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IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"REFUSAL OF PERSONALITY": BRIGID DOHERTY ON ROSEMARIE TROCKEL AND RORSCHACH

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Transcript

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Caro Fowler
Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists about what it means to write history and make art, and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

In this episode, I talk with Brigid Doherty, who is associate professor at Princeton University. Brigid's research focuses on the interdisciplinary study of 20th century art and literature, especially relationships among artistic practices and aesthetic and psychoanalytic theories. In this episode, Brigid and I discuss the book project she worked on while a fellow at the Clark in the spring of 2020, which examines the artist Rosemarie Trockel, and her so-called "Rorschach Pictures."

Brigid Doherty
The notion of the minor is useful in terms of how to conceptualize the experimental dimension of her practices, and of what's at stake in imagining or fantasizing or staging a return to the conditions of the original Rorschach experiment—not as a way of redeeming it, not at all that, but imagining a kind of displacement or refusal of personality.

Caro Fowler
Thank you so much for joining me today, Brigid. I often begin these conversations by asking about formative intellectual encounters. And so I think it would be productive to start this conversation with: how might you describe your experiences in undergrad or graduate school, and how you put together your thinking during that time?

Brigid Doherty

That's a wonderful question. I think for me, in many ways the seminar that was most acute for me as an intellectual experience in graduate school was a seminar that T.J. Clark taught on William Blake's illustrated books, which was a totally extraordinary experience for me. But a lot of what I did in graduate school also reached back to what was a genuinely transformative moment in my undergraduate studies, which was a philosophy class co-taught by Nancy Cartwright and Arnold Davidson, which is a seminar in which I first read Foucault and Ian Hacking. And that was the moment--I was a sophomore I guess?--in my undergraduate studies where I felt like my head exploded in terms of how to frame certain kinds of reading and even close reading that I had already learned quite well--not that I was doing it well, but I been taught very well already in my first two years how to do that through interdisciplinary humanities courses and courses in comparative literature. And that was really transformative. So that really remained a touchstone for me also because it was one of the moments in which I was shown what the potential is for art history to be central to certain kinds of interdisciplinary inquiry, in part because already then, although he published it a few years later, Arnold Davidson was thinking very seriously about how the conceptualization of style in art history around the turn of the 20th century in Wölfflin's work, although it certainly applies to others as well--certainly applies to Riegl, but Arnold doesn't take Riegel up--could be a kind of conceptual apparatus to think about doing the history of all kinds of other things. It goes to the whole question of styles of reasoning, which is a major idea in Hacking's work. For Arnold, that's a point of intersection also with psychoanalysis. So for me in a way, that course that I took in my sophomore year of college has continued to have after-effects, and has been inescapable for me, and was also mind boggling.

We had Stuart Hampshire come in as a guest lecturer, and it was just crazy what they brought into the classroom. In a way it was that course and a couple of other courses in philosophy as an undergrad that brought me to art history. And I felt like doing art history. Studying art history with the people I was lucky enough to study with at Berkeley, and then with the people I have been lucky enough to have as colleagues was in some ways a fulfillment of the promise that I saw in that course about how art history really could bring things to the table at a conceptual level, and not just as a set of accounts of individual objects or moments or movements. Maybe it's interesting then that I say the Blake seminar was an analogous moment in graduate school, I think in part because it was so

totally remote from that or at least seemingly remote from that. Because all we did in that course, as I remember it, we might have read a couple of critical essays on Blake, but we just really read the primary material. And I had very little background in English. It made me wish that I hadn't set out to be a modernist, but it also made me realize that I couldn't, and this is sort of sad, and I suppose it wasn't true, but that there was way too much ground to be made up to go back and work on something earlier. But there were a couple of moments, also in a course with Svetlana Alpers, and in an independent study I did with Michael Baxandall where I thought, "Oh god, I should be working earlier." But I didn't. And I don't. I still don't know enough to go back and be working on an early modern topic or on 18th century Britain.

Caro Fowler
Is that how you came to Dada as a dissertation topic? Is [it] that you found that the conceptual and philosophical investments were complimentary to your own understanding of the discipline of art history?

Brigid Doherty
There was one really immediate motivation for working more broadly on Berlin Dada. I would have written a monographic dissertation on Schwitters if John Elderfield's catalog didn't exist. Although the book wasn't yet published, I also knew that Dorothea Dietrich, who was then teaching at Princeton, had done work on Schwitters that came from a very different perspective than John's, but that was complimentary to it in terms of filling out the historical picture. And so I just felt that there was no room. John Elderfield is among the people in the profession whom I value most at every level. Again, that's another fantasy world. I think I would have been much more comfortable and much more at home if I could have done that [and] just worked on Schwitters, who is the figure within that period to whom I certainly feel the greatest affinity, and whose work I feel most comfortable thinking in relation to. I think the choice to work on Dada--some of it had to do with the fact that in the early 1990s archives were opening in what had been East Berlin. It became clear when I did preliminary research that I was going to get very good access in part because I went and met with archivists. [It was also] in part, I think, because I wasn't a West German scholar.

So I was treated with enormous generosity and kindness by--the archives were then still staffed by the archivists who had been running them under the German Democratic Republic. And so there was a real opportunity there. And I think it was also in some ways a choice of object that felt most resistant to me, and in many ways, most resistant to my sensibility, which is a perverse way in, but it felt necessary.

Caro Fowler
I would love to hear more about your project on Rosemarie Trockel, which you came here to work on, and to hear how that project is part of your larger intellectual engagements with the field of art history and also intellectual history.

Brigid Doherty
This project on Rosemarie Trockel, which focuses on her so-called "Rorschach" works, which are a group of works made in the early 1990s, first [as] a set of so-called wool pictures. In 1991, the year of her first big retrospective exhibition in the US, she showed in Los Angeles at Regen Projects a set of wool pictures: pictures knitted at a factory in Italy based on drawings that she provided that were made in a format on graph paper so that they could be produced using the industrial knitting machines. These were derived from riffs on the 10 cards used in the Rorschach test. And Trockel had been given a set of the Rorschach cards by a German Cologne-based psychoanalyst named Edeltrud Meistermann-Seeger, who Trockel knew, and who had written a dissertation interestingly enough on Rorschach in the 1940s--so someone with a psychoanalytic training and training in psychology and philosophy, and a deep engagement with Rorschach's work himself. So Trockel would have had these Rorschach cards in her studio, and was working with, I think it's pretty clear, both the cards and the textual component to the experiment that Rorschach published in the early 1920s. And the other major point of contact for Trockel in making these knitted Rorschach pictures was clearly a set of very large acrylic on canvas works made by Andy Warhol in the mid 1980s (in 1984), that had just been shown as part of the Warhol retrospective that started at MoMA, and had been in Cologne in 1989/90. So there are these two moments in Trockel's project with the Rorschach materials in the early 90s. One is the engagement with Warhol. She may also well have known a Rorschach-related work that Marcel Duchamp had

published in *Minotaur*. And Duchamp had come to know about the Rorschach we think through Lacan in the early 1930s. So there are a number of touchstones in Trockel's practice as a whole that the Rorschachs take up from works of the 1960s back to those surrealist milieu, back to Duchamp. And that's the art historical engagement. What I came to find extremely interesting about her Rorschach project is its difference from Warhol's. So there are other big knitted pictures which affect certain kinds of transformations and inversions on the look of the Rorschach cards. They become radically asymmetrical for example.

Caro Fowler

In terms of scale, how big are the Rorschach cards themselves? Because it sounds like she must have scaled it up quite a bit, especially if she's using drawings on a grid for a factory.

Brigid Doherty

Yeah, so her Rorschach pictures are more than more than two meters high, but the Warhols are significantly bigger. They're nearly wall-sized. I don't have the precise dimensions of the Warhols in mind, and they do vary to a certain degree. So there's a huge scaling up to stand in relation to contemporary painting of the 1980s, and going back to works on the scale of large abstract pictures from the 1950s forward. And she also made at the same time a set of ink drawings. So the Rorschachs are card size. They're roughly 8 by 10 because in the original experiment they're designed to be held and turned by the subject in the experiment. So the original drawings that Rorschach made, including a whole bunch of test drawings, are accessible in the Rorschach archive in Bern. And that's its own very interesting set of questions that I've gotten a bit involved in, which is "what were the conditions of making of the Rorschach images that he came to use." They were made by Rorschach himself, who had some training as an artist, and was the son of a drawing instructor, and well-read in art history. So Trockel does the large-scale knitted picture works, which are in conversation with painting, but also very much interested in the question of a transformation of scale from an ink drawing to this large knitted work. I've written elsewhere about the dynamics of wet and dry in Trockel's work, and in these that's particularly vivid, because the dryness of her wool medium is everywhere

evident, as is its mechanicalness. If you look at the edges, the margins, the contours of the figures in the Rorschach pictures, you see these dry digitalized edges, which are so radically different from the way ink appears on paper. But she did do this series of ink drawings, which affects a different kind of inversion, and this is not entirely clear how this unfolded, but she seems to have staged a experiment using the protocols of Rorschach's experiment as a generative device for drawing. So it may be that she had someone read to her from the protocols in which test subjects are interpreting the Rorschach cards. And she then made drawings after that through a process that relates to practices of automatic drawing and automatic writing, listening apparently, or having just read (it's not entirely clear what the work of the studio involved to these protocols), and then making drawings not as illustrations of the protocols, but as a kind of inversion of the operations of the experiment. That's part of the account. When one looks at this set of drawings, they also morphologically look as though they are, again, responses to and transformations of the actual look of Rorschach's 10 cards, and there are 10 drawings. She put those drawings through yet another process of color photocopying, in which she enlarged and cut off some pieces of them. Those color photocopies now make up what's called a "book draft." She has a genre of works called book drafts, or Buchentwurfe, book designs really, book sketches. Test pieces for books would be a good way to describe it. And those are now in MoMA's collection. They were shown for the first time in the new installation that opened in the fall of 2019. And to that work, which is this collection of photocopies of the original ink drawings, she very interestingly gave a title that is itself a kind of estrangement and inversion of the title of a film by Robert Bresson, and in that gestures towards a very important dimension of her practice that relates to Bresson's work, which is an opening of her practice onto considerations of the animal and the inhuman. So there's a further inflection of the Rorschach project with a kind of resistance to the notion of personhood and the notion of self that the Rorschach as a projective personality test, which is what it becomes from the 1930s forward, conditions, disciplines, invents, and so forth. There's a kind of resistance to that notion of the subject. Peter Galison has written very wonderfully about the Rorschach test as a technology of the self. And it's clear that in the experiment that Rorschach conceives around 1920, it's

already absolutely right to think of that as a technology of the self. That experiment, which he described as an experiment, and the interpretation of transforms a notion that drops out of the Rorschach test as it becomes deployed all over the world from the 1940s forward. It's not entirely clear, for example, the technology of the self that the Rorschach test is, in the form that Warhol is arguably responding to where it's been used in corporate contexts and military contexts, [and] in anthropological contexts in schools and prisons for 40 years, whether that technology of the self, whether that object is the same object that Trockel has in the studio when she has the set of cards and the protocols that she's received from a psychoanalyst who's talked to her about the experiment and its history presumably in rather different ways. And I came to be really fascinated with this idea that Trockel was simultaneously responding to Warhol--to a set of pictures that Rosalind Krauss has very productively and convincingly talked about as instances of a conceptualization of the artwork as an occasion that will make evident that what's happening in the transaction between these giant acrylic pictures that play upon and are travesties of the imagery, and the potential finding of allusions to the body and to sexuality in the pictures that Krauss sees as a kind of materialization of a understanding of paintings as sites for the projection of the viewers affect, and of the psychology of the viewer as determinative of what counts in the picture. And that strikes me as a strong reading of the Warhol. I think that in engaging with what amounts to a different Rorschach to some extent, while also engaging with the Warhol, one of the things that Trockel is doing is establishing a very different relationship to modernist precedence, [and] to the conceptual foundations of the Rorschach test in the early 1920s than Warhol is. And for me, it was at that moment that the project opened onto larger considerations of Trockel's relationship to early 20th century philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis, which has been a read thread in her work for many years.

Caro Fowler

For Trockel, what is specific about her project you find that's distinct from Warhol's that does really engage with these early 20th century questions around philosophy and literary movements?

Brigid Doherty

So like many people looking at Trockel's work and thinking about it, including the artist herself, I have found the work of Deleuze very productive and very useful. I think slightly different resources within Deleuze maybe than some other people, but extremely useful for me in my thinking about this project and also some of Trockel's video work has been some of the writings on cinema, but also Deleuze and Guattari's writing on Kafka and the notion of Kafka, and of minor literature. I wouldn't want to frame this too narrowly, but one way of thinking about what Trockel is doing when she goes back to later 19th and early 20th century works in philosophy, literature, and psychoanalysis--so key people for Trockel, key authors [and] key materials are works by Nietzsche, Ernst Mach, Freud, Hofmannstahl, Rilke, Kafka, Wittgenstein, Karl Kraus, all men that I've just named. I think a way of thinking about her engagement is in terms of something like a minor practice. So where she is going back and re-engaging the languages and the problematics of philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis in this crucial moment of the beginnings of modernism, and reconfiguring it in a new kind of language that would mark a kind of distinction from practices that we could usefully describe as neo-avant-garde, or even as conceptualist, it marks a certain kind of distance from figures of her generation, although I don't think she by any means fully stands outside of it. Again, I wouldn't want to make this too much of a constraint, and it's partly a matter of applying Deleuze's concepts, but part of the interest is that Trockel also engages directly with Deleuze's work. I think she's thought about it a lot. There are certain works, that allude very specifically to Deleuze's self-presentation, and the presentation of his philosophy in cinematic form for example, or in televised form. I think it's useful to see in her work something like a deterritorialization of style and of genre, and therefore setting up a different kind of model in relation to modernist practices, and in relation to, say, postmodernist practices. And I think that this turning to the notion of a minor literature has the potential to say something about the role of language in her work, which is very important, including what's become a more or less routine use of English language phrases, either appropriated or invented as the titles for her work. And there too I think there's a negotiation of how to

situate her work in relation to recent art, including in the case of these works that I have been studying now, Warhol. There's also a sense in which the notion of the minor is useful in terms of how to conceptualize the experimental dimension of her practices, and of what's at stake in what I think is happening, which is something about returning to the original conditions, or imagining or fantasizing or staging a return to the conditions of the original Rorschach experiment, not as a way of redeeming it or cleansing it of what it becomes as a projective personality test. Not at all that, but imagining what it would be to engage with that in making a series of drawings that want to document a certain kind of graphic activity in relation to verbal descriptions and that want to imagine, I think, a kind of displacement or refusal of personality, and instead to reconfigure this occasion of experiment as a kind of staging or enactment of impersonality. And that obviously exists [in] an interesting relation to Warhol's work. I think they are very different projects, but obviously part of what Rosalind Krauss is doing in the text "Carnal Knowledge" that is about Warhol's Rorschach works is it's an inflection on the notion of the machinic and the impersonal in Warhol that wants to insist on a relationship between that dimension of his practice and a corollary which makes the position, the affect, the psychology of the viewer of his work determinative for the work itself. And I think that is a possibility that Trockel's work forecloses quite radically by at the same time insisting on the impersonality and the near inhumanity of the conditions of the Rorschach works in her hands, and at the same time, a certain kind of authority of her position as artist in the presentation of these works around these questions. I think that one of the key differences is that these are works that are supposed to flout and defy and deny any sense that we might bring to them that they would be constituted in the moment of our psychological projection in relation to them. So they're all about that problematic. But I think they're about it from a fundamental position of refusing that relationship to a viewer.

Caro Fowler

How specifically do you think they refuse that relationship? And I imagine that the ink drawings and the wool paintings enact that refusal in different ways. I mean, the graphic act is probably the medium most closely tied to fantasies or

bounds, personality and subjectivity, and the individuality of the artist. In some ways, it's interesting because she also engages with this material transformation that is integral to the history of art again, which is providing the cartoon to the fabric factory to be scaled up into whether it's a tapestry or a wool painting, and then also with these wool paintings engaging with these tropes around feminism, female artists, the ways in which textile work has been neglected in histories of art, the ways in which there's this assumed in turn impersonality around female artists because there's no creativity within the act. So it seems like all these threads are engaged. I don't want to use that pun because [laughs] I don't like to be punny. But the point is, how do the ink drawings or the wool paintings negate this possibility for the viewer in what I imagine are very different ways?

Brigid Doherty

Yes, so all of that is in play, and that's a wonderful account of the range and also the contradictory or at least potentially contradictory or even potentially heterogeneous ways in which these questions come into play. I'm not so sure about the heterogeneity, which you're not exactly suggesting, but the contradictions are there for sure. In each case, central to what she's doing is an engagement with medium and format in terms of how she's working. So in the wool pictures, they belong obviously to a broader project of hers that I see and have seen in an engagement with the easel picture as something like genre, and as operating allusively in that mode. And again, I find that the Deleuzian notion of the minor is actually pretty productive potentially there too. I thought of it in terms of Derrida's account of genre elsewhere. I would stand by that. So in terms of painting it operates fairly continuously with the ways in which her wool pictures are engaged with the tradition of easel painting without wanting to signal their participation in a tradition in a constructive way necessarily, but wanting to indicate a certain kind of impossibility of not engaging with that genre, so signaling its ambition through that engagement. The ink drawings--10 drawings shown as a group, conceived as a group with one title, which is the title that I mentioned before, comes from Bresson's film A Man Condemned to Death Has Escaped (that's a literal translation of the French). Trockel inverts that title,

and makes the title of this group of drawings One Condemned to Life Has Escaped. Bresson is a point of reference for her more broadly. There are a number of filmmakers of the 1960s--she's very interested in underground film, but Pasolini [and] Bresson are major figures for her. So in taking that title, and presenting the drawings under the name of a certain kind of refusal of life, almost like a refusal of life in the form that life is imposed on us in a broader, let's say, disciplinary situation, I think that's an allusion to the situation of the test or the experiment as the imposition of a technology of the self. And this presents her work as not something like a redemption at all of that seen as an occasion for creative experiment. Nor is it I think a kind of staging in the way that Walter Benjamin or Brecht imagine tests where there's not a redemption of the scene of the of the test, but a refunctioning of it: an attempt to imagine an engagement with disciplinary tests and their technologies that would fashion from their media kinds of artworks that would be useless to fascism. So while there are aspects of Trockel's work, and in particular her interest in impersonality that certainly have to do with those kinds of Brechtian or Benjaminian impersonality, or the impersonality in Benjamin's Kafka or Adorno's Beckett, I think part of the politics of her work here in these ink drawings [is] the format and this working at a scale that's slightly larger than the card--so on a scale and the presentation as framed that seems to relate to the device, the apparatus that you might hold in your hands, but instead insists on its relation to drawing. But then [there is] this extraordinary moment in which she takes the drawings and distorts them and moves them around to make photocopies, which then are presented an index card size, so very much a return to the format and scale of something that announces its belonging to an administered world in a world of testing. There's something there in Trockel in the simultaneous assertion of authorship and refusal of personality, say, or of personhood under certain conditions, and an ethical and a political insistence on the opening of the human onto the non-human and onto the animal in particular, and so of a commitment to certain kinds of acknowledgement there.

Caro Fowler

I think in many ways that's a challenge for academics right now: the ethical imperative to assert one's authority and knowledge, and that one can think and know something or enact that process of finding out that process of dialogue without actually asserting one's own viewpoint as necessarily the only way, but also in some ways taking on humility. It's a question of authority with humility, which [laughs] I'm sorry Brigid, but it's not bred in many of the institutions both of us have been educated in.

Brigid Doherty
No, that's right. It's so important what you say, because there's a distinction between the acknowledgement of being in possession of certain kinds of not just privilege but authority, and emphatically both, and figuring out what to do with that, and for me, a mere disavowal of, that's not going to work--

Caro Fowler
No, it's not.

Caro Fowler
--because one is dispossessed of precisely nothing by disavowing asymmetries, for example asymmetries in student-teacher relationships. It doesn't go away. The disavowal just creates a whole range I think of very dangerous conditions potentially for exploitation in a whole lot of different registers. But an avowal of various kinds of asymmetries and a wish to engage ethically and creatively with them, and to think about what can be done with them--I recognize that there are critiques that can be made of the idea of presenting certain practices of close reading, close looking as a minor mode in the contemporary academy. And I think that those critiques are and would be important. And they would be real critiques that would touch me and my practice, and that I would not want to respond to either dismissively or merely defensively. But I do want to have a conversation about what it means to think about the ways in which within, say modern European culture or say modernism, and within more recent responses to it, commitments to impersonality, to a critique of the subject, to an opening beyond the human, to a de-binarization of the human and the animal have been

central. It doesn't mean that they got everything right. It doesn't mean that those writers and artists and philosophers weren't doing their work from a particular subject position sociologically and psychically. But I do think that with humility and with a commitment to continuing projects of critical histories, we can talk about them. If we decide that we are not going to talk about Hofmannstahl or we're not going to talk about Nietzsche or Schopenhauer or Hegel because we're just going to correct the record by talking about something else--it's not so much that I worry about being left out of the conversation, because that part, the idea where I might be left out of the conversation, the politics of that are okay with me--but the idea that we would just stop talking about European culture and talk about something else instead, that worries me. And again, I don't see this as a proposal that's being made by any of my colleagues anywhere, but it is a thought that sometimes comes from students. But I do hope we keep talking critically.

Caro Fowler
Thank you so much for joining us today Brigid.

Brigid Doherty
Thank you for inviting me.

Caro Fowler
Of course, Brigid, it was my pleasure.

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult clark.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Gabriel Almeida Baroja, Alice Matthews, and Yubai Shi.