

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Katharina Fritsch

Press Packet

O'Grady, Megan. "The Master of Allusion." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, February 23, 2020, pp. 154–59.

Stamberg, Susan. "With Surprising Sculptures, Katharina Fritsch Makes The Familiar Fun." *NPR*, April 20, 2020.

Pobric, Pac. "Katharina Fritsch." *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 7, 2018.

"Katharina Fritsch." *The New Yorker*, December 18 & 25, 2017, p. 22.

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T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE



Katharina Fritsch, photographed last fall in her Düsseldorf, Germany, studio with an in-progress sculpture.

O'Grady, Megan. "The Master of Allusion." *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, February 23, 2020, pp. 154–59.

THE MASTER

With her sculptures that elude meaning or easy categorization, Katharina Fritsch has become a true rarity: a sculptor of the female gaze.

By Megan O'Grady Photographs by Bernhard Fuchs

CONSIDER THE ROOSTER. The cockerel — vigilant herald of sunrise, barnyard strutter — has a long iconographic history, appearing on things like weather vanes and churches (as an emblem of St. Peter) and French soccer jerseys (as *le coq gaulois*, the unofficial national mascot). In the Chinese zodiac, the rooster symbolizes honesty, fidelity and protection. In art history's vast bestiary, the rooster appears most famously in Pablo Picasso's 1938 "Le Coq," its rainbow-colored strokes of pastel expressing the chicken's movements, its irascibility and (fittingly, for the artist) its virility.

Katharina Fritsch's rooster is above all that. Over 14 feet high, with luxuriant plumage a shade of ultramarine blue Yves Klein might have envied, the polyester-and-fiberglass sculpture could be found in London's Trafalgar Square, perched high on the square's fourth plinth for the nearly two years it was there (it is now at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.), piquant company for the traditional statues of self-serious heroes of history — King George IV, Maj. Gen. Sir Henry Havelock and Gen. Sir Charles James Napier, who occupy the other three. (A second rooster is in the sculpture garden of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; a third will be shown this month at Matthew Marks Gallery in Los Angeles, accompanied by two other sculptures.) When the Trafalgar Square rooster was unveiled in 2013, then mayor Boris Johnson noted the irony that an unofficial emblem of France had taken roost in a place commemorating a British victory in the Napoleonic Wars. Fritsch's cock, however,

knows no nation. "The French think it's their rooster; the Minnesotans think it's their rooster. It's everyone's rooster," she says with equanimity. Detached from its expected scale, context or hue — here is a chicken, it is blue — the animal seems to have flown in through a rift in the cosmic fabric, evidence of a sprightlier, less pedantic universe.

The dream life of things — animals of all kinds, but also lanterns and shells, strawberries and umbrellas, figures of saints and the Madonna — are what preoccupy Fritsch, a German sculptor famous for her eerily smooth, outsize polyester-and-fiberglass sculptures in bright, matte, addictive colors. All of us bring a set of private associations to our surroundings, and Fritsch's work operates upon and expands this relationship, revising reality just enough to unsettle us and make the subliminal feel real and graspable and even weirdly covetable. The initial visual startle of her work quickly becomes subcutaneous in feeling: the realm of fantasy and superstition. Much of her work plays with recognizable imagery — especially that of Catholicism and the Brothers Grimm — but presents it as if pulled from some half-remembered illusion. Some of her early work is more overtly about subconscious fear, such as her 1993 sculpture "Rattenkönig (Rat-King)," a circle of 16 rats over nine feet tall with a knot of entangled tails, which enlarges a spooky motif to its symbolic proportions.

What does it mean to see our fears and dreams take up physical space? Fritsch's major 1988 work, "Tischgesellschaft (Company at Table)," features 32 blankly impassive, seated men, a nightmare

OF ALLUSION

vision of “identity dissolving in an infinite space,” as the artist described it in 2001, or what it might look like if all of my exes were invited to the same dinner party. As one draws closer, the men

turn out to be all the same man: her boyfriend at the time, Frank Fenstermacher, of the German new wave band Der Plan. Since then, Fritsch’s oeuvre has expanded to increasingly ambiguous tableaux. In the Museum of Modern Art sculpture garden in 2011, she placed a set of stylized figures, including a 5-foot-7 cadmium yellow Madonna; a trio of saints in cobalt violet, green and black; and a giant gray primeval man with a club. A black snake slithers in front of them. The piece is indicative of Fritsch’s larger role as an artist:

This is sculpture not just as allegory but as performance, almost a kind of postmodern stand-up — and a potent exercise in what Susan Sontag called “radical juxtaposition,” surrounded, as it is, by works from the more famous men of sculpture, such as Henry Moore, Auguste Rodin and Picasso.

It can be difficult to locate what it is Fritsch’s sculptures are trying to say, exactly — but this isn’t a criticism. They seem familiar — the rats and succulent-looking fruit plucked from a long-lost fairy tale, the fluorescent Madonna and skulls pulled from an obscure passage of the New Testament — and yet the pieces refuse to supply an identifiable critique of or statement about the tropes we are so used to seeing contemporary art address: consumerism, gender and racial identity. (They certainly spark a certain desire to have them or to be near them that seems intentional — the

‘I think everything can be a sculpture for me. From the beginning, I wanted to create a kind of middle world, a world that really surprises people like they haven’t seen the object before.’

weird, product-like quality a strawberry might attain when enlarged, cushily recumbent and colored blue.) But in their unknowability, in making us search for answers again and again to no avail, Fritsch has created a remarkable and

unique body of work. It provokes sensations of nameless dread or desire rather than a clear reaction, a kind of working lexicon not of the things that haunt us but rather of what it is like to feel haunted.

IN THE DAYS before I met Fritsch in her studio in Düsseldorf, Germany, last fall, as the artist was preparing for her show at Matthew Marks Gallery, one of her animals in particular troubled me: the poodle. Popularized in part by Albrecht Dürer and Francisco Goya, who featured them in their paintings, the breed became the dog of choice for

early 19th-century French prostitutes and later a fad among teenage girls of the 1950s, who put poodle appliqués on their circle skirts. When I lived in Berlin in 2010, standard poodles had become ironic pets among a certain arty crowd, disturbing in the way that only a living creature employed as a fashion accessory can be. In 1996, Fritsch completed “Kind Mit Pudeln (Child With Poodles),” in which four concentric circles of dogs surround a Christlike infant. The absurdity of the animal itself, with its kitschy pompoms, contrasts neatly with their menacing arrangement, which calls to mind the orgy scene from “Eyes Wide Shut,” with a hint of the final moment in “Rosemary’s Baby,” when the coven converges on the cradle.

“I hate poodles, I must say,” Fritsch says over breakfast at her studio, a vast skylit space not far from a large park that was once home to Düsseldorf’s zoo, which was bombed in 1943. Her upstairs atelier overlooks the rail yards. Fritsch is 64 but looks a decade younger; she has a wonderfully mordant, expressive face and a brainy gameness, and is wearing a beautiful shirt of creamy chamois yellow corduroy that once belonged to her father, an architect. Two assistants, young men, say hello; when I turn to greet a third, bent over a worktable, he turns out to be a sculpture. “Ideas emerge from my subconscious all the time,” she explains, sometimes when she’s in transit, in a car or on a train; others originate in her sleep. “I think everything can be a sculpture for me. From the beginning, I wanted to create a kind of middle world that took you behind the object again by yourself, a world that really surprises people like they haven’t seen the object before.”

Achieving this effect depends entirely on perfection of form. In the two-and-a-half-year-long process of creating the rooster, Fritsch moved the tail three times; the chest was especially difficult to get right, as she didn’t want it to resemble the proud chest of Germany’s imperial eagles, nor did she want “a weak chicken.” Since 2006, Fritsch has used a computer at different stages in the development of her prototypes — scanning an object, making a plaster cast she then painstakingly reshapes and remodels, then rescanning and reworking several times to get the shape and detailing precise. To rely simply on a scan, she says, results in work that is “completely flat. I don’t want to be sentimental about this, but to me it has an effect. You lose this third dimension and the sensuality of the materials, the smell and everything. You need that.” When I ask her how casting in polyester works, she opens a can of the viscous stuff and shows it to me, inhaling. “The smell is amazing,” she says.

In trying to pin her down on the various sources of her iconography, I soon feel uncomfortably like a Jungian analyst. One of my favorite of Fritsch's sculptures, "Oktopus (Octopus)" (2010), which features a small deep-sea diver clutched in one of the creature's long orange arms, has its origins in childhood fever dreams and Jules Verne, she tells me. When Fritsch was a child, her father liked to tease her by whipping open an antique encyclopedia to the page with a terrifyingly detailed octopus illustration, but now she greatly admires and even identifies with the intelligent animal. "They are like artists, because they can change their skin within seconds to reflect their environment. I think this is so incredible," she says, explaining that when

she embarks on an animal sculpture, she first learns everything she can about it from books and documentaries and even natural history experts. But creating an octopus prototype proved to be a major design challenge. "First, I tried to make a scan of a real one — we bought it from the fish shop — but you can't scan flesh because it's always moving. And so I had to be the octopus. I was the octopus. I was really feeling the movement, and I knew it had to be like this," and here she imitates the ungainly cephalopod's sideways slump, the extended arm, and all at once, I catch a glimpse of how Fritsch transmits an abstract idea into form.

Fritsch mixes her own pigments; downstairs, there's an entire room for spray-painting. She's

More unfinished sculptures in Fritsch's studio, including one of her signature roosters. She works in polyester and fiberglass with acrylic paint or industrial lacquer.



secretive about exactly how she creates her colors, which are brought to a paint factory to make an industrial lacquer, but the color selection process is entirely intuitive — “I visualize it immediately,” she says. For decades now, she has worked within a recognizable palette, one that might feel ironic in the hands of another artist but

of Fritsch’s creations — her “Rattenkönig” really is just 16 rats in a circle — is part of the experience of viewing her work, which is confounding, frustrating, funny and ultimately moving because of the search itself, the matte porelessness that resists, refuses, interpretation. And yet they are far too fine in their detail — and too affecting — to be anything close to kitsch.

Her sculpture of a pale pink cowrie shell, for instance, over nine feet tall and sweetly creepy, resembles a colossal *vagina dentata*, I unoriginally point out. “You can see it like this. I see it as a shell,” she replies.

“AT 5, IT WAS clear to me that I would be an artist,” Fritsch tells me over lunch at an Italian place in Oberkassel, a bourgeois neighborhood on the other side of the Rhine where the experimental artist Joseph Beuys lived before his death in 1986. Fritsch’s maternal grandfather was a salesperson for Faber-Castell, and his garage was filled, tantalizingly, with art supplies. “It was a paradise,” she recalls. “I was always fascinated by the pencils with all the colors.”

Growing up in Langenberg in the 1950s and in Münster in the ’60s, both near working-class Essen, in the heart of the Ruhr valley,

Germany’s heavy industry heartland, art wasn’t an obvious career path. “Maybe my parents were secretly afraid of my never making any money, but they really encouraged me to do that, to paint and to draw,” she says. “My childhood was very sensual. It was a very artistic atmosphere.” And a little



here, applied to her identifiable yet enigmatic imagery, feels more sinister: In addition to her iconic celestial blue and a black so dense it seems to suck color from its surroundings, she often uses cobalt violet, calamine pink, cadmium yellow and a particular unearthly blue-green — a color scheme reminiscent of Prada ads from the mid-aughts. How completely a simple change of hue shifts our perception, I realize as we flip through one of her catalogs together.

Part of Fritsch’s genius is how her work seems to beg for interpretation. Is her octopus a self-portrait, an earnest re-creation of her girlhood nightmares or an attempt at taming those fears by making the creature tenderly comic? The sculpture is sensual enough that I can’t help but identify with it; at the same time, I begin to imagine what it might feel like to have one of those chubby arms hold me in its grasp. This kind of ambivalence, the search for deeper meaning and its almost inevitable unraveling through the sheer literalness

Above: “6. Stilleben (6th Still Life)” (2011), which includes a variety of Christian symbolism.
Right: one of Fritsch’s most famous works, “Tischgesellschaft (Company at Table)” (1988), which features 32 seated men.





FROM TOP: KATHARINA FRITSCH "RATTENKÖNIG/RAT-KING," 1991-93, POLYESTER AND PAINT © KATHARINA FRITSCH/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN/COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, PHOTO BY NIC TENWIGGENHORN; KATHARINA FRITSCH, "HAHN/COCK," 2013, FIBERGLASS, POLYESTER RESIN, PAINT AND STAINLESS STEEL © KATHARINA FRITSCH/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN/COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, PHOTO BY IVO FABER. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: KATHARINA FRITSCH, "6. STILLEBEN/6TH STILL LIFE," 2011, BRONZE, COPPER, EPOXY AND PAINT © KATHARINA FRITSCH/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN/COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, PHOTO BY IVO FABER; KATHARINA FRITSCH, "TISCHGESELLSCHAFT/COMPANY AT TABLE," 1988, POLYESTER, WOOD, COTTON AND PAINT © KATHARINA FRITSCH/VG BILD-KUNST, BONN/COURTESY OF MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, PHOTO BY NIC TENWIGGENHORN

gothic: Fritsch kept her religious maternal grandmother company on her many tours of German churches, including the famous 13th-century crypts at Bamberg cathedral. "It's very impressive when you go as a child into the Catholic churches and you see these figures, and there's something that's very cruel about what you see, and I was completely attracted by that," she says. "Bodies dangling from crosses and skeletons in glass tombs?" I ask. "Yes," she laughs. "You have nightmares, but it's so impressive, so strong." At the same time, American culture, its music and tacky consumer products, was conquering West Germany. "I was a big fan of Mickey Mouse and Barbie," she says. "Some parents would never allow their children to have that, but my parents or my grandparents, they were not so afraid of things like that. We — my friends and I — all wanted to be more American." After her application to the Münster Academy of Art was rejected, she instead studied history and art history at the University of Münster. "Art history was terrible for me. It was dusty and lifeless. Art should be alive," she says. The people at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, the famous art school whose students had included Beuys, as well as Gerhard Richter and Anselm Kiefer, "seemed to be much cooler," she adds.

One night in 1978, Fritsch went to Düsseldorf to see a performance by Beuys and the video art pioneer Nam June Paik, who, like Beuys, was teaching at the Kunstakademie at the time. The occasion was

a memorial tribute to George Maciunas, a leading figure of Fluxus, the multidisciplinary art movement that fostered experimentation — initially in the form of radical performance — while also stressing the value of art's role in everyday life. "It was something," she recalls. "We went there in a little car with six people and the area around the Kunstakademie was pretty crowded. It was this new wave and punk thing that was going on there." Carmen Knoebel, who was married to the artist Imi Knoebel, ran Stone im Ratinger Hof, a music venue that, much like New York's Mudd Club of the same era, attracted the art crowd; there, the likes of Sigmar Polke and Beuys listened to Krautrock bands like Neu! and Kraftwerk. Fritsch applied to the city's Kunstakademie, Germany's best art school, and got in.

Thanks in part to Beuys's legacy, Düsseldorf in the '60s and '70s represented a place of radical liberation, becoming an essential force in contemporary art. (Beuys

Left: "Rattenkönig (Rat-King)" (1991-93), with 16 rats over nine feet tall in a circle. Below: "Hahn (Cock)" (2013), in London's Trafalgar Square.



was dismissed from teaching in 1972 after he admitted 50 students to his class who had been rejected by the academy.) His influence lived on at the school in its notable painters, like Kiefer and Richter, but also touched Fritsch's generation of students, among them the photographers Candida Höfer and Thomas Ruff, the latter a good friend and frequent collaborator of Fritsch's. Beuys believed that everyone not only could be but already was an artist. But this everything-goes attitude was as much about the tumult of postwar West Germany as it was a reflection of Beuys's own philosophy. This was a generation of artists born into a chastened, broken Germany in the aftermath of World War II, yet who came of age during the Wirtschaftswunder, or economic miracle, in which the industrial Ruhr area played a central role. The country's re-emergence as a modern industrial superpower with an uneasy relationship to its recent past defines the art of this period, which didn't so much address this identity crisis as simply embody it, resulting in one of the most thrillingly innovative periods in contemporary art. As Beuys, whose most famous work includes planting 7,000 oak trees around the industrial West German city of Kassel in 1982, once wrote: "Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline [sic]." All German artists of Fritsch's generation, in one form or another, have long been preoccupied with the question of what art should be and who gets to decide, and their work reflects profound ambivalence about the human-made world and consumer culture.

In straddling a line between the symbolic and literal, living things and objects, Fritsch's art is itself an ambivalent comment about the elevation of the everyday to a higher realm and the fruitless search for identity and truth in a rapidly changing world. But her very particular aesthetic has always felt larger in scope than the postwar milieu that fostered her, and her work seems to suggest references of all kinds, from René Magritte to Kazimir Malevich — and, of course, a certain essentially punk desire to provoke. When she first entered the Kunstakademie in the late 1970s, painting still dominated, and Fritsch found freedom in the sculpture department, as well as a mentor in the artist Fritz Schwegler (who had been a colleague of Beuys's) and many friends whom she credits as inspiration, including the Minsk, Belarus-born sculptor Alexej Koschkarow, with whom she's exhibited work on several occasions. She attributes her initial interest in multiples and industrial processes to her grandfather back

in Langenberg, not Andy Warhol. At first, she experimented with ready-mades, spray-painting flowers and toy cars with automobile paint. It was in 1987 that she made her breakthrough work, the life-size cadmium yellow Madonna, which became one of her first public works when the Catholic city of Münster installed it in a town square that year (the sculpture subsequently had its nose broken and body graffitied a few times). "When I first painted the Madonna yellow, it was really something," she says. "Now everyone is doing things like that, but at the time, it was really a kind of invention." Fritsch, who recently retired as a professor of sculpture at the academy, where she taught for nine years, laments the loss of that kind of low-stakes improvisation and openness to new ideas, new forms and new names. The Germany she lives in now more or less stands alone as the leader of a fraying democratic Europe, which only enhances some of the mysterious drama of Fritsch's sculptures. What does a Christian symbol mean at a time when much of the developed world is turning away refugees and imprisoning asylum seekers? What is a fairy tale if not a desperate search for home? Fritsch's art raises these questions but refuses to answer them. In the same way that her work defies interpretation, the artist herself doesn't read too much into her formative years, which she sums up as lean and filled with exhilarating, if toxic and rash-inducing, material experiments. "Back then, everybody lived in very bad circumstances and the market wasn't so strong," she says. "We didn't care so much; nobody had any money. It was an innocent time. We were innocent creatures."

DEPENDING ON ONE'S mood, the odd sense of dislocation that Fritsch's work evokes might strike you as irreverent, cleverly transgressive or something more insidious. But the longer I'm in its presence, the more I sense a kind of moral intelligence in her objects, which distance us from our well-worn perceptions and feelings. Then there's the implicit feminism in a female sculptor looking at men — still, oddly, something of a rarity in contemporary art. Fritsch's men — which have included, over the years, a monk, a doctor and a be-toqued chef — call to mind, respectively, Caspar David Friedrich, Faust and an employee of a Bavarian beer hall. They are not in any way erotic. She uses friends as models, men with a certain kind of vanity, she says; the newest work she's preparing for the upcoming show includes two male figures holding mobile phones. The models were the art historian Robert Fleck and the artist Matthias Lahme, and the piece is a reflection of Fritsch's increasing concern about

the disconnections and false promises of a digital age — our total absorption into unreal realms and the particular seductiveness of this form of consumption. We peruse the internet for things that we probably shouldn't: homes, partners, employment, an unnamed and impossible fulfillment. The oblivious blue men clutching their phones are unsettling not because they look so different from us but because they are exactly the people who surround us, who perhaps *are* us.

"I must say that this generation of mine, we were the power women of the 1980s, and we wanted to be strong and straightforward. But then the generation afterward wanted to be feminine, to look nice and to have children, and they also wanted to have a big career. It's such a pressure," she says, referring to the ongoing debate about gender roles in Germany, where women occupy powerful positions in politics but are far less prominent in art and business. While Fritsch is single and has neither children nor poodles — she spends much of her days happily occupied with running her large studio — she's surrounded by a circle of artist friends and is very close with her mother and sister. Sculpture, in particular at this kind of scale, demands very hard physical labor, and casting her molds also involves contracting with industrial workshops staffed exclusively by men: "You get more and more conscious of that, how they treat you and how they often don't listen to you." The fabricators, she explains, will often speak to her male assistants instead of to her. "And then I say, 'Look, please, at me and talk to me. I'm giving the order, I'm paying you.' Only then, you are in the stupid position — then you are the old bitch."

In the market, her work does not sell in the same league as Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst, whose careers have, at times, seemed to parallel hers: Fritsch made the *Madonna* in 1987; that same year, also in Münster, Koons installed a statue of the traditional German figure of the *Kiepenkerl*, a traveling merchant; she completed "*Tischgesellschaft*," the large-scale work featuring *Fenstermacher*, in 1988; Koons debuted his series of sculptures and paintings featuring himself with his lover, the porn star *Cicciolina*, "*Made in Heaven*," in 1989. Fritsch weathered the art world's rapaciousness in the 1980s, refusing to churn out work too fast or under pressure: As such, she never turned cynical. She rarely speaks to the press. But she is understandably disappointed that she isn't spoken of in the same breath as some of her male counterparts nor widely credited for her influence on turn-of-the-century sculpture. At the same time, her unwillingness to please has, she believes,

protected her from a factory mentality she sees in male celebrity artists, from a "heaviness" that isn't just about literal weight.

With this in mind, I ask her if she thinks her work has shifted in meaning through the years, as the art world has changed, not to mention the larger world around her, drowning, as we are, in images of things, from memes and emojis to styles that quickly disseminate and dissipate. It hasn't, she tells me. "The first picture I have in my mind is still the one that is important."

I think of this a week later, back home in Chicago, touring future kindergartens for my 4-year-old, when I observe a classroom of young children Magic Markering identical photocopies of a rooster. As they carefully fill in the cartoonishly thick black outline of its body — this is the kind of school at which staying in the lines is encouraged — I wonder if this will become the prototypical notion of "rooster" that sticks, the picture that springs to mind when they hear its name. (Few of these urban preschoolers are likely to have spent much time around live chickens.) What could this picture possibly mean to them? The coloring-book rooster is merely an echo of an echo, a signifier absurdly distant from the hectic, strident reality of the animal itself, so incidental, in this context, to its own representation. Once upon a time, our forebears gathered around a fire to tell stories; they painted the bison that sustained them, lining cave walls with animals and hunting scenes filled with tenderness and meaning. In doing this, they created what was, for them, a resonant collective iconography; now, of course, these prehistoric paintings are touching in a different way. This, I think, is why Fritsch's work continues to unsettle: Its distance from reality feels unnervingly reflective of the way we live today, increasingly remote from our own animal instincts, our original fears, hungers and joys — the sacral coding that helped remind us, before we made art or commerce of identity, of who we were.

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FINE ART

With Surprising Sculptures, Katharina Fritsch Makes The Familiar Fun

April 20, 2020 · 5:02 AM ET

Heard on Morning Edition

SUSAN STAMBERG

[AUDIO](#)



Hahn/Cock by Katharina Fritsch was unveiled in London's Trafalgar Square on July 25, 2013. The giant rooster sculpture has since been relocated to the roof of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Will Oliver/AFP via Getty Images

German sculptor Katharina Fritsch has a thing for roosters. She's responsible for the giant blue one perched atop the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., overlooking Constitution Avenue. "It brings joy, you know, to the capital," she says.

Stamberg, Susan. "With Surprising Sculptures, Katharina Fritsch Makes The Familiar Fun." *NPR*, April 20, 2020.

Why roosters? They intrigue her; she finds them interesting and sociable. “They have a language — they have 30 sounds for food,” she explains.

In February, one of Fritsch’s roosters flew to the Matthew Marks Gallery in Los Angeles to preside at her first one-person show there. Her large, surprising and funny sculptures were supposed to be on public view right now, but the gallery is closed because of the coronavirus. So here’s a virtual visit to the show, which I was lucky to see in person before the city shut its doors.

The 13-foot, bright blue rooster stands on its own circular, lime green pedestal. Fritsch loves using color — ultramarine blue, red, black. “Adding the color gives a very emotional aspect,” she explains. “People are always attracted by color. Some art historians would say that it’s childish or something like that. I don’t think so.”



Hahn und Podest/Cock and Pedestal (2013/2019) and Zwei Männer/Two Men (2019).

Ivo Faber/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn/Matthew Marks Gallery

Stamberg, Susan. “With Surprising Sculptures, Katharina Fritsch Makes The Familiar Fun.” *NPR*, April 20, 2020.



Zwei Männer/Two Men, 2019

Ivo Faber/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn/Matthew Marks Gallery

The rooster is made of polyester and steel and sprayed with blue acrylic paint — matte, no shine. And facing it — dwarfed (maybe roostered) by it — stand two life-size sculpted men. They wear tight pants, sturdy shoes and long jackets, stylish enough for a big city. The men don't seem to care about the big rooster right in front of them.

“They are looking at their iPhones ... their beloved iPhones,” Fritsch says with a laugh. Twenty-first-century men, absorbed in their technology.

With her perfect smooth surfaces and dry humor, Fritsch takes ordinary people, familiar objects, and turns them into art.

Her Los Angeles exhibition was planned to be on view until May 2, but the gallery remains closed. In the meantime, you can see the sculptures for yourself on the Matthew Marks website.

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ARTSEEN

FEBRUARY 7TH, 2018

KATHARINA FRITSCH

by Pac Pobric

MATTHEW MARKS | NOVEMBER 4 – DECEMBER 22, 2017



Installation view, *Katharina Fritsch* at Matthew Marks Gallery, 523 West 24th Street, New York, New York, 2017.

How big is a cotton spinning wheel supposed to be? That was the question that bothered me most walking out of Katharina Fritsch's recent exhibition at Matthew Marks. Most of the seven sculptures she made for the show were obviously outsize editions of all sorts of things, like a giant blue strawberry titled *Erdbeere/Strawberry* from 2017 that looked like an ottoman proposed by a Memphis group designer, and a bronze, painted, neon green seashell (*Muschel [Hellgrün]/Shell [Light Green]* from 2015) that loomed more than nine feet tall. But Fritsch's purple spinning wheel (*Spinnrad/Spinning Wheel* from 2017)—rendered in fine detail, just like an antique would be, and topped off with what looked like a drooping heap of lush, white cotton (in fact, the entire sculpture is made of epoxy and polyester)—was practically impossible to scale. It may have been a little bigger than an actual spinning wheel; it may have been a little smaller too. Or maybe it was built exactly to size. Without a direct comparison, it was impossible to say.

Fritsch is especially good in this defamiliarizing register. She has long excelled at taking things we think we know—umbrellas, apples, rodents, statuary figures—and twisting them through scale and color into alien objects. The best works at Matthew Marks did that as well as ever. The green seashell (which was given its own gallery) was so neatly painted that from behind, the top of it looked like a completely flat, floating disc—until you looked down and saw its shadow cut across the gallery floor. The same was true of a four-foot-tall plastic egg (*Ei/Egge* from 2017) that Fritsch painted half orange and half yellow. From certain angles, with only the orange half visible, the sculpture looked like a bright, flat, hovering apparition.

Earlier in her career, Fritsch was keener to upset her audience emotionally. Works like *Kind mit Pudeln/Child with Poodles* (1995-96), where 224 black dogs in four concentric circles surround an infant, carried a violent charge that's largely absent in the recent work (even if the skull at the front of the Matthew Marks gallery, titled *Schädel/Skull* from 2017, was a *memento mori*).

These days, she is more interested in the many contradictory associations a sculpture can trigger. Fritsch's

Hahn/Cock (2010–13), the handsome, giant blue rooster she showed on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square in London (now on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC), is at once a criticism of heroic masculinity and a show of strength. Similarly, a sculpture of a lantern shown at Matthew Marks (*Laterne/Lantern* from 2017) was simultaneously a reminder and a rebuttal of Enlightenment ideals, just as the spinning wheel recalls the horrors of slavery as much as it does the quaintness of pre-industrial life.

These associations make Fritsch's sculptures incredibly adaptable; they could fit into any number of themed group exhibitions (A clever curator, for example, could put many of her works alongside Rona Pondick's ghastly and brilliant sculptures of dogs with men's heads). But whereas most group shows flatten an artist's work to serve a specific curatorial purpose, the advantage and risk of a solo exhibition is that the work stands or falls on its own accord. Fritsch, as ever, emerges from the Matthew Marks exhibition (her first in New York since 2008) in a strong position. Her sculptures play well off one another, and seeing them together (even only seven of them) deepens their strangeness.



Katharina Fritsch, *Erdbeere / Strawberry*, 2017, Polyester, paint, 31 1/2 × 31 1/2 × 31 1/2 inches, © Katharina Fritsch / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn / Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo: Ivo Faber, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

So where does she go from here? The antiquated cotton spinning wheel, which is already so unfamiliar, may point in a new direction. For much of her career, Fritsch has dug deep into the kind of work we are familiar with, consistently surprising us with the flexibility of her relatively limited stylistic range. It seems she can obscure and enlighten any everyday thing. But the spinning wheel is not an everyday thing; we rarely encounter one anymore. It comes to us as an already alien device, a technological relic few of us understand. What more can Fritsch do in this territory, where she takes as her subject things we do not know? Perhaps it's a question for her next body of work.



Katharina Fritsch, *Muschel (Hellgrün) / Shell (Light Green)* 2015, Bronze and paint, 111 3/8 × 69 3/4 × 69 1/4 inches, 283 × 177 × 176 cm. © Katharina Fritsch / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn / Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery. Photo: Ivo Faber, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

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MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

THE NEW YORKER



Katharina Fritsch

In her first show in New York in nearly a decade, the German artist continues to refine her signature style, toying with color and scale to uncanny effect. Among the seven sculptures are a deep-blue strawberry the size of a small boulder; a half-yellow, half-orange egg standing four feet high; and a purple spinning wheel, which, at more than seven feet tall, would dwarf any Rumpelstiltskin. Since the sculptures are not all enlarged to the same scale—there is also a nine-foot-tall chartreuse cowrie shell and a five-foot-wide snow-white skull—they resist the theatricality of mere props but, rather, seem to have assumed the proportions appropriate to their symbolic qualities. *Through Dec. 22. (Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200.)*

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StarTribune

She's the artist behind that giant blue chicken coming to Minneapolis Sculpture Garden

The Walker opens a show of smaller works by soon-to-be Sculpture Garden star Katharina Fritsch.

By Alicia Eler Star Tribune | MAY 15, 2017 — 6:02PM



KATHARINA FRITSCH / VG BILD-KUNST, BONN. COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

This version of Katharina Fritsch's "Hahn/Cock" was unveiled in London's Trafalgar Square in 2013 and now is on display outside the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

It's a bird, it's a plane, it's a ... giant blue rooster?!

The soon-to-reopen Minneapolis Sculpture Garden will be home to artist Katharina Fritsch's much anticipated new royal-blue-colored sculpture "Hahn/Cock," which will tower over viewers atop a white pedestal, reaching more than 20 feet in the air. This playful tongue-in-cheek critique of the "macho" nature of large-scale sculpture also works within the conceptual framework of Marcel Duchamp, who famously put a urinal in an art gallery and called it art, arguing that the context makes it art more than the art itself. The blue rooster also brings out a certain squeamishness in many people when they try to say the name of the sculpture.

But there is so much more to Fritsch than just that rooster/giant chicken, or however you feel most comfortable referring to it.

Enter “Multiples,” a Fritsch exhibition opening Thursday evening at Walker Art Center. It contains more than 40 smaller-scale objects that the artist has painted in her signature monochrome style, creating a uniformness that strips the objects of their previous presumed meaning, replacing that with a sense of the uncanny. The interior exhibition offers a smart counterpoint to the hulking rooster that will be positioned outdoors. One element that really stands out is Fritsch’s use of single colors, which continually mystifies viewers.

“She is not very forthcoming about the colors that she chooses,” said Walker curatorial assistant Victoria Sung, who oversaw the show with visual arts curator Pavel Pyš. “She says the color or the image come at once. It’s intuitive.”

The exhibition isn’t ordered thematically, but one can grasp at recurring themes. In one section, visitors will notice the beginning of the artist’s engagement with the multiple. While still in art school, Fritsch created “Schwarz-weisses Auto (Black and White Car)” (1979), in which she took a toy car and toy caravan, and painted over them in singular colors.



Katharina Fritsch, St. Nicolas, 2002, Collection Walker Art Center McKnight Acquisition Fund, 2003, © Artists Rights...



More

“You get a sense that she is interested in notions of commercialism, display and circulation of these everyday objects,” says Sung.

The uniform use of color makes it immediately clear what the object is and its function in the world (if it were functional). Its directness grabs a viewer’s attention much like an advertisement, which is purposeful in that Fritsch is also playing with the language of advertising. One of her early pieces on view, in fact, is an advertisement created for a friend’s publication. The ad never ran; instead, Fritsch made it a multiple in and of itself.

“She was really interested in Joseph Beuys, who is someone we [at the Walker] have a long engagement with,” says Pyš. “He was very much aware of democratizing the art object, working against a single, original, expensive artwork, and allowing people to have access to these.”

The multiples span into other themes, as well, such as religious motifs — a bright, blinding-yellow Madonna figure, a purple St. Nicholas, a black-painted St. Catherine. Animals and insects figure in the exhibition, too; an oversized black-painted fly with white wings is the same size as a black-painted mouse, perched on its hind legs. The 1999 work “Hexenhaus und Pilz” (“Witches House and Mushroom”) is a triangular-shaped black-painted house with white roof, and a red-colored mushroom next door. “Geld” (“Money”), from 1988, is a stack of aluminum money reproductions.

Most of the works in this exhibition are owned by the Walker; all but one of the others are on loan from Matthew Marks Gallery in New York. This makes sense, considering the Walker has been working with Fritsch since 1991. The Walker has the largest collection of her multiples in the United States.

But really, all eyes are on the blue rooster (Lol). As she gets it ready to mount, Fritsch has been thinking about the location. Another version of “Hahn/Cock” sits in Trafalgar Square in London. In the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, it will be in dialogue with regional considerations.

“Here, she was really interested in the different connotations it would take on in Minneapolis, specifically with myths like Babe the Blue Ox, farming and the Midwestern tradition,” says Sung.

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London
**Evening
Standard**

Cocking a snook at Nelson: Katharina Fritsch

by Ben Luke | September 9, 2013

What is the meaning of sculptor Katharina Fritsch's blue cockerel, to be winched on to the empty Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square next week? It's about a lot of things, she tells Ben Luke, including making fun of a hero.



Next Thursday, the German sculptor Katharina Fritsch will put a giant blue cockerel on the empty Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square. It's difficult to avoid the conclusion that many have reached — that the cockerel, that great symbol of France, will appear proudly in Gallic sporting colours, behind Lord Nelson's back, seemingly cocking a snook at the celebration of British military and imperial vainglory that the Square celebrates.

Fritsch freely admits, in her almost-perfect but softly accented English, that her five-metre high fibreglass and resin bird “makes a bit of fun of the hero”. She wanted, she says, “to do a nice sculpture for Trafalgar Square but I wanted to do it in a contemporary sense, which really can't take monuments of war heroes seriously any more”.

Cock, as it's called, is the latest in the rotating series of new sculptures for the Fourth Plinth (most stay for 12-18 months) to provoke controversy, though not always for the same reasons — some objected to Marc Quinn's vast nude of the disabled artist Alison Lapper in 2005, others railed against the eccentric procession of members of the public Antony Gormley invited onto the plinth in 2009.

Many of those voices are traditionalists who want an appropriate permanent statue to grace the empty corner, which was intended to have an equestrian statue of William IV to join Nelson and, on the other plinths, Generals Havelock and Napier and George IV. But significant cultural figures have also expressed

Luke, Ben. “Cocking a Snook at Nelson: Katharina Fritsch.” *London Evening Standard*, September 9, 2013.

their dismay. The National Gallery's director Nicholas Penny told me last year that works on the Fourth Plinth commission — run by the Mayor's office, with a high-profile selection committee — were often “antagonistic to the architectural character of the square”, turning the plinth into “a stage, which can be used ironically, farcically [and] inappropriately”. One suspects he may feel that Fritsch's work ticks those boxes.

Indeed, we have grown so used to art shock tactics that it would be easy to dismiss Fritsch's new work as provocation. But when I meet Fritsch at a warehouse in the industrial wastelands beyond the Olympic Park, where she is putting the finishing touches to the cockerel before next week's unveiling, she says she “definitely didn't think about the French cockerel” when she first came up with the idea. There is no doubt that she wants her shimmering ultramarine bird, nearly five metres high, to be dramatic and arresting but that is true of many of the sculptures she has made over the past 30 years.

Fritsch, who was born in Essen but grew up in Münster in southern Germany, says she knew instantly that the cockerel was visually right for Trafalgar Square and her first priority was the form the bird would take. It was initially based on a stuffed chicken she bought from a taxidermist. She has long wanted to do a cockerel because it's a “worn-out image”, familiar from Picasso's numerous depictions, Brancusi's saw-like bronze or kitsch craft knick-knacks.

“It's a little bit overstretched, and that's the sort of thing I like to work with,” she explains. “An old thing, which you give a twist and it can become a new icon.”

Dressed in jeans and a demure flowery blouse, the bespectacled 57-year-old looks over at her creation, who she describes as “really quite a character — that was really very important for me”. She points out that she had to get a wealth of quirky details right: the breast is proudly thrust forwards but he still has the asymmetrical face of a stuffed animal — “He has to look sensitive and a little bit weak,” she laughs. “He has the feathers which are exploding like fountains, and it has something joyful and proud about it. It's not an easy, simple form, it's complicated... a little bit baroque.”

It was only after she'd worked out exactly how the cockerel would look, she says, that she thought: “Hee-hee, it's fun that I've had this idea, because of all of these generals and the king.” But while she might gently send up the Square's imperial iconography, she also greatly admires it as a place — “The architecture is incredible,” she says. In the Square, “you have the ultimate publicity, but with people who are not used to looking at contemporary art — you're not in this closed circle, you're becoming a popular artist and you have to do something for millions of people. That's very attractive to me, I like it when they have a direct emotional impact on us. I'm much more interested in doing art for everybody — I want to be popular but not populist, that's important for me.”

Such a prestigious public commission — this one part-funded by the Mayor's office, to the tune of £140k with an undisclosed top-up from private sources — is new territory for Fritsch. She has had big museum shows across the world, including at Tate Modern in 2001, and is represented by Jay Jopling at White Cube, yet — until now at least — she has lacked the profile of some of Jopling's other artists, such as Gormley or Damien Hirst.

Her sculptures, which she describes as “three-dimensional pictures”, are realised through a painstaking process of moulding and casting, and often feature animals alongside humans, sometimes in dream-like, fairytale or mythic scenarios, like *Man and Mouse* (1991-92) a gigantic mouse sitting on a sleeping figure, and the *Rat King* (1993), a circle of huge rodents bound together by their tails. These surreal mises-en-scene create unsettling atmospheres, often via vivid use of colour.

Cock is no exception but why is he blue? “The colour was always blue, because the other option would have been red, but a red cockerel doesn’t make sense — that’s stupid,” she says with a raucous laugh, one of several which punctuate our conversation. “The right colour is blue, and I think it opens up a lot of levels of meaning.”

Her conviction sounds eccentric, but Fritsch’s sense of colour is not random or even merely intuitive, it is neurological — she tells me that she has synaesthesia. “I am a person who connects the days of the week or numbers with colours,” she says. But her background also played a role in forming her sophisticated chromatic sense. While she cheerily admits that growing up a Catholic meant she was “tortured” by guilt, the churches she visited with her grandparents in southern Germany as a child were “the first impressions of colour that I got”, she says.

And an encounter with a Trecento Italian master particularly inspired her attachment to blue. “That was a real influence — when I went to Padua and saw Giotto’s frescoes and heaven painted in ultramarine, I thought, ‘That’s really great.’ That’s why I like ultramarine so much, it goes much further back than Yves Klein or something like that. I was much more influenced by religious painting of the early Renaissance, and medieval art.”

Fritsch now lives in Düsseldorf, and is professor of sculpture at the prestigious art school there, where she studied in the late Seventies. She likes teaching because it gives her a break from her studio. “You interact with young people, and I don’t have children, I’m not married, and so you get in touch with younger people,” she says. Encountering students’ work and attitude means she doesn’t rest on her laurels, she says. “Some artists, when they become 40, they die — they live another 40 years or longer and they make work, but they don’t take any risks any more.”

Cock has certainly tested Fritsch in all sorts of ways, from getting the right kind of matt blue paint that can be exposed to the elements, to raising funds for the sculpture as costs soared. “It got more and more expensive, much more than we thought in the beginning, and I ruined myself by putting all my money into it,” she says. So she is approaching its arrival in Trafalgar Square, where it is planned to stay put until early 2015, with a certain apprehension. “It’s always difficult when you take art outside into a place that has so many people in it each day, so I’m pretty frightened if it will work or not,” she says. “I don’t know yet. I’ve never seen it [in situ] before, I will see it the moment it gets unveiled.”

From my sneak preview, even if it is on a faceless industrial estate, I don’t think she has much cause to worry. But what does she hope the response will be?

“I want it to be a really striking thing, as if it has always been there,” she says, “so that people say, ‘It makes sense’. But they don’t know why.”

theguardian

Katharina Fritsch on her Fourth Plinth cockerel sculpture: 'I didn't want to make fun – but I was invited'

by Laura Barnett | July 24, 2013

Katharina Fritsch takes a sip of her mint tea, leans in close and – in a voice full of mischief – says: “I think the English have a great sense of humour. I know they like to play games with language. They like their double meanings. So I wanted to play around.”

The German artist, bleary-eyed in a London hotel after only getting two hours' sleep on an early flight from Düsseldorf, is talking about her sculpture for the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square. The moment she was asked to submit an idea, she knew what it would be: a big blue cock. Sorry, I mean a big blue cockerel. Fritsch's winning commission – an oversized rooster 4.7 metres tall painted a deep matt blue – is unveiled today, positively inviting double entendres as it sits there in the shadow of Nelson's Column. And that, of course, is part of the point.

There is certainly a delicious, childish pleasure to be had in seeing a sculpture called Hahn/Cock (hahn means “cock” in German and carries the same double meaning) in such an august location, waving his tail-feathers at the National Gallery and aiming his beak at Nelson's sniffily turned back. There's humour, too, in the fact that a cockerel – the national symbol of France, especially when coloured a distinctly Gallic hue – will reside for the next 18 months right beside a monument to the vanquishing of the French. Is this irony intentional? “I definitely never thought about the French thing,” she says. “But it's a nice humorous side-effect to have something French in a place that celebrates victory over Napoleon.” She gives an impish smile. “He has come back as a cockerel!”



A model of Katharina Fritsch's Hahn/Cock, for the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, London. Photograph: John Phillips/UK Press via Getty Images

Humour runs through much of Fritsch's work, which is well-known in Britain: she was the subject of a major show at Tate Modern in 2001, and is represented by influential gallery White Cube; but she is much more famous in Germany. Since the late 1970s, when she began studying at Düsseldorf's prestigious Kunstakademie, where she now teaches, she has turned out a series of meticulously rendered sculptures of animals and people, their detailed naturalism made strange by spray-painted colours that are garishly unexpected and uniformly matt.

Sometimes, she places her sculptures in unsettling scenarios, like scenes from a fairytale or a half-remembered dream. In *Man and Mouse*, a giant, soot-black rodent looms over a man's sleeping body; in *Child with Poodles*, a baby lies on a painted gold star, surrounded by hundreds of miniature black dogs. The poodles are funny, but they are also faintly terrifying – and as far from kitsch as it is possible for a plaster poodle to be.

While it's true that only the square's pigeons are likely to be terrified by *Hahn/Cock*, there is more to the work than humour: it's a clear sendup of masculine posturing and power, of which Nelson's column is a fine example. The cockerel's carefully sculpted plumage echoes the folds of the admiral's uniform, while the natty crest looks a bit like his hat. Standing right behind him, *Hahn/Cock* makes stern-faced old Nelson look, well, a little silly. Is this a feminist statement?

"I'm a feminist, I must say," she replies. "It's about male posing, about showing power, about showing ... erections! I mean, look at that column!" She laughs. "As a German woman, when I first came to London, the area around Trafalgar Square seemed to be very much focusing on men – especially with fashion, with Jermyn Street. You have all these dandies, all these businessmen in their suits, who have to be powerful and successful. And they are a little bit posing like cockerels."

Before he's even had a chance to roost, Fritsch's cockerel has already ruffled some feathers – as has become traditional with the Fourth Plinth programme, which has seen a rolling series of artworks on the site. Most of the commissions – including Marc Quinn's 2005 sculpture of the disabled artist Alison Lapper, and Antony Gormley's interactive project *One & Other*, which saw more than 2,000 people occupy the plinth for an hour each over 100 days – have had their share of nay-sayers. This is part of the point: the plinth programme is keen to inspire a healthy debate about what constitutes public art.

Fritsch certainly sees it this way. Chief among the early detractors of *Hahn/Cock* are local conservation group the Thorney Island Society, who registered a planning objection earlier this year on the grounds that the sculpture was "totally inappropriate; however fanciful and dramatic it might appear to be". Fritsch's response is diplomatic. "I think from their point of view," she says, "they might be right. I had a few days of big insecurity. I'm very respectful, as a German coming to a foreign city. I don't want to make fun of Trafalgar Square, or the battle of Trafalgar. But I was invited. And I think that, through this piece, you have a monument that is always asking, 'What was the Battle of Trafalgar? Who is this man on the column?' I think it's keeping history alive."

For Fritsch, colour is what transforms a sculpture from a naturalistic ornament into a symbol. "It evens it out, makes it abstract – like a visual sign, an icon. That is important: my work is always on the borderline between a detailed sculpture and a sign." Fritsch fell in love with colour while touring Germany's medieval

and baroque churches as a child, absorbing their brightly painted works of art; she also has a form of synaesthesia (a crossover of the senses) and associates colours with numbers and days of the week. Sunday is white, the number seven is blue-grey. She is passionate about returning colour to sculpture, believing in its power to trigger an emotional reaction. “In the more abstract 20th century,” she says, “colour was lost. It was not allowed because it was maybe too childish, too sensual, too emotional.”

Emotions certainly run high when Fritsch displays her work in public. In 1987, she was asked to create a public sculpture for Münster, and came up with a sunshine-yellow madonna: a potent statement in such a predominantly Catholic city. The first version, in plastic, was stolen and ended up at a police station; the second, in cement, had its nose broken off, and was regularly sprayed with graffiti. It was a good lesson in how strong reactions can be to public art. “People got very emotional,” she says. “In the daytime, people brought candles and flowers and stood there singing and taking photographs. Then in the night, drunken people hit her or sprayed her. I never expected anything like it.”

More recently, she was delighted by the response to Figurengruppe (Group of Figures), a collection of nine sculptures, including another yellow madonna, that was installed in the garden of New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 2011. “It was unbelievably popular,” she says. “I think people were attracted because it was about colour – and there were no pedestals. The impact of a sculpture becomes very direct when you can stand right next to it and take a photo.”

Hahn/Cock doesn’t present quite the same photo opportunity – unless visitors come armed with a ladder – but the vivid blue bird is sure to be all over Flickr and Instagram fairly soon. For Fritsch, its unveiling today is the tense final step in a long, painstaking journey that began with that initial flash of inspiration. “An idea,” she says, “appears in a minute – you have all these memories and things in your brain and they all get together. In a single second, you have the right picture. I don’t know if this idea will work. But I am hopeful.”

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THE PARKETT SERIES WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS / DIE PARKETT-REIHE MIT GEGENWARTSKÜNSTLERN

PARKETT

NO. 87 · 2010

CHF 45.- / € 30 / US \$ 32

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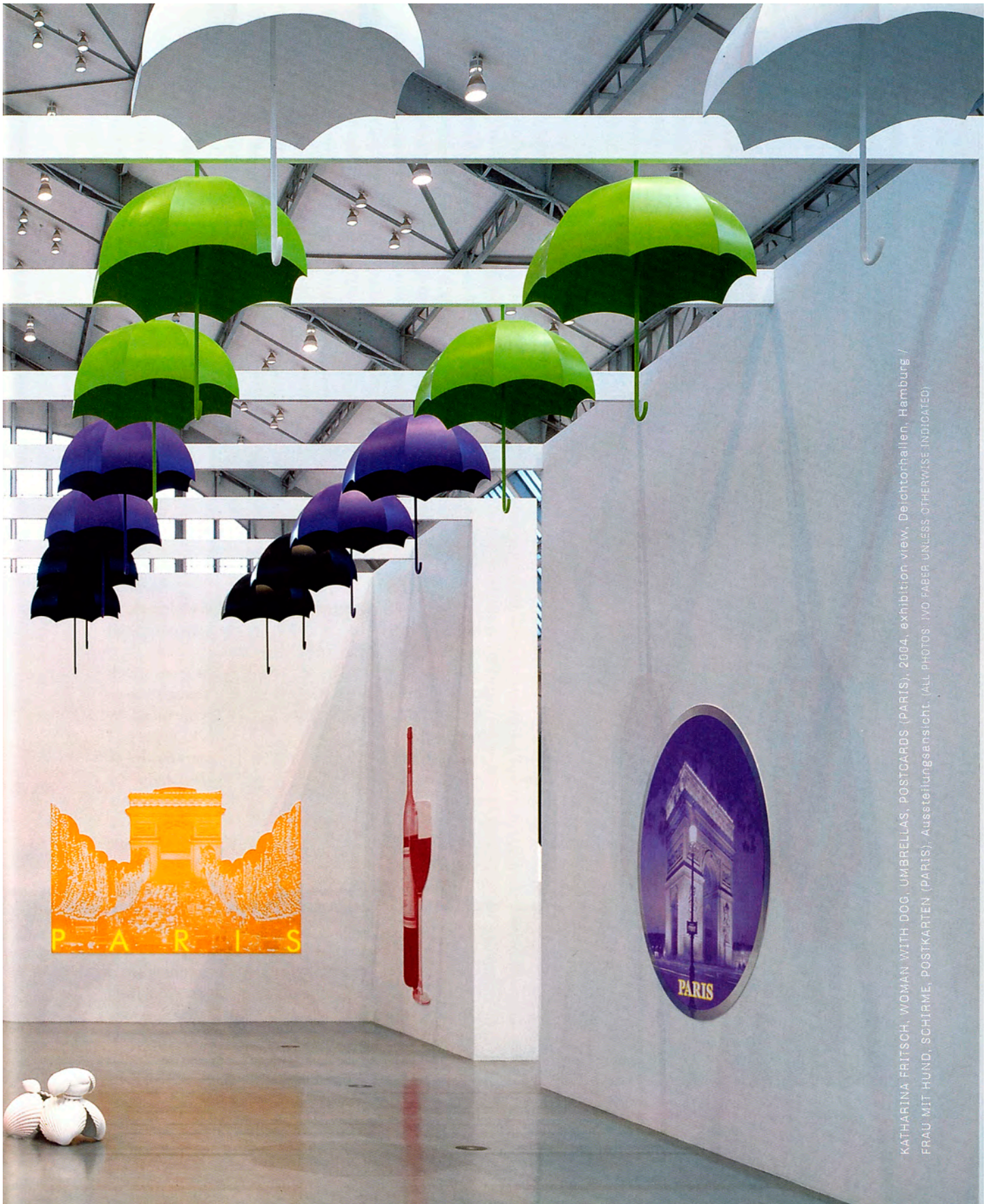
Morgan, Jessica. "From Out There to Down Here." *Parkett*, no. 87, 2010, pp. 34–45.

Criqui, Jean-Pierre. "'This Dream is About You': Katharina Fritsch and the Laws of Animal Attraction."

Parkett, no. 87, 2010, pp. 46–57.



KATHARINA
FRITSCH



KATHARINA FRITSCHE, WOMAN WITH DOG, UMBRELLAS, POSTCARDS (PARIS), 2004, exhibition view, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg /
FRAU MIT HUND, SCHIRME, POSTKARTEN (PARIS), Ausstellungsansicht, (ALL PHOTOS: IVO FABER UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED)

Katharina Fritsch



KATHARINA FRITSCH, DISPLAY STAND II, 2001, glass, aluminum, and objects dating from 1981 – 2001, detail / WARENGESTELL II, Glas, Aluminium, Objekte, Detail.

Much has been said of the unconscious in the work of Katharina Fritsch. It has been described as “sinister and uncanny”¹⁾ and said to deal with “the dark side of the psyche.”²⁾ From her early representations of rats, a monk, and a ghost, to her recent sculptures of a giant, a snake, and an octopus, the ur-myths and fables supposedly summoned by these forms have generally been thought to lead us unwittingly to assess their—and our own—greater psychological depths. Fritsch’s technique is to amplify; her manifestly scrupulous attention to detail, scale, color, and surface allows not only for the immediate comprehensibility of form, but provides one with the sensation of enduring a visitation to the site of a formative experience.

JESSICA MORGAN is curator of Contemporary Art at Tate Modern.

From Out There to Down Here

JESSICA MORGAN

Fritsch’s works are thus taken to be madeleines, in the Proustian sense, evoking the lost memory and imaginary world of childhood.

While I am familiar with the sources from which many of Fritsch’s representations are thought to be derived, I have never been entirely convinced by the psychoanalytic reading of her work. Perhaps I am separated from the work by a generational, or even a national, sort of schism; I do feel quite far removed from any underlying phobias derived from devils, rats, and religious fables. In the urban London of my childhood, the real threats were burglars, muggers, and random street violence. When I look at Fritsch’s RATTENKÖNIG (Rat-King, 1991–93), DOKTOR (1999), or HÄNDLER (Dealer, 2001), my overwhelming impression is of the otherworldly and even hallucinogenic effect of her immaculately modeled, matte surfaces. Their extraordinary autonomy from their surroundings strikes me as ultra-contemporary: rather than appearing like refugees from a recreation of a dance macabre or a German medieval fable, their true home seems closer to commercialized popular culture and to the disarming visual ef-

KATHARINA FRITSCH, COOK, 2008, polyester, color, 79 1/2 x 30 x 40 1/8"; PHOTOGRAPH 6 (BLACK FOREST HOUSE), 2006/2008, silkscreen, plastic, paint, 110 1/4 x 147 3/4"; detail / KOCH, Polyester, Farbe, 202 x 76 x 102 cm; 6. FOTO (SCHWARZWALDHAUS), Siebdruck, Kunststoff, Farbe, 280 x 375 cm, Detail.





KATHARINA FRITSCH, COOK, 2008; PHOTOGRAPH 6 (BLACK FOREST HOUSE), 2006/2008; COMPANY AT TABLE, 1988, exhibition view, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg / KOCH, 6. FOTO (SCHWARZWALDHAUS), TISCHGESELLSCHAFT, Ausstellungsansicht.

fects of film. Indeed, the manner in which Fritsch's work resists contextualization in the gallery further suggests some form of digitized projection. This disarming quality is also a result of their resolutely non-reflective surfaces that disallow for any absorption of the surroundings, as well as their pristine finish that sets them apart from the viewer and from any non-Fritsch artworks unfortunate enough to be in their proximity. And yet, the unnerving, apparitional quality of Fritsch's work is distinctly its obdurate existence in space; our relationship to it, unlike cinema's immersion, remains one of impenetrability. These presences do not come across as simulacra crafted in a Hollywood prop shop, but as unmistakably unique sculptural objects that evidently refuse to fit into their surroundings.

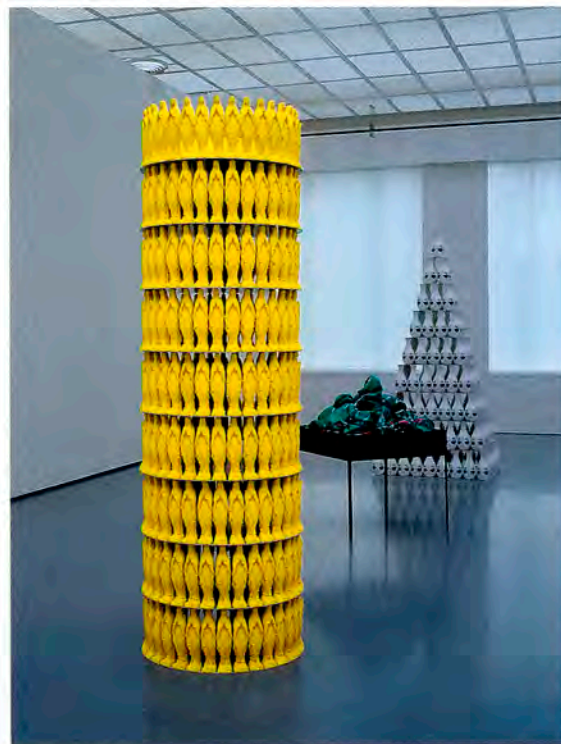
Initially, Fritsch achieved this kind of isolation of form (or image) by placing toy-like objects and multiples on display stands (WARENGESTELL, Display Stand, 1979–84). These glass-shelved structures invited a comparison to the world of merchandize display, but to my eye, they even more closely resembled the sort of display cases often found in domestic environments—those used by a family to protect and exhibit its most treasured objects—be they tchotchkes or semi-precious objet d'arts. This is confirmed by Fritsch's selection of the artifacts, which suggest the vagaries and eclecticism of a "personalized" collection—including a group of toy sheep, a mirror, and a bead necklace, as well as a most perplexing translucent, large green gemstone that sits mysteriously high up on the top shelf. Only the stands that

contain mass-produced versions of the same object (WARENGESTELL MIT MADONNEN, Display Stand with Madonnas, 1987/1989, or WARENGESTELL MIT GEHIRNEN, Display Stand with Brains, 1989) evoke a more typical consumer display aesthetic; in this case, the objects obscure the stand that lies beneath them. In fact, it is truly the outline of the packed stand (a tower of Pisa that doesn't lean, and an hourglass form) that dominates our impression, rather than any of the individual items contained within in it. Fritsch eventually chose to substitute the vitrine for a more traditional pedestal, but one all the while elevated to monumental proportions to accommodate its oversized sculptural occupant. ELEFANT (1987), indeed, took tremendous bravura. It was an almost inconceivably grandiose gesture for an artist in her first solo show in Germany, and it quickly established Fritsch's mastery of a form of alienation and of alien forms. The elephant, with its physical attributes—already associated with museology, albeit that of the Museum of Natural History—had long been established as one of the greatest spectacles of the natural world. Fritsch then added to this trope an arresting, dull-green surface. It was a disarming feat, which she took to even greater lengths with her fluorescent-yellow MADONNENFIGUR (Madonna Figure, 1987). The figure stood without a pedestal famously positioned in a Münster public plaza between a department store and the neighboring church. With this work and others like it, Fritsch achieved an otherworldly remove at odds with the dominant interpretation of her work as a projection of our subconscious fears and desires. While dreams and nightmares are characterized by a distortion of reality, Fritsch's figures are outlandish beings separated from contextual grounding.

On the topic of her sculptural work, Fritsch has remarked on her need to “abide by all the various laws of sculpture,” despite her desire to ignore such laws and produce instead what she calls “three-dimensional pictures.”³⁾ But what is meant by three-dimensional pictures? Does this term connote a perfectly constructed, immaculate image existing purely within the mind, rather than in our ever-deficient reality? And what precisely is the difference between a flat image and a sculpture in the round? Is it strictly a matter of detail? Fritsch has spoken of her ability

to think in pictures, to be versed in a kind of personal interior sign language. This notion of language suggests why her work may be difficult to penetrate for anyone who does not have the linguistic tools to make sense of her system of signs. Nevertheless, this “distancing effect” separates her work from other artists of her generation who have similarly dealt with appropriated objects taken from the everyday. Take, for example, Haim Steinbach, Sherrie Levine, and Robert Gober. Or most notably, Jeff Koons, whose works of the eighties and nineties were often cynically “misunderstood,” especially in Europe. In the meantime it has become apparent that Koons' subversive strategy consists more of celebrating popular culture than of criticizing it. Does that put Fritsch in the same camp with Koons?

In my mind, the major difference between the two artists is that Koons makes a deliberate effort at inclusion through the accessibility of his shiny surfaces, overtly sexual subject matter, and reference to toys and popular culture, while Fritsch, conversely,



Katharina Fritsch

detaches her sculptural “pictures” from their origins, making them appear to be frozen in time and out of reach.

With this in mind, it is all the more surprising to see Fritsch’s recent work. The sculptures have now been given backgrounds! No longer are we confronted by alien beings dropped from nowhere into our reality. Now there is the suggestion that they have an appropriate home. This impression comes from the monochromatic, large-scale photos (pictures of pictures). For example, in one piece, a nauseating, cake-icing-yellow-colored chef holds an utterly undesirable plate of food in front of what appears to be an equally uninviting restaurant. In *RIESE* (Giant, 2008), a cement-gray caveman (modeled from a very tall taxi driver from Düsseldorf who stands at 1.95 meters) with an expression of resigned fatalism leans on his Fred Flintstone-like club in front of a dramatic rocky vista. In *ST. KATHARINA* (2007), a matte black replica of a statue of St. Catherine stands against a wall of lush ivy. While the works retain the sculptural ambiguity derived from their standard Fritschian surfaces and pigmentation, the effect of this new contextualization correlates more to filmmaking. In fact, it was most interesting to read in an essay in the cata-

logue for her recent show at Kunsthaus Zurich that Fritsch had had a fruitful and sympathetic conversation with the legendary set designer Ken Adam, who is known for his work on the early James Bond sets (*Dr. No* and *Goldfinger*) and is the person responsible for the otherworldly settings in Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*.⁴⁾ What Fritsch’s new backgrounds do in combination with the sculptures is not particularly suggestive of the set design genre; however, they are reminiscent of the “blue screen” effects seen in somewhat dated films and television from the sixties and seventies where actors are artificially superimposed onto virtual sets through a trick of the camera/editing room. The photographic images themselves have a suffused light, a scale, and proportions that recall the movie screen. They create an overall effect considerably more driven by narrative than by any single sculptural moment.

KATHARINA FRITSCH, PHOTO (RIVERBANK), 2009, 12-part silkscreen, plastic, paint, 110 ¼ x 630” / FOTO (FLUSSUFER), 12-teiliger Siebdruck, Kunststoff, Farbe, 280 x 1600 cm.





These new works are also extremely funny, though I suspect I am in the minority in finding Fritsch's work humorous rather than strictly serious. I have always found works such as *MANN UND MAUS* (Man and Mouse, 1991–92) and *KIND MIT PUDELN* (Child with Poodles, 1995–96) to be amusingly witty, and the recent *RIESE* (Giant, 2008) and *KOCH* (Cook, 2008) are even more biting sharp in the way that they spoof a certain type of man. It has been noted that Fritsch uses a live model for her sculptures of men while the female forms are derived from pre-existing statues, like *MADONNENFIGUR*, *ST. KATHARINA*, and *GARTENSKULPTUR* (TORSO 2005/06). The precision and realism that Fritsch achieves by working from a live model suggests a contemporary, even everyday persona such that even when confronted by the caveman dressed in animal skin we are aware that the subject of her attack was born in the twentieth century. Meanwhile Fritsch's female figures remain sublimely aloof, allowed to rest in the

KATHARINA FRITSCH, BOOTH WITH FOUR STATUES, 1985/86 / 2001, wood, paint, plaster, 78 3/4 x 78 3/4 x 110 1/4", detail / MESSEKOJE MIT VIER FIGUREN, Holz, Farbe, Gips, 200 x 200 x 280 cm, Detail.

form of ur-archetypes rather than descending to the level of the here and now. Indeed it seems increasingly the case that Fritsch's particular use of surface treatment—the matte coloring that sets them apart in the gallery—also has a gendered aspect, a subtlety that has progressed in the recent works. While previously male figures such as *DOCTOR* (1999), *DEALER* (2001) and *MONK* (1999) were given appropriate coloring for their somewhat clichéd characters (white, red, and black), the recent male figures are not only less immediately easy to identify as “types” (and thus more subtly penetrating), but are matched with colors that appear to have been chosen for their capacity to further repel. By comparison her female figures are let off fairly lightly: a suitably pretty pink used for the recent *WOMAN WITH A DOG* (2004) and a fairly predictable black for the nun-like *ST. KATHARINA*.

It is the discomfiting, satirical nature of her male figures that makes them all the more memorable. Seen in combination with Fritsch's other recent two-dimensional productions, which isolate the clichés of domestic imagery (kitsch fridge magnets and postcards from Paris), her work can be seen to have arrived at a new level of contemporary observation. Perhaps Fritsch's work has lost something of its icy remove through the contextualization of two-dimensional images, but what it has gained is a capacity to register more evocatively in our daily lives: to surround us with pictures in both two dimensions and three, all of which are worthy of dissection.

1) Elizabeth A. Smith, “New Forms for Old Symbols” in *Katharina Fritsch* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2001), p. 7.

2) Lynne Cooke, “Parerga” in *Katharina Fritsch* (New York: Dia Center for the Arts, 1994), p. 6.

3) Katharina Fritsch interview with Susanne Bieber in *Katharina Fritsch* (London: Tate Modern, 2002), p. 98.

4) A Conversation with Ken Adam, Cristina Bechtler, Katharina Fritsch, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, moderated by Bice Curiger. Cristina Bechtler (ed.), *Style and Scale, or: Do You Have Anxiety?* (Vienna, New York: Springer-Verlag, 2009).

Katharina Fritsch



KATHARINA FRITSCH, GARDEN SCULPTURE 1 (TORSO), 2006, polyester, paint, 78 3/4 x 15 3/4 x 15 3/4"; POSTCARD 1 (ESSEN), 2006, silkscreen, plastic, paint, 110 1/4 x 157", detail / 1. GARTENSKULPTUR (TORSO), Polyester, Farbe, 200 x 40 x 40 cm; 1. POSTKARTE (ESSEN), Siebdruck, Kunststoff, Farbe, 280 x 399 cm, Detail.

Über das Unbewusste im Werk von Katharina Fritsch wurde schon viel geschrieben. Es hiess, es sei «düster und unheimlich»¹⁾ und befasse sich mit «der dunklen Seite der Seele».²⁾ Von ihren ersten Darstellungen von Ratten, eines Mönchs, eines Gespensts bis zu den neueren Skulpturen eines Riesen, einer

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Von dort draussen hier herab

JESSICA MORGAN

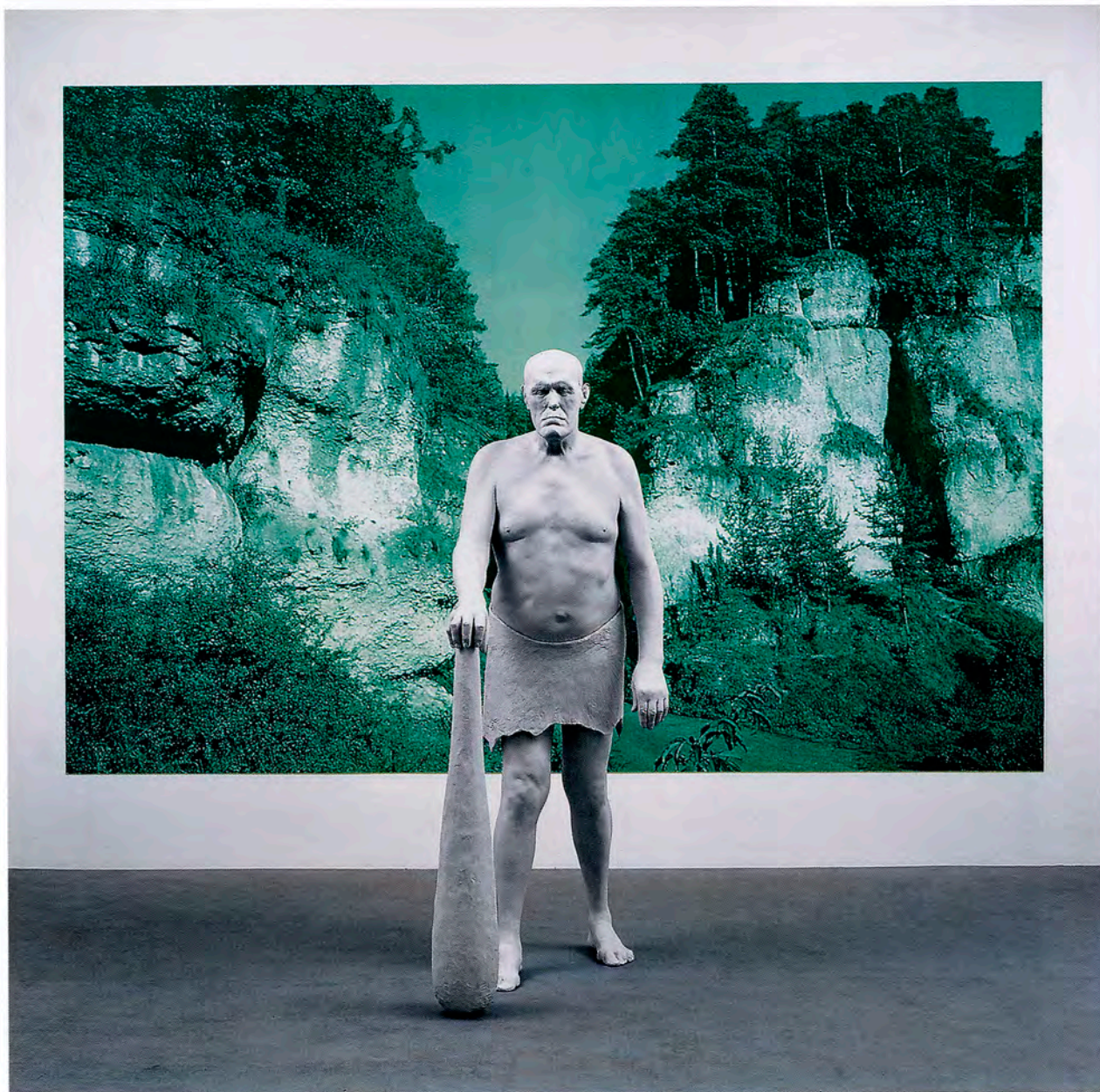
Schlange und eines Tintenfisches wurden die in diesen Formen vermutlich angesprochenen uralten Mythen und Fabeln allgemein so aufgefasst, dass sie uns unwillkürlich dazu führten, deren – und unsere eigenen – psychologische Tiefenschichten zu ergründen. Die Technik Fritschs besteht in einer Verstärkung; ihre erwiesenermassen peinliche Sorgfalt im Umgang mit Details, Massstäblichkeit, Farben und Oberflächen gewährleistet nicht nur die unmittelbare Verständlichkeit ihrer Formen, sondern gibt einem das Gefühl, gleichsam an den Ort einer prägenden Erfahrung versetzt zu werden. Fritschs Werke sind daher als Madeleines im Proust'schen Sinn zu verstehen: Sie beschwören die verlorene Erinnerung und Vorstellungswelt der Kindheit wieder herauf.

Obwohl ich mit den Quellen durchaus vertraut bin, aus denen, wie man allgemein annimmt, viele von Fritschs Darstellungen herrühren sollen, hat mich die psychoanalytische Deutung ihrer Kunst nie wirklich zu überzeugen vermocht. Vielleicht ist es eine generationsbedingte oder sogar eine Art nationale Kluft, die mich von ihrem Werk trennt; unterschwellige Phobien, die mit Teufeln, Ratten und religiösen Legenden zusammenhängen, liegen mir gefühlsmässig ziemlich fern. Im städtischen London meiner Kindheit waren Einbrecher, Strassenräuber und die willkürliche Gewalt der Strasse die wahren Gefahren. Angesichts von Fritschs RATTENKÖNIG (1991–93), DOKTOR (1999) oder HÄNDLER (2001)

KATHARINA FRITSCHE, PHOTOGRAPH 1 (ROSE GARDEN), 1977/2007, silkscreen, plastic, paint, 3 parts, 110 1/4 x 52 3/8" each; GARDEN SCULPTURE 3 (SKELETON FEET), 2006, polyester, paint, 55 1/8 x 15 3/4 x 15 3/4", exhibition view, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York / 1. FOTO (ROSENGARTEN), Siebdruck, Kunststoff, Farbe, 3-teilig, je 280 x 133 cm; 3. GARTENSKULPTUR (SKELETTFÜSSE), Polyester, Farbe, 140 x 40 x 40 cm, Ausstellungsansicht.



Katharina Fritsch



KATHARINA FRITSCH, GIANT, 2008, polyester, paint, 76 ³/₄ x 37 ⁴/₈ x 27 ¹/₂"; POSTCARD 4 (FRANCONIA), 2008, silkscreen, plastic, paint, 110 ¹/₄ x 159 ¹/₂" / RIESE, Polyester, Farbe, 195 x 95 x 70 cm; 4. POSTKARTE (FRANKEN), Siebdruck, Kunststoff, Farbe, 280 x 405 cm.

bin ich zunächst einmal von der überirdischen, ja geradezu halluzinatorischen Wirkung der makellos modellierten, matten Oberflächen überwältigt. Die aussergewöhnliche Autonomie dieser Werke im Verhältnis zur ihrer Umgebung halte ich für ultrazeitgenössisch: Sie scheinen mir in Wahrheit eher in der verkommerzialiserten Volkskultur und den entwaffnenden Bildeffekten des Films beheimatet, als aus einem wiedererstandenen Totentanz oder einer Fabel des deutschen Mittelalters entsprungen zu sein. So wie Fritschs Werke der kontextuellen Einbettung in den Ausstellungsraum widerstehen, wirken sie sogar beinahe wie eine Art digitale Projektion. Diese entwaffnende Qualität geht auch auf die dezidiert nicht spiegelnden Oberflächen zurück, die jede Absorption der Umgebung verunmöglichen, genau wie ihr makelloser Finish sie vom Betrachter und jedem nichtfritschschen Werk abhebt, das das Pech hat, in ihren Dunstkreis zu geraten. Dennoch liegt die verunsichernde, geisterhafte Qualität von Fritschs Arbeiten eindeutig in ihrer unerbittlichen räumlichen Existenz; sie bleiben für uns – anders als ein Film, in den wir eintauchen können – undurchdringlich. Diese Wesen erwecken nicht den Eindruck von Trugbildern aus einer Hollywoodwerkstatt, sondern es handelt sich ganz klar um einzigartige skulpturale Objekte, die sich offensichtlich nicht in ihre Umgebung einfügen wollen.

Es scheint, dass Fritsch diese «Isolation der Form» (oder des Bildes) am Anfang dadurch erreichte, dass sie spielzeugartige Objekte und Multiples auf Gestellen präsentierte (WARENGESTELL, 1979–84). Diese Glasregalgebilde legten zwar den Vergleich mit der Welt der Warenpräsentation nahe, in meinen Augen glichen sie jedoch eher Vitrinen aus dem privaten Bereich – solchen, in denen Familienschätze gehütet und präsentiert werden, egal ob Nippes oder halbwegs kostbare *objets d'art*. Diese Vermutung wird durch Fritschs Wahl der Artefakte bestätigt, die an die Launen und Eklektizismen einer individuell gestalteten Sammlung denken lassen – wie etwa eine Gruppe Spielzeugschäfchen, ein Spiegel, eine Glasperlenkette sowie ein echt verblüffender, lichtdurchlässiger, grosser, grüner Schmuckstein, der sich mysteriöserweise zuoberst auf dem höchsten Regal befindet. Nur jene Gestelle, die mit so vielen Repro-

duktionen ein und desselben Objekts gefüllt sind – WARENGESTELL MIT MADONNEN (1987/1989) oder WARENGESTELL MIT GEHIRNEN (1989) –, dass man unweigerlich an Massenproduktion denkt, beschwören die typische Ästhetik der Konsumgüterpräsentation; in diesem Fall bedecken die Objekte das Gestell, das sie trägt. Tatsächlich ist es in erster Linie der Umriss des prallvollen Gestells (ein nicht schiefer Turm von Pisa und eine Sanduhrform), der unseren Eindruck bestimmt, und nicht eines der darin untergebrachten Objekte. Schliesslich hat sich Fritsch dazu entschlossen, die Vitrine durch einen gebräuchlicheren Sockel zu ersetzen, doch auch dieser wurde zu monumentaler Grösse aufgeblasen, um seinem riesigen skulpturalen «Aufsatz» genügend Platz zu bieten: ELEFANT (1987) erforderte wirklich eine gigantische Leistung. Es war eine fast unvorstellbar grandiose Geste für eine Künstlerin, die gerade mal ihre erste Einzelausstellung in Deutschland hatte, und sie etablierte sogleich Fritschs Meisterschaft im Umgang mit einer bestimmten Art von Verfremdung und fremdartigen Formen. Der Elefant – den man bereits mit der Museumswelt verband, wenn auch mit der des Naturhistorischen Museums – galt mit seinen Körpermerkmalen schon seit Langem als eines der spektakulärsten Naturschauspiele. Fritsch versah das vertraute Sujet mit einer atemberaubenden Oberfläche in mattem Dunkelgrün. Es war eine entwaffnende Bravourleistung, die sie im gleichen Jahr noch mit ihrer MADONNENFIGUR in fluoreszierendem Gelb überbot, die in Münster ohne Sockel an prominenter Stelle in der Fussgängerzone zwischen Warenhaus und Kirche stand. In diesen und ähnlichen Werken erreichte Fritsch jene fremdartige Entrücktheit, die nicht mehr mit der gängigen Interpretation ihrer Kunst als Projektion unterbewusster Ängste und Wünsche übereinstimmt. Während Träume und Alpträume sich durch eine Verzerrung der Realität auszeichnen, sind Fritschs Figuren seltsam fremde Wesen jenseits jedes begründenden Kontexts.

Im Zusammenhang mit ihrem plastischen Werk hat Fritsch von ihrem Bedürfnis gesprochen, «sämtliche Gesetze der Bildhauerei zu befolgen», trotz ihres Wunsches, solche Gesetze zu ignorieren und stattdessen, wie sie sagt, «dreidimensionale Bilder» zu produzieren.³⁾ Aber was ist mit dreidimensiona-

len Bildern gemeint? Bezeichnet dieser Ausdruck ein perfekt aufgebautes, makellores Bild, das nur im Geist existiert, und nicht in unserer immer mit Fehlern behafteten Wirklichkeit? Und was genau ist der Unterschied zwischen einem flachen Bild und einer Rundskulptur? Ist es nur eine Frage von Details? Fritsch hat davon gesprochen, in Bildern denken zu können und über eine Art persönlicher innerer Zeichensprache zu verfügen. Diese Auffassung von Sprache deutet an, warum ihre Kunst für all jene schwer ergründbar bleibt, die nicht über das sprachliche Werkzeug verfügen, um ihr Zeichensystem zu entschlüsseln. Dennoch hebt dieser «Distanzierungseffekt» ihre Werke von denen anderer Künstler ihrer Generation ab, welche sich ebenfalls mit der Appropriation von Alltagsobjekten befasst haben. Etwa Haim Steinbach, Sherrie Levine oder Robert Gober, allen voran aber Jeff Koons, dessen Werke der 80er- und 90er-Jahre insbesondere in Europa oft als zynisch «missverstanden» wurden. Mittlerweile hat sich herauskristallisiert, dass Koons' subversive Strategie eher darin besteht, die Massenkultur zu zelebrieren, als sie zu kritisieren. Ist Fritsch demselben Lager zuzuordnen wie Koons?

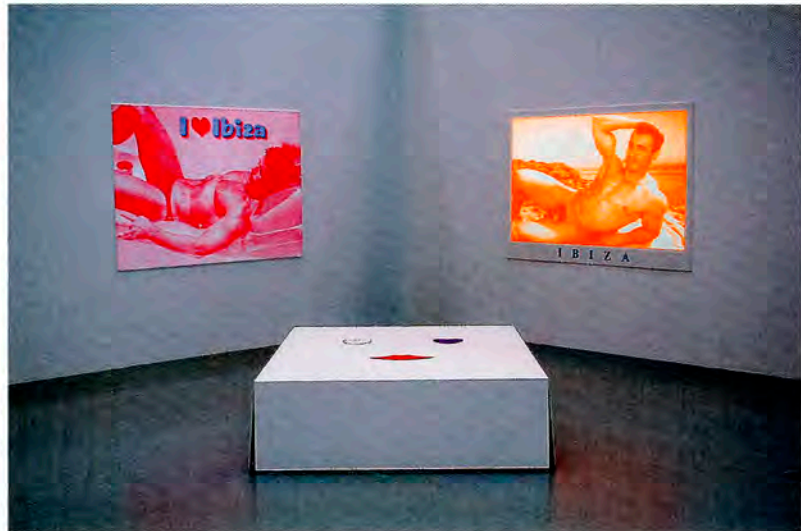
Meiner Ansicht nach besteht der wichtigste Unterschied zwischen den beiden Künstlern, darin, dass Koons – mit der Zugänglichkeit seiner glänzenden Oberflächen, seinen offen sexuellen Sujets und seinen Anspielungen auf Spielzeuge und Populärkultur – einen bewussten Integrationsversuch macht, wogegen Fritsch ihrer Herkunft enthobene skulpturale «Bilder» präsentiert, die wie momenthaft erstarrt und unerreichbar entrückt wirken.

Umso überraschender sind vor diesem Hintergrund Fritschs neuere Arbeiten. Jetzt haben die Skulpturen Hintergründe erhalten! Wir stehen nicht mehr Ausserirdischen gegenüber, die es aus dem Nichts in unsere reale Welt verschlagen hat. Jetzt gibt es Hinweise, dass sie eine eigene Heimat haben. Dieser Eindruck entsteht durch die grossformatigen monochromen Photographien (Bilder von Bildern). In KOCH (2008) streckt uns beispielsweise ein Koch in ekligem Tortengussgelb, vor dem Schwarzweissphoto eines nicht sehr einladend wirkenden Gasthauses, einen gefüllten Teller im selben unappetitlichen Gelb entgegen. In RIESE (2008) steht ein

zementgrauer Höhlenmensch (der Abguss eines 1 Meter 95 grossen Taxifahrers aus Düsseldorf) mit einem Ausdruck resignierter Schicksalsergebenheit auf seine Fred-Feuerstein-artige Keule gestützt vor der dramatischen Ansicht eines felsigen Geländes. ST. KATHARINA (2007) zeigt die mattschwarze Replik einer Statue der heiligen Katharina vor dem Bild einer üppig mit Efeu überwucherten Mauer. Obwohl die Skulpturen das Doppelbödiges der typisch Fritsch'schen Oberflächen und Farbpigmente beibehalten haben, hat diese neue Einbettung in einen Kontext eher filmische Qualität. Tatsächlich war es äusserst interessant, in einem Essay im Katalog zu ihrer jüngsten Ausstellung im Kunsthaus Zürich zu lesen, dass Fritsch ein ergiebiges und von gegenseitigem Verstehen geprägtes Gespräch mit dem legendären Filmset-Designer Ken Adam führte; dieser wurde durch seine Dekorationen und Bauten für die frühen James-Bond-Filme (*Dr. No* und *Goldfinger*) berühmt und zeichnet auch für die fantastisch anmutenden Szenerien in Stanley Kubricks *Dr. Strange- love* verantwortlich.⁴⁾ Die Wirkung, die Fritschs neue Hintergründe in Kombination mit den Skulpturen erzeugen, hat eigentlich nichts mit Set-Design zu tun, doch es erinnert von ferne an die «Blue screen»-Effekte etwas älterer Filme oder TV-Produktionen aus den 60er- und 70er-Jahren, in denen die Schauspieler nachträglich in virtuelle Szenerien eingeblendet wurden, was im Wesentlichen ein Kamera- und Montage-trick war. Das Licht in den photographierten Bildern ist gleichmässig verteilt, und in Grösse und Proportionen erinnern sie an die Filmleinwand. Die Gesamtwirkung beruht sehr viel stärker auf dem narrativen Zusammenhang als auf irgendeinem skulpturalen Einzelmoment.

Die neuen Werke sind auch äusserst witzig, obwohl ich mit der Auffassung, dass Fritschs Werk eher humoristisch ist als todernst, vermutlich in der Minderheit bin. Ich habe Arbeiten wie MANN UND MAUS (1991–92) und KIND MIT PUDELN (1995–96) immer witzig-amüsan gefunden, und die neueren Werke RIESE und KOCH sind noch bissiger, durch die Art, wie sie einen bestimmten Männertypus auf die Schippe nehmen. Es wurde darauf hingewiesen, dass Fritsch für ihre Männerskulpturen lebendige Modelle verwendet, während sie die weiblichen Formen

KATHARINA FRITSCH, FRENCH BED, 2009; POSTCARD 6 (IBIZA), 2007; POSTCARD 9 (IBIZA), 2007, exhibition view, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg / FRANZÖSISCHES BETT, 6. POSTKARTE (IBIZA); 9. POSTKARTE (IBIZA), Ausstellungsansicht.



von bestehenden Statuen ableitet, etwa die MADONNENFIGUR, ST. KATHARINA und GARTENSKULPTUR (TORSO 2005/06). Die Präzision und der Realismus, die Fritsch erreicht, indem sie vom lebenden Modell ausgeht, verweist auf einen ganz gewöhnlichen Menschen unserer Zeit, sodass uns, selbst wenn wir vor dem mit einer Tierhaut bekleideten Höhlenmenschen stehen, immer bewusst ist, dass das Ziel ihres Angriffs im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert geboren wurde. Dagegen bleiben Fritschs Frauenfiguren unnahbar erhaben, sie dürfen in den Formen uralter Archetypen ruhen und brauchen nicht auf die Ebene des Hier und Jetzt herabzusteigen. Ja, es scheint sogar zunehmend so, dass Fritschs besondere Oberflächenbehandlung – die matte Farbe, die ihre Skulpturen im Ausstellungsraum abhebt – ebenfalls einen geschlechtsspezifischen Aspekt hat, eine Finesse, die in den neueren Werken stärker zutage tritt. Während frühere männliche Figuren, wie DOKTOR (1999), HÄNDLER (2001) und MÖNCH (1999), eine dem Rollenklischee entsprechende Farbe erhielten (Weiss, Rot, Schwarz), sind die neuen Männerfiguren nicht nur weniger rasch und leicht als «Typen» identifizierbar (und wirken dadurch etwas weniger penetrant), sondern sind mit Farben gepaart, die aufgrund ihres starken Abstossungspotenzials gewählt zu sein scheinen. Im Vergleich dazu kommen ihre Frauenfiguren einigermaßen glimpflich davon: ein angemessen

hübsches Rosa für die FRAU MIT HUND (2004) und ein ziemlich vorhersehbares Schwarz für die nonnenartige ST. KATHARINA.

Die beunruhigende, satirische Qualität ihrer Männerfiguren macht diese jedoch nur umso unvergesslicher. Betrachtet man sie zusammen mit Fritschs anderen neueren zweidimensionalen Arbeiten, die Klischees aus dem häuslichen Bildvokabular aufgreifen (kitschige Kühlschranksmagnete und Paris-Postkarten), zeigt sich, dass ihre Arbeit eine neue Stufe zeitkritischer Beobachtung erreicht hat. Vielleicht hat Fritschs Werk durch den Kontext der zweidimensionalen Bilder etwas von seiner eisigen Distanziertheit verloren, dafür aber die Macht hinzugewonnen, stärker in unseren Alltag hineinzuwirken: uns mit zwei- und dreidimensionalen Bildern zu umstellen, die es allemal wert sind, analysiert zu werden.

(Übersetzung: Suzanne Schmidt)

- 1) Elizabeth A. Smith, «New Forms for Old Symbols», in *Katharina Fritsch*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago 2001, S. 7.
- 2) Lynne Cooke, «Parerga», in *Katharina Fritsch*, Dia Center for the Arts, New York 1994, S. 6.
- 3) Katharina Fritsch im Interview mit Susanne Bieber, in *Katharina Fritsch*, Tate Modern, London 2002, S. 98.
- 4) *Style and Scale, or: Do You Have Anxiety? – A Conversation with Ken Adam, Katharina Fritsch, and Hans Ulrich Obrist*, moderiert von Bice Curiger, hg. v. Cristina Bechtler, engl./dt., Springer-Verlag, Berlin/New York 2008.

PARKETT

Katharina Fritsch

“THIS DREAM IS ABOUT YOU”

JEAN-PIERRE CRIQUI

“Orpheus, Homer and Hesiod were only able to make the Chimera; God made the octopus.”¹⁾ Thus writes Victor Hugo, at the start of Book IV, Part II, of his novel, *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* (Toilers of the Sea, 1866), the last installment of a trilogy on fate which began with *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), followed by *Les Misérables* (1862). Attempting to catch a crab that has escaped under a great rock formation not far from the shore, Gilliatt, the protagonist, finds himself suddenly confronted by a huge octopus that seizes him, forcing him to struggle mightily against it. This battle between man and octopus provides Hugo with the pretext for a long exposition—half description, half digression—that probably stands as the most striking text devoted to this kind of animal in all of French literature. “It is disease embodied in monstrosity.”²⁾

Apparently it wasn't until the mid-nineteenth century that cephalopods began to take on this terrifying role in the popular imagination. In 1861, in a chapter of *The Sea* (1861) titled “The Plunderer of the Sea (octopus, etc.),” Jules Michelet, letting some dark phantom speak, already associates these animals with the realm of “war” and “murder.” Through the episode just evoked, the *Toilers of the Sea*, which brought the world *pieuvre*—until then limited to the dialect of the Anglo-Norman islands—into French, established the creature's demonic legend:

*Your muscles swell, your fibers writhe, your skin cracks under the foul weight, your blood spurts forth and mingles frightfully with the lymph of the mollusk. The creature superimposes itself upon you by a thousand mouths; the hydra itself incorporates with the man; the man amalgamates himself with the hydra. You form but one. This dream is upon you.*³⁾

Towards the end of her recent exhibition at the Kunsthau Zurich (2009), Katharina Fritsch offered onlookers a work in perfect resonance with this Romantic myth of the octo-

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KATHARINA FRITTSCH, ELEPHANT, 1987, polyester, wood, paint, 63 x 165 3/8 x 149 1/2" / ELEFANT, Polyester, Holz, Farbe, 160 x 420 x 380 cm.

Katharina Fritsch and the Laws of Animal Attraction

pus. I am talking about OKTOPUS (2006/2009). On a slender white platform four feet by four feet, the figure of a bright orange octopus clutches, in one of its tentacles reaching up into the air, a deep-sea diver who is matte black in color, similar to the adjustable-height tripod supporting these elements. This distanced presentation makes the scene akin to a sort of laboratory specimen, an impression even further accentuated by the monochrome, non-mimetic character of the colors assigned to the diver as well as the animal. Living beings usually have a single hue in the sculptural world of Fritsch, who thereby follows what one might call the "Pink Panther principle": that is, her use of color serves an identifying, even symbolic



KATHARINA FRITSCH, OCTOPUS, 2006/2009; BRAIN, 1987/2009; SKULL WITH TOP HAT (MODEL), 2006/2008, exhibition view, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg / OKTOPUS, GEHIRN, TOTENKOPF MIT ZYLINDER (MODELL), Ausstellungsansicht.

purpose, without necessarily being related to the actual appearance of the representations.⁴⁾ At the core of this universe, animals hold a prominent place, first of all because of the relative frequency of their appearance, and secondly due to the specific task they are assigned. The manner in which the artist portrays them, but also the situations in which she puts them, makes them ambiguous forces at the intersection of multiple currents: primal human fears and superstitions such as those often described in children's stories, totemic thought and its images, Freudian *Unheimlichkeit* and dreamwork. In Zurich, works from the "Zeitungssillustration" (Newspaper Illustration) series, exhibited not far away from OKTOPUS, gave a precise sense of the latter's complex tonality through a system of echoes. These enlargements of essentially "late-nineteenth-century" engravings on plastic panels similarly showed a deep-sea diver carrying the corpse of a shipwrecked woman, a girl devoured by a crocodile, or even—in keeping with a more indirect, though no less crucial relationship between the octopus and its victim—a group of ladies from New York giving themselves over to the effects of opium.

Because they disturb us, Fritsch's animals hold us, attract us, and even sometimes astound us. When we stand before them, we are gripped, in the same way as the diver of OKTOPUS.

KATHARINA FRITSCH, NEWSPAPER ILLUSTRATION 4
 ("SCENE FROM THE LONDON ZOO: PULLING AN ALREADY
 SWALLOWED BOA FROM THE MOUTH OF A PYTHON"),
 2008, silkscreen, plastic, paint, 52 3/4 x 78 3/4" /
 4. ZEITUNGSILLUSTRATION («SZENE IM SCHLANGEN-
 KÄFIG DES ZOOLOGISCHEN GARTENS ZU LONDON:
 HERAUSZIEHEN EINER BEREITS VERSCHLUNGENEN BOA
 AUS DEM RACHEN EINER PYTHONSCHLANGE»), Sieb-
 druck, Kunststoff, Farbe, 134 x 200 cm.



This is because the “silence of animals,”⁵⁾ which conveys, for those who pay close attention, a considerable weight of meaning, clearly has something in common with the modes of signification proper to imagery and to art, which themselves cultivate a form of (literal or metaphorical) silence. The poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, particularly the *Neue Gedichte* (1907), is full of this sort of affinity: one need only read, among many others, the poems entitled “Der Hund,” “Die Gazelle,” and “Die Flamingos” (*In Spiegelbildern wie von Fragonard ... / In Mirror Reflections like those of Fragonard ...*) to enter a world where naked life mingles intimately with the image, and where the most infinitesimal element—as in the case of the ancient torso of Apollo to which Rilke devotes himself—returns our gaze (*denn da ist keine Stelle, die dich nicht sieht / For there’s no place on it that does not see you.*)⁶⁾

Animal presence is fundamentally polymorphous in the work of Fritsch, in which we have encountered, over the years, cats (KATZEN IM KÖRBCHEN/Cats in Punnet, 1980, derived from a bronze bibelot); toads (UNKEN, Croakers, 1982/1988, a disk inside a green slip-cover provided with a central label of the same color, which presents the listener with the amphibians’ croakings during mating); dogs (the bulldog with which Herr Reimers walked about for an entire day in 1986, at the opening of the outdoor sculptural exhibition “Sonsbeek ’86,” which was documented by the photograph SPAZIERGÄNGER MIT HUND/Stroller with Dog, 1986, and is comparable to FRAU MIT HUND/Woman with Dog, made eighteen years later, in 2004, where the animal has the distinctive feature of being represented, like its mistress, through other animals, namely conches); birds (LEXIKONZEICHNUNGEN VON VÖGELN/Dictionary Drawings of Birds, 2006/2008, and TAPETE MIT DINOSAURIERN/Wallpaper with Dinosaurs, 2007, where they are presented against a background of prehistoric creatures); reptiles (SCHLANGE/Serpent, 2008, a shiny bronze that looks like a long ribbon of licorice); and insects (3. POSTKARTE [KÄFER]/3rd Post Card [Bug], 2009). And we must not forget one of her most imposing works, and no doubt the first to bring the artist international attention, the life-size ELEFANT (1987), in green polyester, perched atop a tall, white, oval pedestal. But here I shall briefly dwell only on two animal works, which seem to me closely connected.



KATHARINA FRITSCH, NEWSPAPER ILLUSTRATION 6 (“A CROCODILE ATTACKING A GIRL”), 2008 /
 6. ZEITUNGSILLUSTRATION («ÜBERFALL EINES MÄDCHENS DURCH EIN KROKODIL»).



KATHARINA FRITTSCH, POSTCARD 3 (BEETLE), 2009 /
3. POSTKARTE (KÄFER); FLORENTINE FRITTSCH and
KATHARINA FRITTSCH, REFRIGERATOR, 2008 / EISSCHRANK.

FLORENTINE FRITTSCH and KATHARINA FRITTSCH, REFRIGERATOR MAGNET, 2008 / EISSCHRANKMAGNET.

MANN UND MAUS (Man and Mouse, 1991/1992) immediately strikes us for the maximum efficiency with which the sculpture highlights the contrast between black and white. It is a profoundly dualistic composition that associates its juxtaposition of man and animal with the duality of those two colors, and with the polarities of up/down, vertical/horizontal, waking/sleeping (the mouse, in any case, being portrayed in a position contrary to sleep). It is certainly hard to imagine that the man's situation is somehow a comfortable one, but such a consideration tries, no doubt, too hard to relate it to some sort of reality, which the size of the rodent contradicts outright. The most likely hypothesis is therefore that of the dream, with the mouse belonging to the brain activity of the sleeper, like the bones one often sees in the balloon over a sleeping dog's head in comic books. For this reason, the erudite reference that came to the minds of many observers and commentators of this work was Henry Fuseli's *THE NIGHTMARE* (1781), a painting exhibited for the first time at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, in 1782, whose success later led the artist to paint several other versions. It should, however, be pointed out that, unlike what is happening in the Fuseli painting (where the scowling incubus, sitting on the sleeping woman and facing the viewer, embodies a satanic combination of human and animal, with the latter also manifest in the form of a goggle-eyed horse's head), no explicit sign of struggle or suffering is presented in Fritsch's sculpture. It is therefore equally legitimate to see it as derived from any number of ancient religions, such as Egyptian, according to which what looms over the sleeper is his soul—or, according to other references, his totemic deity. Pondering this sort of conjunction between interiority and otherness, Georges Bataille, in his *Theory of Religion*, wrote: "The animal opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me. In a sense, I know this depth: it is my own."⁷⁾

Thus it is a logical step, so to speak, from MANN UND MAUS to RATTENKÖNIG (Rat King, 1993). In the latter, the animal has proliferated, and man has disappeared. He will return not long thereafter, combined with an even larger group of animals, in KIND MIT PUDELN (Child

with Poodles, 1995/1996), a joyously absurd pairing of an asexual child with two-hundred and twenty-four poodles arranged in concentric circles around him, a work that has always made me think of the famous snapshot taken by Harold Edgerton in the 1930s which shows a drop falling into some milk—but that’s another story. A kind of terror immediately emanates from RATTENKÖNIG (a direct experience of the sculpture here becomes more necessary than ever). The fear derives from the size of the rats, which each stand nearly 10 feet tall, but also from their being organically joined together, which gives one a foreboding of permanently conflicted movement, painful and utterly hellish. The anxiety is generated by the sense of *teeming* (*grouillement*), which Barthes, in analyzing the work of an artist quite unlike Fritsch, Bernard Réquichot, used to explain this particular zoological anomaly: “Now, it seems that the conglomeration of creatures provokes in us a paroxysm of repugnance: swarming worms, nests of serpents, hives of wasps.”⁸⁾

In parallel with this potential chaos, Fritsch’s sixteen rats are immobilized for eternity, like sphinxes, and full of mineral majesty; they bring us back to the most archaic sort of religious art. I see them as sly gods of dream and the night—potential catastrophes, which it is up to us to ward off through various offerings and repeated visits to the temple that houses them, though with no guarantee of success. Victor Hugo had evoked a similar phenomenon concerning the evil octopus in the *Toilers of the Sea*, which I will cite to leave our fascination open-ended for now:

*Possibility is a terrible matrix. Monsters are mysteries in their concrete form. Portions of shade issue from the mass, and something within detaches itself, rolls, floats, condenses, borrows elements from the ambient darkness, becomes subject to unknown polarizations, assumes a kind of life, furnishes itself with some unimagined form from the obscurity, and with some terrible spirit from the miasma, and wanders ghost-like among living things. It is as if night itself assumed the form of animals.*⁹⁾

(Translation: Stephen Sartarelli)

1) Victor Hugo, *The Toilers of the Sea*, trans. Isabel F. Hapgood (New York: Penguin Publishers, Signet Classics, 2000), p. 415.

2) Ibid, p. 417.

3) Ibid, p. 419. Both published three years after *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*, Comte de Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror* and Jules Verne’s *Vingt mille Lieux sous les Mers* (1870) perpetuated this myth in very distinctive registers, though both are obviously indebted to Hugo’s novel. Concerning the question of when legend rivals scientific observation, see Roger Caillois, *La Pieuvre. Essai sur la logique de l’imaginaire* (Paris, La Table Ronde, 1973).

4) In this way, the octopus in OKTOPUS is a color more suggestive of a fox. Whether this is coincidental or not, it is worth noting that Greek thought likened these two animals to one another, considering them both to be endowed with great shrewdness. See the excellent book by Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Les Ruses de l’Intelligence. La Mètis des Grecs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), particularly chapter II, “Le renard et la poulpe.” Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Hassocks, England and New Jersey: Harvester Press: Humanities Press, 1978).

5) A passing tribute to the monumental study by Elisabeth de Fontenay, *Le Silence des Bêtes. La philosophie à l’épreuve de l’animalité* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

6) A world that is no more and no less than that of the “poem of nature,” as invoked by Jean-Christophe Bailly in an essay distinguished by its sensitivity as well as its literary quality, *Le Versant animal* (Paris: Bayard, 2007), p. 118.

7) Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 22.

8) Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 211. It is interesting to note that the cases Barthes cites in the continuation of this passage all involve Germany (Altenburg, Bonn, Schnepfenthal, Frankfurt, Erfurt, Lindenau).

9) Victor Hugo, *The Toilers of the Sea*, Volume 2 (Cambridge: Little Brown, 1888), p. 200.

«DIESER ALBDRUCK IST ÜBER EUCH GEKOMMEN.»

JEAN-PIERRE CRIQUI

«Orpheus, Homer und Hesiod haben nur die Chimäre erdenken können; Gott hat den Kraken erschaffen.»¹⁾ So beginnt der 2. Abschnitt des Kapitels «Das Ungeheuer» des 4. Buches vom 2. Teil des Romans *Die Arbeiter des Meeres* von Victor Hugo, nach dem *Glöckner von Notre-Dame* und den *Elenden* der dritte Band seiner Roman-Trilogie über die Schicksalshaftigkeit.²⁾ Als der Romanheld Gilliatt versucht, nicht weit vom Ufer entfernt eine Krabbe zu fangen, die sich in ein grosses Felsloch geflüchtet hat, findet er sich plötzlich einem riesigen Kraken gegenüber, der sich seiner bemächtigt und gegen den er sich erbittert zur Wehr setzt. Dieser Kampf zwischen Mensch und Krake bietet Victor Hugo die Möglichkeit zu einer ausführlichen Abhandlung – halb Beschreibung, halb Abschweifung –, die von allen Texten der französischen Literatur, die sich mit dieser Tierart befasst haben, zweifellos die erstaunlichste ist: «Schreckliches Wesen, das in Wirklichkeit ein Weichtier ist. Seine Knoten knebeln; seine Berührung ist lähmend. Sein Anblick erinnert an Skorbut und Gangrän. Krankheit hat sich zu Monstrosität zusammengefügt.»³⁾

Es scheint, als hätten die Riesentintenfische erst ab Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts die Rolle des Untiers in der kollektiven Fantasie übernommen. Bereits 1861 hatte Jules Michelet in seinem Buch *La Mer*⁴⁾ im Kapitel «Der Freibeuter des Meeres (Krake usw.)», in dem düstere Phantasien zu Wort kommen, dieses Tier mit der «Welt des Krieges und des Mordes» in Zusammenhang gebracht. Durch die erwähnte Episode in Hugos Roman fand das Wort *pieuvre* für Krake, das bis dahin nur in den Dialekten der anglonormannischen Inseln vorkam, Eingang in die französische Sprache und erhielt seine dämonische Konnotation:

Was ist eine Kralle gegen diesen Schröppkopf. Mit den Krallen dringt das Tier in euer Fleisch ein; beim Saugnapf aber dringt ihr selbst ins Tier ein. Eure Muskeln schwellen an, die Fasern krümmen sich,

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Katharina Fritsch und die Gesetze animalischer Anziehung

die Haut platzt unter dem widerlichen Druck, das Blut spritzt auf und mischt sich in abscheulicher Weise mit dem Körpersaft des Mollusken. Das Tier stülpt sich mit tausend gemeinen Mündern über euch; die Hydra verleiht sich dem Menschen ein; der Mensch vermischt sich mit der Hydra. Beide bilden ein einziges Wesen. Dieser Albdruck ist über euch gekommen.⁵⁾

Gegen Ende ihrer Ausstellung im Kunsthaus Zürich (2009) konfrontierte Katharina Fritsch das Publikum mit einem Werk, das eine perfekte Reminiszenz an diesen romantischen Mythos des Kraken⁶⁾ ist: OKTOPUS (2006/2009), auf einer dünnen, weissen, quadratischen Platte von 1,20 Metern Seitenlänge liegt ein greller, orangener Oktopus und hält in einem



KATHARINA FRITSCH, MAN AND MOUSE, 1991/1992, polyester, paint,
88 5/8 x 51 1/8 x 94 1/2" / MANN UND MAUS, Polyester, Farbe, 225 x 130 x 240 cm.
(PHOTO: NIC TENWIGGENHORN)

seiner in die Luft ragenden Tentakel einen Taucher gefangen, dessen mattschwarze Farbe derjenigen des höhenverstellbaren Dreifusses ähnelt, auf dem der Oktopus liegt. Die distanzierte Präsentation lässt die Arbeit wie eine Art Musterexemplar in einem Labor erscheinen. Dieser Eindruck wird durch die monochromen, unnatürlichen Farben von Taucher und Tier noch verstärkt. Meistens sind die Geschöpfe im plastischen Universum der Katharina Fritsch einfarbig; damit folgt sie einem Grundsatz, den man das Rosaroter-Panther-Prinzip nennen könnte: Die Farbskala hat Signal-, ja Symbolcharakter, ohne dass sich ein Bezug mit dem tatsächlichen Aussehen des dargestellten Gegenstands aufdrängt.⁷⁾ Tiere nehmen in diesem Universum einen bedeutenden Platz ein, einerseits weil sie relativ häufig vorkommen, andererseits wegen ihrer Symbolträchtigkeit. Die Art und Weise, wie Fritsch sie darstellt, aber auch die Situationen, in die sie sie einbettet, verleihen ihnen vieldeutige Kräfte am Kreuzungspunkt verschiedenster Strömungen: seien es die uralten Ängste der Menschheit und ihr Aberglaube, wie sie beispielsweise

in Märchen zum Ausdruck kommen, sei es die Eindringlichkeit totemistischen Denkens und seiner Bilder, das Unheimliche oder die Freudsche Traumarbeit. In Zürich machten Arbeiten aus der Serie «Zeitungsskizzen» (2007/2008), die im gleichen Raum wie der OKTOPUS hingen, dessen vielschichtige Tonalität deutlich, als wären sie ein System von Echos. So zeigten die Vergrößerungen von Illustrationen im Stil der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts einen Taucher, der den Leichnam einer ertrunkenen Frau trägt, ein junges Mädchen, das von einem Krokodil gefressen wird, oder auch – a priori ohne direkten Bezug zum Kraken oder seinem Opfer, aber nicht minder gravierend – eine Gruppe von Frauen in New York, die sich der Wirkung des Opiums hingeben.

Weil sie uns irgendwie beunruhigen, lassen uns die Tiere der Katharina Fritsch innehalten, ziehen uns an, ja bringen uns zuweilen aus der Fassung. Manchmal geschieht es, dass wir sie ansehen und gepackt werden wie der Taucher vom OKTOPUS. Das liegt zweifellos daran, dass im «Schweigen der Tiere» – für denjenigen, der darauf zu achten weiss – so viel Bedeutungsschwere mitschwingt – ganz ähnlich den Aussageweisen der Bilder und der Kunst, die ihrerseits eine bestimmte Form des Schweigens (im wörtlichen und im metaphorischen Sinne) kultiviert.⁸⁾ In Rainer Maria Rilkes Dichtung, insbesondere in den *Neuen Gedichten*, wimmelt es von Spuren einer solchen Affinität; man braucht unter den zahlreichen Gedichten nur «Der Hund», «Die Gazelle» oder «Die Flamingos» («In Spiegelbildern wie von Fragonard ...») zu lesen, um einzutauchen in eine Welt, wo das nackte Leben mit dem Abbild aufs Engste verbunden ist und selbst die kleinste Stelle, wie beim archaischen Torso Apollos, zu dem auch Rilke Zuneigung fasst, unseren Blick erwidert: «denn da ist keine Stelle, / die dich nicht sieht».⁹⁾

Die Präsenz des Animalischen ist ganz und gar polymorph im Werk der Katharina Fritsch, wo sich im Laufe der Jahre verschiedene Tiere begegnen: Katzen (KATZEN IM KÖRBCHEIN, 1980; nach einer Nippfigur aus Bronze), Amphibien (UNKEN, 1982/88; Single-Schallplatte

in grüner Hülle mit ebenfalls grünem Etikett in der Mitte, das dem Hörer das Quaken der Unken zur Brunftzeit ankündigt), Hunde (die Bulldogge, mit der Herr Reimers im Jahr 1986 am Tag der Eröffnung der Skulpturenausstellung Sonsbeek '86 einen ganzen Tag lang spazieren ging, was auf der Photographie SPAZIERGÄNGER MIT HUND festgehalten wurde, zu dem wiederum die achtzehn Jahre später entstandene Skulptur FRAU MIT HUND (2004) passt, bei der das Besondere ist, dass Hund und Herrin aus anderen Tieren – Muscheln – komponiert wurden. Es folgen Vögel mit urzeitlichen Geschöpfen im Hintergrund (LEXIKONZEICHNUNGEN VON VÖGELN, 2006/07, und TAPETE MIT DINOSAURIER, 2008), Reptilien (SCHLANGE, 2008; ein glänzendes Bronzeobjekt, das wie eine ausgerollte Lakritzschnecke aussieht), Insekten (3. POSTKARTE [KÄFER], 2009), und nicht zu vergessen das imposanteste unter den Säugetieren und zweifellos die erste Arbeit, die Fritsch international bekannt machte, ihr lebensgrosser ELEFANT (1987) aus grünem Polyester, der auf einem hohen, weissen, ovalen Podest thront. Ich möchte mein Augenmerk auf zwei weitere Werke richten, die Tiere in Szene setzen und mir auf das Engste miteinander verbunden zu sein scheinen.

MANN UND MAUS (1991/92) besticht auf Anhieb durch den Schwarz-Weiss-Kontrast der Skulptur: Es ist eine ganz und gar dualistische Komposition, die den Gegensatz von Tier und Mensch mit dem zweier Farben verbindet, aber auch mit den Gegensatzpaaren hoch/tief, waagrecht/senkrecht, wachend/schlafend (zumindest ist die Maus in einer Haltung wiedergegeben, die der eines Schlafenden diametral entgegengesetzt ist). Man kann sich freilich nur schwer vorstellen, dass die Lage des Mannes irgendwie bequem ist, aber das würde bedeuten, dass man sie mit einer realen Situation verbindet, was allein die schiere Grösse des Nagers ausschliesst. Das Nächstliegende scheint also der Traum zu sein, wobei die Maus – wie der Knochen, der in Comics in einer Sprechblase über dem schlafenden Hund zu sehen ist – etwas mit der Hirntätigkeit des Schlafenden zu tun hat. Eine Assoziation, die sich unweigerlich aufdrängt, ist das Gemälde mit dem Titel der NACHTMAHR (1781) von Johann Heinrich Füssli, das 1782 erstmals in der Royal Academy in London gezeigt wurde und dessen Erfolg den Künstler dazu veranlasste, weitere Fassungen zu malen. Doch im Unterschied zu Füsslis Bild (es zeigt einen Alb, ein satanisches Mischwesen, auf einer Frau hockend, das sich mit verzerrtem Gesicht dem Betrachter zuwendet, und im Hintergrund einen glupschäugigen Pferdekopf) findet sich im Werk von Fritsch kein greifbares Zeichen für einen Kampf oder Schmerz. Daher ist es ebenso statthaft, darin eine Abwandlung jener unzähligen antiken religiösen Darstellungen zu sehen, ägyptischen beispielsweise, wo über dem Schlafenden seine Seele thront oder – nach anderer Lesart – sein Totemgott. In seinen Überlegungen über diese Art des Zusammentreffens von Innerlichkeit und Andersheit schrieb Georges Bataille in seiner *Theorie der Religion*: «Durch das Tier öffnet sich vor mir eine Tiefe, die mich anzieht und die mir vertraut ist. In gewissem Sinne ist diese Tiefe mir bekannt: Es ist die meine.»¹⁰⁾

Es ist nur folgerichtig, nach MANN UND MAUS über den RATTENKÖNIG (1991/92) zu sprechen. Die Tiere haben sich stark vermehrt und der Mensch ist verschwunden. (Er wird später wieder auftauchen, inmitten einer noch viel grösseren Tierschar, nämlich in KIND MIT PUDELN [1995/96], einer vergnüglich-absurden Kombination aus einem geschlechtslosen Kind und 224 Pudeln, die in konzentrischen Kreisen um dieses angeordnet sind, was mich immer an das Photo mit dem in Milch herabfallenden Tropfen von Harold Edgerton aus den 30er-Jahren denken liess, aber das ist eine andere Geschichte.) Der RATTENKÖNIG hat etwas imminent Bedrohliches an sich – hier ist die unmittelbare Konfrontation mit der Skulptur notwendiger denn je. Dieses Gefühl der Bedrohung hat mit der Grösse der Ratten zu tun, die alle knapp drei Meter hoch sind, aber auch mit der unentwirrbaren Verknotung ihrer

Schwänze, die jede Bewegung als unmöglich, schmerzhaft, ja infernalisch erscheinen lässt. Es ist das beklemmende Gefühl, wie es durch ein «Gewimmel» ausgelöst wird, jenes Phänomen, welches Roland Barthes im Zusammenhang mit einem von Fritsch weit entfernten Künstler namens Bernard Réquichot untersuchte, indem er diese besondere Anomalie im Tierreich als Beispiel heranzog: «Nun scheint es, dass das Konglomerat von Tieren in uns den Gipfel des Abscheus auslöst: Ein Gewimmel von Würmern, Verknotungen von Schlangen, Nester von Wespen. Dieses märchenhafte Phänomen fasst den ganzen Horror der Tieragglomerate zusammen: der Rattenkönig.»¹¹⁾ Parallel zu diesem potenziellen Chaos sind die für immer regungslosen sechzehn Ratten von Fritsch, gleich Sphinxen, von mineralischer Majestät erfüllt und verweisen uns aufs Neue auf die religiöse Kunst in ihrer archaischsten Form. Ich sehe in ihnen heimtückische Götter des Traumes und der Nacht – Mächte der Katastrophe, deren unmittelbares Bevorstehen wir bannen müssten (durch diverse Opfertgaben, wiederholte Besuche im laizistischen Tempel, der sie beherbergt), allerdings ohne Garantie auf Erfolg. Im Kontext des unheilvollen Kraken in *Die Arbeiter des Meeres* kam Victor Hugo auf ein ähnliches Phänomen zu sprechen, mit dem wir hier enden möchten, indem unsere Faszination in der Schweben gehalten wird:

*Das Mögliche ist eine furchtbare Matrix. Das Mysterium konkretisiert sich in Monster. Schatten spalten sich aus diesem Block, der Immanenz, ab, zerreißen, lösen sich, rollen, wogen, verdichten sich, entleihen sich die Schwärze der Umgebung, durchwandeln unbekannte Polarisierungen, nehmen Leben an, bilden mit der Finsternis wer weiss welche Gestalt und mit dem Miasmus wer weiss welche Seele und dringen als Larven mitten durch die Lebenskraft. Gleichsam tiergewordene Finsternis.*¹²⁾

(Übersetzung: Caroline Gutberlet)

1) Victor Hugo, *Die Arbeiter des Meeres*, übers. v. Rainer G. Schmidt, Hamburg, Achilla Press, 2003, S. 407.

2) *Notre-Dame de Paris* erschien 1831, *Les Misérables* 1862, *Les Travailleurs de la Mer* 1866.

3) Siehe Anm. 1, S. 409.

4) Jules Michelet, *Das Meer*, übers. v. Rolf Wintermeyer, Frankfurt/New York 1987; das erwähnte Kapitel beginnt auf Seite 146.

5) Siehe Anm. 1, S. 412.

6) Drei Jahre nach *Die Arbeiter des Meeres* erschienen das Prosagedicht *Les Chants de Maldoror* von Lautréamont (dt. *Die Gesänge des Maldoror*) und der Roman *Vingt mille Lieues sous les Mers* von Jules Verne (dt. *20.000 Meilen unter dem Meer*), die diesen Mythos auf sehr unterschiedliche Weise fortschrieben, wobei ganz offensichtlich Hugos Roman beiden als Inspirationsquelle diente. Zu der Frage, worin die Fiktion mit der wissenschaftlichen Beobachtung konkurriert, vgl. Roger Caillois, *La Pieuvre. Essai sur la logique de l'imaginaire*, Paris 1973 (dt. *Der Krake. Versuch über die Logik des Imaginativen*, übers. v. Brigitte Weidmann, München/Wien 1986).

7) So lässt die Farbe der Krakenfigur Oktopus eher an einen Fuchs denken. Ob nun Zufall oder nicht, in der Vorstellung der alten Griechen gehörten diese Tiere, die beide für äußerst schlau gehalten wurden, zusammen. Siehe das grossartige Buch *Les Ruses de l'Intelligence. La Métis des Grecs* von Marcel Detienne und Jean-Pierre Vernant (Paris 1974), insbesondere das 2. Kapitel «Der Fuchs und der Krake».

8) Meine Hochachtung für das monumentale Werk von Elisabeth de Fontenay, *Le Silence des Bêtes. La philosophie à l'épreuve de l'animalité*, Paris 1998.

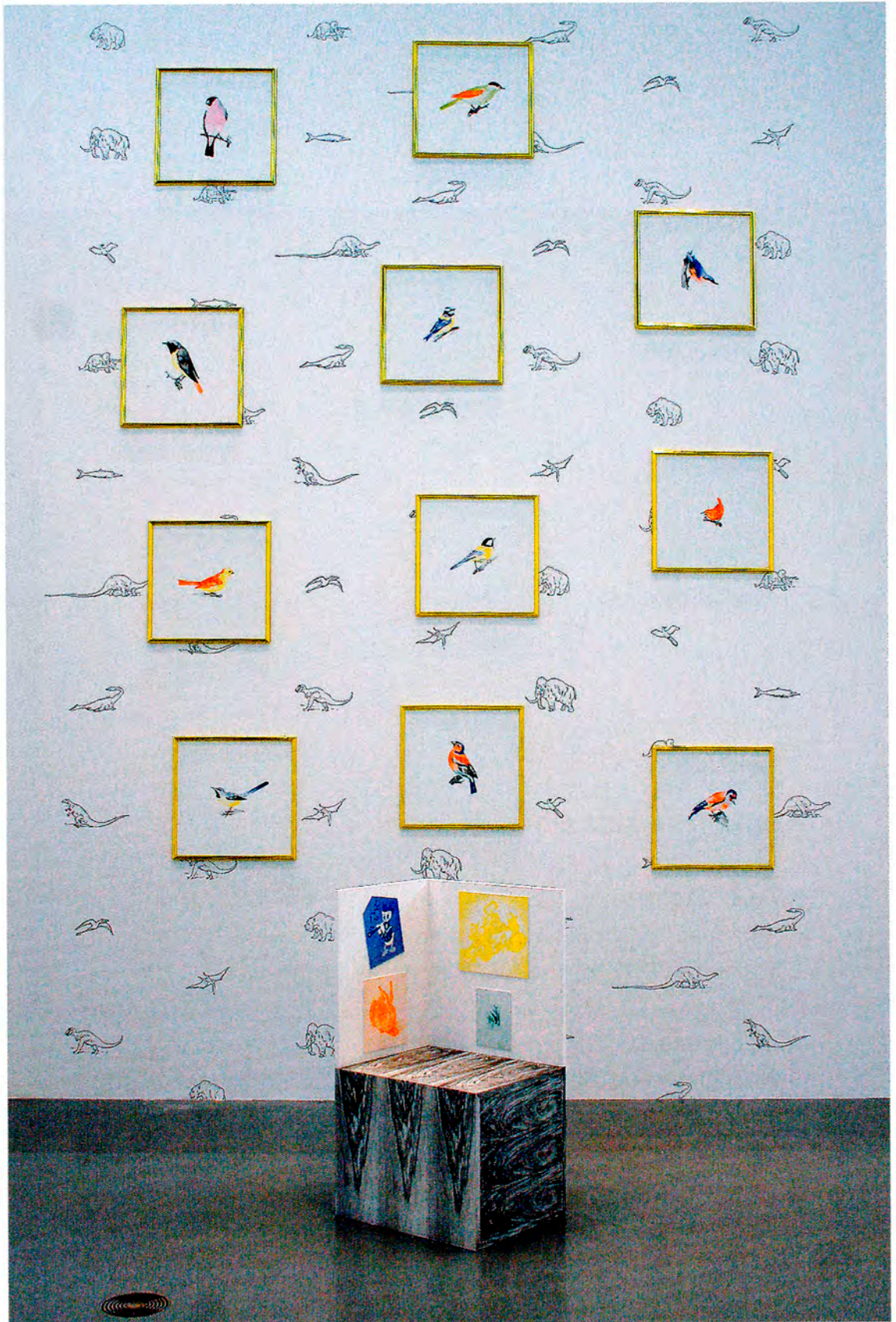
9) Rainer Maria Rilke, «Archaischer Torso Apollos», in *Ausgewählte Gedichte*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp-Verlag, 1982, S. 58.

10) Georges Bataille, *Theorie der Religion*, übers. v. Andreas Knop, München, Matthes & Seitz, 1997, S. 23 (franz. OA *Théorie de la Religion* [1948], Paris 1973).

11) Roland Barthes, «Réquichot und sein Körper», in *Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn. Kritische Essays III*, übers. v. Dieter Hornig, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp-Verlag, 1990, S. 219–246, hier S. 222 f. (franz. OA «Réquichot et son corps [1973]», in *L'Obvie et l'Obtus. Essais critiques III*, Paris 1982). Es ist interessant festzustellen, dass die im Anschluss an die zitierte Stelle genannten Fälle alle in Deutschland zu finden sind (Altenburg, Bonn, Schnepfenthal, Frankfurt, Erfurt, Lindenau bei Leipzig).

12) Siehe Anm. 1, S. 414.

KATHARINA FRITSCHE, BEDSIDE TABLE, 2009; WALLPAPER WITH DINOSAURS, 2007; LEXICON DRAWINGS OF BIRDS, 2006/2008, exhibition view, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg / NACHTTISCH, TAPETE MIT DINOSAURIERN, LEXIKONZEICHNUNGEN VON VÖGELN, Ausstellungsansicht.



ARTFORUM

Katharina Fritsch

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

That there is something patently ugly about much—if not all—of Katharina Fritsch's work is too little remarked upon. Perhaps this has to do with the *way* it is ugly: not at all in the conventional sense of wandering afield from some aesthetic "ideal," or even in presenting for abject delectation the long-hidden, seamy underbelly of something we thought we knew. Indeed, Fritsch's objects court another kind of ugliness; they take their forms as perfect, smoothly contoured icons that rebuff the eye through a kind of affectlessness or, perhaps better said, through a kind of aloofness.

This particular schism between surface and depth is usually attributed only to people. (Of someone beautiful but mean or indifferent, we say shruggingly that "they're ugly on the inside.") But such a divide seems, too, to inform much of Fritsch's oeuvre, which over the past three decades has willfully confused material things and their psychological effects. Lynne Cooke, writing about Fritsch's monumental (and monumentally creepy) *Rat-King*, 1993, argued that this and other of the artist's sculptural works are "neither fetishes nor trophies" but "artifacts devised to act as catalysts." The description is apt, for Fritsch's works do seem to set off a kind of chemical reaction in their viewers. They cue associative links without necessarily admitting these as their own content and, in doing so, call attention to the ways in which public and private meanings act as strange—sometimes incompatible—bedfellows.

Take Fritsch's recent installation at Matthew Marks Gallery, titled *The Garden*, 2008. A series of free-standing walls built for the occasion dictated visitors' traversal of the space around a sterile configuration of four central cubicle-like structures, each of which housed its own tableau. Entering these über-controlled spaces, one couldn't help but feel that even the most formal English garden would appear downright unkempt in comparison. A kind of

Katharina Fritsch,
Schlange (Snake),
2008, bronze,
67 x 27½ x 4½".



contemporary memory palace, Fritsch's "garden" choreographed so many exacting dioramic encounters, each asking to be related to the previous, however blindly, and however obliquely. One space held a table covered with a red-and-white checkered tablecloth that offered not picnic wares but a vibrantly blue pair of cast kidneys, placed just so; in another, a gray vase stood dumbly, its strangely plasticine body belying its classical pretense; elsewhere, a pair of skeleton feet evoked both a cheesy horror show and a staid archaeological museum.

These objects and others, including a jet-black Saint Katherine and a gray giant—whose cast, painted surfaces are so lushly uniform that they almost look soft—were surrounded by large-scale silk-screen prints. Each depicts a pastoral or otherwise idyllic landscape (most of the images are from postcards Fritsch collected as a child; there are shots of Essen, Langenberg, Münster, etc.) or a vision of abstracted "nature" (close-ups of a thick hatch of ivy and a rose garden, for example). Yet these images, however much their subjects—and ostensibly their deep-rooted connection with the artist herself—would seem to promise a kind of humanizing context, also operate as smooth, unyielding surfaces. Indeed, leached of differentiating hues, a few are presented in stark black-and-white, while most are rendered as weird monochromes (or, more precisely, they are shown *monochromatically*, since some are split into two or more single-color sections), their generically "specific" subjects swathed in vaguely chemical colors. Pictures that would otherwise be the epitome of nostalgic banality operate, then, as standoffish stand-ins. Here the markers of small-town life (in Germany, but also *everywhere*) were presented as flatly silk-screened generic images of, among other things, a cathedral, a sailboat drifting lazily on the Ruhr, a public square. But for all the ostensible warmth one would think they would have amounted to, the environs of Fritsch's "garden" felt fantastically chilly.

—Johanna Burton

ARTNEWS

reviews

Katharina Fritsch

Matthew Marks

Katharina Fritsch is known for magnifying kitsch figurines—as in her *Rat-King* (1993), a colonnade-like ring of rodents—into massive monochromatic, flat sculptures. Her work, which often transforms religious and folk objects as well as tourist postcards, has of late become increasingly uncanny.

This show, “The Garden,” opened with *Giant* (2008), an avuncular gray caveman with a pugnacious chin and a very large club. He grimly guarded the gallery space as if his life depended on it. “The Garden” itself was a series of greatly enlarged old black-and-white picture postcards, silk-screened in washed-out monochrome or duochrome tones, depicting rocks, ivy, forests, picturesque German villages, and lakeside vistas.

The flabby Teutonic ogre with the club (based on a cabdriver Fritsch met who was suffering from gigantism) was the first of four freestanding sculptures that haunted “The Garden.” The others were a carbon umbrella (Fritsch was quoting herself from other installations), a bronze snake, and a matte-black Saint Catherine, missing her characteristic wheel but clutching a bouquet and a bleeding heart. Four discrete “garden” alcoves each contained a puzzling sculpture: an almost classical white female torso with an ugly boxer’s nose; a checkered picnic table with two bright blue kidneys (a nod to Yves Klein?); a pair of skeleton feet with too many digits and cloven toes; and a large gray urn on a plinth.

Each of these sculptures—which collectively resisted interpretation—was surrounded on three sides by the big flat postcards, generally divided into two parts, each a different hue, made them appear doubly flat. Their pale but harsh hues grated on the viewer’s eyes.

Fritsch’s work thwarts expectations at every turn. What was the Providence monastery (this image divided vertically into three colors) doing among views of Essen, Münster, and other nostalgic German sites from the artist’s childhood? Did the acrobatic statue in the park seen in one image have

something to do with the bronze snake on the floor? Were there elements of a forgotten fairy tale or a hidden past lurking within them?

Despite the snake, Fritsch’s garden installation resembled less the Garden of Eden than it did those Germanic allotment plots where townsfolk grow flowers and vegetables and enjoy picnics on Sundays. Yet it also hinted at a place where evolution and Christianity mix uneasily, where saints and devils both dwell, where death and life meld and classical statuary and folk artifacts—and gemütlich traditions—merge into an enormously uncomfortable stereotype. Fritsch’s art, hiding any sense of meaning, displaces a great deal of responsibility onto viewers and leaves them in a state of uncertainty. Maybe that condition has something to do with silences in Germany’s past. But at this moment in history, you might be forgiven for mistaking the artist’s patron saint for a woman in a hijab—her bleeding heart certainly looks a lot like a grenade.

—Kim Levin



Katharina Fritsch, *Riese, Postkarte Franken (Felsen)/Giant, Postcard Franken (Rocks)*, 2008, polyester and oil-based ink and acrylic on plastic panel, sculpture: 77 1/2" x 42 1/2" x 30"; silk screen: 110 1/4" x 157 1/2".

IVO FABER/KATHARINA FRITSCH/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK



Katharina Fritsch
Matthew Marks, through Fri 24
(see Chelsea).

If you've done a basic Cook's tour of Paris—or just studied high-school French—you will probably be able to tick off the monuments represented in the monochromatic silk screens that line the walls in Katharina Fritsch's current show. There's the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs-Élysées, Sacré Coeur, the Eiffel Tower, one of Guimard's Art Nouveau subway entrances and gargoyles on the cornice of Notre Dame. There are even a few French culinary monuments thrown in, like larger-than-life images of

croissants and coffee, baguettes and a bottle of red wine.

Fritsch is less concerned with the city of Paris itself than with its tourist trade, which is ripe for the kinds of questions she seems to be asking: When do monuments become kitsch?

When do icons become clichés? Culled from postcards that simply say *Paris* at the bottom, the blown-up images function as flash cards for a city whose actual culture gets lost in the mix.

New York is the ideal location for such a show, since New Yorkers are used to seeing our own complex heterotopia boiled down to a few ciphers like the Statue of Liberty or, until 9/11, the World Trade towers. And yet this show feels light. A pink Jeff Koons-like sculpture of a Victorian lady and her dog, made from giant fake seashells, and a ceiling lined with multicolored umbrellas add a sculptural dimension, but they detract from the postcard works' considerations about culture, tourism and, perhaps, what qualifies as Pop in the age of globalization.

—Martha Schwendener



Katharina Fritsch, installation view.

ARTFORUM

KATHARINA FRITSCH

TATE MODERN,
LONDON

RACHEL WITHERS

To begin, a niggly question: When painting or sculpture is labeled “uncanny,” what is actually being claimed? Katharina Fritsch’s image world—of effigies and doubles, skulls and spooks, votive figures and *völkisch* motifs—has fixed her work in this explanatory frame; the term “uncanny” is often used to describe her art, and words like “unsettling,” “dark,” and “threatening” abound in the literature accompanying her Tate retrospective. Freud’s 1919 paper is fairly precise about the defining effects of uncanny narratives and occurrences: Loosening rationality’s grip, they permit repressed mental formations (primitive animism, infantile narcissism, castration anxiety, the death drive) to return, triggering panic, a paranoid impression of being menaced by unseen presences, and so on. In short, Freud is interested in uncanny anxiety because it exceeds the scale of aesthetic sensation and measures as hysterical symptom. Visual art can provoke physical reactions, no doubt about it: maybe shaky feelings of shock, or nausea, or (let’s be more cheerful) sexual arousal. But can gallery objects really induce sweaty anxiety in their viewers, as a yarn by M.R. James or a scary movie might? Could an encounter with Fritsch’s work

make a normally rational adult imagine that a polyester skeleton in a lab coat (see Fritsch’s *Doctor*, 1999) or a giant plastic rodent (see *Man and Mouse*, 1991–92) or a posse of black plaster poodles (see *Child with Poodles*, 1995–96) are inexplicably out to get her? Freud concludes his study by noting that a tale needs more than just the presence of particular motifs to give readers the heebie-jeebies, a point not lost on Anthony Vidler in *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992). Uncanniness, Vidler stresses, is not a property of space (or, by extension, of specific objects or imagery) but a mental state of projection in which the boundaries of the real and unreal start to wobble. Narratives, as noted, can induce this slippage, but things—buildings, paintings, sculptures—have a second-order relationship to it; they emblemize rather than cause uncanny anxiety.

The Tate’s exhibition comprised eighteen works spanning Fritsch’s career, from the very early, tiny *Gray Mill*, 1979 (included as a component of *Display Stand II*, 1979–84), to *Dealer*, 2001; and barring maybe just one piece—the audio installation *Ambulance*, 1990—the works’ most striking characteristics were their emphatic tangibility and immediate physical comprehensibility. In Freud’s account, uncanny motifs lead from the familiar and intelligible to the unfamiliar and disturbing, but Fritsch’s works, in their vivid physicality, lead from the knowable and graspable in the gallery to the all-too-knowable and graspable output of mass-production. A good example is the floor piece *Heart with Money and Heart with Wheat*, 1998–99, two giant heart-shaped spills of chunky plastic coins and ears of wheat. The wheat ears resemble Christmas

decorations and are colored a sickly metallic “gold”—an acid greenish-yellow that recalls such items as Mylar candy wrappers, food packaging, and disposable foil ashtrays. The coins are made from dull silvery metallized plastic. Both invite picking up, but in the same way that cheap goods or props for commercial display do; one knows for certain that one’s haptic curiosity will be disappointed by the ordinariness of the objects’ feel. The same goes for *Dealer*, with his fabulously crisp trouser creases, sharp cuffs, and smooth, unbendable lapels, treated with Fritsch’s hallmark velvety paint surface, this time in a rich red. One wants to reach out and touch—but knowledge of the painted plastic’s texture already resides in the twenty-first-century consumer’s well-trained fingertips. Wheat ears and coins might bring to mind folksy, *heimisch* gifts or gingerbread-house decorations; *Dealer*, with his single cloven hoof and pony-tail, is clearly intended to invoke a whiff of the diabolical. These are uncanny motifs, for sure, but their substantiality and knowability preclude uncanny effects.

Gary Garrels has commented that for Fritsch, “locating a point of tension in form and proportion that corresponds to a personal and intuitive sense of rightness is critical,” and he goes on to assert that the “vividness of the encounter” with the artist’s work is significantly at odds



Above, left: Katharina Fritsch, *Man and Mouse*, 1991–92, polyester and paint, 94½ x 51½ x 88½". Right: Katharina Fritsch, *Dealer*, 2001, polyester and paint, 75½ x 22 x 14½". Below: Katharina Fritsch, *Heart with Money and Heart with Wheat*, 1998–99, plastic, aluminum, resin, and paint, 26' 2¼" x 13' 1½".

with “normal habits of perception.” The first of these statements seems quite correct: Fritsch’s capacity for making incredibly finely tuned “right” decisions about the forms, manufacturing techniques, proportion, detailing, and finish of each of her works binds her oeuvre together. Her account in the Tate’s catalogue of her painstaking studio activities is illuminating: She describes the effort it took to get the hood of *Monk*, 1999, to look perfectly, stereotypically hoodlike, and reveals that the coins used in *Heart with Money* had to be completely remade when she realized they’d look better a couple of millimeters thicker.

However, is there really a categorical difference between the experience of her works and those hypothetical “normal habits of perception”? Arguably, the “rightness” of Fritsch’s artistic decisions corresponds to standards set in the world of commercial manufacture, design, and display: It’s the fine art of knowing how to lend an object a really itchy, arresting, self-contained finish. However much the artist herself might wish to distance her work from 1980s Simulation, it’s this effect that grips one’s attention: With their tightly judged repertoire of technical effects, her pieces intensify the experience of mass-produced items, managing to be both virtuosic and absolutely, estrangingly blank and adamant. Thus the work does ultimately earn its “uncanny” label, but at an entirely emblematic level. To claim that it is genuinely spooky (in the good old Freudian sense) is to willfully ignore the real sources of its alienating vocabulary. □

Rachel Withers is a London-based art critic.

Art in America

Katharina Fritsch at Matthew Marks

For her first New York sculpture show in seven years, Katharina Fritsch presented two large, fairly recent installations. As ever, the work finds its genesis in German folktales and symbols pared down to their purest, most minimalistic essence. Perhaps to flesh out the display, the gallery also put up some earlier Fritsch multiples in a back office.

The first piece, *Herz mit Geld* (Money Heart), was a huge installation of silver coins, arranged on the gallery's concrete floor in the shape of a heart. Glimpsed from the street on a steamy summer day, it shimmered like a mirage—an impression that intensified, oddly enough, after one entered the space. Up close, one realized that the coins were clearly fake. (They're actually aluminum-coated plastic disks.) One also saw that they'd been carefully arranged, with a flat layer at the bottom to support the structure and create its neat edge, and the rest piled more lavishly and randomly on top, the better to catch the light.

This piece was inspired by a cautionary fairy tale of 1826 about a humble charcoal burner who trades his human heart for money and a heart of stone. But as Fritsch's metallic heart glimmered there, in one of Chelsea's most austere forbidding spaces, it was hard not to read it as a metaphor for the gallery itself, as well as the surrounding neighborhood.

The other piece, *Hexenhaus und Pilz mit Kugel* (Witches House with Mushroom and Four Balls), was shown in a smaller back room. Here, Fritsch arranged five low white pedestals under a skylight. The central one held a small black house whose steeply peaked roof was edged in white. Facing it stood a tall red mushroom bal-

ancing on a rounded white stem; it seemed to tip slightly toward the house, as if drawn into its orbit. Both objects are made of wood coated with polyester-impregnated paint, which creates a matte, velvety surface. Surrounding them, on the other pedestals, stood four metallic orbs colored silver, gold, red and blue. They resembled dull Christmas tree ornaments or opaque crystal balls.

This piece exerts a magnetic fascination that I couldn't quite figure out. Maybe it derives from the curious balance between the objects—basically, polygons and spheres—or perhaps from the matte and reflective surface contrasts. But I also found myself wondering if the allure might not lie in the specter of the enchanted house itself. Though this piece isn't precisely derived from a fairy tale, it certainly recalls the enticing gingerbread house that Hansel and Gretel encounter in the forest—the one that hides the witch's oven. It was chilling to suddenly realize that an oven stands at the center of German folklore—and especially to see this suggested so elegantly and obliquely.

—Carol Kino



Katharina Fritsch: *Money Heart* (aerial view), 1998-99, plastic and aluminum, 39¼ by 39¼ feet; at Matthew Marks.

The New York Times

Katharina Fritsch

*Matthew Marks Gallery
1018 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street
Through June 8*

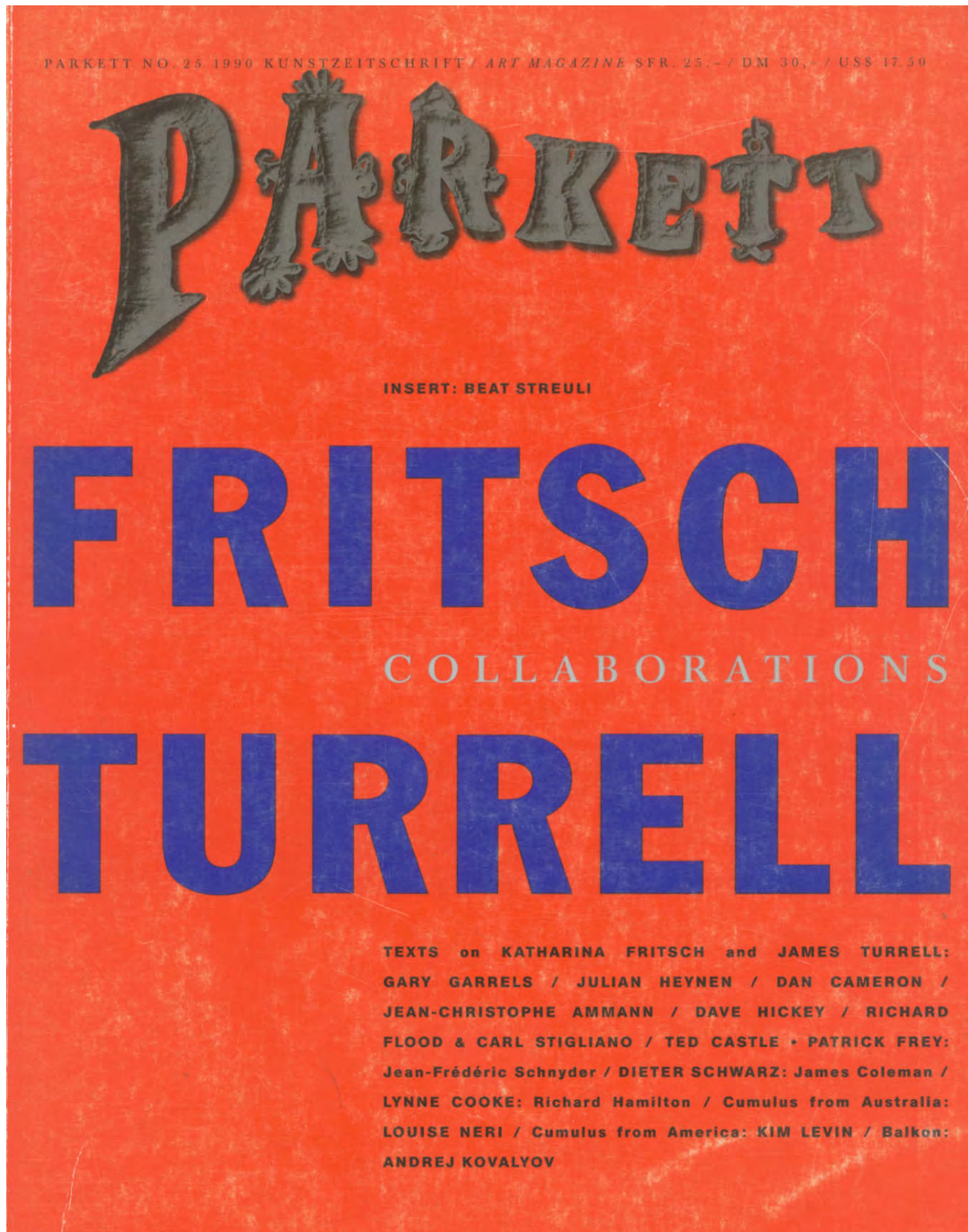
Those who saw Katharina Fritsch's 1993 installation at the Dia Center for the Arts will not quickly forget it: a circle of giant rats, enlarged from small figures into sculptures nine feet high. The works in this new show of multiples seem comparatively benign at first glance, but grow more troubling as you think about them.

In the upstairs gallery, Ms. Fritsch, a German artist, reproduces objects and figures — plastic vases, brass jewelry, plaster cats and poodles — that you could probably buy in the German equivalent of Woolworth's. But by painting the objects monochrome colors — black, white, yellow — she involuntarily transfers them to the realm of art. You are forced to contemplate their contours — sometimes pedantically realistic, sometimes archly stylized — as statements of sculptural form. The result is a strange but not unpleasant sense of esthetic queasiness.

Downstairs, an elaborate installation reproduces a series of pictures from a children's version of the Bildwörter Duden, an illustrated dictionary, that belonged to Ms. Fritsch's father when he was a child in the 1930's. There are scenes from "Snow White" and "Little Red Riding Hood," from popular festivals, from weddings and communions, all of them drawn in a deliberately clumsy, naïve style. Nowhere are Nazi ideas directly referred to, but they seem latent at every point, behind the hollow images of village life, as thin and white as the paper they are drawn on. In this context, a summer solstice scene of dummies burned at the stake becomes truly chilling. PEPE KARMEL

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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Garrels, Gary. "Disarming Perception." *Parkett*, no. 25, 1990, pp. 34–40.

Heynen, Julian. "Speculations on Trucks, Cemeteries, Foxes, and Other Images." *Parkett*, no. 25, 1990, pp. 53–63.

Cameron, Dan. "Setting Standards." *Parkett*, no. 25, 1990, p. 64–67.

KATHARINA FI





Garrels, Gary. "Disarming Perception." *Parkett*, no. 25, 1990, pp. 34–40.

DISARMING PERCEPTION

GARY GARRELS

THE APPARENT is a conditional state – thus our word apparition, with the implication that what is perceived to exist will and must disappear. We continually test the truth of our perceptions by various strategies to determine if a degree of absoluteness might be possible, that is, to know if something will continue to exist despite a change of conditions, or to understand the conditions that make the apparent possible.

WHEN IT WAS suggested that the work of Katharina Fritsch and James Turrell be juxtaposed in an issue of *Parkett*, it was this sense of the apparition that came to mind. With the work of both artists, the vividness of the encounter is so at odds with the normal habits of perception that these habits, in which we place such trust, are disarmed. An absoluteness contrary to ordinary experience temporarily suspends the usual understandings by which we orient our sense of perception. When confronted by the inadequacy of habits which allow us to get by day to day, we recognize how diminished are our perceptual conventions. With the work of both Fritsch and Turrell, immediacy and perfection, a sensate completeness, instill a feeling of unreality, of an existence apart from the ordinary, which induces a forgotten sense of wonder. We are impelled toward alertness and a renewed critical judgement.

BUT WHAT IS the means to do this? Here is where the artists would on appearance be incommensurate. Turrell uses light, space, and atmosphere to construct completely abstract works whereas Fritsch's objects reside solidly in space and are instantly recognized images. The standard clichés and references the two artists evoke by their work – Turrell some notion of the sublime and Fritsch some idea of kitsch – underscore the seeming dissimilarity. But, of course, either of these judgements is misleadingly simplistic.

GARY GARRELS is Director of Programs of the Dia Art Foundation in New York.

Page/Seite 34: KATHARINA FRITSCH, MULLF, 1990, Kraftwerk an der Römerbrücke in Saarbrücken, H. 700 cm / MILL, Power Station at the Roman bridge in Saarbrücken, 27517
Page/Seite 35: James Turrell, RODEN CRATER bei/near Flagstaff, Arizona.

BOTH ARTISTS work from a position of precision and absolute control of materiality. Formal decisions are fundamental and are rendered completely. The work itself appears to be a constant, an equilibrium maintained against entropy and decay, against which we the viewer must gauge the conditions of our response. The work appears stable, assured in its existence, even as we recognize that appearances are deceiving, and the test is upon us, the viewer, and not the artist.

JULIAN HEYNEN has analyzed and identified formal characteristics of Fritsch's work, and the fundamental points he makes are equally applicable to the work of Turrell; frontality and symmetry which "have the ability in a certain way to make pictures out of these sculptures";¹⁾ the central significance of color, by which "designated characteristics of a work can also find far-reaching expression";²⁾ and "minimalistic concentration . . . an authority of simplicity."³⁾ Superficially the work of these two artists could hardly be more disparate. All the more startling are the shared qualities discovered on closer study.

1) Julian Heynen, *Katharina Fritsch 1979–89* (Münster: Westfälischer Kunstverein; Frankfurt am Main: Portikus, 1990), p. 68.

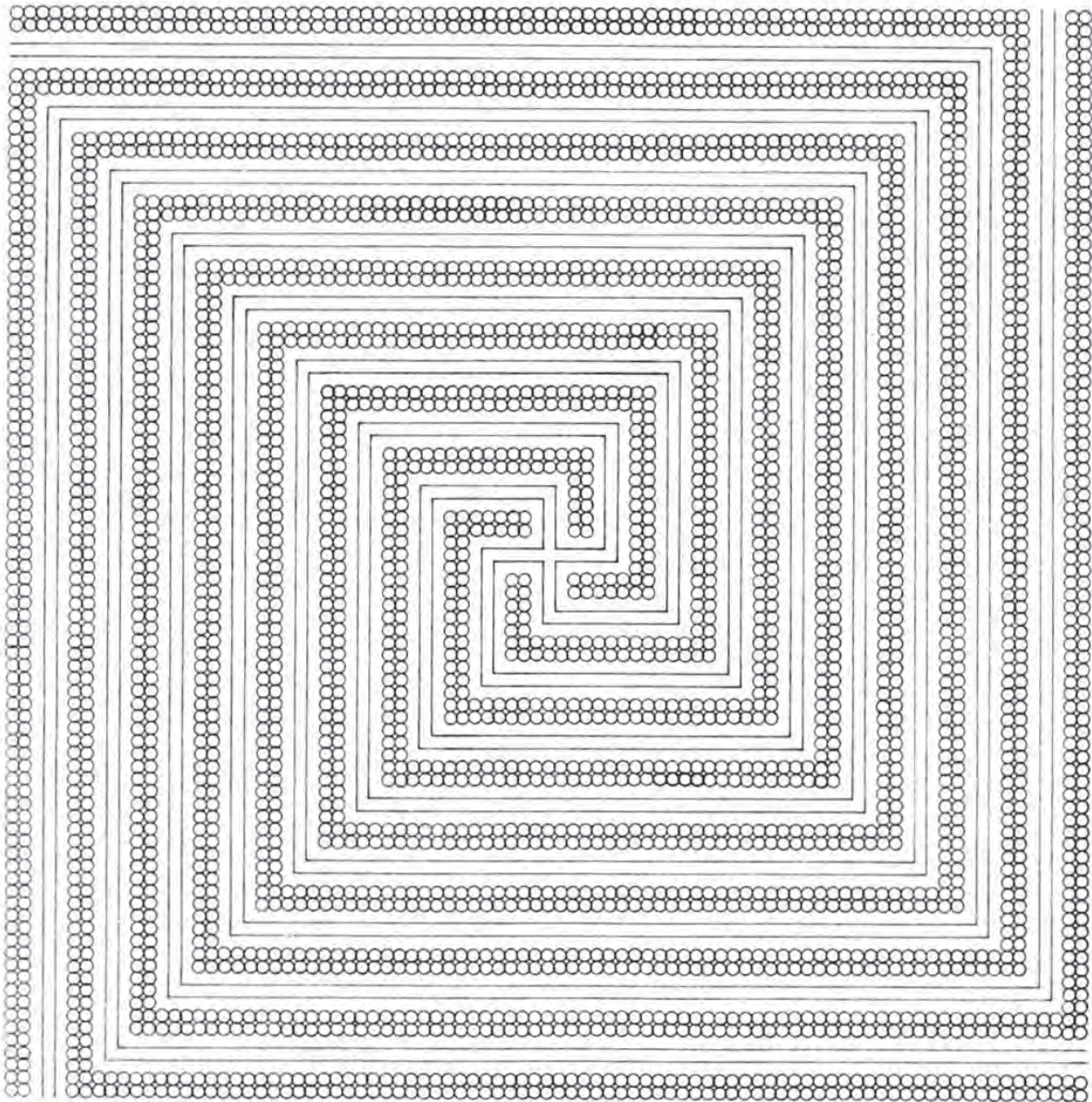
3) *Ibid.*, p. 69.

2) *Ibid.*, p. 69.

BOTH ARTISTS have no fear of beauty, nor are they distrustful of things speaking directly for themselves. The nineteenth century dialogue between truth and beauty is re-engaged, with a position that truth is beauty but the nature of that truth is specific and particular. In the work of neither artist are there recondite layers of reference or allusion – in short, mannerism. Rather, truth appears open to apprehension if only the eyes are open, if the vision is clear; perception is a linkage between the eye and the mind.

NEITHER DO the two artists abstain from making a moral claim in their work. In fact, the old-fashioned notion that the work of art can hold an ethical position – that right and wrong are choices and that art can make this distinction – seems central in both of their practices. Even beyond this, their work suggests that art can and should engage a spiritual experience. There should not be a confusion though with transcendentalism or the more blinding error of mysticism. In the work of both a linkage with spirituality is grounded irrevocably in the materials and experience of life.

SOMETHING should be said of the differences as well, of what can be learned about the work of either artist through what they do not share. In part their differences reveal shifts between generations and between America and Europe. Both artists set up a conditional situation of being, a reckoning with self – with perception, experience, and memory. But where for Fritsch this condition is essentially social and rooted in historical specificity of time and place, for Turrell the confrontation is with natural phenomena, apart from culture. Fritsch's work is enmeshed in history, in sedimented layers of collective memory and



KATHARINA FRITSCH, FRIEDHOF FÜR REIHENGRÄBER, 1980/82. die mit Rasen bepflanzten Gräber liegen rechts und links der asphaltierten Wege, die von Norden, Süden, Osten, Westen zum kreuzförmigen Mittelpunkt und von dort in eine der vier Himmelsrichtungen wieder hinausführen. Die vier Meter breiten Streifen zwischen den Gräbern sind dicht mit Vogelbeerbüschen bepflanzt, die im Sommer orangefarbene Früchte tragen.

CEMETERY FOR ROW GRAVES, the rectangular graves on which grass has been planted lie to the right and left of asphalt paths that lead to the cross-shaped center from the north, south, east, and west, and from there back out again. The thirteen-foot strips between the graves are densely planted with rowanberry bushes that bear orange berries in summer.

reference, while for Turrell the individual is alone and immediate in confronting experience. The American condition suggests fragility, tenuousness, and absoluteness at odds with the European sense of mediated, normative, and culturally grounded understanding. With Fritsch the specificity of reference is confirmed and undermined. For Turrell experience and knowledge available to the individual alone is the essential test and means to strength.

WITH THE WORK of these artists we are no longer simply observers but participants in an act of revelation. It is the individual who is forced to engage an attitude of criticality about his or her position in relation to the work of art and to all the understandings carried within our judgements of the world. We are confronted with the inextricable link between vision and truth.



PARKETT

Katharina Fritsch

Speculations on Trucks, Cemeteries, Foxes, and Other Images

JULIAN HEYNEN

Can one talk about artworks that do not (yet) exist? About works that have only reached the stage of diagrams or scant descriptions? Works that are not planned as concepts, but

as concrete physical and pictorial realities? Not only our imaginative faculties but the issue of authorship is at stake here. Is everything at this stage mere conjecture? What, if anything, justifies anticipating artistic implementation in this fashion? Certainly not simply recounting the artist's ideas and intentions, because where there is narrative, there is personal perspective.

All of Katharina Fritsch's works start with a clear and precisely visualized image of a thing: a situation

*The castaway has rediscovered
the transparency of complexity in
his simple object.*

Hannes Böhringer

that, by definition, incorporates both the individual view and the collective sign. But do not these two elements establish the right and the directives for following

the artist's visual imagining precision, for conjuring up the intimated image, for discovering it? Might not the guidelines for individual viewing be gleaned to a certain extent from the characteristics of existing works? And should we not put at least some faith in the collective sign? Admittedly, even then (re-)construction is not smooth sailing; it is an experiment for advanced studies, for initiates. Leaving the confines of pure observation means stepping on thin ice and engaging in a condition of active complicity and speculation.

There are seams, transitions between earlier work and the essence of recent proposals. The commercial

JULIAN HEYNEN is Deputy Director of Museums in Krefeld.

character of many works, no matter how unique they may be, precludes an exclusively individual approach. We know or suspect that the same thing or at least something similar must exist elsewhere for the eyes of other viewers. The more recent display units make this obvious in one and the same place. But even when the presentation and appearance of the unusual, the singular, take precedence as in *ELEPHANT* or *COMPANY AT TABLE*, the public element is essential to the situation and involves places of collective experience – even if they are places of seeing and silence.

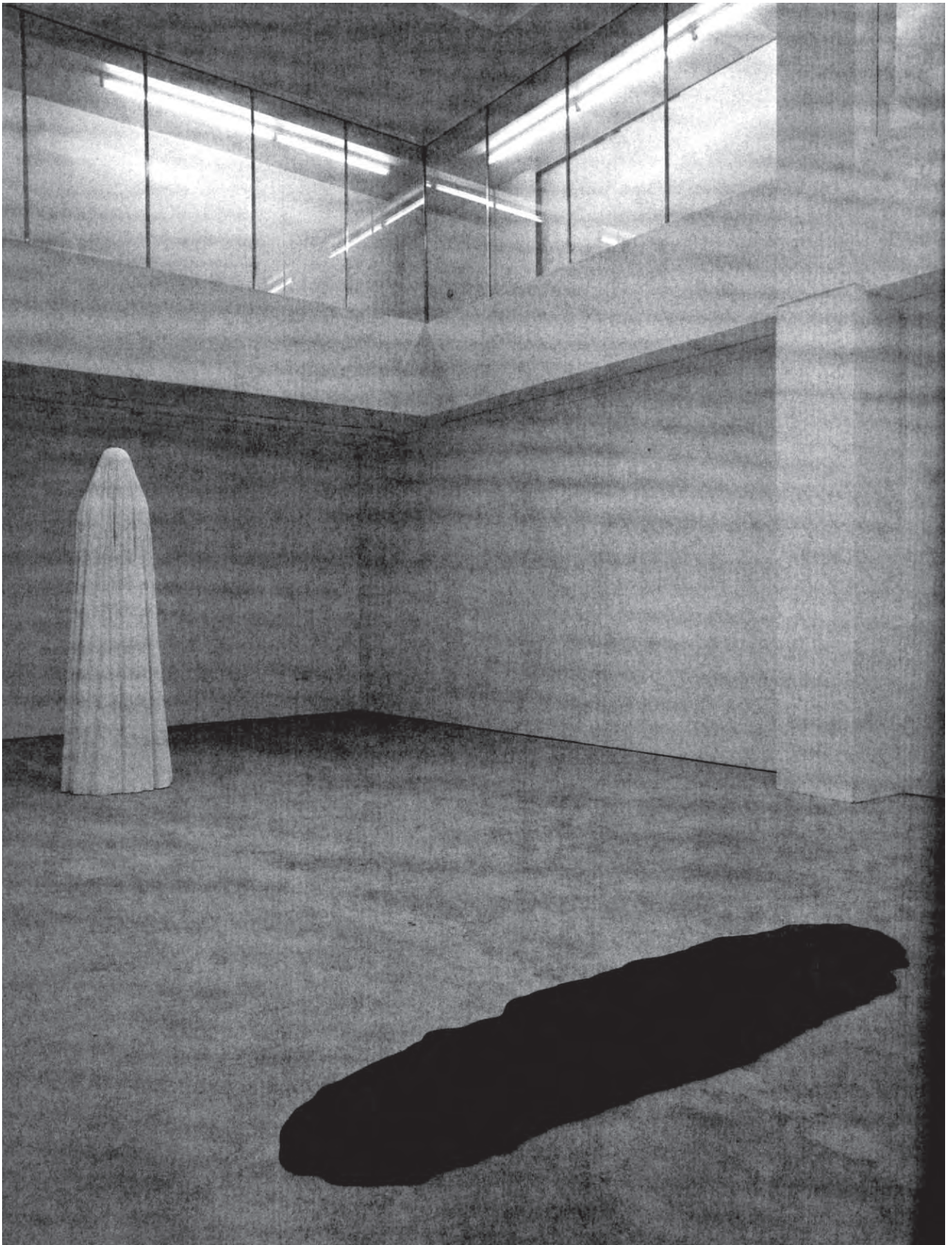
Is the departure from the museum, the move to space that is known as common or public, merely a difference in degree or is it not, in fact, a highly consequential move, entailing, as it does, a change of rules? Out “there,” the issue of status is aggravated. Does the underlying similarity between the works and their models not make it even easier for them to blend into their new situation, to disappear into daily life? Exactly when are the scales balanced between the assimilation and the accentuation of art-things? – A case in point is *MAN WALKING HIS DOG* in Sonsbeek Park. He was so precisely constructed in such a suitable, likely place, he was so true in form and color, so true sociologically and psychologically that his realism was constantly in danger of becoming suspect, of being taken as a fiction. This man and his dog – an overstated image, verging on a staged presence – strolled through an urban park that had been taken over for a few weeks by art in the form of an exhibition. The figure was possessed of such familiarity and credibility that many visitors thought they had seen him although he had made only one brief appearance due to practical difficulties. This indicates a collective mooring of the image that gave it the look of a casual (ordinary) myth.

Similar forces are at work in the black-and-white lacquered car with trailer on a parking lot, or the trailer truck painted red that is meant to drive endlessly all over Germany. As means of transportation, the two pieces are completely ensconced in the pragmatic and mental mega-system of traffic. But their precision of color is one factor (among others) that sets them off against the system and lends them symbolic significance. The paradox of wheels that

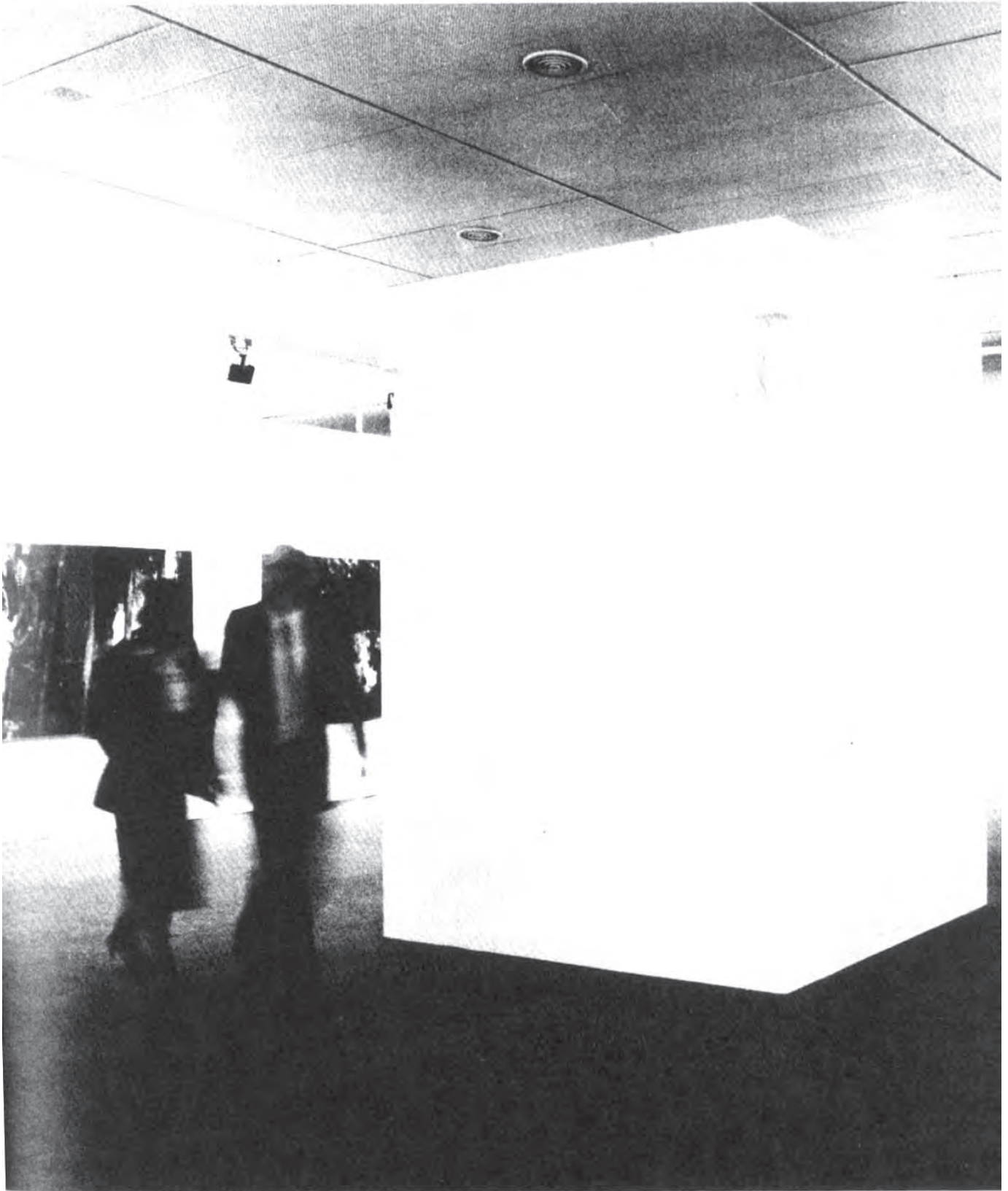
are stationary, of “resting traffic,” the image of restless motion, of an aimless journey without end – all are reminiscent of old, familiar myths. The truck prompts memories of the Flying Dutchman, for instance, but being set in the familiar flow of daily life rather than in the remote, artfully created realm of fiction, the work belies its association with fairytales or plays and functions with less constraint, less drama, less authority than traditional myths. Instead the image seems more probable and rather casually extends its symbolic potential to the individual who must also bear the burden of exploiting it. And it heightens the symbolic focus, the emergence of newer and deeper insights, by means of the unexpected moment. Every new encounter lends the image new meaning (within limits) – or lets it flow by unrecognized in the stream of passing impressions.

In cases where the initial sign is sufficiently defined in the collective conscious, as in *ELEPHANT* or *MADONNA*, multiple distance is established through precise manipulation, beginning with the status of these things in their public location. Even if they could, by nature, belong where they are, their actual, unexpected appearance isolates them, even dislodges them for one startling instant. This effect is achieved by such devices as subtle shifts in scale, stylization through symmetry and frontality, and color. *MILL*, located in the vicinity of the power plant that commissioned it, seems much larger than life. With its light-gray impeccability and its independently revolving wheel, it demonstrates the simultaneous embeddedness and distance of a symbolically overworked image in the dimension of the landscape. The hackneyed, all-too-familiar idyll is tested for its core of collective credibility and placed in a new, contemporary context.

With the exception of *MILL* (and, if you like, *MADONNA*), none of the large “public” projects has been carried out. Designs have been made for landscaping city spaces which serve a variety of everyday purposes. They are prototypes that require certain spatial and “atmospheric” conditions, as well as having to adjust their own dimensions to existing parameters. The oval-shaped *LAWN WITH EIGHTY POPLARS* is nothing but a place for a neighborhood to congregate. Its only distinction lies in not delimit-

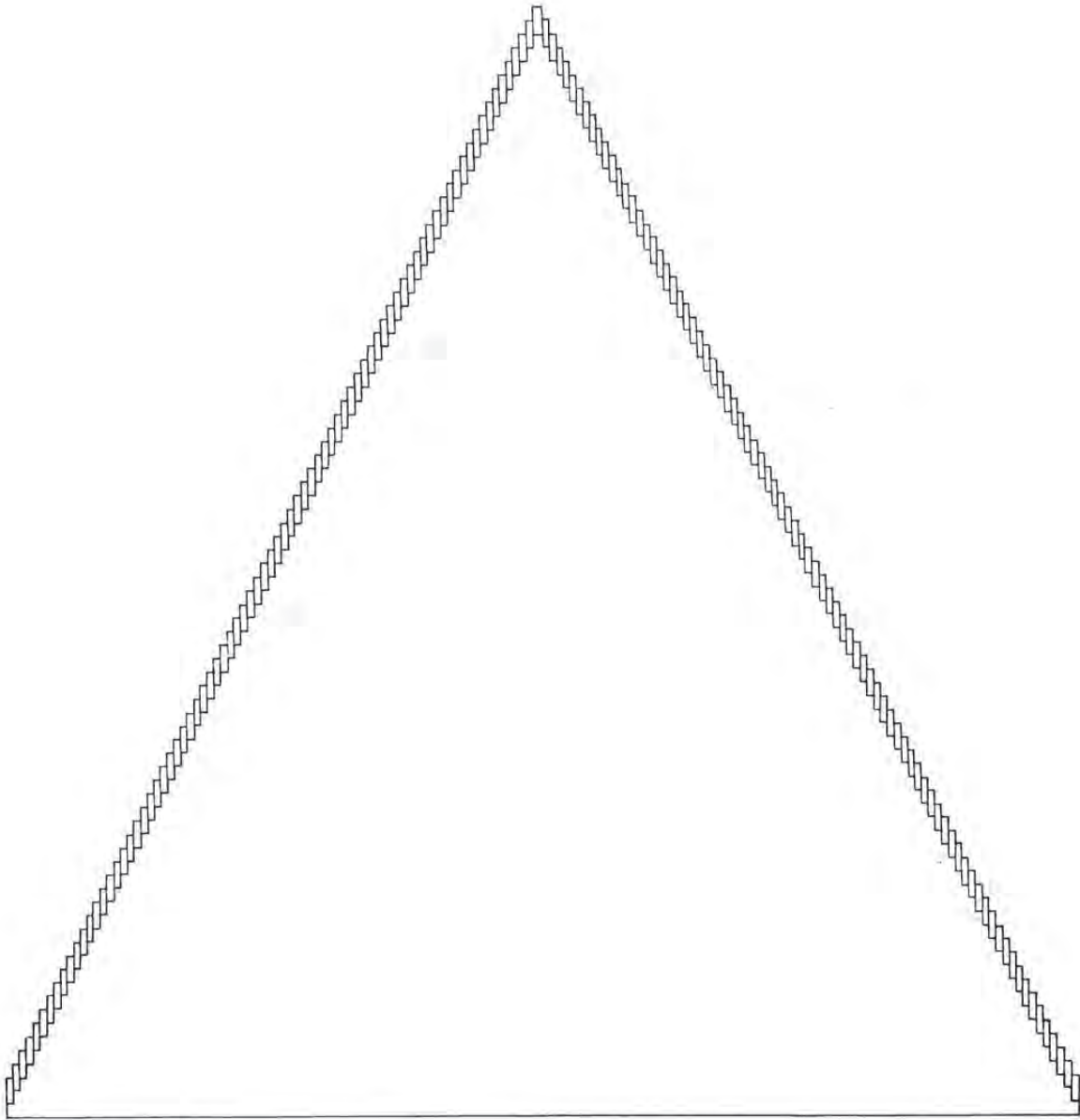


Heynen, Julian. "Speculations on Trucks, Cemeteries, Foxes, and Other Images." *Parkett*, no. 25, 1990, pp. 53–63.

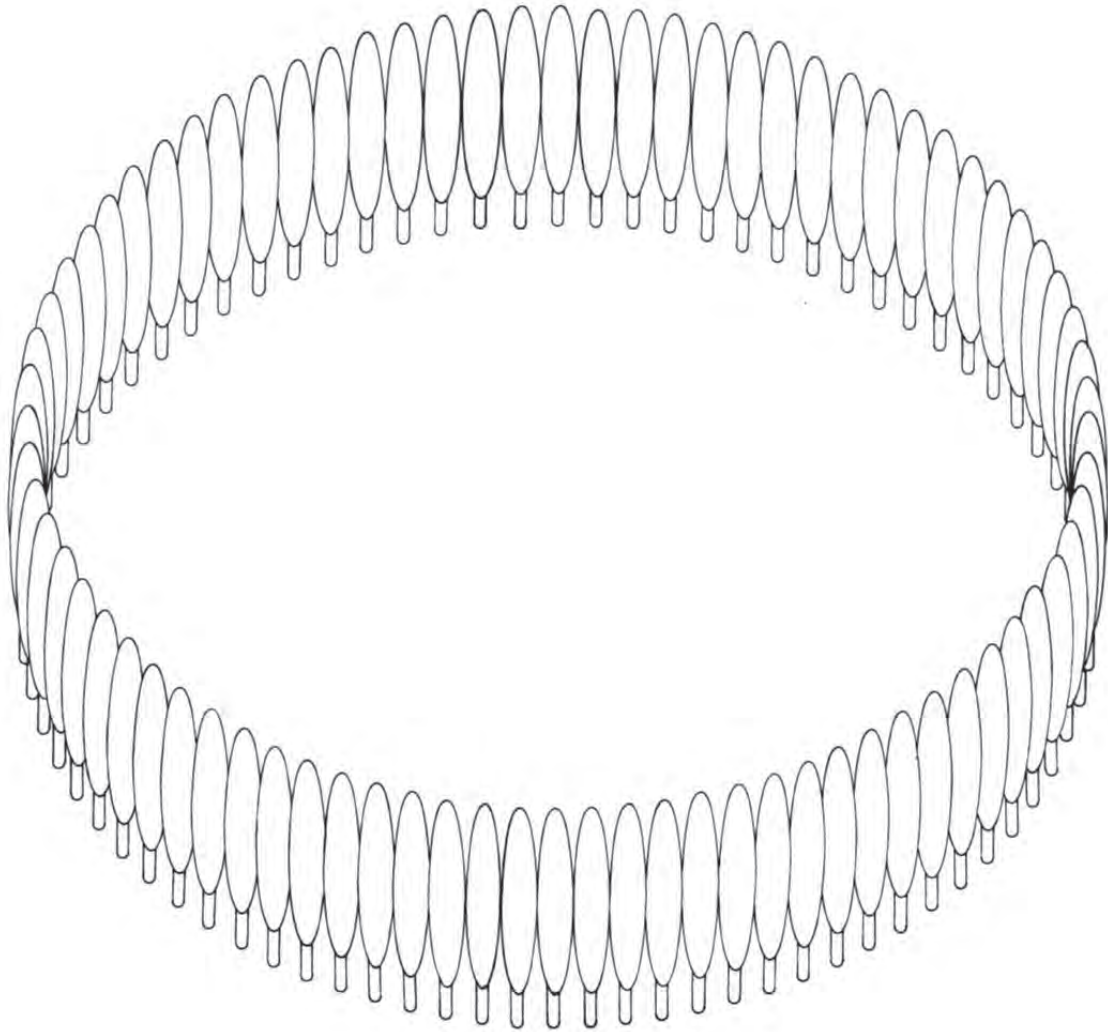


KATHARINA FRITSCH, KOJE MIT VIER FIGUREN, Holz, Gips, 200 x 200 x 280 cm/BOOTH WITH FOUR FIGURES, wood, plaster, 78³/₄ x 78³/₄ x 110¹/₄".
(INSTALLATION AT THE FORUM [ART FAIR] IN ZÜRICH, 1985, GALERIE SCHNEIDER, KONSTANZ)

Katharina Frisch

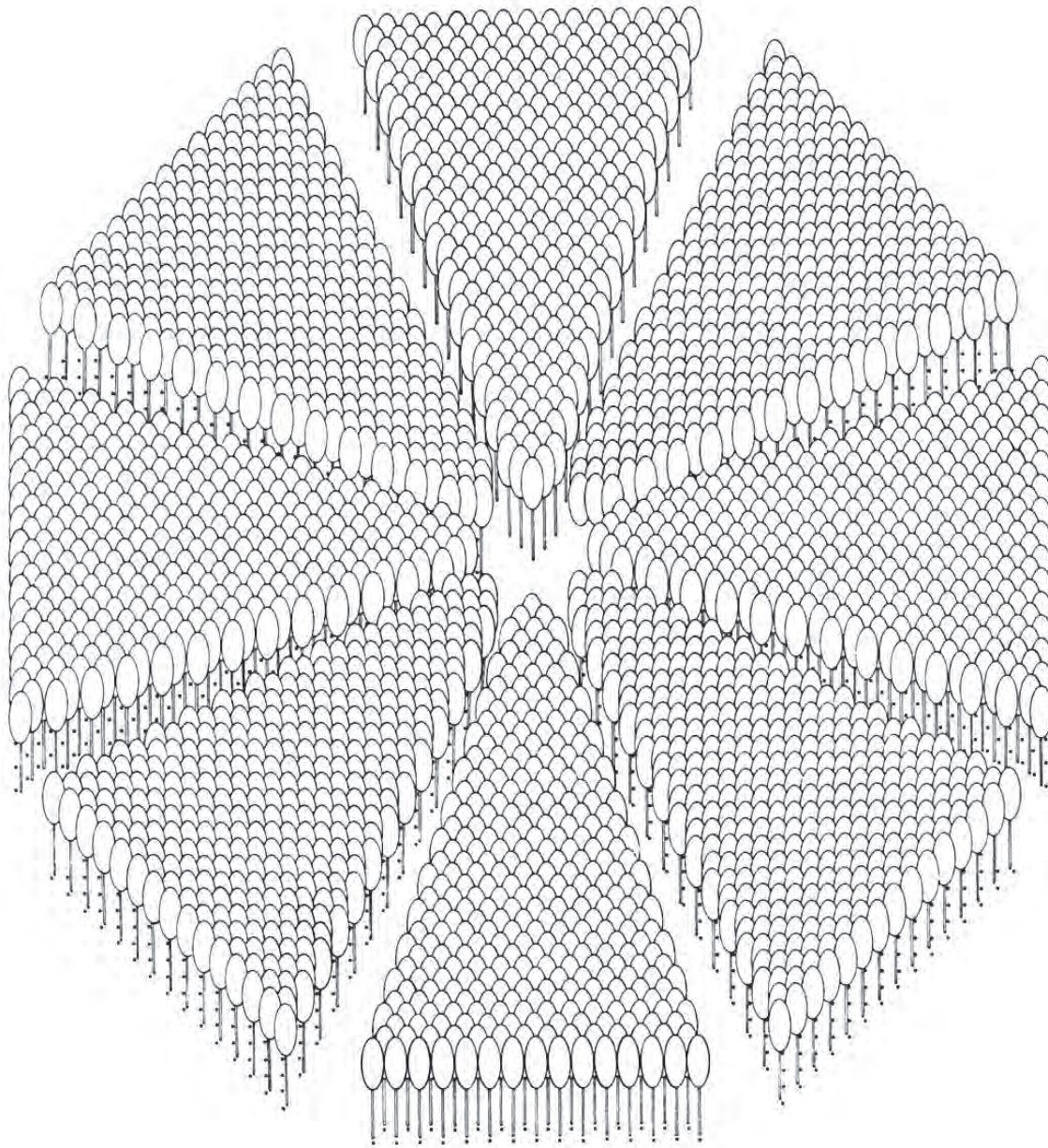


*KATHARINA FRITSCH,
TREPPE MIT JE ACHTZIG STUFEN, 1983/84, (ADFRISS)/
STAIRCASE WITH EIGHTY STEPS ON EACH SIDE, (ELEVATION)*



*KATHARINA FRITSCH,
RASENPLATZ MIT ACHTZIG BÄUMEN, (PAPPELOVAL), 1983/84/
LAWN WITH EIGHTY TREES (OVAL OF POPLARS)*

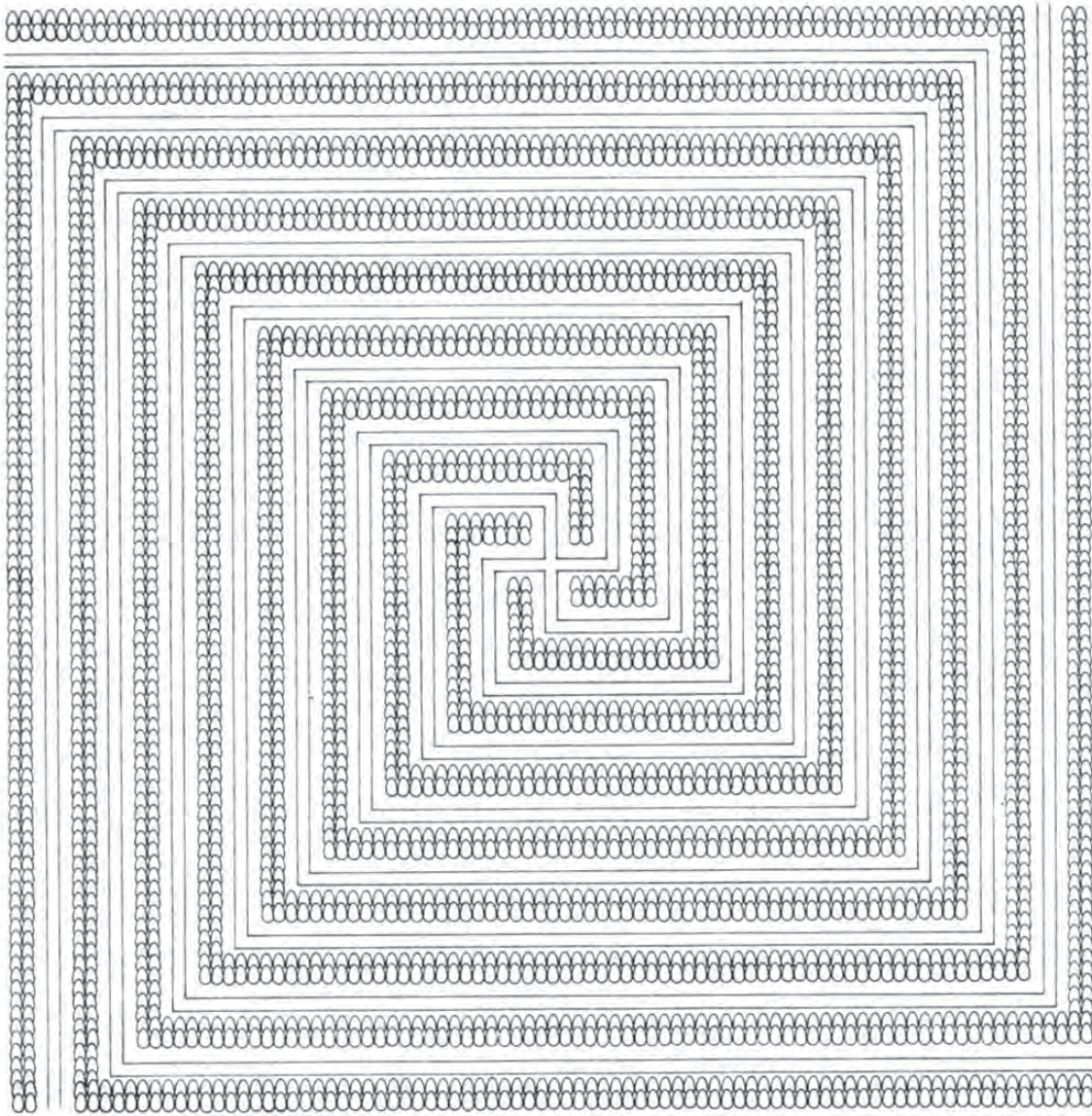
Katharina Fritsch



KATHARINA FRITSCH,
FRIEDHOF FÜR URNENGRÄBER, 1982/83,
die quadratischen Gräber mit jeweils einer ge-
pflanzten Birke und einer zwanzig mal zwanzig
Zentimeter grossen schwarzen, in den Boden ver-

senkten Platte, bilden zusammen einen achteckigen
Wald mit einem sternförmigen Freiplatz in der
Mitte, von dem acht sich nach aussen verbreiternde
Wege strahlenförmig ausgehen./

CEMETERY FOR URNS, the square graves, each
with a birch tree planted on a black plaque, 7 1/4"
square, lowered into the ground, form an octagonal
forest with a star-shaped area in the middle from
which eight paths radiate outwards.



KATHARINA FRITSCH,

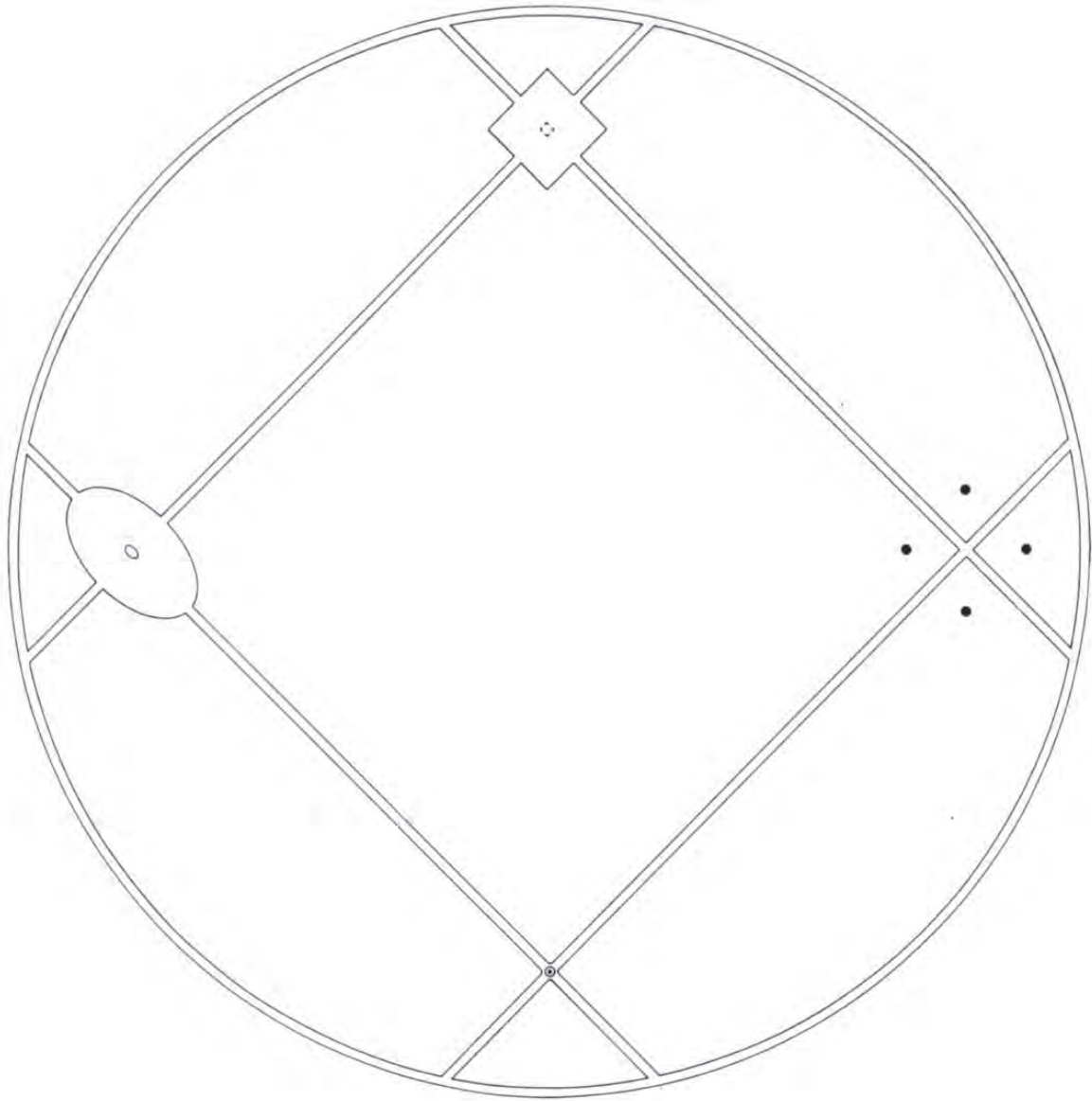
FRIEDHOF FÜR REIHENGRÄBER, 1980/82.

die mit Rasen bepflanzten Gräber liegen rechts und links der asphaltierten Wege, die von Norden, Süden, Osten, Westen zum kreuzförmigen Mittelpunkt und von dort in eine der vier Himmels-

richtungen wieder hinausführen. Die vier Meter breiten Streifen zwischen den Gräbern sind dicht mit Vogelbeerbüschen bepflanzt, die im Sommer orangefarbene Früchte tragen./

CEMETERY FOR ROW GRAVES, the rectangular graves on which grass has been planted lie to the

right and left of asphalt paths that lead to the cross-shaped center from the north, south, east, and west, and from there back out again. The thirteen-foot strips between the graves are densely planted with rowanberry bushes that bear orange berries in summer.

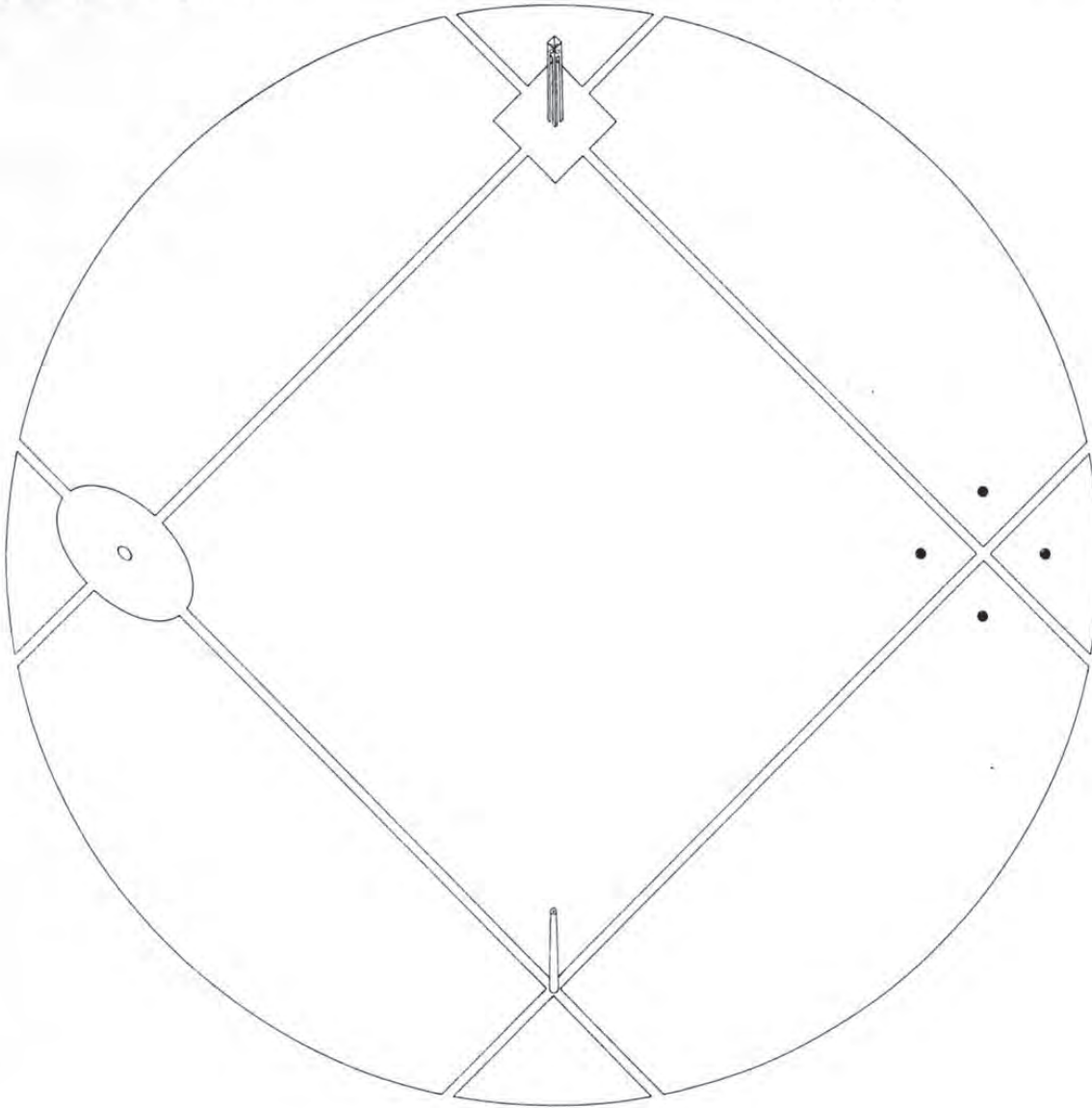


KATHARINA FRITSCH, VERGNÜGUNGPARK, 1983/84
runder Park mit vier Plätzen und asphaltierten, ein Meter breiten Gehwegen,
dazwischen Rasenflächen/AMUSEMENT PARK, circular park with four squares
and asphalt paths, each thirty nine inches wide, with lawn between.

Katharina Fritsch

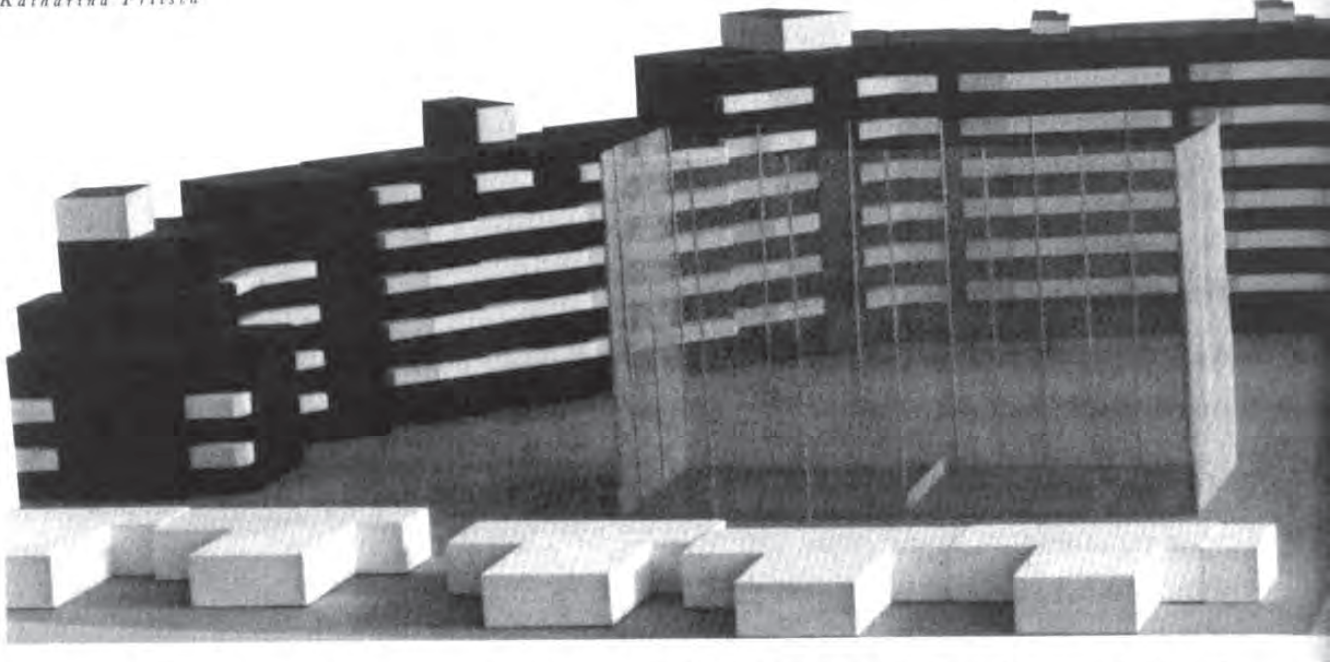
2. Viereckiger Platz mit acht Meter hohem, grauem Uhrturm (vier Uhren aussen, vier innen) aus Beton./Square with gray concrete watchtower with four clocks outside and four inside.

4. Wegkreuz mit vier Meter tiefem, schwarzem, in die Erde spitz zulaufendem Wasserbecken./Intersection with black funnel-shaped pond, thirteen feet deep.



1. Ovaler Platz mit ovalem, silbernen Aluminiumwasserbecken mit zwei Zentimeter hohem Rand./Oval square with oval, silvered aluminium trough, with rim three quarters of an inch high.

3. Runder Platz mit acht Meter hohem, rotem, gemauertem Schornstein./Circular square with red brick-clad chimney, twenty-six feet high.

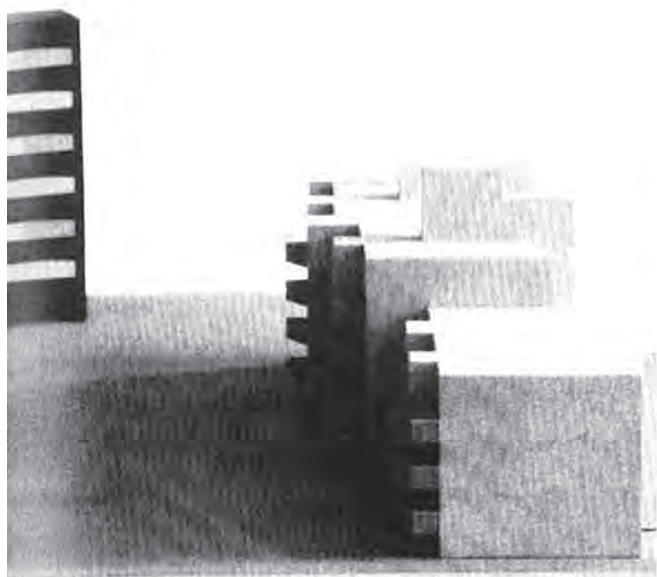


ing its use but merely providing a frame. And the frame is provided with just enough semiosis to mark the site as a place of WE and HERE without specifying or enhancing it in any way. – A related situation would be created by TENNIS COURT. Surrounded by multi-storied apartment houses, it would incorporate a striking anomaly with an almost theatrical treatment of its subject in the form of a 72-foot wire mesh fence: playing and watching, the actors and the other anonymous ones, THEY and WE, the special and the ordinary. But even in this case, it is not really a stage that has been constructed nor is there a real performance. The design of the site underscores, formulates, and defines the situational givens as it glides between unconscious pragmatism and theatrical emphasis upon specific aspects of the social space.

With the design of cemeteries, Katharina Fritsch has become involved in collective spaces of a very special nature. Hers are anonymous burial sites embedded in a rigid, geometrical order that is open to a variety of traditional symbolic readings. First of all individuals can walk into and through these sites on several different paths. The images are simple and both literally and figuratively wide; allegories, whose real dimensions are within easy grasp. The CEMETERY FOR ROW GRAVES is laid out in a square, the sides of which are 200 yards long; the octagonal

CEMETERY FOR URNS has a diameter of 105 yards. Both define areas whose concentrated design and coloring create places of peace and contemplation. The formal treatment of nature in these parks converts the constant return of sameness into an impressive image of effortless concentration. Once again, the public framework bears essentially on the dimensions of imagination, memory, and “myth.” These projects prove to be directly related to the artist’s other work, while extending their potential for collective imagery into a space with more social possibilities. Since they basically opt for integration, despite making a disconcertingly pointed statement, they incline towards a certain anonymity – similar to the “commercial character” of other works. One could do worse, it seems to me, in dealing with the still poorly defined relationship between art and public spaces.

In addition to projects immersed in an ordinary context, there are others that target the exceptional, the eventful, even the marvelous. AMUSEMENT PARK WITH FOUR PLACES with its closely spaced quartet of casual and yet symbolically charged attractions is somewhat like a scale-model landscape. A circular lawn, a good 320 feet in diameter, is crisscrossed with asphalt paths at whose intersections laconic “distractions” await the visitor: a brick



KATHARINA FRITSCH, TENNISPLATZ, 1987.

Modell, Holz, Draht, 23 x 150 x 125 cm/

TENNIS COURT, model, wood, wire, 9 1/8 x 59 x 49 1/4"

(WESTFÄLISCHES LANDESMUSEUM FÜR KUNST UND KULTURGESCHICHTE.

MÜNSTER)

smokestack (labor, when it was still visible?), an extremely flat, oval basin (a mirror, Narcissus?), a slim concrete tower on spindly legs, with clocks on all sides, four turned inwards, four turned outwards (nothing without time?), and finally, a little way off, four round, black, seemingly fathomless water holes (secrets, holes in the world?). As in the early DISPLAY UNIT, the offers are crowded – and yet each thing remains distinct. Distraction is feasible only by waiving the search for a system or a program.

The impenetrability of staging, the temptations of artificiality are taken a step further in two projects that manipulate nature itself. They are tableaux vivants to be executed in zoos as places of entertaining enlightenment that can never quite belie their kinship with the theater. There would be a few foxes with fur dyed a luminous red that would run around on the green grass of an open-air enclosure. Or there would be a number of black-and-white tapir living (as if on stage) in a mirrored enclosure that would reflect both them and the public. Imagine these scenes as abstract patterns, as stylized stills of motion, as actors engaged in unconscious choreography, perhaps even as the topsy-turvy world of a dream, and one cannot help but feel the fascination and doubt engendered by such facilely activated confrontation, such a seductive blend of nature and art. I

see these pictures before me but I am still not sure of their reality. They articulate an extreme that steers the marvelous and/or unfathomable, both utterly defenceless, into the ordinary. Such images teeter on the knife-edge between success and the insipid after-taste of disintegration.

The large public projects with their stubborn ambition of signifying beyond the “white cube” emphatically advance some of the issues that are central to Katharina Fritsch’s oeuvre. How can one arrange images that are so clear and valid that we cannot get them out of our minds (that have always been there), without draining them of strength and meaning, without becoming rigid or embarrassing? How can art, in an age characterized by the constant replacement of images and values with new images and values, make an important statement without indulging in sentimentality, nostalgia or pseudo-mythos? What measure of naïveté and distance, faith and criticism is possible in one picture before it shatters or evaporates? The objective is a realistic attitude as much as it is resistance to a flagrantly accelerated status quo.

(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)

PARKETT

Katharina Fritsch

Although it is rarely discussed in these terms, one way to look at the practice of art in the late 20th century is in light of its having gradually transformed itself from a set of problems based on the production of meaning to a parallel but different set of problems based on its discernment. Arguments tend to flow in both directions as to whether artists in earlier times stood more outside the process of critical judgement or within it, but the fact remains that it has tended to be in large part the artists' skill at using his or her hands and eyes in combination that is most certain to draw out the spectator's wonder.

That this is no longer the case should be beyond question: the progress of technology during the past four decades has created a world in which today it is within the bounds of reason for virtually any middle-class family to make movies about its own exploits, then watch themselves on the home video center – or even in front of millions of TV viewers. A class of schoolchildren can write, edit, design, and publish their own newspaper (complete with photos) using no tools other than a personal computer and printer, and Fax machines transfer text and graphics almost instantaneously to any corner of the globe. With ease of access to such image-generating, -producing, or -distributing technology becoming increasingly commonplace, the production of images is no longer dependent on the talents of the few, but is now subject instead to the caprices of the many. Anyone can originate, adapt, copy, or multiply images, but how few know what a good Inuit mask or a good de Kooning painting looks like, how many fewer know why, and is such a gift more important to being an artist today than any other?

It is a revolution first set into motion by Gutenberg, then shoved into second gear by the invention of photography. By 1915, painting and sculpture found temporary refuge by going underground, seeking shelter in the only place where the camera couldn't find it: the deeper recesses of the human mind. Viewed in this capacity – i.e., from the perspec-

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SETTING

tive of making vs. pointing – Duchamp's Ready-mades became more, for example, than just conspicuous symbols of the absence of the artist's struggle; parading unadorned through the museum's inner sanctum, they stand, in fact, for the less obviously critical problem of the artist's newly-defined ability to see "art" where others perceive only banality or loss. But as the changes of the latter half of the century have made all too clear, most artists' built-in critical capacity is more

than capable of functioning as a substitute for the critical act itself, culminating in an aesthetic stand-off whereby the artist is in charge of picking and choosing from a seemingly inexhaustible supply of pre-existing material, then arranging it to suit or reflect his or her world-view. Like the structuralists and semioticians who pioneered the late-century mania for subtexts and double entendres, contemporary artists whose work conforms loosely to the moniker "post-modern" are specialists in cutting and pasting their world from a whole into pieces, then re-assembling select parts back together again. Somewhere along the way – at least in the best work of this kind – the power of discernment effectively plays the most important role of all in this process, all but thoroughly displacing the once omnipotent force of the artist's hand.

Obviously, there are other issues bound up in these questions, such as ideology, the psychoanalytic gaze, and the possible impending disappearance of the "high arts" as a separate category unto themselves. Yet this latter situation – which, after being regarded with alarm throughout most of this century, is only becoming a reality now that no one seems to care whether it takes place or not – is perhaps the only one of these concerns which registers strongly in Katharina Fritsch's work, and which also lingers longest after the visual encounter has past. Addressing itself directly to the subject of art's inability to convey the urgency of its own perilous situation, Fritsch's art sets up a literal confrontation in which the very clarity of the project exists largely in order to effectively

STANDARDS

undermine the viewer's expectations, resulting in a tense holding-ground of difficult and carefully guarded information whose meanings have literally reached a stage of critical mass.

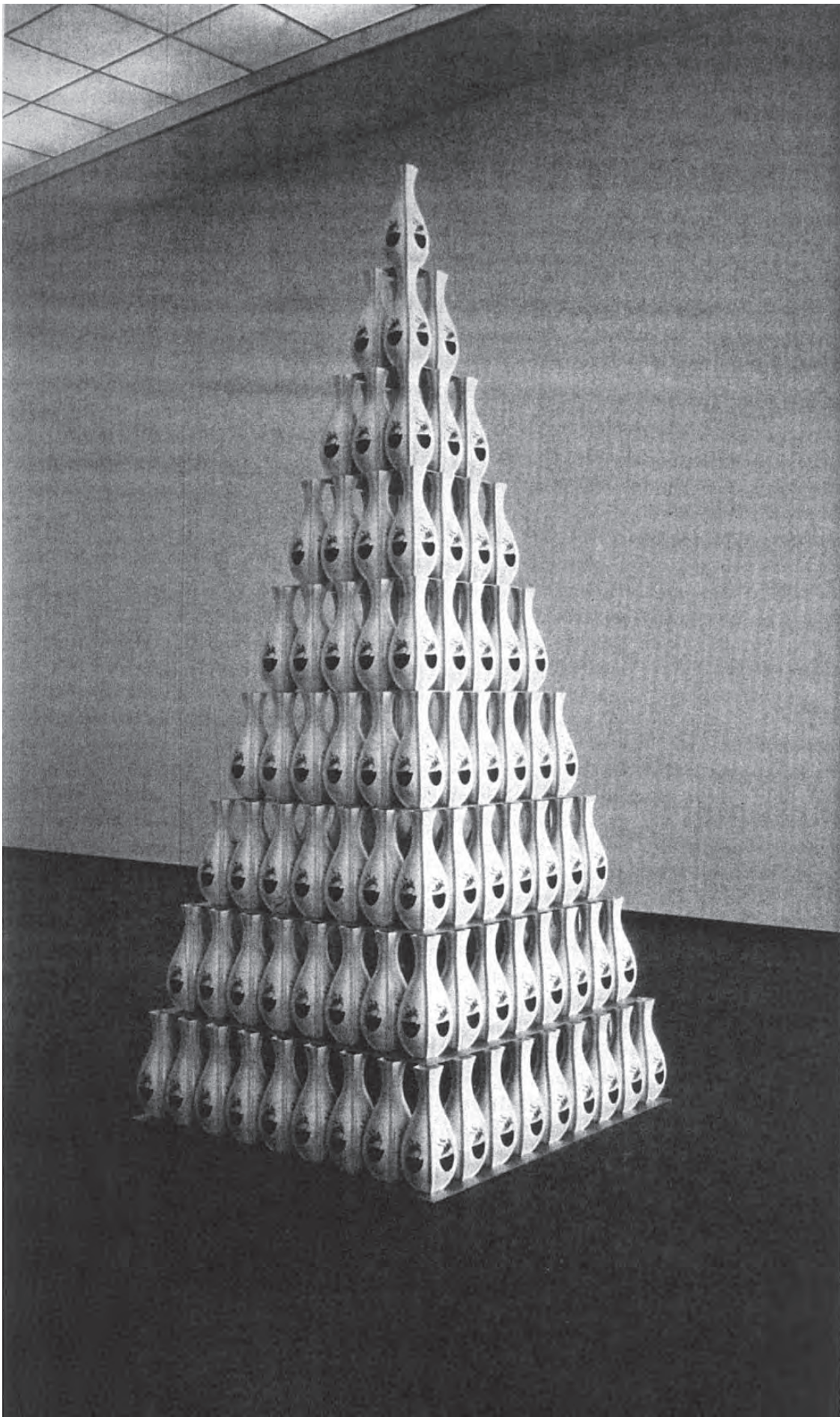
The most facile interpretation of Fritsch's art would have the themes that she chooses standing-in for the hidden subject of art itself. What possible meaning can the Virgin of Lourdes otherwise have in the present-day world of political and economic dissolution, except as a degraded icon to cling to for those who see the very concept of transmittable value gradually slipping from their grasp? Certainly this type of interpretation permits one to place a certain blame on the institutions of art for serving as accessories to the crime of over-exposure, by permitting art to sever itself from societal values in the first place. Yet whereas the spirit of this view of Fritsch's work may be plausible, it can be logically faulted for getting off on the wrong foot, in the sense that the last thing she is looking for in her art is a return to some earlier time when values were supposedly much simpler or more accessible than they are today. More importantly, perhaps, Fritsch's art is really not about critique at all, a realization which becomes particularly important when viewed in comparison to a number of American artists whose work her sculpture superficially resembles. To call attention to this aspect of her work is not to promote the somewhat transparent point of view that criticality has fallen out of fashion, but such a paradox does become important once we begin to consider that our difficulties stem from our having concluded that there is something drastically wrong with art just because it is gradually ceasing to exist.

In somewhat sharp contrast to this line of discussion, what Fritsch's art sets out to accomplish is to propose an altogether new role for art within society, one which is based on putting the artist's sense of discernment to work in quantifiable ways. Dismissing the problem of art's self-designated discursive terrain as a self-imposed barrier, Fritsch goes instead for the

heart of the problem, which is the relentless pursuit of standards for those whose daily contact with art is practically nil. These are the people, Fritsch's argument might go, who have been robbed of the right to benefit from a beautiful world, and whose lives are noticeably poorer for having suffered that deprivation. There is nothing coy or ironic in this observation—just a detached, objective reading of certain evidence which happens to be painfully apparent to anyone who cares to stop and consider the image-flow around them. Abundance, we have been told countless times, is no substitute for quality, and yet to impose new standards—or at the very least to propose models on which new values can be built—brings to mind a type of early-modern optimism that one would associate more with the Bauhaus or the British Arts and Crafts movement than with any major figures of the past fifty years.

And yet, Fritsch's work does not convey any semblance of nostalgia, primarily because of the artist's insistence that the way in which her sculpture is presented must communicate a sense of being suspended between the unquestionably real and the emphatically not-real (the aesthetic, for example). We know that Fritsch's MADONNA has not merely been "found" in an accidental way, but neither has the artist "created" it. What she has done is insist that this specific form is the best cultural vehicle, as it were, for the ideas and feelings it is intended to express, and therefore merits the heightened attention which its replication and new coloring signify. As has quite frequently been mentioned in regards to Fritsch's work, such untempered striving for ideal forms brings up the myriad problems of formalism and its quasi-mythical quest (in its latest guise, at least) for "quality."

The reason why Fritsch's art cannot be considered an extension of that particular set of problems, however, is that her work is as much about the application of those standards as it is about the standards themselves, whereas the abuse of formalism in the recent



KATHARINA FRITSCH, WARENGESTELL MIT VASEN, 1989, Aluminium, Kunststoff, 270 x 115 x 115 cm/TIERED SHELVES WITH VASES, aluminium, synthetic material, 106⁵/₁₆ x 45¹/₄ x 45¹/₄”
(PHOTO: KATRIN SCHILLING)

past in order to limit the range of art's possible meanings occurred at a time when works of art were considered self-sufficient entities anyway, and therefore not required to define themselves from the inside out. Hence, although the means by which Fritsch has made her art convincing may appear to be formalist in the extreme, she is really more interested in the possibility of applying these underlying standards against those offered by the world outside the realm of art than in duplicating certain sets of formulae which are purported to reliably lead the user to create an extended series of visually perfect forms.

For Fritsch, however, there is much more interest to be found in the sociocultural notion of form as that which is not questioned, which marks important occasions or lends significance to an event, than in any rarefied ideal that can only be understood by those indoctrinated in formalism's historical criteria. For example, the ideological problems that linger in the background of any such problems regarding "perfect" form are offset in the artist's mind by the fact that unstudied responses to her work are usually as valuable (if not more so) than those proffered by her colleagues and contemporaries, whose relation to Fritsch's work is frequently determined by the way in which she manages to live up to (or disappoint) their expectations. For her to state at the outset that art must begin to deal with the observable fact that the objects which make up our visual environment influence one's outlook in a multitude of subtle and/or obvious ways means that Fritsch has already reconciled her role as a crusader for the kinds of standards and values which she believes these objects ought to convey.

Although kitsch has never held an abiding interest for her, Fritsch feels that post-modernism's inability to cope with the accelerated image-fatigue of cultural banality in fact signals a much more serious shortcoming within the self-justifying structure of the avant-garde than in the culture at large. To take an easy example: in the art world, if one object is determined to be less aesthetically important than another, related object, then the former object's application to the cycles of life is quite naturally lessened, while the latter's is, just as naturally, compounded.

However, the late-capitalist consumer structure of objects contains two leading premises that effectively cancel one another out. One is related to the above, in that the more people who buy a product, the more of a standard that product becomes. Yet the other premise – which is as important as the first, if not more so – addresses itself to the problem of variety, particularly the consumer's seemingly insatiable hunger for increasingly specialized variations of everything that exists on a store shelf.

One need not dig too deeply into Fritsch's work before it becomes clear that the common factor which ties much of this material together is beauty: that which has the gift of being able to please. The vitality of this beauty, however, lies in the fact that it can be quite easily replicated, that it only requires having been noticed to be appreciated: her flower/vase combinations are particularly radical statements in this regard, for example, since they almost force the viewer to examine them closely to determine if they are, in fact, some form of trick. This expectation of having one's hopes dashed – which is a critical part of the avant-garde's seduction/abandonment pattern – is, in the end, more of a sociocultural problem than an aesthetic one, however important a role beauty must play in its solution. The underlying concern here is even more basic, however: although one is quite accustomed to noting on a regular basis that the "system" does not work, that it is as unwilling to recognize the conditions of quality as it is over-willing to bend its standards in order to support the claim that quality is in the eyes of the beholder, one is reluctant to insist that it is lack of beauty which makes the whole thing break down (even though on an instinctual level this appears to be the case). This is where Fritsch's interest in de-specializing the work of the artist becomes central to her undertaking: although one does not see these works at first as being uncompromising, the latter point is one on which Fritsch would be forced to disagree. A successful revolution may be fought over virtually any issue at all, but a united people must agree from the start on what is beautiful and what is not, or else they will soon become hapless victims beneath their enemies' feet.