

Free Fall

By Camilla Jalving, *Art Critic, Ph.d.*

A woman enters a room, wraps a piece of cloth around herself, climbs onto a table. This is what I imagine, but not what I see in the photographs that make up Sophia Kalkau's *Red Suite* of 2007, hanging here in front of me. What I see is a woman on a table, draped in a piece of cloth. First in a sitting position, then lying down. Like a sculpture, an existence halfway between an object and a body. Half alive, half dead. Nevertheless, it makes sense, for several reasons, to imagine the first scenario - the woman entering the room, wrapping herself in the cloth, climbing onto the table. It makes sense because this movement is implied by the photographs themselves. As a latent act threatening to erupt in the instant the cocoon bursts, the cloth is thrown down, and the figure sits up and changes position. But it also makes sense because the movement seems to take place *between* the photographs of the suite: between one photograph and the next. Between the picture of the woman sitting up and the picture of the woman lying down. For in between these two positions lies an act which, though invisible to me, must nevertheless have taken place. An interruption of the seemingly static state shown in the photographs. *Red Suite* in this way represents a series of stills selected from a far longer sequence, which I can only imagine. It shows something, but leaves something else invisible. Something that is a precondition, however, for what I can see.

A Fundamental Tension

Does this sound cryptic? Perhaps. But even so, it may serve as a preliminary attempt at defining Sophia Kalkau's *Dog and Die* exhibition at Brandts. A first try at working my way beneath the smooth, mirror-like surface of these photographs, their stylistically pure, almost stoic appearance, and get a tentative grip on what I am really seeing here. A woman, yes. Wrapped in a piece of red cloth, yes. So far we can surely agree. But there is more to it. There is more in these photographs than is being shown. And this is true not only of these particular photographs. The feeling of something latent, something unsaid and uncertain (understood both as not known and not shown) seems to apply to Kalkau's artistic practice in general. You could call this feeling a fundamental mood, or better perhaps, a fundamental tension between presence and absence, between the visible and the invisible. A feeling that something has happened, may happen, or will happen. In the works themselves, between the works, and between the works and me.

The Eye of the Sculptor

Sophia Kalkau was originally trained as a sculptor, but works in both photography and sculpture. The difference between the two media is not very great in this case insofar as Kalkau's field of investigation seems to be the same whether she works in two or three dimensions: What is a

human body, how does it behave in space, and what sort of situation can it create? While a classical sculptor creates objects in stone, plaster or some other material, Kalkau here turns herself into a sculptural object. Volume draped in a piece of cloth like a Greek sculpture, a reclining Athena in a flowing, marble dress. 'Look', she says to me one day during a conversation in her studio, 'how beautifully the drapery falls here – almost like a mermaid's tail.' She points to a corner of the cloth wrapping itself around the woman's feet, in a series entitled *Folds* (2008), thus constituting a small, sculptural element by itself. It is the eye of the sculptor that sees this – in a photograph that contains the same elements as a sculpture: volume, form, surface. In this sense, the medium is not so important. The important thing is what it is used for.

Props for a Play

The fold belongs to the territory of detail. And this is where Kalkau operates. On the level of detail. Take her spherical objects: they seem extremely palpable, but at the same time their chalky white, meticulously treated surfaces make them appear otherworldly. Like objects from a dreamworld or from a distant planet in the farthest galaxy. Among other things, the exhibition presents the observer with a large, tweezer-like needle, a die and some spools. Although they are completely out of proportion in relation to their expected usage, they still seem to call for such usage. This is where the fundamental tension, the feeling of something latent in Kalkau's work, once more enters the picture. Like props kept in a theatre's store room, these minimalistic, taciturn objects invite action: take hold of me, throw me, roll me! The act resides as a possibility in the object itself, as the promise of a spectacle that may or may not unfold. Like the photographs of the draped woman, they point to a space of future possibilities. Perhaps the space of possibilities glimpsed in the slide projection entitled *Dice* of 1999. In these images, the number of eyes on the die changes, as if it had been thrown by an invisible hand between each picture. One, two, three, four, five, six... For a while this static object is set in motion before the observer's gaze. Like a mechanical ballet, controlled by invisible forces and my own imagination.

A Performative Gaze

Based on these examples from the exhibition, it would be fair to say that Kalkau's art contains a performative dimension - an element of action, in the individual work expressed as the trace of a past incident, or the promise of a future act. The die stands still, but it *can* move and perhaps will do so shortly. At least on the imaginative level where I throw the die, grab the needle, roll the spools. Of course such a reading of Kalkau's art is made possible by my viewing the works through a certain optics, a certain gaze. You could call it a performative gaze insofar as I look for performative or theatrical aspects of the work. Put differently, you might say that I approach it as if it were a performance, rather than an object.

Here, in terms of art history, we must look back to the 1960s and 70s, when performance art grew out of the experimental, creative environments of that time. Especially in New York, where many of its practitioners were to be found among women artists for whom performance became an art form to be conquered as a new, untested territory, free of centuries of masculine

dominance. Here no Picasso or Jackson Pollock had set the agenda in advance. Here women artists could write their own history. From its very beginnings, performance art was praised for its spontaneous qualities. It is live and alive – as one of the contemporary critics wrote.¹ Tied to the moment, it unfolds as actions and interventions at street level, in galleries and in artists' studios. Its raw material is the artist's own body, whether dressed or nude, in pain or pleasure. It views itself in opposition to the commercial art market which turns art into a trivial consumer item, handed across the counter as paintings sold by the metre. For performance is what happens here and now. Something immaterial that has disappeared almost before it begins.

Photography as Performance

Although Sophia Kalkau's artistic practice does not directly inscribe itself in the history of performance art (the sculptural tradition is at least as important), nor in its emancipatory rhetoric, performance art still provides a possible, historical framework for her art. In connection with Kalkau's photographic work, it seems relevant to point to such artists as Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke. *Eye/Body* is the title of a performance carried out by Schneemann in her studio in 1963. This performance takes the form of a painting installation in which Schneemann, naked and smeared in paint, tries to merge with her own painting, filling the role of both image maker and image, painter and model. Schneemann's performance can be seen as an investigation of the relationship between painting and body, not unlike Kalkau's investigation of the relationship between sculpture and body, even though their aesthetics are far from identical. Similarly, Kalkau's *Out of my Hair* of 2007, which day by day records the artist's loss of hair as the result of cancer treatments, may be compared to Hannah Wilke's final performance work, the unsparing record of the progress of her own cancer in the 1992 photo series entitled *Intra-Venus Series*. Although the two artists are miles apart aesthetically - Kalkau's expression is minimalistic, her photographs seem cleansed of the horror and unpleasantness that Wilke compellingly displays - they are united by their mutual investigation of the body as the carrier of traces.

The similarities between the three artists exist on the technical level as well. All three use the camera actively in their performance works, deliberately posing before the camera eye. 'Action for Camera', is what Schneemann herself calls her *Eye/Body* performance, carried out for and photographed by the Icelandic artist Erró. In the same way, Wilke's *Intra-Venus Series* addresses the photographic image. Not just because this is the place from which she meets my gaze, but also because this photo series is a performance work made for the camera. It could be called photo-performance, a designation that would also describe Kalkau's photographic art, for although her photographs exist as pictures in themselves, with their own aesthetics and beauty, they are also documentation of something that has taken place. They are photo-performance in the sense that they embody the act of taking the picture - posing, placing your body in the right position and arranging the cloth in the right folds: A woman enters a room, wraps a piece of cloth around herself, climbs onto a table.

Invisibility as a Motif

'But why do I never see the woman's face?', you might ask. 'Why does she veil herself?' 'Why doesn't she face me instead of turning her back to me, as in the photo series *Mops* of 2008 and *Out of My Hair* of 2007?' Perhaps because this position with her back turned makes me want to see her. Makes me long for what remains hidden from my gaze: her gaze. Let us go back in time once more. Between 1975 and 1978, the American photographer Francesca Woodman took a picture of herself. *Space*, it is called. Presumably, it was made in response to an assignment she was given at the Rhode Island School of Design where she was studying. On this black-and-white photograph, Woodman is seen standing with one leg lifted and her arms stretched out. She is moving, so the motif is blurred, her contour unfocused. As she stands there, she looks more like a ghost than a human being. A shadow that has left its fleeting trace on the light-sensitive paper. At first, one would think this a failed shot of the kind that would be discarded before the vacation photos are shown. But if one looks at the rest of Woodman's work, it soon becomes obvious that this blurring of the motif is no accident, but, quite to the contrary, central to her practice. In the course of the few years she worked as a visual artist, before taking her own life in 1981 at the age of 21, she shot a large number of self-portraits. Only a few of them, however, live up to what is usually expected of a photographic portrait: a picture in which you see the portrayed person – properly. Woodman shows nothing – properly. She shows something, but what she shows is that which would rather not be shown. Such as the body that blurs itself by moving, jumping up and down on the spot, or crawling into the protective glow of backlighting. In her pictures, it is her body which, as it is being shown, tries to avoid being shown. This happens to such a degree that the avoidance itself becomes the motif.

Seeing is Knowing

Woodman's paradoxical treatment of visibility is interesting to consider in connection with Sophia Kalkau's artistic practice. Although the expression differs – where Kalkau is sharp and precise, Woodman is grainy and unfocused – the logic is the same. Kalkau, too, uses visibility to evade just that. She, too, shows herself without really showing herself. One moment she is hiding inside a die, the next she is hidden by a hat covering her head, disguised in drapery, or standing with her back turned and wearing a wig. Visibility and invisibility are keeping company. As if playing a stubborn game with the observer, I am lured into looking, but my gaze is blocked. Kalkau makes herself visible, but still does not allow herself to be seen.

What does this mean? It means something to the meaning, you might say. The meaning generated by the works in their encounter with the observer. For the tension between visibility and invisibility that pervades Kalkau's art presents a challenge not only to my desire to see, but also my desire to know. Invisibility acts as a way of guarding against a final decoding, in the same way that all the actions that already have unfolded, or that can or maybe will unfold, in and around Kalkau's works lend them an air of something fundamentally unfinished. I may know what is taking place right now (in the picture or the object), but not what will happen in a little while. The art historian Mikkel Bogh has said of Kalkau's sculptures that "they insist on being sensed and

thought, but at the same time resist being sensed and thought through to the end.”² It could likewise be said that Kalkau’s works insist on being seen and recognized, but at the same time resist full visibility and recognition. As observers, we are left in the gap between the work itself and its possible meanings. Caught in the midst of the latent, fundamental tension that gently electrifies the space between the work and our gaze. It is both frightening and intoxicating. Knowing puts one on firm ground. Knowing that there is something one does not know is as dizzying as a free fall. Dangerous, but alluring.

¹ Quotation from Noël Carroll’s essay ‘Performance’ in *Formations* 3, no. 1 (1986), p. 63. For contemporary descriptions of performance art, see also RoseLee Goldberg’s early survey *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, published as early as 1979.

² Mikkel Bogh, ‘Rumspil’ in Sophia Kalkau, *Not a Pair of Dice*, Copenhagen, Forlaget Basilisk, 2000, p. 11.