

Susanne Jakob

The Duel; or, Nonverbal Dialogue with the Object of Study

The act of photography is like going on a hunt
in which photographer and camera merge
into one indivisible function.¹

Rather than bow and arrow, shotgun, or rifle, modern nimrods stalk their motifs with highly sensitive cameras. Pursuing, stalking, lurking, waiting, until the optimal position is found, then the shooting from a hidden spot—those strategies are employed by both hunters and photographers. Anyone who produces technical photographs employs to a greater or lesser extent, more or less consciously, this ancient behavior pattern. The “shot” can be obtained using various strategies: One variation is that of passively lying in wait. Here the shutter release is pressed at the right moment, but there is no effort to intervene in the action. Another strategy is aggressive pursuit, which is associated with searching for clues and researching. In the third variation, the photographer gets actively involved by arranging or staging: He or she constructs situations, assembles visual bait (objects) into compositions, or directs people to take certain positions or poses. Sinje Dillenkofer’s photographs of animals, still lifes, nudes, and portraits could be assigned to this last group. The objects of the photographs were deliberately sought out, tested for appropriateness, and recoded by their positioning in space, by adding and leaving out.

The objects of Sinje Dillenkofer’s studies are living creatures; recently, they have also included views inside receptacles for objects of various functions. Her pictorial subjects never appear just in a single photograph but always in series, forming proximities and genre-specific affiliations with other similar motifs. For her photographic study, the “models” are taken from their natural, social, individual context and placed in artificially staged surroundings. The question of the relationship of reality and artificiality, of individuality, typification, and standardization is present in all the artist’s photographic works. One example of this is the portrait series *Die letzten Könige von Paris* (The last kings of Paris), in which representatives of Parisian haute couture are photographed against white background and in a rather sober style, but given feudal attributes and insignias of power. Physiognomic details and differences in gestures and facial expressions that might perhaps have permitted inferences about individuality and identity are eradicated by the superior force of meaningful poses and attributes. Another method for recoding living bodies is found in the portrait series, for example, the numerically arranged series *Kaninchenschmauen* (Rabbit snouts) and *Die Umkehrung* (The reversal) (both 1994–95).

For the latter unusual portrait series, the artist photographed the right sole of employees of DG Bank in Frankfurt. This part of the body, which normally remains hidden, was printed in a variety of formats and placed in boxes whose size and depth are based on the hierarchy of the company.

The Photographic Attitude and the World of Artifacts

The recent *Porträtserie von jeweils sieben Säugern und Vögeln* (Portrait series of seven mammals and seven birds) is about ordering systems like those seen in zoological collections in natural history collections. The objects of her photographic study were taken from the inventory of the natural history collection of the dukes of Württemberg (now in the Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde, Stuttgart), which were archived as objects for display and study. Hence the models for her photographs are not natural creatures but artifacts that have been subjected to multiple transformation. The metamorphosis of the natural creature into an artifact begins with killing or dying, with hollowing out, stuffing, and reconstructing the animal's body. Only the precisely reconstructed surface testifies to its existence as a natural being. The significant shell of the body is all Sinje Dillenkofer has selected and designated the object of the photograph and of art. Here too the artist is repeating the principle of showing things in strict typology—apart from their relationship to the reality of the museum. Thus their hides are not photographed in their function as items in a museum archive but as isolated artifacts. The form of their presentation and the surroundings of the artifacts are just as artfully arranged as they are themselves: With the belly turned upward, pressed somewhat flat, all four legs extended, they become symbols of the exposed and defenseless. The pure white surroundings of the hides looks as clinically neutral as a dissecting table, and the stretched, shadowless creatures seem to float above it, dematerialized. It is, as Foucault remarked, a “non-temporal rectangle in which, stripped of all commentary, of all enveloping language, creatures present themselves one beside another, their surfaces visible.”²

The topographic gaze of the camera, which fixes on the mounted animals in a distance shot, evokes the comparison to scientific observation and analysis: the serial arrangement of seven mammals and seven birds visibly destroys the individual and makes the features of the species visible. As if in a taxonomic study, the photograph uses the typological and serial organization of the objects to expose differences and similarities in the form, proportion, number of details, colors, and surface structure of the mounted animals. The parallelism for the situation of a scientific observer and the position of the camera when photographing the objects suggests the two cognitive methods are similar: Both in the empirical sciences and in the visual arts,

observation, description, and comparative seeing are methods of taxonomy and (stylistic) categorization and hence the production of knowledge.

The Duel: Real, Reproduced and Absent Bodies

The path from the *objet cherché* to the photographic end product of Sinje Dillenkofer is an elaborate process of hard work. The photographs taken in the natural history museum are edited digitally and subjected to further formal and semantic transformation using various reproduction methods. By transferring the fourteen images of animals to a handy postcard format, the reproductions take on the character of plates illustrating treatises on natural history. But the souvenir and fetish qualities that are also associated with postcards points beyond the historical concept of nature, which is still associated with collecting, cataloging, and archiving: The reproductions of specimens from museums correspond more to the contemporary idea of nature, which the American historian Daniel J. Boorstin has described as follows: “The artificial has become so commonplace that the natural begins to seem contrived.”³ A contemporary use of the animal image also emerges in the representation of fourteen vertebrates on inkjet prints the size of a human being. These large-format banners are arranged according to criteria of species and hand down from the ceiling in two parallel rows. They occupy the same space (of action) as the viewer and unfold a tangibly physical presence, so that the reproduced dead bodies become the equal partners of the living ones. The confrontation of the rational animal with its animalistic alter ego becomes the symbol of the encounter and the human being’s duel with its suppressed inner nature. Confrontation, dialogue, and duel provide the leitmotifs for the exhibition of exhibits 1–16 at Schloss Neuenbürg. For Sinje Dillenkofer, *Das Duell* (The duel) is a complicated metaphor: On the one hand, it is subject to traditional rules and hence is one of the achievements of civilization intended to tame the original aggressive drive. On the other hand, the concept also stands for the photographer’s duel/dialogue with the resistant motif that wants to be constantly reinvented. Both elements are expressed in the exhibition by two inkjet prints around eight meters wide that function like backdrops and are installed on either end of the vaulted cellar. The monumental plotter print *Im Schnee* (In the snow) opens up into a pictorial space that seems endless, in which a group of naked people are walking across snow. Given the pixelated structure of the print, they look schematic, like an ancient shadowgraph, and they can only be distinguished as men and women based on typological features. The pictorial space, which invites viewers to enter it, evokes associations of a hunt, connected to questions: Who is following whom? Who is the hunter and who the prey?

The opponent in the spatial duel is the digitally enlarged print-out of a shotgun case, known as a *Flintenpärchen*, from the early twentieth century. This historical collector's piece is a felt-lined case with hollow forms for two shotguns that can be disassembled into pieces. This prepunched ordering system, in which each functional part of the shotguns has its predetermined place, is empty. The hollow forms thus stand as placeholders for the absent bodies. At the same time, they can be read as abstract forms that have been blown up into a mysterious architectural pictorial space. The recoding of the shotgun case as a spatial, stage-like backdrop obscures its horrifying function as a container for something deadly.

In the exhibition space a visual dialogue unfurls between open and closed pictorial spaces, between absent, reproduced, and present bodies. In her photographic works and especially in the exhibition conceived for Schloss Neuenbürg, Sinje Dillenkofer reflects on human methods and desires to "get a hold of" nature, to recognize and comprehend it.

Notes

1 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Matthews (London: Reaktion, 2000), 39.

2 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 131.

3 Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 250.

Susanne Jakob is an art historian and the artistic director of the Kunstverein Neuhausen.

Translation: Steven Lindberg