

q/a



*Können und Müssen (Ability and Necessity)*, 2022.  
Polyurethane elastomer, steel, brass, anatomical model, and cart.  
218 x 1016 x 181 cm.

KATI GOTTFRIED, COURTESY GALERIE MEYERWANKER, VIENNA

# Counter Images: A Conversation with Raphaela Vogel

by John Gayer



FROM TOP:  
**Rollo** (detail),  
2019.  
10 architectural models  
(plastic, wood, steel,  
sheet metal, and fabric),  
chrome-plated connecting  
pipes, steel, and video  
with sound on LED screen,  
video: 6:41 min.

**Für uns (For us)**,  
2021.  
Bronze, tubular steel,  
chain, Grundig Auditorama  
spherical speakers,  
and heavy-duty belts,  
2-part installation,  
260 x 200 x 200 cm.



Raphaela Vogel's practice has evolved like the proverbial rolling snowball. As a student, she became interested in the performative aspects of painting, which led her to video (featuring herself and sometimes her dog as performers), to self-recorded music and what she calls "video sculptures," as well as to large-scale installations combining all of these elements. Her startling juxtapositions of materials, imagery, and subject matter—she has a keen interest in cultural history and the transmission of knowledge—question notions of ownership, query human reproduction and gender, and explore our relationships with technology, animals, and the built environment.

"KRAAAN" Vogel's recent survey exhibition at the De Pont Museum in Tilburg, the Netherlands, provided a concise introduction to her most prominent themes and her unusual ways of approaching them. The title (a mash-up of the Dutch and German words for a construction crane) relates to hubris, as well as to technology—how it is used, what it symbolizes, and how it interacts with living things. Vogel considers this central problem from various perspectives, drawing on art history, literature, and the viewer's imagination to construct obscure and dystopian visions that shock and invigorate while reminding us of the world's inscrutability.

**John Gayer:** The first work in "KRAAAN" was the striking *Können und Müssen (Ability and Necessity)* (2022), in which a team of giraffes pulls an enormous model of the male genitalia. How did this work develop, and what does it represent?

**Raphaela Vogel:** I originally produced *Können und Müssen* for "Mit der Vogel kannst Du mich jagen" ("You can hunt me with this bird"), at Galerie Meyer Kainer in Vienna. It is what, in German, we call a *Gegenbild*—a counter image—which is an image that stands in opposition to another image. In this case, the counter image is *Uterusland* (2017/2019), which features a robust stream of milk. Surging out of a greatly oversized breast, that milk turns into a powerful, rearing white horse. The idea came from "Production: Made in Germany Drei (Three)," a group exhibition that I participated in at Kunstverein Hannover. It got me thinking: What about reproduction? I used the same materials for both sculptures. The anatomical models are used in hospi-

TOP: EDDO HARTMANN; COURTESY THE ARTIST AND IQO, BEFLIN / BOTTOM: KATI GOTTFRIED; COURTESY GALERIE MEYERKAINER, VIENNA



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itals to illustrate the diseases that affect various parts of the body. While the white plastic symbolizes milk in *Uterusland*, it represents sperm in *Können und Müssen*. The giraffes are pulling a massive penis—penis, not phallus, since it is an anatomical model and not a symbol—which is affected by cancer and other maladies.

**JG:** The model offers two cross-sectional views. One side, for example, shows the bladder, while the opposite side reveals its interior. The parts and the afflictions are clearly labeled.

**RV:** There are genital warts, polyps, prostate problems, and a pump for erectile dysfunction. The genitals obviously need support, and the giraffes provide that. A lightweight brass chain, beginning in the bladder

and passing through the urethra, links the model to the giraffes and the giraffes to each other. It symbolizes urine. Walking past the sculpture, you notice how the positions of the animals' necks vary, which conveys a sense of movement in time and adds a cinematic feeling to the experience. The fact that some are more erect while others bend down represents the morphology of the dysfunctional penis. By presenting the problems of the penis in such a direct way, the work calls its ability and necessity into question.

For me, these works recall images of ancient horse-drawn chariots, an idea that originally emerged while making *Uterusland*. The vertical cut that exposes the breast's inner structure also divides it into two halves, which suggests a pair of wheels being pulled by the

THIS PAGE:  
**Uterusland**,  
2017/2019.  
Polyurethane  
elastomer, milking  
tubes, metal bracket,  
wooden stick,  
polypropylene cord,  
tube insulation,  
and video, detail  
of installation at  
the Neues Museum  
Nürnberg, 2020.



horse. But that characterization is ambiguous, because one cannot be certain if the breast is spitting out the horse or if the horse is pulling the breast. The giraffes, on the other hand, are clearly pulling the penis.

**JG:** *Depicting giraffes as draft animals is an unusual idea.*

**RV:** Although colonialists tried, wild animals, such as giraffes and zebras, could not be domesticated. My use of animal imagery, though, derives more from my interest in heraldry than from the natural environment. It has this cultural basis—how they appear with weapons, on shields, flags, and insignia. It has to do with the attributes we project onto animals.

**JG:** *How did you make the giraffes?*

**RV:** I have two bronze giraffes, but I prefer not to use

bronze because it's too monumental, too loaded. So, I made casts of the bronze figures using a non-toxic bioplastic that can be liquified as often as needed. Here, I used it to cast hollow and ghost-like forms, which have a specific whiteness. I like this material because it serves multiple functions. Since my work unites different ontologies, realities, and materials and often includes film and sound, combining these elements can be difficult. There are times when I need materials that help me link things, which you, as the viewer, will see repeated. This plastic and the metal tubing that I use operate as connecting elements. But these materials can also have different meanings, symbolize various things, be abstract or, as in the case of the giraffes, be concrete.

**JG:** *The use of tubing in *Rollo* (2019) is especially*

*intriguing. Though it connects most of the architectural models in this devastated cityscape to a central structure, the reasons for that arrangement are obscure. In "KRAAAN," the installation was enhanced by the fact that the De Pont Museum occupies a former wool mill.*

**RV:** This was the third showing of *Rollo*, and I liked it the most because of the building's history—the fact that it retains aspects of its industrial character. It is neither an autonomous white cube nor an architectural monument. I also used a new type of LED screen, which enabled the installation to be presented in daylight. In earlier presentations, the film had to be in the foreground, where the movement and images captured much of the attention. But in this case, there was a balance, and the architectural models could operate as the film's counter image.

OPPOSITE:  
*Rollo* (video still),  
2019.

THIS PAGE:  
*Rollo*,  
2019.  
10 architectural models  
(plastic, wood, steel,  
sheet metal, and fabric),  
chrome-plated connecting  
pipes, steel, and  
video with sound on LED  
screen, video: 6:41 min.  
View of work installed  
in "KRAAAN," De Pont  
Museum, Tilburg,  
the Netherlands, 2023.

My idea was that this is a city, very horizontal and spread out. Since the museum space is also horizontally oriented, it enhanced that idea. Many of my sculptures have focused on verticality and phallic symbolism. The monuments in *Rollo*—church towers, the Arc de Triomphe, the Statue of Liberty, for example—are sites that can be ascended. People can enjoy the view, watch the enemy. But in this iteration, they were spread out and connected to a new center, a device vaguely reminiscent of the Brussels Atomium. This center, however, has no symbolic function, no authority. Its purpose is merely technical, and that has a decentralizing effect. And then, above it all, there is the crane. Not only is it higher than the tallest structures, but a woman, who is shoeless, is escaping by climbing to its top—I had been thinking about existential problems.

**JG:** This relates to *Nr.1—Aus Berichten der Wach- und Patrouillendienste* (1985), a film by Helke Sander, which was included in the exhibition.

Sander re-enacts a true story in which a woman and her two children climb a crane to protest the lack of affordable housing. It is difficult to watch, especially since she has distributed leaflets stating they will jump if a place cannot be found.

**RV:** It is a very political work, a very strong work, which pushes people to act. Nina Simone performed the song "Ain't Got No, I Got Life," which is also very existential. I decided to rewrite that song, to sing it, and make it part of the installation. But in my version, who owns what is not so clear. At the end, I added: "Got my dog, I have my dog." My film—a homage to Sander's work—generates doubt: What is my reason for climbing the crane?

**JG:** There's nothing romantic about these ruins.

**RV:** Europe is decayed and abandoned. It's not the center of the world anymore. Abundant times are over.

**JG:** Strangely, the Atomium—a massive replica of an iron molecule—is represented by spherical speakers playing "Ain't Got No, I Got Life."

**RV:** That's because I prefer to incorporate technical components into the sculptures. The speakers and projectors are always part of the installation. I don't hide them in a nearby chamber. This is important for me.

**JG:** At times, parts of the museum's ceiling could be seen through the translucent LED screen, and they complemented your film.

**RV:** I also used the ceiling for hanging the leather pieces that make up *The (Missed) Education of Raphaela Vogel* (2021). Normally, I avoid working with the physical elements of a space. I prefer to supply the tubing and trusses, which allows me to modify the arrangement and scale of the installations. But in this show, the ceiling worked with the architectural models in *Rollo* and contributed to the presentation of the leather pieces, especially since they allude to the processing of animals in slaughterhouses. So, I made an exception to how I usually do things.

*A Woman's Sports Car*, 2018.  
Video (4:38 min.), sports car, 2 projectors, LED lighting, and fabric, 2-part installation, sports car: 112 x 162 x 370 cm.



“ I have involved objects and animals that are close to me, but it's a thin line. It's not about displaying aspects of my life. ”

EDDO HARTMANN, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BO BERLIN



**JG:** How much freedom did you have in realizing the exhibition?

**RV:** There was an exchange of ideas. When Martijn van Nieuwenhuyzen, Director and Chief Curator, invited me, he wanted to show the architectural models. He believed that *Rollo* would be perfect for the museum. I agreed, but I also wanted to use the new wing for *A Woman's Sports Car* (2018), because the rotating car projects a similar sense of centrality. That work likewise includes video, music, and an object from the external world; and my dog, Rollo, appears in both works. Because the car refers to my mother's car and the video in *Uterusland* (2017/2019) is about birth, the subject of motherhood is accentuated. Then, having sound at both ends of the exhibition, quieter works could be placed between them.

Since this was a survey of what I've done over the past decade and I didn't produce new work, I decided to include works from my art school days. These video projections created a contrast with the penis that I really liked. At the 2022 Venice Biennale, the penis was part of the "The Milk of Dreams" exhibition, which included many surrealistic works; but at the De Pont, the juxtaposition of the early phenomenological videos and the sculpture proved fascinating. It showed me that I could rethink my practice through various pairings.

**JG:** The videos are mesmerizing. In *Kamerbruch (Camera breaking)* (2011), you seem to be sparring with or trying to tame an animal in your studio, but it's a camera.

**RV:** That's true. The ropes and things that I am using

OPPOSITE: FRED COTT; COURTESY IGO, BERLIN AND THE ARTIST / THIS PAGE: ROMAN MAIZ, COURTESY IGO, BERLIN AND THE ARTIST

are somewhat like the chain that represents urine in the sculpture. There seems to be a formal relationship that is related to controlling something. In the video, I am trying to control the view of myself, the one that the camera is recording.

**JG:** How were the images of you at the scanner in *Psychogräfin (Psycho Countess)* (2012) captured and compiled? Was there a lot of editing?

**RV:** Not very much editing was involved. It's just clip after clip. I had an experimental phase, where I dismantled scanners and cameras, integrating new cameras within the machines to expose their interiors. In this case, after removing the glass, I attached a small camera to the scanner head to get the machine's perspective. It's a very object-oriented ontology.

During this period, I rarely reworked the material digitally. There was zero postproduction, just the machine and the layered reflections. Normally, one only scans still images, but I also scanned video to see what would happen with moving images. At the time, I was greatly inspired by Joan Jonas's works; and since the scanner beam in my video also appears to be rolling, it recalls *Vertical Roll* (1972).

The installation of these videos also prompted the question: What is film? Film consists of a series of moving still images that create an impression of continuous movement. But what happens when a sequence of six chambers shows the same work? Suddenly, the process of exponentiation applies. So, there were two parameters for experiencing the projections—individually, by entering any one of the chambers, and collectively. How sculpture relates to film also interests me. The fact that time is essential to experiencing both is why I like to combine them. Usually that happens



FROM LEFT:  
*The (Missed) Education of Raphaela Vogel*, 2021.  
Pen, oil crayon, oil paint, leather, glue, goat leather, sheep leather, elk leather, and cord, dimensions variable.  
View of installation at Kunstverein Hamburg, 2021.

*Found Subject* (detail), 2023.  
Multimedia installation and 2-channel video: color, sound, 6:09 min. (synchron); dimensions variable.

in a condensed way, as in *Rollo*. But their contrasting characteristics—an enduring presence versus a transient one—require they be balanced.

**JG:** What about *The (Missed) Education of Raphaela Vogel*, your dog, and the allusion to your mother? Does an autobiographical thread percolate through your work?

**RV:** I have involved objects and animals that are close to me, but it's a thin line. It's not about displaying aspects of my life, nor am I thematizing my own perspective. I work from my own position. I use (auto)biographical material at times, but many times I don't. The "I" in that installation is quite ambiguous.

**JG:** Do the *(Missed) Education* texts and diagrams derive from independent research? Are they an inventory of things omitted from your schooling?

**RV:** Both. They consist of information from school notebooks that I re-wrote to remind me of what I had learned and didn't learn, plus additional knowledge that I decided to add. The compilation is very subjective and ranges from Karl Marx to dressage and the history of jazz. You can assume I am presenting myself as an educated and uneducated person at the same time.

There is a panel that delineates one of Sergei Eisenstein's multi-level sequence diagrams, which, by charting his scenes, the musical phrasing, the score, the composition, and movement patterns in each frame, shows how they are interconnected. In terms of montage and the semantics of images, he is important for me.

**JG:** The fact that you painted and wrote on leather recalls illuminated manuscripts made with parchment, while the suspended leather panels themselves resemble banners, which reminds me of your interest in heraldry. The imagery is very important, as in the sets of images that make up *Würde / Motive (Dignity, would / Motif, motivation)* (2021). What is the focus of that installation?

**RV:** My idea was to emphasize the motif, because the tradition that shaped my work emphasized only style, attitude, and gesture. In some ways, *Würde / Motive* is also contrary to *(Missed) Education*. I decided to assemble a visual archive, a collection of my images,

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OPPOSITE:  
Installation view of  
“Uterusland,”  
Neues Museum  
Nürnberg,  
2020.

as opposed to my knowledge. I collected images from many sources—the internet, my phone, old magazines, my boyfriend's record collection. Then I attempted to organize my archive, like Aby Warburg, for instance. By delving into the origins of Western art history, Warburg tried to explain our culture through visual images. Though I refer somewhat to his archive, the majority of the material is my personal archive. I use these motifs in my videos or to create a mood board for a film, to get the right atmosphere. Hanging the sets in a linear arrangement enhances the reading of the images.

**JG:** Different kinds of tubing and looping feature in *Uterusland*. The film component, in which you zip down a water slide with a baby doll, is juxtaposed with streams of milk flowing in and out of suspended milking clusters. What is that about?

**RV:** It echoes the crazy looping of the water slide in the water park, where the work was filmed. But it could also be somewhere else—a drain, for example.

**JG:** The color of the milk changes in one place and adopts a ridged texture. It's another contradictory image. The milk is static and yet seems to flow freely.

**RV:** When I make these works using bioplastic, I am usually thinking about morphology in sculpture. This frozen liquid is one moment in an image or in the imagination, and then, if you have different kinds of movement, it creates a somewhat literal moment in the sculpture. ■

*Raphaela Vogel's work will be on view at Petzel Gallery's Chelsea location, January 11–February 17, 2024. Later this year, solo shows are planned at the Centre d'art contemporaine—la synagogue de Delme in France and the Kunsthalle Giessen in Germany.*



ANNETTE KRADISCH, COURTESY BG, BERLIN AND THE ARTIST