

Rosemarie Trockel / Thea Djordjadze: limitation of life

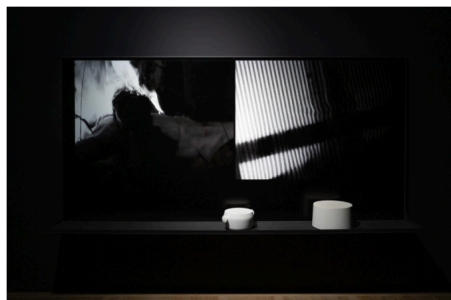


FIG. 1 Installation view of Rosemarie Trockel / Thea Djordjadze: *limitation of life* at the Lenbachhaus, Munich, 2024–25, showing *kapelle von venice, but without terror*, by Rosemarie Trockel and Thea Djordjadze. 2017/2024. Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artists and Sprüth Magers; photograph Ernst Jank).

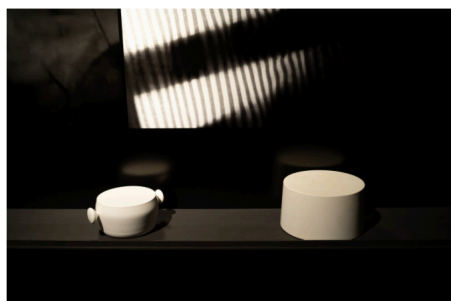


FIG. 2 Detail of *kapelle von venice, but without terror*, by Rosemarie Trockel and Thea Djordjadze. 2017/2024. Mixed-media installation. (Courtesy the artists and Sprüth Magers; photograph Ernst Jank; exh. Lenbachhaus, Munich).

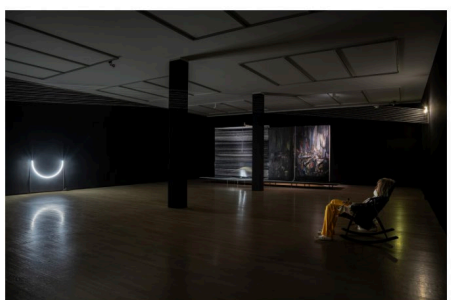


FIG. 3 Installation view of Rosemarie Trockel / Thea Djordjadze: *limitation of life* at the Lenbachhaus, Munich, 2024–25. (Courtesy the artists and Sprüth Magers; photograph Ernst Jank).

The ‘Artist’ is absent from *limitation of life*, a condensed, non-linear retrospective of the twenty-year creative partnership of Rosemarie Trockel (b.1952) and Thea Djordjadze (b.1971), and yet the artists are undeniably present. Over the last fifty years, Trockel has established a vast and heteroclitic body of work that resists categorisation, reflecting a feminine – if not feminist, a category she eschews – experience of the cultural industry in which she came of age. Djordjadze, who first met Trockel in 1998 while studying at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, is predominantly known for precarious installations that disrupt Western, modernist ideals of unity, autonomy and stability. In their joint practice, the two artists exhibit collectively, while maintaining their distinctive visual identities and working methods. This can be understood as an extension of the relational and contingent nature of their respective *œuvres*, which defy the presence of a unique authorial position. Abolishing chronology and didactic material, they favour a creative, intuitive and resilient approach to exhibition-making. At the Lenbachhaus, Munich, the artists continue their approach of devising installations in which both form and meaning change in relation to space and time.

Five works are arranged sparingly across two black-painted, dimly lit rooms underneath Franz von Lenbach’s historic villa that forms the heart of the museum. A short wall text at the entrance provides the only discursive guide to the show, in which visitors are given a brief overview of the artists’ relationship, their use of materials and their place within traditions of ‘scrutinizing [...] the creative process and interrogating its premises, traditions, freedoms, and constraints’. Crucially, the text also provides the inspiration for *limitation of life*: the opening lines from Arthur Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer* (*A Season in Hell*; 1873), which read ‘One evening, I seated Beauty on my knees – And I found her bitter. – and I insulted her’.¹ This passage has also served as the title for two of the artists’ previous exhibitions: *Un soir j’ai assis la beauté sur mes genoux*. And I found her bitter. And I hurt her at Sprüth Magers, London, in 2007 and its tenth anniversary reconfiguration at the gallery’s venue in Berlin.

At the Lenbachhaus, Rimbaud’s aesthetic violence is manifested in the mixed-media installation *kapelle von venice, but without terror* FIG.1. Two waxed black-and-white photographs hang behind two white funerary urns FIG.2 placed on a low shelf. For the project, Trockel and Djordjadze burnt sculptures that represent artistic ‘geniuses’ – the ‘writer’, the ‘painter’ – before sealing the ashes in urns.² The images, which capture the wavering presence of human-like forms, are culled from the video documentation of the burning process.



FIG. 4 Installation view of Rosemarie Trockel / Thea Djordjadze: *limitation of life* at the Lenbachhaus, Munich, 2024-25, showing *A Ship So Big, A Bridge Cringes*, by Rosemarie Trockel and Thea Djordjadze. 2007. Wool on canvas, oil on canvas, screenprint on Alu-Dibond, steel, aluminium, perspex, foil and water, 305 by 691 by 121 cm. (Courtesy the artists and Sprüth Magers; photograph Ernst Jank).



FIG. 5 Detail of *A Ship So Big, A Bridge Cringes*, by Rosemarie Trockel and Thea Djordjadze. 2007. Wool on canvas, oil on canvas, screenprint on Alu-Dibond, steel, aluminium, perspex, foil and water. (Courtesy the artists and Sprüth Magers; photograph Ernst Jank; exh. Lenbachhaus, Munich).

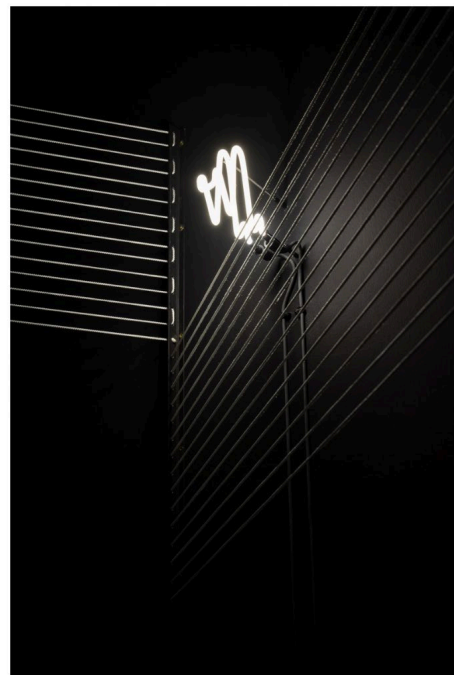


FIG. 6 Detail of *Lob der Langeweile*, by Rosemarie Trockel and Thea Djordjadze. 2008. Mixed media installation. (Courtesy the artists and Sprüth Magers; photograph Timo Ohler).

The physical transformation and visual disappearance of these figures can be understood as the prelude to limitation of life.

In a chthonic reversal of Lenbach's ornate interior and museological shrine-like framework, the exhibition offers a meditation on the finite nature of dominant aesthetics, historically embodied by the individual (Western, male) artist. What follows is a decentralised, pluralistic process, in which multiple forces – the artists, works, architecture, institution and viewers – engender and shape one another.

Two pillars integral to the museum structure, also painted black, are given centre stage in the next room, which is illuminated only by neon works of art FIG.3. Blocking the view of the largest installation in the show, their practical and semiotic limitations become part of the exhibition, investing the space itself with a new (de)constructive function: calling into question the systems of visibility promoted by the institution. Destabilising both perception and knowledge, *A Ship So Big, A Bridge Cringes* FIG.4 comprises four large canvases, arranged in two pairs – one placed side-by-side and backed onto the other – which are installed atop a metal basin filled with water. A piece of rope is slung over the canvases FIG.5, dangling loosely over the front and creating a U-shape at the back. Each surface differs in style and material: one is an abstract oil painting that recalls high modernism; another is threaded in black, white and grey wool; and another is populated with seemingly arbitrarily arranged clay, metal and wood elements. Confined to the wall behind a pillar, this 'anti-monument' frustrates both physical and visual engagement, evading art-historical notions of authority, authorship, originality, value and permanence.

For Trockel and Djordjadze, work titles are not purely descriptive; they also take on a sculptural quality and are used to build linguistic allegories. The artists' departure from the Rimbaud quotation in their exhibition title may signal a more personal development, for the term 'limitation' is by now well-established in both their critical vocabularies. In the catalogue for Trockel's 2000-01 solo exhibition, for example, Iris Müller-Westermann highlighted how the artist's works 'make the limitations of female life visible through the means of the art'.³ More recently, Djordjadze related her practice to her Soviet upbringing in the following terms: 'I need certain limitations [...] I then break them, so that I can move freely – both mentally and artistically'.⁴ Djordjadze has described her practice in terms of poetry, in which a finite number of words are constantly reconfigured in anticipation of a meaning that only forms in the making.

Lob der Langeweile (In Praise of Boredom) FIG.6 takes its title directly from Joseph Brodsky's dismal valediction to the class of 1989 at Dartmouth College, Hanover.⁵ A series of iron strings span the entire width of the room, affixed to the walls and bookended by twisted neon lights. These formations recall Djordjadze's native Georgian script – which does not recognise the hierarchy of upper- and lower-case letters – or musical notes on a stave, perhaps a reference to her late father, who was a pianist. Evoking both music and speech, the installation introduces the notion of time into the exhibition.



FIG. 7 Installation view of Rosemarie Trockel / Thea Djordjadze: *limitation of life* at the Lenbachhaus, Munich, 2024–25, showing *Limitation of life*, by Rosemarie Trockel and Thea Djordjadze. 2007. Mixed-media, dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artists and Sprüth Magers; photograph Lukas Schramm; exh. Lenbachhaus, Munich).

Boredom, Brodsky remarked, ‘speaks the language of time,’ it is ‘by large a product of repetition [...] and life’s main medium is precisely repetition.’⁶ Indeed, repetition is central to Trockel and Djordjadze’s exhibitions, which use the same format and vocabulary to create new syntactical structures, substituting relationality for originality.

At Lenbachhaus, this practice parallels the experience of the house museum, where meaning emerges through connections between the disparate objects of a personal collection.

However, whereas museums preserve and fix objects in time, the artists’ installations are dynamic and alive in their embrace of contingency.

Limitation of life FIG.7 is also the title of a work in the exhibition that is initially hard to bring into focus: a hyper-realistic sculpture devised as a *mise-en-scène* of Michel Houellebecq’s novel *The Possibility of an Island* (2005).⁷ It represents an emaciated ageing female artist, which – in correspondence to their respective creative approaches – combines Trockel’s head and Djordjadze’s hands. Seated on a rocking chair mid-way across the large gallery, she emerges slowly from the dark, prompting eerie surprise once visitors become aware of her presence. A face mask is lowered across her chin, a cane is placed in her lap and she is smeared with paint; a change of clothes sits next to her in a bag. She is an artist who is still working but is fatigued. Disheartened, she contemplates the pitiless mockery of the U-shaped neon that appears to be smiling at her from the opposite wall – a reference to the male-dominated Minimalist era in which Trockel began her career and which took its toll on generations of women artists. The smiling light has an Ozian quality: its self-aggrandising strategies will eventually materialise before its spark goes out. Subtly, latently, Trockel and Djordjadze share their artistic struggles, which reflect broader cultural and sociopolitical inequalities, while continuing to push at aesthetic and institutional limits.