

Johannes Meinhardt

## Phenomena of Shifts and Transitions

### Sinje Dillenkofer's *INVERSIO*

In her photographs Sinje Dillenkofer has from the outset worked with phenomena of shifts, with reversals, with inversions, with chiasms of antitheses. The very different classes of such inversions and phenomena of shifts can be traced back to basic definitions of the medium of photography that affect our perception even up to the present day, when digital photography has replaced analog photography.

For the emergence of photography in the 1830s represented the birth of an ontologically new type of object, whose status as reality posed entirely new problems. The only distinction that had existed until then between external and internal reality—of the extended material world of physical things subject to space, time, and causality, and of the inner world of immaterial mental objects, ideas, thoughts, and internal images—was undermined by a new type of image, the photographic image, whose status of reality in the logic of perception and logic generally was completely different.

Until that time the material world of objects in space and time has been subordinated to the spiritual world of ideas, primal images, and concepts (or vice versa). With photography, however, a new type of object had come into the world, one that was at odds with these hierarchies: In contrast to the painting, which apparently has its origin in the inner world of consciousness or the imagination, the photograph is a kind of self-depiction of nature, an objective form of nature becoming an image in accordance with natural laws. With photography, a second-order reality, a reality of depiction, had emerged in nature itself. Although people were familiar with several forms of self-depiction in nature—for example, mirror images and shadows—they were tied to the presence of the object that was reflected or casts its shadow. Only with photography was there a captured, enduring image of the fleeting moment of a mirror image or cast shadow.

In a photograph, cutting out a detail of the spatial and temporal continuity of the flow of the present in an interplay with the linear projection of three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional plane permits the formation of optical phenomena of shifts—related to the optical illusions studied by Gestalt theory. It begins with the inversion of top and bottom still within the plane (*Untitled FLAMINGO 1* and *2*, 2012, and *Untitled No. 18*, 2000) as well as in serial arrangements of forms the sudden transformation into the opposite forms, and hence of the inside and outside of forms (in *Untitled No. 2*, 2000, where one sees either spoons or “milk cans”). In the relationship between plane and space, the edges can be perceived as running toward the back or toward the front and curved planes as convex or concave, as protrusions and invaginations or hollowed out (as with *CASES*; or with the series of enlargements of rabbit snouts from 1997 to the present; or with *Untitled, Tableaux 1–5*, an installation of five highly enlarged horse nostrils, 2006). Spatial lines can suddenly turn into planar lines (*LIFELINES*, 2011, a

photographic work used as black-and-white wallpaper with the motifs of nine umbilical cords, or the black-and-white borderlines on the bodies of the Valais Blackneck goats in *GOAT I*, 2012), and three-dimensional surfaces become two-dimensional planar forms.

Moreover, the photograph as an illustration of surfaces also serves to double these surfaces; it is as if it were placing itself over the visible objects in order to mark them. This doubling of the surface is particularly interesting with living creatures, above all with the human body. The body as a place of separation and transition from an inner, mental world and an external, material world forms the impossible threshold between the two; it is neither object nor consciousness and at the same time is both object and consciousness. But the perceiving body exists as skin: the skin as a whole is an all-encompassing organ of perception, and all the senses are for their part transformations of skin. Perceived from outside, the skin is a sheath, a wrapper, a material surface; seen from the inside, from the perspective of self-perception, the skin is the place of sensory perception, the boundary of the self or I. In Sinje Dillenkofer's photography, human skin—as in the body works from 1992 to 1996, in which she uses sometimes the skins and hides of animals also—plays a central role: The photograph is for its part a doubling of the skin, being itself an organ of perception, since in the photograph the perception of the traces inscribed in a photosensitive plane suddenly shifts into the perception of an image, and hence an illusory, three-dimensional, and corporeal space that is grasped purely optically.

In the group of works *CASES*, 2000–2012, Sinje Dillenkofer then doubles the absence specifically linked to the medium of photograph. The photograph as supplement of what it depicts also demonstrates the absence of what it depicts and its iconic presence. When Sinje Dillenkofer photographs interior views of the lids and bottoms of empty containers, which reproduce in negative, as a hollow, the form of the objects they protect or preserve (dishes, flatware, tools, musical and medical instruments), these containers and boxes themselves taken on the character of deictic indexes: they point to something in the world; they do not signify but rather point with a finger at something or mark—namely, as hollow forms—the objects they surround like a second skin. On the one hand, they themselves possess the form of the objects; on the other, they point to or represent it. This results in a staggering of absences, which point to absent objects by means of indices. The case becomes even more interesting when the preserved and protected objects leave behind traces in their container, when their metal colors the velvet that normally lines the *CASES*, or when the velvet is worn down from touching the objects, or when light causes the velvet to fade. Then the containers also turn out to be causal indices, indices of the past, traces. Whereas the negative forms of the containers were formed by human beings, the chemically or mechanically produced traces in the containers were produced on their own, objectively, inscribed without intention or consciousness: just as in the photograph, into which light has inscribed itself. The ambivalence of skin, sheath, cladding, armor (*WARRIOR I–15*, 2006), the hollow body is deeply anchored in the ontology of the medium of photography. Because photographs can only depict surfaces in space, they are particularly susceptible to suddenly changing from front to back, verso to recto, inside to outside. The skinned hide,

the removed item of clothing, and the iron armor offer paradigmatic types of spatial surfaces that are, on the one hand, containers and protective suits and, on the other, surfaces, hollow spaces, and hollow bodies that can be emptied.

Because they are self-depictions of nature, the status of these images as reality is contradictory and hence ambiguous: objective, mechanical, chemical, physical processes (or their digitalization) produce effects that indisputably belong to the world of material and energy and that result without the intervention of a human being or consciousness. For that reason, the photograph brings with it an irreducible faith in perception: we know—indeed from the very outset—that photographic reality can claim the same trust, the same faith, as any other perception in the world. It has nothing to do with the imaginary. “Photography has something to do with resurrection: might we not say of it what the Byzantines said of the image of Christ which impregnated St. Veronica’s napkin: that it was not made by the hand of man, *acheiropoietos*.”<sup>1</sup>

The confusion of levels of reality grows further when the negative form is produced not as an addition or supplement to a positive form (as with the *CASES* or containers) but in fact precedes the positive form, the object, in the world and is the true original, as with the models or molds (a few of the *CASES*, from 1976 to 1979; wood models for cast forms, built 1937; Daimler Chrysler Classic Center Stuttgart, 2006). If a mold or intaglio form, a negative form, is the original that precedes the infinitely repeatable cast or imprinted forms made from it, then the resulting positive forms are secondary in their status as reality. The material reality of the objects is preceded by a design, a model, and a plan that are realized in the negative mold or intaglio form. This basic model for industrial production—which also applies to photography as a method of reproducing as many images as desired using industrial production—is able to provoke in the photography a double intersection, a double chiasm, of levels of reality; if the reality depicted in the photograph was itself consciously produced—that is, staged—it results in a contradictory gradation of degrees or levels of reality. In the industrial production of commodities, the mental design, the mold, and the cast object follow one another logically, whereby the seemingly evident and positive reality of the objects is derived both mentally and materially: the commodities are causal indices of their production process, of being cast in a mold, and they are deictic references to a plan or sketch that was not just supposed to be shown but has also been materially realized. The goal of these staggered processes is the multiple reality of commodities.

In the industrial production of photographic images, analogously, when they depict a staged reality, the design or invention of a planned scene, the material dramatization of the scene and the photographic depiction follow according to the logic of production. But if the photograph is the goal of this sequence, if the perceptual faith that clings to the photograph is used to give the dramatization the character of a preexisting, primary, and in that sense true reality, then the chain of derivations is short-circuited and winds into a circle. The seemingly unproblematic appropriation of the visible world via photography

becomes, if reality is staged for the photograph, an abyss, a vicious circle.

The conventional antithesis of, on the one hand, documentary use of photography and, on the other hand, a staged, fictional, or deceptive use—which in general regulates its individual or social use—is thus untenable. And the untenable nature of this opposition has been demonstrated by Sinje Dillenkofer, especially in her early groups of works. That begins in 1985–93 with her *Self-Portraits*: When the photographer and the photographed object coincide, when the camera's gaze and the observed body (which itself gazes, looks back) intersect, the specific split personality that results when a subject feels he or she is being watched becomes the theme of the photograph. The person who feels he or she is being watched produces, in addition to his or her normal consciousness focused on some objects, a second consciousness that senses the gaze of the others and imagines itself being seen from outside as a body. This double or split consciousness, in which both one's own body and others' gaze at one's body—or the image the others have of it—becomes conscious in an interrelationship, results in the pose.

The overlapping of documentary reality and staging is particularly striking in the group of works *RESERVES 1–21* of 1992, with twenty-one two-part portraits of the executive assistants of renowned corporations, such as *RESERVE 21, Norma I. Foerderer of the Trump Organization, New York*. Each of these portraits consists of a black-and-white photograph in which one of the women is depicted in representative work clothes in a pose of her own choosing and a color photograph of the same woman in an appropriate public presentation—chosen together with the photographer; both are taken in her office. But the social reality that is shown in documentary fashion by the “semiofficial” photograph is itself a dramatization, in which the women themselves orchestrate their self-image in accordance with the—imagined and socially acquired—demands of society. And the *mise-en-scène* of the color photograph also follows an image—namely, the image the photographer has formed of the woman in question. Social reality is always already *mise-en-scène*, the production of an image for the gaze of others: this can be imagined by the subject or articulated by others through their language or behavior. In this way, the documented reality and the staging of reality, on the one hand, and the self-image and the image others have, on the other, interlock.

Thematically, Sinje Dillenkofer's photography has come to focus increasingly on the technological subjugation and formation of nature. Photographs of animals—especially of stuffed or impaled animals or hides (such as the sixteen-part work *THE DUEL*, 2006)—demonstrate the vulnerability of flesh, the helplessness of flesh, its finite nature. Because we all participate in an anonymous flesh of the world—announced especially clearly in the closely related flesh of other mammals—when we deal with the death of animals we inevitably enter an archaic world, a world of hunting, of the killing and use of animals, which in modern societies is supposed to be as hidden away as possible. The slaughterhouse (*Self-Portrait*, 1989) is, according to Georges Bataille and the Collège de Sociologie, the numinous site par excellence of secular societies. But these days, perhaps the truly unspeakable and unbearable thing is

no longer the slaughter house but rather functional factory farming, the instrumentalization, the technological and technocratic reduction of life to economic functions—just as human beings have been reduced to an economic function in slaveholding societies. Because they are reduced to objectives (toy, status symbols, functions, food), animals become uncanny—it becomes possible to experience reducing the human being to objectives (*SUBSTITUTE I*, A–F, 1990; the series of portraits of sheep *5 MEADOWS*, 1994; *sight bill 1* and *2*, 2004; *THE PARABLE*, 1995/2010; *GOATS 1–5*, 2012).

But any form of putting on display—no matter whether it is animals or people being photographed—has a quality of subjection, of helplessness, of being exposed. That is most true of the branches of photography in which medium is explicitly used as an aid to recording and overseeing people. The respect for life and the uncontrollable aspect of nature in the human being makes the animal a mirror of the human being—a mirror of its aspect as a creature. The inevitable moments of guilt connected with killing, which in archaic societies require sacrifice as a way to reconcile with the spirit of the animal, demand a new respect that no longer understands our own fleshy and corporeal qualities—and hence our finite nature—functionally as a disturbance of the dominance of nature but rather as an essential part of our existence.

**Notes:** 1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981; orig. pub. in French in 1980), 82.