she constructs, for at every interpretative turn Trockel frustrates attempts to establish a clear narrative in her work. She



Rosemarie Trockel, *Continental Divide*, 1994, video still.

composes an institutional critique not to mobilize resistance but to point to such efforts as ultimately ineffective. She is willing to speak publicly, but mocks her own sincerity. She provokes response, only to throw it in doubt. This makes for what is most interesting, and most frustrating, in her art, and breeds the suspicion that how comfortable she is in letting the viewer connect with her work is parallel to how comfortable her own situation allows her to be with revelations from the murky realm of personal relations, feminine experience, and, ultimately, the bugaboo of self-expression.

Or, as Trockel, the antagonist, asks her pseudodoppelgänger, the victim, "Do you conspire against me? We are not playing. It's real. . . . Be a nice girl, and we try this whole thing again." Clearly, Trockel is anything but nice. While grabbing laughs with her flashy wit and willful attitude, she breaks as many codes as she can get her hands on. It's not nice to do a tabloid job on one's fellow artists—all of whom, so the story goes in *Continental Divide*, disgust her. It's not nice to present oneself as ego-maniacal, especially when one has managed to penetrate the male bastion of the German art world to become a feminist role model. Quite a contrast to the cargo of the authentic self with which Joseph Beuys—to whom she has often been compared—made his magic. With glee we watch as Trockel trashes his ghost and mirthfully frays the threads of certainty that might lead us to a conclusion about her intentions or to organic wholeness in her work.

Whether in her grainy black and white basement videotape or the series of multiples that were also included in the exhibition (most of which are indexed to the female body, fashion, domesticity, phallic objects, sex—the usual Trockel stuff) she weaves a web of stereotypes and iconographies, double entendres, and subtexts. Although

Trockel changes shape constantly she always leaves open the possibility that at any moment she will spring back to her original form.

All this is not without ideological import O.K. Maybe there isn't an authentic self to expose. Maybe she resorts to stereotypical feminine iconography—such as knit suits, stove-top burners, and scrub brushes—only to defeat the desires of those who would claim her as their own, whether they be feminists who demand "correct" form, or formalists who see content in terms of esthetics, or spiritualists who envision artistic expression as the font of truth, or conceptualists who continue to place stock in institutional critique. She satirizes all but pledges allegiance to none. Her pleasure comes from breaking boundaries. It's a lot to grasp, all this uncoupling. This is Trockel's drama, one that incorporates "partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity," to borrow a phrase from Donna J. Haraway. As Trockel reminds us, with tongue fully inserted in cheek, "We are not playing. It's real."

—Jan Avgikos