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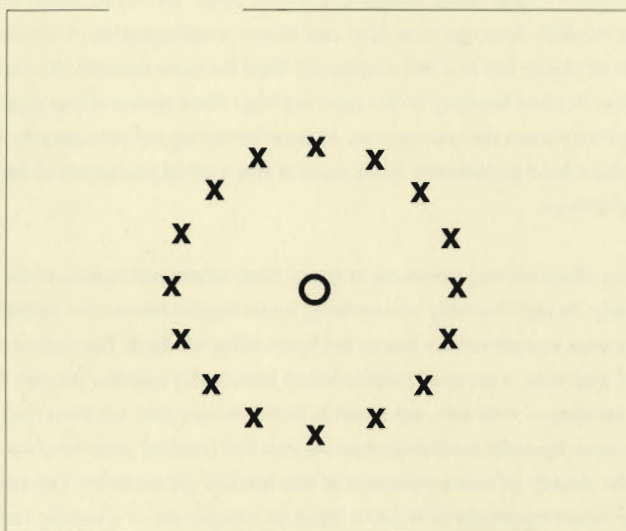
Katharina Fritsch was born in Essen, Germany on February 14, 1956. She studied at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, where she continues to live and work. Since her first show in 1984 she has exhibited widely in Europe and North America.

Major funding for this project has been received from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency, Washington, D.C., with additional funding from The Cowles Charitable Trust, the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, the Dia Art Council, the major annual support group of the Dia Center for the Arts, and the Dia Art Circle. International transportation was provided by Lufthansa German Airlines. Support for the 1992-93 exhibitions program has also been provided through a generous grant from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

A catalogue documenting the installation is forthcoming.

Dr. Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, art critic and curator of the Kunstverein in Hamburg, will give a lecture on the installation on Thursday, April 29, 1993 at 6:30pm.

Site Map



*Rat-King (Rattenkönig)*, 1993

medium: polyester resin

dimensions: height 2.8 m, diameter 13 m

X — rat

○ — knot of tails

*Rat-King (Rattenkönig)*, 1993

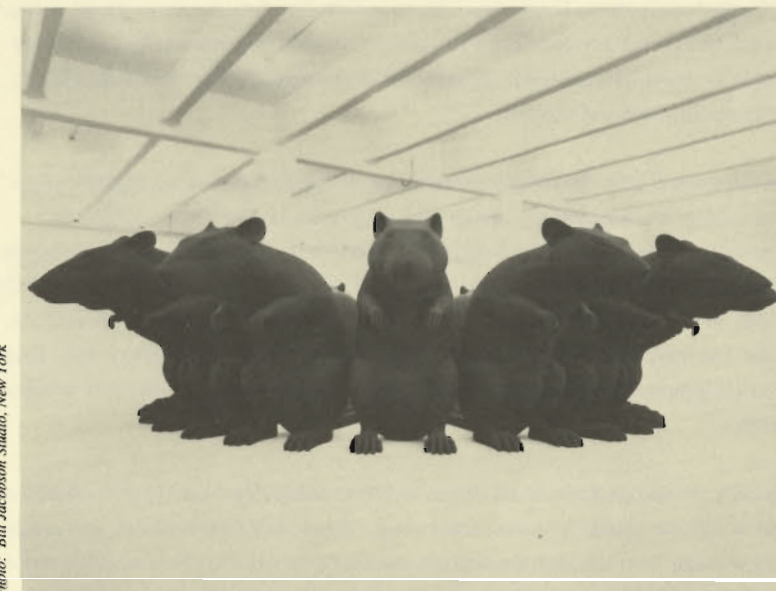


Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York

April 15, 1993–June 19, 1994

548 West 22nd Street, New York City

*Rat-King (Rattenkönig)*, 1993

"...nothing has substance for him but what has already been mediated by memory," Adorno writes of Proust. "His love dwells on the second life [the afterlife, of posterity], the one which is already over, rather than on the first." And he continues: "For Proust's aestheticism, the question of aesthetic quality is of secondary concern. In a famous passage he glorified inferior music for the sake of the listener's memories, which are preserved with far more fidelity and force in an old popular song than in the self-sufficiency of a work by Beethoven."<sup>1</sup> Much in Katharina Fritsch's work speaks to this. The potency of memory propels her art, as does a search for the immediate affectivity integral to childhood experience and only seldom recaptured after, as in unparalleled, unexpected moments of wonder.

Not surprisingly then, the objects she produces are neither fetishes nor trophies, relics from another life, but carefully constructed artifacts devised to act as catalysts, as "madeleines." Their singularity is measured neither by notions of uniqueness nor by the idiosyncracies of the eccentrically personal—nor are they drawn directly from the realm of high art where affectivity tends to fall victim to the immutability of the masterwork. Indeed, she maintains: "I often choose objects that are loaded in themselves. They should be autobiographical and of general significance at the same time, in order to be comprehensible."<sup>2</sup>

Typically, Fritsch produces serial objects or forms which clearly betray their identity as casts or replicas: identical figures seated along a bench; the Madonna based on a pocket-sized souvenir from Lourdes; the elephant modeled on a specimen from a natural history museum. And typically, too, they relate as much to mass-cultural forms as to high-art prototypes for, as Adorno argued, distinctions between different levels of culture are eliminated once they are no longer isolated as domains of the objective mind but are drawn into the stream of subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> Although familiar and mundane, as realized by Fritsch, these subjects become imbued with a highly charged character that lifts them from the realm of the banal to take on an iconic, even archetypal status.

In many of her early monumental projects, including the life-size green elephant and a water mill located adjacent to a power plant, this impact is achieved by subtle shifts in form and scale, and through the stylization attendant on symmetry, frontality, and normative proportion. The pristine forms of both mill and pachyderm demonstrate "the simultaneous embeddedness and distance of a symbolically overworked image," as

Julian Heynen succinctly states. "The hackneyed, all-too-familiar [motif] is tested for its core of collective credibility and placed in a new, contemporary context."<sup>4</sup>

Several of Fritsch's most recent sculptures evince a darker mood than either the *Elephant* or the *Mill*. Amongst these *Man and Mouse* is unforgettable. A life-size male figure made of plaster lies in a bed constructed from the same material, the covers drawn up to his chin. Perched brazenly on his chest is a huge black mouse whose slinky tail curls suggestively down the counterpane. At once horrifying and yet strangely seductive, this image fixes itself ineradicably in the mind as if it were an emanation of the most deep-seated of fears.

The *Rat-King (Rattenkönig)* too seems to spring from suppressed regions of the mind. And, similarly, its nightmarishly mesmerizing forms imprint themselves indelibly as if enunciating what was previously known but never acknowledged. The earliest recorded sightings of a rat-king, a group of rodents bound inescapably together through the accidental knotting of their tails, are found in Northern European accounts dating from the Renaissance. Sporadic recordings over the past five hundred years have served only to ground the already inflamed reputation of this freakish phenomenon. For mention of the rat-king recurs repeatedly in Western literature irrespective of scientific verification of its authenticity. The power of the image no more resides in the veracity of these embroidered accounts than *vraisemblance* is the measure of *vérité*. As indicated by Fritsch's use of a tempered realism in preference to naturalism, veracity in this instance should be gauged in relation to inner truth rather than by standards of mimesis. The fastidiously adjusted profiles, the near symmetry of replicated and duplicated forms, and the almost overpowering scale, together with the hieratic geometry of their circular configuration imbue this work with a potency far more eloquent than would be possible with a merely lifelike version. Lit by a relentlessly harsh light, the *Rat-King's* dark forms thrust forward towards the spectator in an epiphanic encounter that is as unsettling to the spirit as it is challenging to the body.

L. C.

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1. Theodor Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1981), p. 182.
  2. Stephan Schmidt-Wulffen, "Katharina Fritsch: Mechanisms of Epiphany," *OBJECTives: The New Sculpture* (Newport Beach, California: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1990), p. 51.
  3. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," *Prisms*, p. 182.
  4. Julian Heynen, "Speculation on Trucks, Cemeteries, Foxes and Other Images," *Parkett*, no. 25, 1990, p. 54.