

ORDERS

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We are not safe: in the world. We are not sure: in front of art. Both are true, but relating existence and reasoning power illuminates; it gives us room to play. In a wondrous way the crossing of one, existential insecurity, with the other, the endorsement-dependent experiment of feeling for statements, promises a tentative freedom. Christian Sievers' works play with the crossing of real danger with aesthetic reflection. Just as the shimmering fabric of his tailored works reflects the light differently, dependent on the position of the viewer, the following remarks act as a movable, non-definite reflection of what looks at us from his works.

I

For the longest stretch of its existence human life seems to have been controlled primarily by fear and terror. Material hardship and illness, the violence of an unpredictable nature and the arbitrariness of the powerful few were omnipresent. Any kind of opacity meant danger. Within civilization the ruthlessness of authoritarian laws reprised the severity of life once again. Against hardship stood imagination. It saw what wasn't, and added to that the belief in its reality. Human fantasy, productive and reproductive invention, created words, images and scripture to escape the horror that it rises from. In it, as in dreams, thought and being are one; an idea powerful until today in religious beliefs in which God creates, as He speaks. All the while its main feature is ambivalence: it is nourished by the experience of a reality that it is not, and in the course of its cultural development becomes a counter-world, a beyond, that serves as the blueprint for realities to be created, social as well as natural. The origin of human imagination is ambivalent; the physical and the spiritual, material

substrate and intelligible meaning couple within it. It is ambivalent in its relation to societal praxis, which it leads as *theoria* and surpasses as utopia. It is ambivalent as culture-constituting power by giving hope while simultaneously evoking apocalyptic terror.

Art is the part of the realm of imagination in which this ambivalence meets itself. For a long time its commitment was to beauty. Once man started to see himself as the author of history and as the creator of his own, future form, its language changed: still sensual promise of liberty and bliss, but as an aesthetic of the ugly it serves also as an accusation of oppressive conditions and as a distorting mirror of an increasingly fragmented self. Until the mid-20th century, Western civilisation revelled in using all its industrial and aesthetic capabilities, explosively and catastrophically. Since then it has turned its attention to its own fragility. The dangers we currently perceive as the most urgent are of a different kind than the threat nature might pose. Human imagination is receptive (it bundles disparate sensory inputs to a coherent impression) and it is productive (it creates symbols, through which civilisation conquers, structures, moulds nature). Culture and nature have been influencing each other for thousands of years, a dynamic every one of us has experienced through our own upbringing. Human imagination turns the world into a picture of itself, a conceptualisation through images that are learnt and applied. Discontent with civilisation increases with the degree that the mastery of these images fails. Now it is not only the also-rans of progress that demand another organisation of society. Behind the labour of human imagination stands the power of our desires, or their negative, the overbearing strength of our fears. Behind the productivity of binary machines stands the systematic logic of disembodied symbols.

That is why it is now the imagination of *homo sapiens*, liberated through technology,

that threatens the balance between nature and culture that all life depends on. The world as a global nexus has found neither a stable social order nor a durable political system. It faces ecological challenges that cannot be mastered by single, heroic figures; not even by single countries or civilisations. Despite, or maybe because of the tremendous dynamism of our productive forces, driven by technology, the future shapes of our societies are open-ended and uncertain as never before.

The ambivalence of the imaginary, the inconsistency of its desires (the demand for complete security is as much a phantasm as the demand for boundless freedom) impregnates the kind of threats we are facing. It seems obvious to read Christian Sievers' works as a commentary to a specifically contemporary nervousness, one that accompanies man surrounded by machines.

II

This catalogue presents the artist's works in a narrative structure. The individual images are already condensations of events, whose meaning the viewer has to unlock for himself. The way the works are presented in exhibition and catalogue allows for the interrelation of motifs and groups of work. We see sociable people, whose familiarity undermines their armouring through protective suits; the warding off and ducking of a photographically fixed man; the glowing intactness of protective wear whilst its wearer lies comatose. We see emergency services in roundabouts. We do not see the danger for which the rescue is at hand. The scenarios that Christian Sievers creates expose the contrast of closeness and distance, skin and fabric, intact representation and its caricature through unguarded subjectivity; individuals that do not live up to the stabilising function of their clothing and act out of character. His clothes series shows shirt and suit made from retro-reflective fabric, a material that is usually not deemed necessary

where suits are worn, their owners triumphing in civilised composure over the perils of nature.

The works gain their inner suspense by artistically blending what usually belongs to functionally and aesthetically different spheres: protective clothing is neither designed to be fashionable nor worn for representational purposes as a second skin. The fun stops where fire fighters are at work: the fatal logic of the first nature overrules the playful freedom of the second.

The arrangements are marked by absurdity and a quiet irony: the puzzles that Christian Sievers creates are not visually solvable. Our gaze and our curiosity fail in front of the emblematic order of that which clashes paradoxically in the images. Instead of offering the recognising effort a logical way out, the artist plays with the objects he created. The clothing made by him is not intended to protect, but unfolds its effect by the motion of light in the eye of the viewer moving in front of it. The series of ink drawings that put the security clothing in a plausible context have been digitised and inverted, so that the electronic manipulation is the starting point for the traditional drawing. The sociable men in protective suits dissolve into organic meanderings where their image has been exposed to the natural reaction of moisture, paint and paper. Painting dethroned by photography regains its subject, without the driving hand of a painter, through banding together chemically with the constituents of the print.

The works' subject matter refers to a threat, but they don't feel threatening. The absurdity intended by the artist, amplified by formal clarity, surprises and provokes laughter. The dilemma of distance and closeness is resolved in hilarity; a quiet Dionysian smile undermines the Apollonian struggle of the will to understand what is being shown. In this way the aesthetic experience proposes itself as an alternative to the hopelessness of a logic in which the desire for protection in order to allow for kindness effectively thwarts

intimacy. This is an art without an authoritative gesture, it invites us to deduce its meaning through our own motion. The all-too-real need to be protected against danger is being transformed in a perplexing way by its aesthetic displacement. The viewer gains a distance that is missing in the moment of threat.

A series of individual photographs can be read as a key to the body of work as a whole. The fending-off gesture of the subject fixed by the camera is ambiguous: behind his guarding arms his gaze is as curious as the photographer's. The dethroned subject of culture has lost its place in the vehicle of civilisation and looks underneath the seat for what it has lost on the way to becoming the subject. A slow but busy nature reclaims its space in an alarmed culture, whose shrill racket might anytime ruin its arduous nest-building work. The artist is interested in the contrast showing up in these constellations, not its closure.



Christian Sievers' arrangements and orders don't offer a resolution to what coexists strangely within them. They expose a dilemma. The meaning of art cannot be universally determined when the universal itself comes apart because of diverging developments, and the only common ground is the economically measurable existence on the art market. Conversely, the public remain its main addressees: art is never just private, neither pure perception nor indulgent consumption—and certainly not just business. The ambivalence of social processes, the uncertainty about the inner core of the social in highly specialised industrial societies returns in the intentional ambiguity of artistic positions, and in artistic strategies that demand a response from the audience, rather than standing up on their own as a surrogate for lost certainties. Subjectivity dissected into role-play provokes artistic love of experiment. Heterogeneity has

been an outstanding feature of art since World War II, from Pop Art to Fluxus, and in the last few decades the languages and forms of expression have diverged completely. Ever since installation and the mash-ups of diverse genres have become art forms of their own, any material and even detritus can be presented with regard to its aesthetic impact. All contemporary art has in common the gesture to refuse mere pretty make-believe, working with the viewer in mind.

As a thing among things artworks have a tough job at holding their ground against an excessive industrial production and being more than just another commodity. Visual art subsists on its visual conciseness. In its subject matter Christian Sievers' work relates to socio-political strategies that strive to establish security by visual surveillance and pretend to ensure the stability of the social through an ever more perfect illumination of public space. The artist makes claim to an autonomous visibility of art by turning the increasing visualisation of the public sphere just as visibly into its paradox. His artistic practice enacts the discrepancy between the object and its photographic reproduction, which fails, as in the case of the clothes pieces, because the flexible effect of the object cannot be copied, or by subjecting photographic prints to painterly processes that he cannot control. The comic elements of that, which he captures in an image, and as an image, emphasise the narrative and performative aspects of this work. They present conversation and action as genuine elements of artistic creativity. Museums and galleries are thus only provisional sites for what these artworks want: to undermine the present dilemmas performatively. The works are orders, in both the sense of arrangement and command. They assemble and contrast the experiences of those who view them. The irritation caused by them refers the audience to itself as the addressee of artistic practice, and calls upon the ability to let one's own bafflement grow intelligent.

The pictorial and material test arrangements we encounter in this catalogue experiment with the gap between animal and technological imagination. Fantasy produces images. While the automatons of progress, from camera to TV station, will, once programmed, continue to produce images, independently and predictably, the imaginary output of man feeds erratically from the desires and fears of his unique corporeal existence. The image-making of human imagination follows in a long retrospection, in which the experiences of earlier generations continue to take effect through symbolic traditions. And still everyone's individual history is different. This history is also natural history. The technologically mediated imaginary, the socially controlled production of desires and fears evens everyone out to their social role in the big picture; specifically, to their subsistence as consumer or official, in a world in which nature increasingly flourishes in greenhouses, is relocated to reserves, or is simulated by surrogates. A free society lives on the non-resolvable discrepancy between common concerns and privately grown idiosyncrasies, which it protects even where these run contrary to collective interests. Only in a free society does the social allow for antisocial behaviour, and keeps the boundary between the two flexible. Darkness, even if it is only the darkness of sleep, is an irredeemable constituent of liberty, as is fear. It gains a concrete expression in art, where what is invisible becomes visible as a puzzle. The reflections of visible surfaces staged by Christian Sievers reflect the beyond of reflexes.