

Interview Sinje Dillenkofer by Regina Michel, ZF Kunststiftung Friedrichshafen, publication CASES 2009-10, ZF Kunststiftung Friedrichshafen, 2010

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RM: You started a few years ago to photograph the insides of historical containers, which used to hold silverware, precious vessels, or technical and scientific equipment. What was your motivation for that series?

SD: While visiting the Landesmuseum Karlsruhe in 2001, I happened to see a toiletry case belonging to Stephanie von Baden that had been an engagement gift from Napoleon Bonaparte in 1870. I was taken by the opulent craftsmanship and materiality devoted to something that was “only” on function and for storing objects. At the same time they created a landscape of lines, forms depressions and elevations, which were visible in the cases’ covers as marks and imprints, which reminded me of sketches by Cy Twombly. I discovered a case full of projections, yearnings, interests and social values which to me, in respect of our extended notion of art, viewed from a distance of 150 years, seemed an interesting starting point for an artistic exploration.

RM: You empty the containers before photographing them. What remains are cases with cavities, lined with velvet and silk. What role do the absent objects, which are only seen as an imprint, play?

SD: The objects determine the content and form of the cases. They are the original cause of the abstract forms, which were incorporated exactly into lid and bottom. Moreover, to me they are references of their time and give information about their original function and society from which they stem. They are absent in the images but through form and depression, as a negative space and imprint of the original, they have an auratic presence. The real objects’ appearance and perceived materiality I leave up to the viewer’s fantasy.

RM: In how far does your work deal with the visibility of aging processes, of a lived life that has left marks?

SD: The traces of use and storage in the containers are important to me. They allow me to visualize past, and thus time, by photographing and depicting them as abstract, painterly, emblematic lines and hatchings. As such they embody also human presence, make the users of the containers “detectable” and present in the image, even in their absence. In addition to the work of art, as a quasi subtitle, the viewer is given information about the container, its owner, function and time. Now, it depends on one’s imagination to make the un-seeable come to life, or personify it, to give it a story. There, the curiosity of the viewer, his or her life experience and associative power of imagination play an important role, to consider whether what is seen is credible. For the viewer what is absent could come into existence, the anonymous could become personified, the past present or vice versa. Photography borrows a moment from reality, extracts it from its original surroundings and materializes it in its specific ways in the new context of art. Doesn’t the viewer do the same with what he sees and how he brings it life for himself?

RM: These etuis and cases were principally used to store valuable objects. What role does the metaphysical charging through the value of the absent objects play?

SD: Are they valuable at all? What defines their value for whom? They inform about the interests of certain groups of society, and trace the change of power from monarchy, aristocracy to bourgeoisie to modern age. Aren’t these mainly trappings of power, that represent the possession of education and knowledge from technology, science, and culture? Doesn’t the relationship of value and functionality compared to the fittings of the containers in the photographs tell the viewer about the importance of the respective object and its intrinsic value? Often the value is found in the underlying

stories, also in new relationships, which can result from artistic analogies. In CASES, the containers as well as their respective content and the owners play a role. They both serve an idea and express a social interest. All this, translated into an abstract image, becomes an independent form, which takes over a role in the society of its present time.

RM: What importance do terms like beauty and aesthetics play for CASES?

SD: What was considered beautiful then, and what do we define as beautiful today? To what extent was and is beauty an expression of power, and thus used for representational purposes? To me, beauty is created in the way we put ourselves in relation to objects. Can their nature and individual peculiarity be made into something real at all, and in that sense, can beauty be made visible? I use forms of expression of beauty, the subject itself, and play with what the viewer finds supposedly attractive, fine, esthetically appealing and thus familiar, and with what he defines as ugly, foreign, or threatening.

RM: You stage the containers with light, using color and form in service of artistic expression, and thus you highlight the abstract, emblematic quality in your photographs.

SD: Through photography organic materials such as goat- or deerskin, velvet and silk with which the containers are lined, become painterly structures; cases made of wood or synthetic materials like metal, felt or plastic become geometric, graphic images that sometimes bring to mind concrete art. Line, form and color, normally devices of painting, are used photo-technically and become the true designer of my photographs. Light and shadow help me to work against the visual perceptions of the viewer, and to dissolve references to reality within the images. They make the three-dimensional seem two-dimensional and vice versa, for example by highlighting a darker factually lower lying area, or by making a bright illuminated less dominant. At the same time the optics of the camera can technically help to shape. Our view of the image is fixed and predetermined by its central perspective. The choice of lens, the distance to the object and the resulting point of view can change the image's form proportionally, and influence the reproduction of its surface textures.

RM: On the subject of surface texture, what is the importance of the different paper and framing of the vary CASES?

SD: They help to make the nature of the images visible to the viewer. Depending on the surfaces' materiality they can appeal sensually, suck you in, or distance you from them. The latter happens with the color images that are laminated under glass. The viewer is reflected, like in a mirrored façade set between him and the image space, whereas the black and white papers the barite, silver gelatin or handmade papers, - made from organic materials like cellulose, - matte and exposed like skin or a membrane, appear directly the viewer. The before images make reference through their framing to the relationship between pictorial space and surrounding space. They become object-like, classic panel paintings or architectural surfaces that need no frame.

RM: Particularly the partly large-format photographs give the viewer no reference to actual size, function, and original context of the portrayed containers. What role does the format play?

SD: Some prints are smaller or ten times bigger than the original object. I want to reduce the recognizability of the photographic image, so that the abstract picture disappears in its own dimension and makes the viewer curious. How does the effect change, according to size and ratio of viewer, pictorial space and surrounding space? In view of the fact that our body is reference for our perception, how do we decide if we define an image for instance as big and threatening, or small and cute? Were the images mounted as wallpaper in a room installation, they could be explored spatially and thus experienced visually in a new way.

RM: In how far do you want to question the existing order of the visible?

SD: How do we define that order in a society where everything must be immediately recognizable, measurable, evaluable and controllable? I play with the viewing and perceptual habits of the observer and invite him indirectly to question whether he sees and perceives something as new, or whether he sees only what he recognizes. The real vision happens in one's head anyway.

RM: Your research process reminds me of scientific fieldwork. Do you see a research aspect in your work?

SD: Not in the sense of a conceptual or purely scientific method. These are questions that I explore, intuitively or conceptually in my artwork. In contrast to the past in my paintings or etchings, or today the drawings and the computer, photography allows me to portray a subject, to claim its authenticity applied to a moment, and to use this as a concept, as a measuring device and starting point for further shifts of perception and context.

RM: The object's transformation into photographed images makes them available to be re-viewed, compared and analyzed at any time, like in an archive. What importance has the aspect of preserving, documenting, comparability and thus typology?

SD: Unlike a scientific archive, I am not interested in the principle of order per se, the keeping and saving as instruments of research or completeness. The area of my work is determined by my interest. In CASES I am interested in typological diversities of abstraction, which stem formally and content-wise from guidelines and data, and – if given – historical reference of the containers. The cases are photographed in a central perspective, orthogonal, true to scale, and in that sense documentarily. They could also be understood as documenting different processes of realistic appropriation. The research into this project and to be able to draw out and compare specific aspects of content, caused CASES to become a series. How does the historical functions of the objects determine the abstraction in the later photographs of its/their container? Why do all my researched containers come from the Western world? Do they reflect the human yearning to conserve what is beautiful and valuable, to immortalize life itself and thus the primeval urge to gain power over life and death? These questions are so fundamental that they can be posed in every culture. This raises for me the question about the concept and meaning of "archive" itself.