

Kimberly Bradley, “Unpacking the Meteoric Rise of Raphaela Vogel,” *Frieze*, March 24, 2023.

FRIEZE

Unpacking the Meteoric Rise of Raphaela Vogel

The artist’s wild works and unwavering appetite for the unusual has made her a prominent fixture on the German art scene

BY KIMBERLY BRADLEY IN PROFILES | 24 MAR 23



Ever since Raphaela Vogel’s first institutional solo show in 2015 at Bonner Kunstverein – puckishly titled ‘Raphaela and the Large Kunstverein’ – when she was still only 27 years old, art writers have attempted to pin down her bizarre, idiosyncratic work. For instance, Claudia Aigner, for the Austrian newspaper *Wiener Zeitung*, wrote in 2022: ‘You don’t always know what you’re seeing, but looking away isn’t an option.’

Almost a decade on from her meteoric debut, Vogel’s work remains as perplexing as it is fascinating. Even a shallow dip into Vogel’s wildly varied *oeuvre* – room-size metal frames draped with painted animal skins; dizzying videos starring the artist (and sometimes her dog) shot with a 360-degree camera; monumental sculptures featuring huge portable toilets or giraffes tethered to spliced-open genitals – reveals that she can’t be slotted into the canon’s existing pigeonholes.

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‘I’m interested in entertaining myself,’ she said during one of our encounters in Berlin this winter, without irony or arrogance. ‘Or creating a first draft of a world.’



Raphaela Vogel, *Müssen und Können* (Necessity and Ability), 2022, exhibition view, polyurethane elastomer, steel, brass, anatomical model, 2.2 × 1.4 × 10.3 m. Courtesy: the artist, BQ, Berlin and Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna; photograph: Eddo Hartmann

Spending time with Vogel, or her work, feels like an invitation to enter a peculiar multidimensional cosmos which requires learning an entirely new visual vocabulary. Intuitive and non-hierarchical, its methods both DIY and digital, Vogel’s language contains few familiar phrases; it rather evokes primordial emotions and instant reactions. As Kunsthalle Basel director Elena Filipovic writes in the catalogue essay for the 2018 exhibition ‘Ultranackt’, Vogel’s shows or installations usually feature at least one ‘fist in the face’ – an oversize medical model of a boob squirting milk does pack a punch. But there’s also a quieter world-weariness and

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generous doses of humour and playfulness. Just as Vogel entertains herself, she also entertains us.

At last year’s Venice Biennale, Vogel’s *Müssen und Können* (Necessity and Ability, 2022) featured ten giraffes rendered in porous, milky polyurethane hitched via a golden chain to an oversize anatomical model of a flaccid, cancerous penis. Critics had a field day with the piece’s feminist implications, but there’s also something overtly hilarious about a team of wild animals trying to get a broken penis up, so to speak. *Rollo* (2019) – a video/installation on view at Kunsthaus Bregenz in 2019 – shows spinning, distorted images of Vogel and Rollo, her white giant poodle and unofficial mascot, gleefully jumping on a trampoline. Later, Vogel climbs a construction crane in the rain, singing a slowed-down version of Nina Simone’s 1968 song ‘Ain’t Got No, I Got Life’. (Vogel’s new German lyrics include: ‘I got no clue’, ‘I have my period’ and ‘I have my dog.’) Other films like *A Woman’s Sportscar* (2019) – projected through the headlights of a real sports car at Haus der Kunst, Munich, in 2019 – show Rorschach-esque abstractions. They’re kaleidoscopic eye candy but, at some point, it’s clear that what we’re seeing is a spinning mirror-image of Vogel’s bikini-clad body, its curves and colours observed from her own eyes, looking down in dispassionate self-objectification.

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Raphaela Vogel, *A Woman's Sports Car*, 2018. Courtesy: de kunstenaar and BQ, Berlin; photograph: Eddo Hartmann

The works are hypnotic, seductive and existential. They touch on our most basic psychological impulses. For instance, Rollo's Sisyphean climbing is both aspirational and anxiety-provoking, while in the video *Tränenmeer* (Sea of Tears, 2019), Vogel plays accordion on a rocky outcrop in a raging sea, the sight of which is both terrifying and awe-inspiring. Video and installation are usually coupled: the former's montages and heavy-metal-meets-sound-art soundtracks create a powerful tension with the latter's physicality. Since that first institutional exhibition in 2015, motifs appear time and again, notably her triangular faux (and/or real) animal skins on which the artist draws, paints, plots charts or writes. This is most impressively executed in *The (Missed) Education of Miss Vogel* (2021), a piece in which she traces all the things she wished she'd learned better in her youth – Marxist theory, jazz history, the many applications of petroleum – on 16 multicoloured animal skins hanging from two circular repurposed stage-set scaffolds. Also recurrent are medical models, cars and architectural forms including pavilions, cranes, follies and, of course, the often vast exhibition spaces in which she shows. Animals are everywhere: not just in videos as living creatures, like Rollo or Vogel's late cat, but also as sculptures – a

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rearing stone horse, dinosaurs, a giant arachnid reminiscent of Louise Bourgeois’s *Spider* (1995). In earlier films, such as *Isolator* (2016), the artist shot with old-school drones in which the device’s legs frame the scenes. ‘Leather is one strand in my work, architectural models are another, as are plastic forms and film works. There are maybe eight different strands which I combine variously in exhibitions. I’m building a structure – it’s like *feng shui*, or theatre.’



Raphaela Vogel, *The (Missed) Education of Miss Vogel*, 2021. Courtesy: de kunstenaar and BQ, Berlin; photograph: Eddo Hartmann

Yet the most frequent motif is the artist herself – her body or voice as ‘figure’, as she says. The figure, or protagonist, is not necessarily an ‘I’: this is not conventional self-portraiture or performance but, maybe, a representation of an everywoman, or überwoman, navigating an intentionally uncanny scenario. ‘I’ve always found it embarrassing to portray the “I” or to be exhibitionist in performance, but an artist always brings the self into their work,’ she says. ‘It’s about finding the balance, the thin line, and it’s important to me to explore this.’ I think of my own generation’s filmic line-treader, Matthew Barney, who built worlds – and appeared in

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shifting and opaque roles within them – in the 1990s. But Vogel feels closer in spirit to the postmodern German artists who gained prominence in the 1980s – like Cosima von Bonin or even the late Martin Kippenberger, who famously lived by the battle cry: ‘Embarrassment has no limits!’

Through all of these works, we see Vogel’s presence and collaged perceptions, even the people and other creatures closest to her, but very little of her biography. It’s the opposite of identity politics. She mentions how weird it is that she’s viewed as a feminist artist simply because she works with steel and on a large scale. ‘How does an artist appear in her own work?’ Vogel asks me. ‘As a boss, a woman, a circus director, a camerawoman, a diva, a reporter or an actor of women’s roles? [Feminism] is just one topic amongst many.’



Raphaela Vogel, *Rollo*, 2019, video still. Courtesy: the artist and BQ, Berlin

I meet Vogel for the first time in her Berlin studio on a rainy January day. Rollo bounds ahead, greeting me with wet-pawed enthusiasm. In person, the artist is welcoming and easy-going; her 185 m2, two-storey space contains an array of props, including a carousel horse, an oversize

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stiletto-as-chair that came from a bordello and a pillar that Vogel thinks is ugly. On the floor is a melted-plastic creature (maybe a dog); several skins hang from a metal scaffold. A walk-in cylinder labelled ‘BotSpot’ is a 3D scanner that the artist uses to produce her videos. ‘These are all tests,’ she says of the things I see. ‘The studio is pretty empty.’ Many works are already en route to Tilburg in the Netherlands, where ‘KRAAAN’ (Crane), Vogel’s most extensive show to date, runs at the De Pont Museum of Contemporary Art until August.

Some things about Vogel: she was born in Nuremberg. Her father died of a heart attack when she was four years old, but she was later told that his death might have been staged. (This remains a mystery, but Vogel made a work about it, *Hochbett*, in 2016: an abstracted canopy bed set over her father’s gravestone, with an accompanying video.) She grew up with her mother, a nurse, and had a happy childhood. At 14, Vogel played in a punk band called The Fist Fuckers. At 17, she left school, and moved into a squat in Berlin for about a year. She returned home, finished school and studied art at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Nuremberg, then transferred to the renowned Städelschule in Frankfurt, studying under the artists Simon Starling and Peter Fischli. She tells me that at art school, she didn’t take the art world particularly seriously. Later, she studied at De Ateliers in Amsterdam.

She thought she’d ‘try out art’ for a couple of years and then go to medical school. (Her final school grades, which in Germany serve as university entrance criteria, weren’t high enough to study medicine from the outset.) She moved to Berlin in 2016. She says she doesn’t read much of the theory that drives the German capital’s art discourse but, the longer we talk, the more I recognize she knows plenty of it. Later, she mentions she’s ‘surrounded by theory’ and that her partner is Diedrich Diederichsen, a cultural critic and professor at Vienna’s Academy of Visual Arts. Since that first large show in Bonn, institutional shows have come in steady succession. She has three galleries – BQ in Berlin, Gregor Staiger in Zurich and Meyer Kainer in Vienna; New York gallery representation is (im)pending. ‘I’ve never been to New York,’ she admits. She wonders whether her work might be too much for the American art audience. I think viewers there will be intrigued.

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Raphaela Vogel, *Hochbett*, 2016, exhibition view, bunk bed, curtains, border, tombstone, flatscreen, 3 × 2 × 1.5 m.

Courtesy: BQ, Berlin; photograph: Thomas Arendt

Something about Vogel's artmaking: she works alone. 'I couldn't concentrate with someone in here with me,' she says; her solitude is not just about controlling outcomes but also keeping authorship clear and avoiding exploiting others as actors or even camera operators. Drones, selfie sticks and the BotSpot allow her to serve as both actor and cameraperson. She's also the editor, sound mixer, singer and instrumentalist. A fan of Italian singer Milva, campy Austrian performer Hubert von Goisern and American country star Charlie Rich, she has sung their

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songs on her soundtracks. She fabricates her monumental pieces herself. She uses technological devices like drones as points of departure, not as driving forces.

Overall, Vogel tells me, her work is about ‘exposing a type of attraction that underlies contemporary art. The pre-culture-industry circus [...] not in a sentimental sense but, like the early films of Disney or [Sergei] Eisenstein, as a method of waking people up with little shocks rather than narratives. People, animals, sensations! This is how the circus used to advertise itself.’ Her 21st-century circus is fascinating, fun, a little dark and thankfully far from the algorithm-driven addictions of the internet.

A week after our Berlin studio visit, I meet Vogel again in Eichwalde – a quiet town in Brandenburg just past Berlin’s far eastern edge. It’s more bucolic than the usual, slightly depressing, post-communist towns of eastern Germany. Vogel mentions that the place plays an important role in the 1932 film *Kuhle Wampe*, co-authored and co-directed by Bertolt Brecht and highlighting the working class in the twilight of the Weimar Republic. The artist has been renovating a modernist house built in 1931 and working in its rooms and grounds. ‘I need a backyard, animals and space,’ she says. Outside is a pavilion topped with white elephant sculptures and hanging spirals; a leather skin is painted with a dog’s face. On the roof is a large orb that looks like a Christmas ornament.

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Raphaela Vogel, *Würde / Motiv*, 2022. Courtesy: de kunstenaar, BQ, Berlin (Christen Sveaas Art Collection + Galerie Gregor Staiger, Zurich); photograph: Eddo Hartmann

Vogel bought the house in early 2022, about the same time that she had her son. “The moment I moved out of the city and had a baby, my topics changed,” she explains. Her newest body of work hinges on the house’s history – a surprising move for an artist who has long avoided the research-based practices so prominent in the German art scene – but the story, she tells me, ‘triggers everything I’m doing right now’. No wonder: in the process of renovating, she learned that a Jewish family hid in the home’s lower levels during World War II. Father, mother and son survived, moving to a displaced persons camp, where the father died in 1949 (the mother and son later moved to Israel, then the United States). “The father was a theatre-maker and poet. He wrote about the house in *We Survived* [1949], an American anthology of reports by Jews who managed to survive the Nazi terror,” says Vogel. ‘I also found a tango score and lyrics he wrote with Miss Germany of 1930, Carla Boehl, in a used bookstore in Lithuania.’ In her new video in

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progress, she sings the song with its sweet lyrics about how both men and women are beautiful when they’re loved and kissed. Her masked ‘figure’ dances in the BotSpot to a haltingly rhythmic digital accompaniment. Starting in late April, she’ll install the backyard pavilion near the Volksbühne theatre on the east side of Berlin, and play the tango at regular intervals as a public art piece.

No one had ever recorded the song before and Vogel initially hesitated to tap into the source material. ‘It’s really sentimental,’ she says and, particularly in the wake of last year’s controversies surrounding antisemitism at documenta 15, she’s aware of the sensitive nature of addressing such material as a non-Jew. Nonetheless, she sees the act of memorializing both the music and the moving story of a family who survived Germany’s darkest period as worthwhile. We talk about the art world’s current demand that artists should take a strong political stance. Vogel is keenly aware of the importance of taking a position, but what leads her practice is far more interior and intuitive. When she was young, Vogel recalls, her mother allowed her to move the furniture around at home to create imaginary worlds. And here she is, decades later, still re-envisioning those early drafts of new universes, as the world out there – hers, mine, ours – is in constant flux.

This article appeared in frieze issue 234 with the headline ‘Raphaela Vogel’.

Main image: Raphaela Vogel, Tränenmeer, 2019, video still. Courtesy: BQ, Berlin

<https://www.frieze.com/article/unpacking-meteoric-rise-raphaela-vogel>