

Seeing inbetween **Beate Ermacora**

With "CASES" Sinje Dillenkofer tackled a theme that might seem trivial at first view. What should be interesting about old storage cases, tattered containers and caskets, one could argue, especially if they are empty?

Yet, the artist leads us through these subjects to a cosmos of its own that is -unexpected and surprising – able to tell a multitude of stories that deal with cultural valencies, gender relations, societal habits, beauty and violence, time, and in the end also with life and death. While doing so she steers our attention in a subtle way towards shapes, colors and materials, confronts us with moments between concrete legibility and the abstract, involves us in a game of perception, where we recognize, both guessing, and at the same time being asked to fill the gaps that she is enigmatically working with, with our own imagination; thus asking the question, how we read and interpret photographs.

In the body of work of Sinje Dillenkofer cutlery boxes appear for the first time in 1994 in her series "Leben Essen (Eating Life)". She presents a set of square boxes, which are open, showing the viewer the pleated, silken inside. In the lids of these open boxes the artist draped small piles of sand, earth and stones; therefore opening another layer of legibility, as if she was placing weights on a scale pan. Nature versus civilization, durability versus transience, or natural value versus cash value. Such a subtle reference system is absolutely characteristic of Dillenkofer's approach. Moreover, she presents her photographs often in three-dimensional object cases which foster the illusion of physicality. Since 1999/2000 she has definitely focused on the examination of storage containers in her artistic interest. At first comes an extensive series of cutlery boxes, which the artist reproduces with their content, before she focuses on the "CASES". These offer an undreamed abundance of possibilities, both formal and in terms of content with which Dillenkofer relates to her earlier work, and examination of societal structures.

In contrast with previous bodies of work, "CASES" show only empty containers without content, which makes them appear more ambiguous and intriguing. Moreover, Sinje Dillenkofer shows not only cutlery boxes, but looks into the inner life of very different cases, caskets and etuis, which she finds in museums and archives. With that she opens another field of association that leads to fundamental questions about archiving, collecting and sorting, just as to the question of what is valuable enough to be kept and for what reason. Because the subtitles can only give a hint about the real use of the different cases, the artist subtly presents us an enigmatic, symbolic world of colors and forms that appears picturesque and graphical, inspiring the imagination. Especially the insides of the covers with their marks and scratches, which are often presented alongside the matching bottoms as diptychs, lack any discernible material connection. We see tectonic, geometrical forms, which are graded in depth with holes and slits ground into the surface. We are prone to discover still life-like arrangements in some images, or see works of minimal art in grid and dot systems. We are inclined to try to relate the single elements, rather like in a sheet of cardboard cut-outs. Again and again we encounter landscapes of softly falling fabric, which are reminiscent of skin in their organic structures. In his text "Haut und Höhlung (skin and hollow)" Johannes Meinhardt dealt in great detail with the libidinous association of the seen with the body and its orifices, and refers as a result also to the connection to photography: "These visible or suggested cavities are peculiar signs; signs in the strong sense that they

name and beyond that make visible what is absent, or not visible: the object filling its shelter, or the organic cavity. (...) A photo is also (...) a kind of imprint, or a kind of pale imitation of the visible skin of things.”¹

Marks and signs of usage enliven the textures, so that an artistic impression arises once more. Although Sinje Dillenkofer takes photographs in an objective, even documentary way and her subjects are put in scene true to scale, they remain in a perceptual space of ambiguity. Especially the exhaustion of possibilities between the border of painterly and photographic legibility are definitely intentional, so as to make the portrayed objects legible in a new, conceptual context. Thus, the artist opens a demanding game between subjective and objective patterns of perception, as they are traditionally represented in painting and photography. That the genres have long blended into each other, and remain in constant exchange, is especially shown in contemporary painting where thematic actuality often stems from photographic presentations. The competition between painting and photography is as old as the medium of photography. However, if the criterias are reversed today, they contain all the perception patterns of each other's medium in it, and that is the excitement, how Sinje Dillenkofer unexpectedly infiltrates painterly components and their categories of interpretation in her photographic work. As so often in her body of work, image and photographed object fall into one. Some pieces are glass framed, which gives the effect of display cabinets, creating a distance to the viewer; others assert their imminent presence with extremely matt, technically unprotected surfaces which seem symbolic and vulnerable like skin or a membrane and which suck the viewer into their pictorial space.

Sinje Dillenkofer creates her own principle of order with “CASES”, one that points to emptiness and absence and speaks nevertheless of intense presence. The material objects that left the contours in the containers created for them are not seen, yet they are ever present. Because as soon as we read the information for the single photographic objects, another world unfolds, a world that lies behind the visual surface of the photographs and immerses us in stories and history. Nowadays, it does not matter if we buy a drill, a cell phone, cosmetics, or jewelry; anything is packed in cases, boxes, or containers, and all the single pieces are placed in standardized, precise moulds. According to Dillenkofer's research this packaging system has a long tradition. Certainly at first comes a very practical aspect, namely to protect basic commodities and valuables during transport, and as not to loose any parts in case of objects divided into several parts. The boxes are constructed according to rational and space-saving criteria. In case of technical equipment that was mass-produced, like the different outside micrometers manufactured around 1950, which the artist photographed at the historical collection of the ZF Friedrichshafen AG, not much attention was given to the interior fittings. However, if one looks at boxes that were used as presents, like the container for frontloading revolvers from Kaiser Josef I, 1845 or the musical instrument case for a horn from Tsar Alexander III, 1845, the appeal lies in the bright colors of the lining, which enhanced the objects lying on top in the best way. Thus, there is a reference to value on an aesthetic level, as we know it also from jewelry caskets with their precious-looking velvet and silk fabrics linings. One can well imagine the effect when for example the etui for a precious vessel for King August the Strong was opened in 1719, and the expensive, probably gleaming valuables were exposed on top of a red and white silk background. For these objects etuis were especially made so that the outer form told about the content; however, usually square or rectangular boxes were made that lead to no conclusion about the content.

In "CASES" Sinje Dillenkofer always questions aspects of beauty and asks what a society at large considers valuable, themes that she examined already in her earlier works. For example in the series of pictures "Substitute I" (1990) and "Substitute II" (1990), portraits of dogs and urns for dogs shown alongside trophies and medals for canine beauty contests, or in "The last Kings of Paris" (1995) where protagonists of the Haute Couture fashion business are shown with regalia of royalty. These staged scenes show that beauty can also be used as a means of power, and reflects Dillenkofer's interest in social hierarchies and the tapestry of relations between them. Meinhardt writes about the series "Cutlery Boxes" (1999/2000) in which silverware is lined up in orderly fashion: "in a critical historical reading (...) would be noticed that these cutlery boxes in their own history as well as in their socially determined expression are part of an absolutistic aesthetic: an aesthetic of standardization of individuals, and of subjugation of the aforementioned, a predetermined public value system."² Obviously when viewing "CASES" the question arises, whether they are all standardized, or if they are very luxurious customized items, like for instance the container for the duck juicer from Empress Elisabeth of Austria, at the end of the 19th century. On closer examination of these enigmatic photographs, one inevitably starts searching for differences in the style of containers, which are allocated to male or female aspects of life. In regard to a broader approach "CASES" present an unconventional instrument for Sinje Dillenkofer to think about time, culture, society, and even about the question how we handle life and death: "are the vessels and objects from the "CASES" series documents and expression of human longing for eternal life, eternal beauty, or the attempt to gain control over those?" she asks.³

The artist adds a new aspect to her series with three newly created fanfold that are up to 980 cm long. They document museum visits in Friedrichshafen, as one can gather from the titles. While Dillenkofer walked through the museum, she took after a predetermined number of steps one photograph of the floor and one from the ceiling. Thus she reduced the architectural space to a vessel from which, analogous to the photographed boxes, we only see bottom and top. The artist herself is not seen in these images, and the single institutions with their main emphasis on certain parts of the collection, as well as the archival guidelines are not shown in the diagrams. Instead, they tell of the photographer's presence, her movement through "museum boxes", and serve the viewer as coordinates for his or her own imaginary visit.

In her work Sinje Dillenkofer offers us hypotheses and models of perception under the particular conditions of photography, where she intentionally plays the documentary character of photographic reproduction well aimed against fiction and imagination. What makes "CASES" so intriguing and ambivalent is the aspect that we see, but can never categorize what we perceive, the tangible discrepancy between presence and absence creates a third imaginary element which represents the real essence of the images.

¹ Johannes Meinhardt "Haut und Höhlung. Sinje Dillenkofers Fotos von Oberflächen, Aushöhlungen und Spalten", in: Sinje Dillenkofer. Fotoobjekte" Städtische Galerie Villingen-Schwenningen 2002 P. 3 – 10, P. 4f

² Johannes Meinhardt, "Präsentation und Repräsentation: Sinje Dillenkofers 'Besteckkästen'" in Sinje Dillenkofer. Fotoobjekte", Edition Kabinett, Stuttgart 2000, P. 3 – 9, P. 4

³ Sinje Dillenkofer in an email to Beate Ermacora, March 5, 2010

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