

Photography, Storage and Absence

© copyright Rolf Sachsse, 2015

Text Katalog, Ausstellung: Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum Innsbruck, 2015

'A container is a structure designed to store and enclose items made in such a way that it cannot be entered by a person.' It is in these terms that one of the oldest concepts in the history of law is defined in §243 of the German penal code. It was used in the 14th century in a variety of legal cases involving tenure and safekeeping and has always described the encasement of objects in the absence of people and of the objects themselves. In her series of works entitled CASES, Sinje Dillenkofer devotes her attention to these very containers, which can also be called by a series of other names and are thus able to create their very own metaphors: box or casket occur the most frequently, with their stronger emphasis not so much on the container itself but on a present or absent possession from which people were often happy to make dispensations.

The absence of people within the container connects it with art, especially the visual arts and modern art in particular. Walter Benjamin sees a connection between this absence and the value of art as an exhibit, also and precisely by means of the reproductive nature by which art communicates by means of technical media such as photography and film; the permanent exhibition of a work is its presentation in a museum. Because of the museum's history and concept, the container has become a means of housing; the value of what is stored leaves its mark on history. It is these elements that Sinje Dillenkofer deals with in her series of works CASES, both media-critical and sensuous at the same time.

The artist takes containers of historic objects, which they were made to store, and empties them; she photographs them, enlarges or reduces the pictures by multiples of their original format, in this way making them autonomous works of art. Work starts with the search for containers which merit the effort of this photographic treatment – but this is not a technical condition, but one dependent on mindset and a sense of cultural history. In the best sense of the word, each container photographed must incorporate both what was once stored in it and what is missing from the picture. This incorporation gives rise to all the others parameters of artistic design, from the pictorial form to the positioning of container and picture.

From a photographic point of view, work on the CASES has at first glance a reproductive character: Sinje Dillenkofer travels to a museum, an archive, a collection and takes pictures of containers. These can be boxes for valuable jewellery, scientific apparatus, but also duelling pistols and other weapons. Since these objects themselves are absent, there is a lot of scope for imagination: what has been captured in the container and thus in the photo, and what has not? The description of the object with the title provided in each case, along with date and location of collection, does not offer any significant help as the index provided cannot stand for the real thing to which it alludes. The containers themselves incorporate a value, meaning that these questions are always linked to the question about the meaning of object and picture. Especially with objects with a military or medical history, a moment in history intrudes on evaluation because the period of the mechanical sustaining of and threat to life is quite obviously past. The intensity of these questions is supported both by the precision of the reproduction and also by its size.

Sharpness has long been an indispensable function in the history of photography, virtually a guarantee of the objective duplication of the world in the picture. This duplication is first and foremost the result of an effect which the 19th century expresses with the negative concept of the surrogate: the exchange of one material surface for another, economically usually inferior.

With its reproductive precision, photography has virtually inverted this concept – everything which is photographed is automatically transformed into a surface created by the medium, thus acquiring value. Sinje Dillenkofer exhibits this effect in the portrayal of the containers she has copied, often with a textile finish, by relentlessly registering in her pictures, by means of light or mechanical effects, all the changes of colour and all the faults and worn areas in the material. These changes only become apparent on a second or third glance at the picture and lead inexorably to the question of the authenticity of what is portrayed.

Size is a not insignificant aspect of the question about the verisimilitude of what is being shown. With her scaled alteration of the object in the image, Sinje Dillenkofer is making reference to the independence of the image created by the medium from its source, and also encouraging observers to look in a different way: if you step close enough to the picture, it is as though you yourself can finish up in one of the cases portrayed. This is where you become all too painfully aware of the absence of the stored item from its container, but at the same time its meaning is enhanced as it is alluded to by the title of the picture. For example, 19th century cutlery is no longer the incorporation of the late medieval tradition by which the ruler would protect himself against poisoning, but is transformed into a venerable feudal ritual with the bestowing of titles such as the 'Tyrolean Office of Heritage Cutlery', reflected in the turquoise velvet and the sand-coloured silk of the container's lining – and it is only in the photograph that it gains the value of an exhibit, as ascribed to art by Walter Benjamin.

In the CASES Sinje Dillenkofer assigns a major and two-fold significance to colour. On the one hand, the containers of liturgical equipment of Catholicism, ubiquitous in Tyrol, bear the colours appropriate to the absent object: burgundy red for the abbot's staff, blue for the chalice; on the other hand, the oldest objects such as the charter from 1518 are embedded in the most modern, acid-free archive cardboard packaging, covered in the administrative documents' neutral gray. A gray scale image of a set of ice cream spoons from the 1920s gives a metallic textile-like impression, initiating the transfer of the photographic image into the stereotypic representation of an absent object. And another effect is occasionally to be observed here: the binocular hollow face illusion, a picture puzzle. As we observe, especially with shallow containers and large prints, our powers of perception can no longer physiologically differentiate what is on top and what on the bottom of the relief. This can go so far that processing in the brain selects the wrong option, seeing height instead of depth, and vice versa.

Sinje Dillenkofer is here demonstrating that photographic chromaticity can hardly now be used as a pictorial base, because the screen's transparency has to a large extent replaced the chromatic context with surface or reflecting colours. In common with the traces of usage which the photographic recording scrupulously translates into every picture, the image begins to assume an objective life of its own independent of the container; the fact of its being stored in a photographic image becomes a moment of epiphany for the absent item, along with its own historical trace. The absence of the objects from the pictures alludes to a double dislocation: Sinje Dillenkofer photographs her containers in collections where, however, they are not exhibited. Nonetheless, the location where they were found plays an important role in the artist's concept, determining whether the picture is included in the collection of images and therefore defining the photographic act itself. Finding is linked not only to seeing, but also to recognition, which is enshrined in the moment of observing the pictures. In capturing what is absent in the photographic image, in its subsequent processing and transformation, especially with regard to size, as well as in its later being displayed in a book or exhibition, all the traces of the hidden object remain just as accessible to the senses as in the abstract composition of each and every picture itself.