



Cogito ergo sum?

Rosemarie Trockel:
The Critic, 2015
Mixed Media
170 × 60 × 60 cm

The jury commends her versatility and experimentation. According to one author, her work displays a protean variety that eludes all attempts to judge it by conventional criteria. Her art, we are told elsewhere, always operates on at least two levels, suspended in a subtle balance between formlessness and form. What do we do now? What do we understand when we read such sentences? **“Cogito, ergo sum”** is the title of a knitted work by Rosemarie Trockel from 1988. It consists of a plane, 220 × 150 cm in size, with the words **“Cogito, ergo sum”** stitched into it with a woolen thread. All around this inscription, wool was stretched onto the frame. The soft, fuzzy fabric replaced the canvas and was itself the painting. The script with its black, slightly quavering line standing out against the light brown plane was not the only contrast, for in the lower right, also made of wool, there appeared an additional rectangle in black, comprising nearly a seventh of the picture’s surface. **René Descartes meets Kasimir Malevich? Two famous, conceptually oriented men receiving an unexpected answer from a woman?** This is not just a matter of irony or mother wit. Already a few years earlier, Reiner Speck, a doctor and art collector from Cologne, had cited Friedrich Nietzsche in respect of Rosemarie Trockel: **“We have art so that we do not perish of the truth.”** Speck emphasized that Trockel presents us with riddles rather than stories, with existential situations that are full of hermetic ambiguity. Trockel’s works, in which he sensed **“a gender-specific artistry to the benefit of art,”** reminded him of oracles. We are in the middle of spring 2020. **Recent days and weeks have been marked by uncertainty, considerable material loss, and perhaps, for many of us, by anxiety. Anxiety as to how our familiar world will go on, and how it can go on.** We are not superstitious, but perhaps we are becoming alert to the language of oracles. Perhaps we are thinking about fundamentals more than we usually do. **“Separate from all and united with all”** is how the famous “first” hermit, Evagrius Ponticus, born south-east of Alexandria in the year 345 A.D., defined the hermit’s life. Not quite 1700 years ago, Home Office and quarantine were not on the horizon, and even chastity and privation were not this hermit’s sole preoccupation: How does solitude enable one to attain states of mind that, nourished by continual questions and probing self-reflection, produce insight? In art, such phases of transition are called a **“change of epoch.”** **We are now sensing the imminence of epochal change, and where would it manifest itself sooner and more explicitly than in art?**

A magnum opus by Trockel of 2015, “The Critic,” a life-size figure partly made of silicone, was the artist’s alter ego. It made its appearance at the Bregenz art museum. “The Critic” stood on a glass pedestal, gazing straight ahead, arms dangling, garbed in a blue dress and loafers. One saw a blond woman, her hair crimped in four large circles and wrapped in saran wrap. Balanced on her head was a pail containing fox tails, among other objects. The back of her bullet-proof vest was studded with several dozen hunting trophies – teeth, paws, also a desiccated frog. In the language of voodoo, this was gris-gris, a measure of protection. We may assume that there was more at issue than the artist’s protection against art critics. One significant element seemed to be the figure’s solitude, her reclusiveness, her reflective absorption, her endurance. The bulletproof vest and protective amulets signified that something was being held onto, perhaps even brought to a halt. A transition, perhaps an upheaval, seems imminent today. **With this work, Trockel was not only advocating a successful, highly intelligent, visually impressive feminism. Along with that, and not unrelated, it pointed to social change, bringing lower class forms of cultural expression and consumption into the galleries and museums.** Hotplates, for example, were her answer to minimal art. She was posing and continues to pose questions about intimacy and proximity, about love, about the state of society and our ways of moving in physical space. She is one of those artists who epitomize what the great art historian Reinhart Koselleck calls a saddle or threshold time. In this crisis, we are finally looking again for epochal art. Trockel is one of those personalities who are able to deliver epochal art and hence an important piece of the future.

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