

Petzel

Cassie Packard, "Raphaela Vogel: *In The Expanded Penalty Box: Did You Happen to See the Most Beautiful Fox?*," *The Brooklyn Rail*, February 2024.

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

ArtSeen

Raphaela Vogel: *In The Expanded Penalty Box: Did You Happen to See the Most Beautiful Fox?*

By Cassie Packard



Installation view: *Raphaela Vogel: In the Expanded Penalty Box: Did You Happen to See the Most Beautiful Fox?*, Petzel, New York, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Thomas Barratt.

No one at the thronged opening of Berlin-based artist Raphaela Vogel's debut New York solo show seemed particularly concerned about the fate of the photos shot by *I Am Touching* (all works 2023), a large, curved structure made up of five rows of single-lens reflex cameras on metal scaffolding vined with cables. Peeping out of rounded rectangular boxes, the rapidly shuttering cameras capture gallery goers at numerous angles, emphasizing those viewers who foray into the inverted panopticon's proscenium to perform for the machine. The photos are then projected onto the wall in rapid succession, the gestalt being a structural film befitting a mass surveillance age. Perhaps my fellow attendees were comforted by the press release's assurances that "the scanned pictorial fractures of oneself...[would] vanish again without being stored in the digital ether." More likely, we are all so profoundly mired in surveillance culture—accustomed to monitoring ourselves and others online and bartering our biometrics for the ability to

ON VIEW

Petzel

January 11–February 17,
2024

New York

Petzel

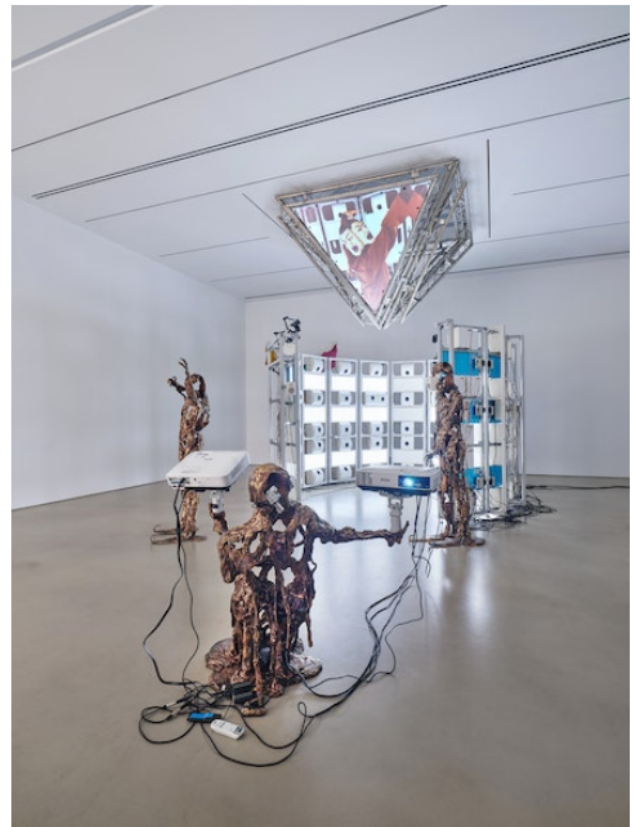
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move in physical, digital, social, and legal space—that any apprehension didn’t register as noteworthy.

The photos, which might haphazardly depict a slice of a leg or the top of a head, don’t appear to be geared toward human viewership. The installation is based on a 3D scanner that photographs people and products in order to build digital avatars. Flickering on the wall, the pictures of visitors—made by and for machines, like so many images today—bear the peculiar status of operational images denuded of their operability. Vogel has previously used drones and 3D scanners to make dizzying video works in which she is the lone human performer. In this more participatory piece, she continues to interrogate the ways in which our technological apparatuses “see” us; the objectifying—and perhaps feminizing, if objectification feminizes—effects of their gaze, which treats humans like data visualizations; and what sort of world these modes of visibility and representation envision, reinscribe, and reify.

That isn’t to say that her work is outright condemnatory. Projected above the machine on a triangular tarp (Vogel’s touchstone geometry), a stop-motion-style video of the artist-maenad performing on the scanner’s stage suggests a sense of Dionysian play—though on the knife’s edge of something much more ominous, conjuring up a QAnon Shaman. Vogel wears a three-faced mask so that, like the machine or some omniscient god, she can see in every direction; art-historically, tri-face figures have been used to represent the “three ages of man” (past, present, and future) as well as the prudential virtues of memory, intelligence, and providence. She jumps around maniacally, sticking her legs in the air as she wields two silver lion statuettes (another recurrent motif, suggesting virility), or flapping a fabric cape that resembles monarch butterfly wings.

Beneath the video are three oversize bronze figures that look flayed. The



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contrapposto *Unspecial Agent 3* is tasked with cord management, the cables running through its hands, while *Unspecial Agent 1* holds the projectors and *Unspecial Agent 2* shields its featureless face. The artist’s “agents”—the moniker bears a conspiratorial whiff—reference Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier’s “Modulor Man,” a measuring stick based on the idealized proportions of six-foot-tall men in English detective novels. Vogel’s installation links modernist design ideologies that center able-bodied white men while purporting to be rational and universal to the biases baked into our own supposedly rational architectures (consider the racial bias in machine vision and predictive policing).

Le Corbusier, whose fascist sentiments were recently the subject of scrutiny, introduced the Modulor Man in 1943, in the middle of WWII. Located in a world in which the past always comes back to haunt, Vogel’s transgressively slippery exhibition associatively scrambles past and present, or even flattens them like a jpeg. Upon moving to a house in Eichwalde on the outskirts of Berlin, Vogel learned that the German Jewish writer Erich Hopp hid from the Nazis there, successfully evading their violently surveillant gaze. The artist located the sheet music for “Jede Frau ist Schön” (“Every Woman is Beautiful”), an esoteric, never-recorded tango Hopp had written with the 1930 winner of Miss Germany before the Nazis banned the pageants. In a reparative act, Vogel recorded a rendition of the sweet tango, which plays in the gallery. It is intercut with Walls of Jericho’s metal song “All Hail the Dead” (2004), a reminder of the horrors in the wings.



Raphaella Vogel, *Vergleiche Vergleichen (Compare Comparisons)*, 2023. Antique scale, recyclable plastic, oil lacquer, oil paint on goat and deer leather, 2 parts, each approx.: 118.11 x 55.12 x 70.87 inches. Courtesy the artist and Petzel, New York. Photo: Thomas Barratt.

The choice of a band whose name references the occupied West Bank feels deliberate in the context of Israel’s ongoing decimation of Gaza following Hamas’s October 7 massacre. The conflict has been a flashpoint of debate in Germany, where efforts to reckon with a Nazi past have hardened into conflations of criticisms of Israel’s conduct,

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or expressions of solidarity with Palestine with anti-Semitism. Artists and culture workers have described a McCarthyist environment where censorship takes place against a backdrop of digital surveillance. While the photos in *I Am Touching* might escape the computer's memory, *Vergleiche vergleichen (Compare Comparisons)*, titled in reference to German debates about relativizing the Holocaust, brings up remembrance culture, which involves its own forms of forgetting and erasure. Suspended from skeletal horse heads and conjoined by a vintage scale are two substantial pieces of leather, Vogel's canvas of choice for over a decade. One side features a painted portrait of philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who in the 1986–87 "Historikerstreit" (Historians' Debate) argued that the Holocaust should not be relativized and that Germany was collectively responsible for its past. The other depicts postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe, who kicked off what has been called the "Historikerstreit 2.0" in 2020 when accusations that he had relativized the Holocaust and supported the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) movement, and was thus antisemitic, jeopardized his invitation to a German cultural festival. One can imagine that in Vogel's Berlin, these figures haunt every room.

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<https://brooklynrail.org/2024/02/artseen/Raphaela-Vogel-In-The-Expanded-Penalty-Box-Did-You-Happen-to-Sec-the-Most-Beautiful-Fox>