

Kat. Rosemarie Trockel - Kunsthalle Basel, ICA London 1988

## FROM ICON TO LOGO (1988)

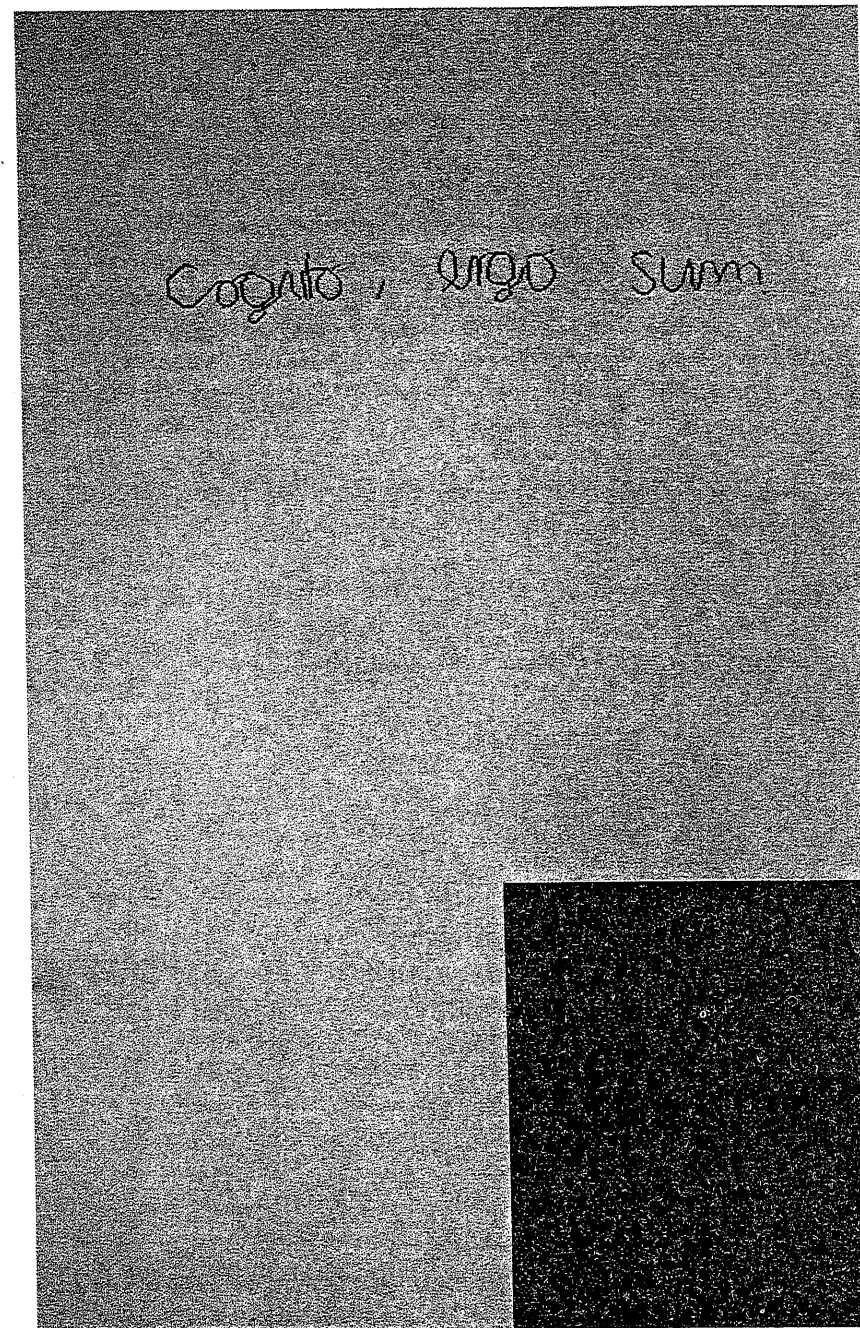
BY  
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Let us begin by considering something which will not really be our concern here: the discourse on the immanence of fashion and art. To think of the history of art as merely a play of styles is to ignore the social conditions which determine how styles first emerge and subsequently change. We are not concerned, therefore, with going back through the history of ornamentation from the Wiener Werkstätte through to op art and pattern art. We shall leave these historical sources to the Neo-geometrics. As far as possible we want to avoid ascribing Trockel's work either to this line of descent or to Ungaro's classical neckline or Valentino's "dazzle of colour" dressing, though it would be possible to demonstrate a relationship with both of the latter. This whole "Artists Make Clothes" business is a notorious nonsense. "Artists Make Fashion" could only be the title of an anthology written from a blinkered perspective, in which the object itself remains hidden. The vestimentary code is of interest, after all, only when it is seen as clothing reality. The vestimentary code takes its meaning not from fashion itself, for fashion is only the framework for the image society gives of itself through clothes.

If Rosemarie Trockel knits pictures rather than painting them, that is to say, if the solid image becomes a woven image, then what is produced is a mixture of pictures and clothes which reflects the mixture of cultural and vestimentary codes. This tendency for pictures to become clothes and clothes to become pictures is reinforced by the motifs of the pictures, which are old, familiar knitting designs. This means that not only the material and the

methods she employs in her art (fabric and knitting), but even the motifs she depicts are scorned, even shunned, by the artistic world. By the very fact of using material and clothing designs as visual motifs, the picture is itself converted into a garment, and in the process the wearers themselves become pictures. If, in shaped canvasses, format and content were identical, in the knitted picture-as-garment, the sign and its wearer are identical. The observer becomes the observed, the signifier the signified. What tremendous social changes have caused such a thing to happen in the realm of signs? What we are really interested in there is the social code that is speaking through the vestimentary code, which itself has a cultural code woven into it. People are the bearers of clothes, just as clothes are the bearers of a message. If the garment is a picture and the picture is material for the garment and if, in the process, the interpreters of the code themselves become pictures, then we can read what the social code omits or negates as it is articulated through fashion or visual culture. As in the masks of non-European cultures, the meaning of these knitted pictures is not to be found in what they represent, but in what they omit and negate. These knitted forms are therefore anagrams of a society which we can only now call by its real name. This society, the Corporate Society, produces a logo-culture, in which the trademark (logo) has taken the place of the icon. Trockel's knitted pictures are, therefore, *logograms*. Their decoding reveals the condition of our logo-cratic society. That, we shall argue, is what is interesting in Trockel's art: she reflects the shift from the icon to the logo and the social change in our culture underlying this, as she relocates the activity of sign-producing from the painted image to the woven one. Thus she brings to the theatre of the sign the scenario of signifiers, where confusions are part of the system and signifiers are interchangeable. In



passing from icon to logo, from canvas to textile, from picture to patterned material, the underlying social conditions of the icon, picture and canvas are revealed, as it were, in the rear-view mirror. If clothes belong in the dictionary of lies, because they may deceive us both about social status and the status of the body, they may deceive us both about social status and the status of the body, then this corresponds to the function of pictures themselves. For the garment is really always a picture and each picture is a garment, a facade, a backdrop, a mask, a curtain. We need only recall the most famous picture of classical times, which, typically, has remained unknown because it only exists in textual form, namely Parrhasios's picture of a curtain. By equating the painted with the woven image, the illusory picture with the tissues of lies, Trockel points to the suppressed aspect of lying and the deception in the picture itself. Just as clothes mask something, so too the picture hides and conceals. It is precisely when a garment is concealing things or making them disappear altogether, that it comes closest to the picture. As masks, therefore, the relevance of the woven image (clothes) and the solid image (painting) is not in what they show, reveal or represent, but in what they omit, negate and conceal. When there is a disruption of the vestimentary code, into which, as Trockel shows, the cultural code is woven, the voice of society is articulated. The vestimentary code does not refer only to people, but also to culture. This is the basis of Trockel's shift from the icon to the logo, from the painted to the knitted picture. For as a "language spoken by all, but known to none" (R. Barthes, *Systeme de la mode*) clothes say less about the nature of human beings, and in fact say much more about the epistemology of society. People whose trousers are full of creases, may, nonetheless, be secretly carefree. I am more concerned with what Trockel's logograms, as an aesthetics of appearance, say

about society. Fashion does not only provide answers to questions of form in the upper reaches of the industrial firm, but also to questions about the cellar of culture, about the basement of industrial society. Since clothes and costumes are better actors than their wearers, there are no simple ways to find the answers we are looking for. We really do have to read the logograms of industrial aesthetics as anagrams. For when we talk of "dressing something up", we mean veiling its faults and improving its appearance; glossing over the weaknesses in its reality, and toning up its appearance. So the picture stands between reality and design – "a thing for nothing" (Shakespeare) – as Rosemarie Trockel shows us in her equation of knitted picture and painter's canvas, of pattern and individual motif. The picture too reinforces the aspects of mere appearance and illusion. The visual culture as a whole veils the social conditions, interchanges the signifiers so that these could even be combined with a contrary signified. Like as mask, the picture feigns a sovereign spontaneity, when in fact the dominant style has, for many years, been the mechanical and the automatic. The real meaning of the concept "pattern" is in fact "model", that is a pattern to copy, in the same way as, for example, a knitting pattern is copied to reproduce an article of clothing. Whereas, then, the exchange value of the picture was grounded in the fact that it was a site of originality, the reproduction of knitted motifs is less interesting for its geometric beauty than for the fact that these reproductions – in total contrast to the classics of iconography – are invitations to copying and imitation. These knitted pictures with their knitted motifs provide us with the spectacle of a society based on copies, on industrial reproduction and general substitutability. If the visual energy of a period so displaces and narrows itself that the greater part of our visual communication, as it is to be found in

magazines, television and film, is no longer provided by icons but by indices and logos, then a true artist is duty-bound to react to these displacements. Through the masks of the image, through the signs, through the curtains and clothes, through the materials and patterns, we see in Trockel's knitted logograms the activity of manipulation and ideology. The supplanting of the icon by the logo has the effect of allowing us to see through fashion to the naked facts, and through modish effects to the fake.

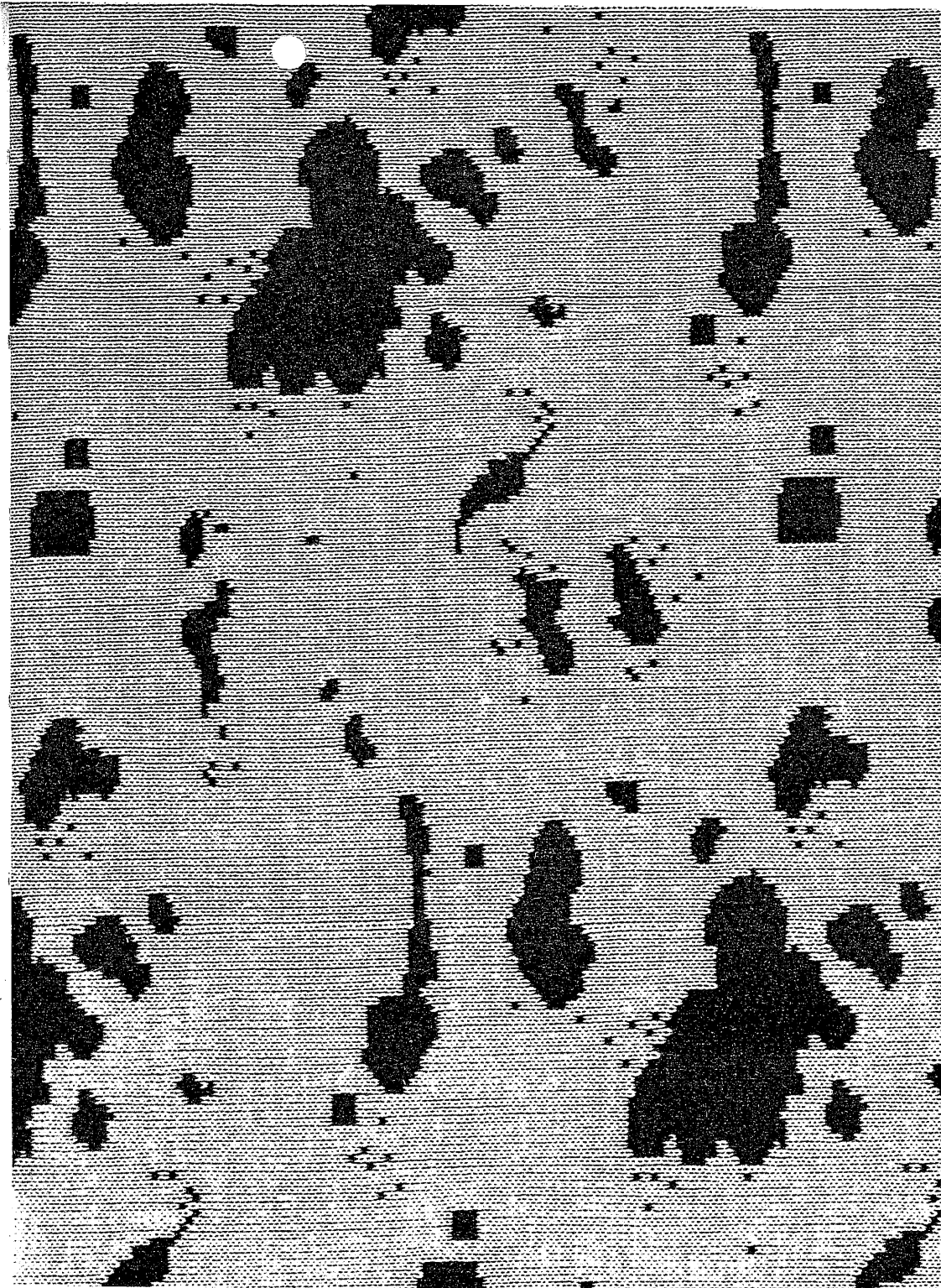
Trockel's knitted pictures teach us the morality of images in the mirror of fashion: if one (male) needs a dressing down, one (female) is punished. If one (female) remains dressed, one (male) becomes bored. If one (male) changes ad-dress, one (female) has to report it to the police. At the end of Fashion Street the State lies in wait. It is from this state of affairs that the deconstruction of the picture-based culture – as achieved by Trockel's knitted pictures – draws its subversive power.

Trockel's initial move consists in replacing the solid image with a woven one, thereby undermining the work of art in terms of both materials and method. In a second phase, classical motifs are replaced by industrial patterns and semiotic ready-mades. At a third stage, icons are replaced by logos. The basic aesthetic operation here is one of *devaluation*. This has to do not only with the material and with the art form (knitting) – for how could the heroic creativity of a man be compared with the honest knitting of a woman – but also with the symbols involved. Wool is precisely not the material from which great heroic pictures are made. Knitting does not have the same power as an art-form or as a sign-producing activity that erecting steel plates, or hewing stone has. As Rosemarie Trockel introduces this artistically inferior material and this aesthetically inferior art-form, we become aware of the extent

to which the feminine is excluded from culture. For wool as a material, knitting as a method, and knitted motifs as a thema are signifiers of the feminine. If these signifiers are seen as culturally inferior, then the feminine itself must be seen as inferior too. This first dismantling of the conditions underlying works of art shows us that culture is not woman's place. Since, however, all gestures directed at the destruction of culture have been recuperated by culture, culture can no longer be destroyed; it can only be transformed. In opening up to what was previously excluded from culture as inferior, she is transforming culture with her genuinely feminine material and her genuinely feminine activity.

Like Duchamp's ready-mades, which were not, like a painting, the products of his individual handiwork, Trockel's knitted pictures are not craftwork but are produced industrially by a computer-aided knitting machine into which patterns have been fed. The image content and the referents of the knitted pictures are also pre-programmed, memorized, unambiguous patterns. Trockel's knitted pictures reflect not only past social conditions which brought forth standardised patterns that both mirrored the processes of industrial production and were aesthetic forms; they also reflect the present conditions in which not just objects but signs too are transformed into commodities. These ready-made signs are logos. Trockel does not work in the sign-space of the past. She does not delve into the archives of art history, uncovering old icons and dusting them off; she directs our gaze into the sign-space of today, where signs have become commodities and ready-mades. Aesthetic strategies that were those of Duchamp and Schwitters – one recalls the origins of the term "Merzbild" in "Kommerz-Bank" – and also of Pop Art, which extolled the commodity character of objects from the consumer's standpoint (cf. the use of the Coca Cola bottle as a ready-

made object in Jasper Johns and as a ready-made sign in Andy Warhol), have been extended by Trockel into the sign-space of the present. In this way, she is able to demonstrate what has already occurred but has not yet become visible, namely that our culture is moving over altogether, as a result of generalized commodification, from an iconocratic society to a logocratic one, from an iconography to a logography, in which icons are supplanted by logos. By further devaluing, by artistic means, objects and pictures that have already undergone real, but hidden, devaluation, Trockel's pictures refer us to something that is already present, but does not yet show up in reality. However, this devaluation is a process which can also run in the opposite direction. When the hammer and sickle appear as a knitted image on a bourgeois article of clothing, together with the woolmark, then this indicates a



devaluation of the high-flown ideology associated with that logo. This equating of logos of propaganda for products with those of ideological propaganda is a slap in the face for both, for each sees itself as the opposite of the other. In this way, she demonstrates that ideology is being completely sold out through *logo-dumping*.

The woman who wears an item of clothing by Trockel is not wearing a work of art; she is embodying the devaluation of subject into commodity that occurs through the distortion of the vestimentary code. The shadow of industry pursues the subject in the article of clothing, which moves under its own steam like a kind of vestimentary automobile. Industry casts its shadow over the subject by way of items of clothing and the images they bear in the same way as it casts its shadow over culture. Duchamp's „Rembrandt as an ironing-board“ shows that the muscles of money can smooth one's way through the day. When, in Trockel's art, commodity images (logos) and commodity objects (clothes) – either in abstracted form (as patterns) or concretely – replace classic iconography or the picture itself, the displacement from icon to logo becomes visible. The result is that she initiates debate upon logo-cratic society in which not only objects but signs and subjects are turned into commodities. Just as the symbol is the sign for objects, so the logo is the sign for commodities. A logo-dominated, logo-cratic culture naturally also transforms our conception of images. Even art has gone for the total “knock-out” look, through a recycling of its styles and signs. Under the pressure of the logocracy and the laws of the market, art itself has become subject to the same total exchangeability of all elements, styles and signs (eclecticism, mannerism, Appropriation Art etc.). The pressure of logography compels it in this direction, because iconography is closed off; it is a no-go area, a barren field. The only

solution for breaking out of this zone in fact rules out traditional art, which at best attempts to compromise with strategies of collaboration like Pop Art, by mixing logos from the mass culture (such as the Coca Cola logo) with icons from the high culture or, alternatively, seeks, by drawing on traditional art forms, to turn these logos into icons.

In this total exchangeability which affects not only the signifiers but also the signifieds, signs are destroyed. To this extent, one may speak of a semiotic catastrophe. Trockel's pictures, by contrast, maintain a state of *semiotic ecstasy*, because they demonstrate the transformation of a sign space into a logo space. Trockel does not try to draw a parallel between mass-produced, mechanically produced pictures from the low culture and those of the high culture, or to reconcile icons of individuation with icons in the mass culture, as Pop Art sought to do.

The de-valued textile-picture with its motifs “ready-made” by industrial machines or with its mass-production or mass-ideology logos is not merely a tour de force of individual imagination and self-expression, but lays bare a permanent devaluation, a lasting shrinkage of value. And the shrinkage is apparent not only because, as fabric, it is washable, but because, as Duchamp's Rembrandt reminds us, it can also be ironed.

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