

### Some Notes on Sophia Kalkau's Art

By Bo Nilsson, Director, Kunsthall Charlottenborg

Not long ago I saw an exhibition of works by Chantal Akerman, Francesca Woodman and Lili Dujourie at Lunds Kunsthall. It was an exhibition that had been given the title *Ellipsis*, and which most people would probably describe as a feminist manifestation – and not simply because it presented works by three women. The exhibition was also curated by a woman, Lynne Cooke. The strange thing about the exhibition was that it felt old-fashioned, even though it included younger as well as older artists. Its title, *Ellipsis*, suggested that an attitude persists from the feminism of the 1970s to the present that is still valid. The old-fashioned look of the exhibition was unmistakable, and probably intentional. The focus of interest was the female body, with gender as the central aspect and the issue of control over one's own body and sexuality as the typical ingredients. The question of the balance of power between the sexes was likewise central. I'm not quite able to see, however, why Lynne Cooke would want to turn the clock back to the feminism of the 1970s and reject today's more complex picture of sexuality, identity and gender.

There is no doubt that Sophia Kalkau's art has a feminist side to it, but it looks quite different from the attitude evoked in the *Ellipsis* exhibition. I have seen Sophia Kalkau's art in several contexts, but it was not until her installation for the exhibition *Danskjävlar – a Swedish Declaration of Love* at Kunsthall Charlottenborg that her strategies acquired the complexity that distinguishes her work and offers a somewhat different picture of feminism. There is reason to believe that her exhibition *Dog and Die* at Brandts in Odense will be even more complex, due to the large number of works.

What makes Sophia Kalkau special is that her works do not at first support each other; on the contrary, they tend to be counterproductive. It is this openness of the creative situation that makes Sophia Kalkau one of the most dynamic and unpredictable artists in Denmark, and also one of the most difficult to interpret.

For her exhibition *Fra Hexa til Vasen* (From Hexa to Vase) at the New Carlsberg Glyptotek, which took place in 2007, a few months before the Charlottenborg exhibition, she intervened in the world of this classical institution with sculptures that were related to the ancient tradition, but at the same time succeeded in appearing alien in this context, due to their extremely un-exalted position on the floor. The installation at Charlottenborg included an object related to the works shown at the Glyptotek. But while the latter were positioned on the floor, the object at Charlottenborg was placed in a way that can hardly be called low. On one of the high gallery walls, the artist had installed a work entitled *Suspended Balls*, consisting of two silvery balls on which a peg is faintly seen as part of the cast balls. The two balls represent the male reproductive organs or – with their silvery appearance – possibly bombs. Their short, fat shape calls to mind the atomic

bombs dropped by the Americans on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the Second World War. The metallic quality of the work furthermore suggests that it is a cast piece, and it was the only sculptural object in Sophia Kalkau's installation.

The work *Suspended Balls* was no doubt installed high up in order to give it status and dignity. Depending on the interpretation of the work, its elevation can be perceived as a sexual erection, or as a threat (the weapon aspect) – or as artistic dignity, if one chooses to view it as sculpture. In other words, it is about typical male qualities. What makes this work different is that it is made by a woman, and it is she who controls its meaning and thus the concept of masculinity. For the work can be placed high or low on the wall by means of a hoist, which makes it an artistic choice how to install it. It is without doubt an effective metaphor to show sexuality, weaponry and artistic production as belonging together in the male conceptual world. Sophia Kalkau has moved into the territory of masculinity with a very subversive agenda.

In contrast to the physicality of *Suspended Balls*, the rest of the Charlottenborg installation consisted mainly of photographic works, which gave it a palpable complexity. As an artistic medium, photography does not carry the same weight in the traditional view of art as sculpture, painting and drawing. The origins of photography as a functional medium has lowered its status. Since the 1970s, however, photography has been of decisive importance in the establishment of a feminine dimension in contemporary art, although its public breakthrough had to wait until the 1980s, when a number of women artists, headed by Cindy Sherman, made the camera their own tool, and women went from having been objects for male artists to being their own subjects.

In two of the photographs exhibited by Sophia Kalkau at Charlottenborg, entitled *Top Suite*, she is seen wearing drapery reminiscent of an Egyptian robe or a Roman toga. Covering her head she is holding sculptural forms that all have the characteristics of classical sculpture. By hiding her gaze, however, Sophia Kalkau links this sculptural tradition to the body rather than to the gaze. Male opposed to female in a fascinating way, as Laura Mulvey might have said.

The Charlottenborg exhibition also included a photo series entitled *Red Suite*. It consisted of three, oblong, photographic works in the same format, hung one above the other in an aesthetic arrangement with obvious similarities to a type of sculptural work by Donald Judd, usually called a "stack" – a formal organization of an element that is repeated and static, merely a spatial expanse on the wall. Sophia Kalkau's *Red Suite* employs this abstract organization of space, but poses a contrast to Judd's minimalism in a very characteristic way.

The point of departure for *Red Suite* is Sophia Kalkau's own body wrapped in a red piece of cloth, draped by means of various energetic movements that bring to mind parts of a performance act more than it does classical sculpture. Performance clearly enters as an element in this work, rooted in the feminist art of the 1970s. Despite the fact that the body is placed on a podium, lending it sculptural connotations, the work is extremely sensual and emotional. It shows a woman

who is clearly enjoying the situation, and whose satisfaction seems not to depend on anyone else. One could interpret this photograph as an expression of 1970s feminism in its self-sufficiency, but in connection with *Suspended Balls* the work becomes part of a more complex interpretation of feminism in which the balance of power does not look as clear-cut as it did in the 70s. In the exhibition at Brandts, this photo series has been expanded with two photos of a seated figure, *Sitting Red*, who is also the artist herself, but not at all characterized by the same energy of movement. The figure in these pictures has a static quality, reminiscent of a Buddha, and projects a more meditative and metaphysical feeling. It is in going from one work to the next that one realizes that Sophia Kalkau is very familiar with sculptural form, without for that reason showing off her knowledge. Rather, her aim seems to be to change the parameters of how we perceive what we see, by means of subtle shifts and different points of departure. Sexuality and sensuousness are here contrasted with the meditative and more spiritual aspects of female art, expanding our idea of the aspects of female identity in a bodily form.

To this series of pictures she has furthermore added a number of photos featuring white drapery, *Folds*, in which movement is stopped, and the sculptural dimension takes over. These pictures can seem macabre, since the cloth has a certain resemblance to a shroud, but I do not think one needs to be quite as morbid in one's interpretation of them. Perhaps they could be seen as a kind of classical sculpture, a view supported by the likeness of the white cloth to marble and plaster, with the drapery suggesting the life that once was in the body, rather than the life that is now gone. It is characteristic of Sophia Kalkau to try a certain approach in one work and in the next use an approach that may seem contradictory. It is an indication that it is not the strictly formal that interests her, but a relationship between activity and passivity that seems more contemporary than the 1970s feminist ideals of consistently acting with a view to high, emancipatory goals.

In the photo series *Out of my Hair* we are given the opportunity to follow the artist for a limited period of her chemotherapy during which her hair becomes increasingly thin and finally almost disappears. This extensive series of pictures has the feel of an account. There ought to be something profoundly tragic in this story of a young woman struck by a deadly disease. But there is nothing pitiful about Sophia Kalkau's photo series. She chose to photograph herself from the back, and therefore one never gets into contact with the feelings one would otherwise be able to read in her face and which would cover a wide range - if a story of suffering were the object. Instead the focus is on how the hair will grow thinner and thinner and in the end almost completely disappear. It is loss of identity that pervades this photo series, a loss not least felt in our society where hair is an expression of sensuousness and thus of sexuality. It is as if the entire sexual being is lost when the hair disappears. The pictures clearly tell a tragic story, but at no point does it become a tragic story of womanhood as such, which in 1970s feminism would have been the perspective. In Sophia Kalkau's case it is not womanhood that is the object of her investigation. She adopts a strictly personal perspective, but does not feel sorry for herself. Because we only see her head from behind, she does not appeal to such feelings. The emotional is

replaced by something more abstract, namely the shape of her head. The more hair she loses, the more sculptural and masculine the form of her head becomes. She becomes almost androgynous. Paradoxically, the shape of her head comes to look like the work *Suspended Balls*.

In the Odense exhibition she has added a counterpart to *Out of my Hair*. It is a photo series, *Mops*, that also takes her own illness as its point of departure. In this series, too, the artist's head is seen from behind, but instead of the thinning hair, we see different hairdos in the form of wigs. There are three different wigs with a basic colour scale of yellow, brown and red. Locks of the artist's own hair are also seen peeping out from under the wigs, creating strange hybrids. In this work, Sophia Kalkau seems to comment on the fact that even at the time of greatest misery there is fashion, especially if you are a woman. It is a paradoxical and ironic attitude which in a very fine way communicates with *Out of my Hair*.

Sophia Kalkau's art articulates a formal language that transcends barriers between historical, modernistic and contemporary points of departure. This multi-faceted approach is cross-fertilized with everyday themes, with basic materials such as textiles, and with marginalized forms of art such as performance, creating a network of content that is distinctly personal, despite the different points of departure. In this way Sophia Kalkau formulates a non-dogmatic criticism of not only modernism, but also classicism which she places in the same conceptual tradition as formalism, the cult of genius, and the notion of progress as central. In contrast to this, she allows herself to work with several approaches simultaneously, using them in her own personal and incomparable way, creating new connections that instead of being dogmatic are inventive and profoundly personal. It is a question of credibility.

It has been a central tenet of classic 1970s feminist art that it should not just reach a narrow, avant-garde circle with inside knowledge of the codes of art. There was a wish to address new groups which in regard to gender, class and ethnicity were outside the art system. Sophia Kalkau's work is not informed by these dogmatic, pedagogic ambitions of art having to be socially beneficial and emancipatory on a supra-individual level. She bases her art on pedagogy addressed by one individual to another. In this case the artist is on the same level as the viewer. It is a one-to-one relationship in which the artist is not in a superior position. Nor is her work addressed exclusively to women viewers. It is about equality between the sexes. There is, in other words, a deeply felt democratic afterglow in her work.