

Petzel

Alex Greenberger, "A German Provocateur Makes Her US Debut, Turning Her Probing Lens on Her Viewers," *ARTnews*, January 19, 2024.

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BY ALEX GREENBERGER  January 19, 2024 11:43am



Raphaëla Vogel.

PHOTO PAUL SOCHACKI/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK

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If you attended the 2022 Venice Biennale, chances are you still remember the penis. It looked like a seven-foot-tall anatomical model, with sores on its shaft and cancerous growths on its insides. Mounted on wheels, this tumescent, tumorous member was attached to a procession of sculpted giraffes, whose white bodies appeared to melt away, dripping apart as they trudged onward.

The artist behind this phallus was the young German phenom **Raphaella Vogel**, and the sculpture, titled *Ability and Necessity* (2022), troubled some viewers and energized others. New York Times critic Jason Farago wrote that the Vogel piece was one of the show’s “moments of stunning bad taste.” It wasn’t clear whether he meant that as a compliment or an insult.

Or maybe it was both. Vogel’s art tends to provoke and delight simultaneously, and she embraces the bizarre mix of emotions her work might elicit. “It’s not that I want people to be afraid or shocked,” Vogel said on a recent afternoon, speaking in a backroom of the New York gallery **Petzel**, which began representing her last year.

She pointed out that the penis of *Ability and Necessity* could not serve a purpose. It was being toted around like a parade float; it had outlived its function as a reproductive organ or, say, a symbol of the patriarchy. With a straight face, Vogel asked, “It’s a bit funny, right?”

Within Germany and the surrounding region, Vogel’s art has accrued a following. Ask five of her fans which aspect of her oeuvre is most successful, however, and you may get five different answers. Some may point to her videos, in which Vogel, often acting as the work’s director, editor, and performer, turns the lens on herself, creating situations in which she seems trapped by her device’s gaze. (One memorable video involved the usage of a drone that loomed high above, capturing Vogel playing the accordion on a rock in the middle of the sea.) Others may praise her paintings, which often resemble freestanding animal hides rather than traditional canvases hung on a wall. Still others may laud her installations, which she approaches like sets, reformulating their elements with a mind for how viewers move about them.

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Vogel's *Ability and Necessity* (2022) was among the most talked-about works of the 2022 Venice Biennale.

PHOTO GIUSEPPE COTTINI/GETTY IMAGES

For the first time, US viewers are getting a proper taste of Vogel's art with a solo show held at Petzel that opened last week. The centerpiece of the exhibition is *I Am Touching* (2023), an installation in which viewers walk into a structure formed from a curved wall of cameras whose lenses click repeatedly. On a nearby wall, a projector displays what those lenses see: unsuspecting viewers caught unaware. Above, jerky images of Vogel dancing while wearing a three-headed mask flash by.

“It's work that you really don't see in the States so much anymore,” Cecilia Alemani, curator of the 2022 Venice Biennale, said of the Petzel show. “It's been so much painting, and to walk into a gallery and see something like that, it reminds me of Jason Rhoades, Mike Kelley”—two late sculptors whose works are now considered widely influential.

Because the cameras point at anyone who enters *I Am Touching* and reflect their images back, the work needs the viewer to be fully realized. Vogel said she is “not such a fan of interactive work,” so she approached making the installation apprehensively, opting

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something "in-between," something which could function on its own. Its effect is eerie, like a 360-degree scanner that requires no human beings to operate itself.

And in a typical gesture for Vogel, she approached the material associatively, weaving together a number of references that may seem unlike and inscrutable. Take the triangular screen that hangs above the installation. Vogel refers to the triangle as "my sign," and has used it repeatedly in her art. The dances being enacted, too, are inspired by German Expressionism of the 1920s, and the music playing has its roots in a song initially crooned by Carla Boehl, the 1930 Miss Germany winner. When these allusions do show themselves in her work, the references are deliberately indirect. Twice in our interview, Vogel said of her work, "It's not meant to be one-to-one."



Installation view of "Raphaella Vogel: In the Expanded Penalty Box: Did You Happen to See the Most Beautiful Fox?," 2024, at Petzel, New York.

PHOTO THOMAS BARRATT/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PETZEL, NEW YORK

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Vogel has long avoided a practice that is easy to categorize. She went to art school in Nuremberg, the city where she was born in 1988, with plans to become a painter. But she found herself constrained by all the baggage that accompanies that medium in Germany. “It’s always about gesture,” she said of the formalist instruction she received in art school. “I wasn’t allowed to do what I wanted.”

Her solution was to paint on leather—specifically, the leather that most manufacturers could not sell. “I wouldn’t buy industrial produced leather,” she said. “I would buy it from places where you know that the animal was living free. They would shoot it in order to have the population balanced. Those animals always have a lot of insects on their skin, so the skin has such a bad quality that it couldn’t be given to industrial use, like for a car, because it’s of such bad quality. And that, for me, is interesting because there’s so much already going on. It’s not blank.”

She first began showing her leather works around Germany in the mid-2010s, but Vogel’s breakthrough came in 2018, when Switzerland’s **Kunsthalle Basel** mounted a vast show that featured her leather paintings. There was also a room in which a horse sculpture was twined with red speaker cables—Vogel said it was meant to be like blood—and another gallery that featured a series of squat sculptures that looked like crouching figures. It was a grand, fully formed vision, all the more impressive because Vogel was not yet 30 when she produced some of the sculptures in the exhibition.

Curators raced to find analogs for the work. Speaking to *Artsy* in 2018, Zurich-based art historian Raphael Gygax labeled Vogel the “heavy metal version” of Pipilotti Rist, the Swiss video artist known for her kaleidoscopic installations. Elena Filipovic, the curator of the Kunsthalle Basel show, agreed with the Rist comparison, writing to ARTnews that both artists have “modeled a concern with revisiting the norms for presenting videos and having done so with a fearless feminism at its heart.” For Filipovic, though, Vogel’s approach differs in a key way. “There is something entirely singular,” she said, “about Raphaela’s peculiar fascination with skin and water, holes and perception to articulate a very contemporary vision of what it is to be a woman in full possession of her confidence and power with a video camera over her arm or under her leg.”

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Installation view of “Raphaella Vogel: Ultranacht,” 2018, at Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland.

PHOTO PHILIPP HÄNGER/KUNSTHALLE BASEL/COURTESY THE ARTIST; BQ, BERLIN; AND GALERIE GREGOR STAIGER, ZÜRICH

Vogel’s Petzel show is in some ways a departure from that mode, however. *I Am Touching*, the central installation, began with an investigation into a former resident of her current abode: the theatre director Erich Hopp. He lived in the house in Eichwalde, located just outside Berlin, during World War II, at a time when other Jewish Germans like him were being hunted down by the Nazis and deported to ghettos and death camps across Europe. But, save for a plaque denoting that he had once called this place home, Vogel could find little else about him.

“Research is not really my world,” Vogel said, “but I had to deal with [his life] because I couldn’t stop thinking about it.” Suddenly, she found herself engrossed in the Berlin city archives, on the search for documentation about Hopp and his work. She discovered the sheet music written for a tango to be sung by the 1930 Miss Germany. Titled “Jede Frau ist Schön” (“Every Woman Is Beautiful”), the song has now been resurrected by Vogel, who can be heard intoning it via a recording that booms through the gallery.

The gesture is a tender-hearted one, but in a typical Vogel flourish, it is also humorous: her rendition of the titular lyrics flatters not just women, but men too. (“In that way, it involves everyone,” she said.) And the same could be said of the show, which bears a

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long-winded, dryly funny title: "In the Expanded Penalty Box: Did You Happen to See the Most Beautiful Fox?"

Speaking as if the title were a totally rational one, Vogel broke it down. In soccer, a penalty box is the 44-by-18-yard area closest to the goal; any fouls committed against an attacker within this box are considered especially grave and rewarded with a penalty kick from 12 yards from the goal line. In the art historian Rosalind Krauss's 1979 essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," she theorizes that today's forms of art-making demand different ways of seeing. Combine the two concepts, and you may have something like a gallery show today: "an expanded penalty box," in Vogel's logic.

"The gallery," she said, "is a space where every move you do, every move you take, is punished a little bit more than you would in your studio," as if it had occurred in the penalty box. She seemed to express no fear about what kind of punishment she might receive for her Petzel show if it isn't received well.

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