

'Friezes' – Photographs by Sophia Kalkau

bildkultur | gallery on January 23, 2010 — Introduction at the exhibition opening

by Matthias Bullinger

"Dear ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, we are happy to be here with you to open our first exhibition of the year 2010.

For this exhibition, Sophia Kalkau selected photographs, which give an exemplary overview of her recent artistic works. Five different series from the last couple of years are presented here: 'Attributes,' 'Manual' – a title that could be translated in a matter of fact, technical manner as 'the instruction manual', but if you add some irony perhaps also as a hand-out or a finger exercise – and 'Penche-toi! Penche-toi'. In addition, there are two exhibits from the 'Horizontal Red' and 'Mops' series on view.

Sophia Kalkau creates her works with a sculptor's and photographer's eye; they can be read as highly personal, visual essays, very elegant, emotional and with a sensuous quality. But since Sophia Kalkau is also an accomplished art historian and art theorist, we can see her images as visual contributions to the ongoing discourse on fundamental questions in art, particularly in photography. For example, the works evoke questions about the typically three-dimensional sculpture as a photographic subject or how artists use their own bodies in photography. Other questions arise such as authorship in photography, the function of self-portraits in the search for one's own identity or the female role as both subject and object in contemporary photography. Sophia Kalkau herself takes the center stage in all of the series I mentioned earlier. She is both the image and the images creator.

From the beginning, the 'self-portrait' has been a prominent and significant topic in photography. Here, photographic historians would probably refer to Hippolyte Bayard, who already sat 'in front' of the camera in 1840. The conceptual and serial aspects we find in Sophia Kalkau's work are part of this long tradition, but they are even more so connected to the schools of photography from the 1960s.

Let us therefore look back for a moment.

In the year 1960, the then 32 year-old Yves Klein climbs on to the ledge of a roof in a Parisian suburb. He is waiting to accomplish a daring feat. Two photographers Klein asked to document the event are on the street below. Their photographs show Yves Klein airborne, his body erects and arms spread out. However, the helpers standing below with a rescue net to catch Yves Klein are not visible in the picture.

The photograph "The Leap Into The Void" that Klein published becomes a key image in contemporary photography history. Instead of the determined effort to capture the 'decisive moment' during a situation unrolling itself in front of an alert photographer's eyes – as Henri Cartier Bres-

son defined the photographer's mission – the 'event' is actively staged by the artist with photography serving as a means to an end. The event could have taken place without the documentary quality of photography; however, it would not have been caught on film and become known as it is. Sophia Kalkau's photographs can also be understood as part of this tradition. In this context, the art historian Camilla Jalving very poignantly speaks of the 'performative gaze' that can guide us.

If we, as viewers, focus our attention on the central motif of the 'sculptural' in these photographs, we can perhaps find some stimulating inspiring connections to Bruce Naumann. His "Self Portrait as a Fountain" perhaps comes to mind. We can find links to Gilbert & George's 'living sculptures,' Robert Häuser's "Wings" or Valie Export's 'body configurations.' If we look at a different facet – such as the female role as both subject and object – other names and ideas come to mind such as Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke, which Sophia Kalkau quotes and develops further. A consistently singular trait in Sophia Kalkau's work is the effortlessness in which she takes on different conceptual traditions, applying several approaches at the same time and yet keeping a distance from the individual dogmatic framework.

In the photographs from the series 'Attributes,' realized between 2001 and 2008, Sophia Kalkau explores the possibilities of how a human can be transformed into a sculpture by adding simple objects. She holds these objects in her hand or on her back, in front of her eyes or wraps them around her head. All objects are reduced to their essential form, yet contain all elements we find in classic sculpture: volume, form and surface. We can discover a wing, a button, a wheel or perhaps a flower petal. Their tangibility alone establishes an inspiring game of interpretation in the search for archetypal symbols; a search for the history of images we consciously or subconsciously carry within us. What is the meaning of the angel figure on the little pedestal? Why does it turn away from the viewer? Are those really bells, the figure with the helm-like felt hat is holding in front of his eyes like a pair of binoculars? Do they possibly refer to the 'tubular bells,' the music instrument depicted on Mike Oldfield's legendary record cover in 1972?

In the series 'Mops', the word choice is hardly a coincidence with the English expression having many meanings from cleaning mop to head of hair, Sophia Kalkau treats hair as the main symbol for female attractiveness. This series of 25 images originated at a time when Sophia Kalkau lost her hair due to illness. Mixing her own hair with different colored hairpieces, she created strange hybrids. In the series she subtly comments on how it is always possible, especially for a woman, to be fashionable and that attractiveness and femininity do not need to disappear under dire circumstances.

Hair, long, brown and open, is also the most conspicuous feature in the series 'Penche-toi !' – 'Penche-toi !' 'Bow Down'. This series has the clearest references to the exhibition title 'Friezes'. On first impression, it seems you are looking at a photographic nude, as the naked body suggests. However, upon a closer look this impression recedes and almost disappears behind the sculptural properties of the bent over body crouched down on a shelf. At first, the figure, let-

ting her hair down and exposing the back of her neck, seems to be photographed in the same position. Only a second or even third look reveals the minimal changes and slowly lets us experience movement from one image to the next, very similar to the photographic movement studies first presented by Edward Muybridge at the end of the 19th century. To the attentive viewer, the intrinsically rigid format of the frieze then turns into an animated performance. These aspects of one person's gradual transformation, especially the erotic connotations of hair, can also be found in the third act of Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolist drama "Pelléas et Mélisande" to which Sophia Kalkau refers in a complementary audio installation. Actress Ursula Olsen reads the scene, in which the beautiful Mélisande leans out the window of her castle and drowns out her admirer Pelléas' carefree play with the sumptuousness of her tresses ... The photograph 'Horizontal Red' also stems from a multi-part 'sculptural performance'. In each of the images, the artist lies immobile on a wallpaper table, wrapped in a red garment. Her posture, however, emits a tension, which we perceive as movement. A physical, sensual intensity we cannot pull ourselves away from. We experience the person's presence and representation without really seeing it.

In the small-format 'Manuals' – a wonderful series on everyday expressions – Sophia Kalkau finally disappears completely behind the setting. One only sees her hands moving through arranged holes. The pictures remind us of a pantomime, a photographic allusion to the delicate border between a motionless figure and the sensation of movement.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have pointed out several possible facets in the works by Sophia Kalkau – as always from a personal perspective. If you would like to know more about the theories behind the works or if you just would like to know how to actually wrap yourself in a red cloth in such an elegant fashion, then please feel free to ask Sophia Kalkau herself. She is a fascinating and inspiring conversational partner.

Thank you for your attention."