

Visual Codes of the Generic

Karina Nimmerfall in Conversation with Rike Frank

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Rike Frank: At the beginning of this interview I think it is important to point out that we are talking about an exhibition, *Hollywood ist ein Verb*, and a series of works that I am only familiar with from descriptions. That is to say, we are talking about "images" of an exhibition and about images of images of images, which seems to me to be a particularly interesting aspect when talking about your works, and I would like to come back to that later on.

But back to *Hollywood ist ein Verb*; this is a joint exhibition by Isabell Heimerdinger and yourself. What interests me is how you arrived at the title?

Karina Nimmerfall: The title of the exhibition is a reference to a neon work by Isabell. It is part of a series in which she quotes headings from reports in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that sum up the life work of an actor or director in a single title, as it were. In the newspaper article "Hollywood ist ein Verb" appears as the German translation of Ed Ruscha's work *Hollywood is a Verb*; so the title of the exhibition is a quotation from a (translated) quotation – a fact that seemed interesting in the context of the works on show and as a point of departure for the exhibition.

Rike Frank: At the same time, "verbs" usually describe activities, actions or occurrences ... So, in this sense, did you also want to draw attention to an activity? *Hollywood ist ein Verb* instantly reminds me of images in motion – that images are dynamic, structure, affect, and you might even say, conjugate us. So does the title also say that "Hollywood" consists of a pool of "conjugable" images, ones that you both use, albeit with different artistic practices?

Karina Nimmerfall: The title also works as a slogan that permits a host of possible interpretations – an aspect that I am very interested in. I like your interpretation in that I am particularly interested in the image economy of current Hollywood productions in my works, so I examine, pick up and use recurrent images and patterns of use.

Rike Frank: When you emphasise the openness of the title and the images, I wonder what other possible interpretations you are thinking of and what interests you about them?

Karina Nimmerfall: I do not think of specific interpretations as much as the structural openness of the title, translated into the principle of the image. I am interested in the power of image texts – titles or texts that open up the image for a variety of imaginative associations; for example, in my series *Substitute Locations* I try to describe the different interpretative possibilities of a place by documenting locations from the very successful current American television series *C.S.I.* (Crime Scene Investigation) in images and text; among other things, you see a photo of an average single family house in an American suburb – a picture of a "real" house in which someone "actually" lives. But at the same time it is a stereotype, a film set, the home of a fictitious person, a crime scene, etc.; i.e. a fictitious place, a place that often appears more real than reality itself.

Rike Frank: Could you expand that thought ... What experience of "place" or "being on site" does this produce?

Karina Nimmerfall: I am interested in "cinematic maps" (Norman Klein): place descriptions in Hollywood productions that seem to replace the "real" place with their construction by the media. Usually it is a constant repetition of the same thing – a shifting of images that often have no actual connection with real places but nevertheless a widespread connection, thanks to media clichés. The television series I just mentioned – *C.S.I.* – perfected this principle: it is produced in the versions Las Vegas, Miami and New York, but hardly ever shot on location. The series is shot mostly in the studio and they usually use Los Angeles as a substitute for "on location" shots. In order to define the "actual" scene of the plot, street scenes and city views shot on location are interspersed. This "second unit photography" draws on common (media-conveyed) clichés and is thus easily recognised and identified by viewers. That is to say, the cliché as collective knowledge is used as a means of localisation. But in this context I am not so much interested in the clichés. I am more interested in the additional or background information about certain architectural subjects, and their patterns of use, that are transported by the shots: recurrent standardised models of space – inconspicuous, ordinary stereotypes – that do not identify any specific, unmistakable place and that can be used repeatedly, without becoming entrenched in the viewers' memory; which is also basically the principle of "stock shots".

Rike Frank: If your “source material” works with stereotypes, what is the role of the individual subject in your work? Are your photos also exemplary, in the sense that you are not concerned with the individual picture, but rather with visualising patterns – an image space that carries no specific history but still has a narrative? Ed Ruscha talked about the “noise of everyday life” in this context. And I think the challenge is to learn to read this “noise” or the “coding” and to give it visibility, which is what your work is about, if I understand you correctly ...

Karina Nimmerfall: Yes, that’s right. In my photos, the individual subject is rather secondary; the important thing is the serial aspect and, in connection with this, the visualisation of certain patterns of use. They are usually of vernacular architecture: barren image space that, while appearing to be neutral, actually opens up the space for projections. If we talk about Ed Ruscha, I would say that I am interested in the contemporary form of his “noise of everyday life” and that I try to visualise background information in an updated form of this concept, in order to demonstrate how our daily perception is connected with the economic interests of the film industry.

Rike Frank: Perhaps this is a good time to back up a bit and discuss working methods and approaches in general terms: I would like to know how you develop your works, how you go about researching and choosing your topics, and whether, over the years – since you began your artistic work – there have been any shifts or reorientation in terms of content, and how you would describe these shifting processes?

Karina Nimmerfall: I always work project based; i.e., one project usually consists of several works – multi-part spatial installations, videos, series of photos, and text – which often then lead me from one project to the next. The starting point for my research is the examination of media image strategies: specifically the selective use of certain architectural subjects. In the course of my artistic praxis, interests have moved from design and lifestyle magazines to television productions, by way of Hollywood films; and in my latest projects I deal with visual codes of real estate marketing. So the focus of my research is always on mass media or mainstream productions, as they can be taken to read certain socio-economic trends, and their manifestations, very immediately. That’s why I decided to work with material from current television series in recent works too, because they seem to have achieved greater importance than Hollywood films in recent years. Television production budgets have skyrocketed and there has been a lot more experimentation and innovation compared with new cinema blockbusters. Also, in addition to these observations in terms of media analysis, my immediate surroundings also play an important role, when I develop a project and select material: thanks to a lengthy stay in Los Angeles, for instance, my interest in lifestyle magazines shifted into Hollywood films. The ubiquity of faux locations and architectures, in which fact and fiction merge into one, had a great influence on the development of my work. Researching on location and investigating documentary strategies, taking into account the influence of the entertainment industry on the construction of realities, have since been an important factor in my work; so while I was, at one point, staying in Dallas I therefore decided to explore the city with the aid of information conveyed by television: to set out on the trail of the establishing shots used in the TV series *Dallas*. The research on location gave rise to a series of photographs with graphical manipulations, from which, in turn, I developed the concept for two interrelated spatial installations. Then, in my current works I used material that is based on my first-hand observation of the construction boom and growing speculative business of luxury residential real estate, found both where I live in Berlin and during studies I conducted as part of a scholarship trip to New York City.

Rike Frank: You say that you focus explicitly on the mainstream and its manifestations in your artwork – be it in Hollywood productions or in new lifestyle concepts, which also impact on current housing construction. And we spoke about the fact that you are concerned with the seismographic quality of these representations, reflecting what you describe as “socio-economic trends”. What other specific quality does the mainstream have for you?

Karina Nimmerfall: I think it is important to investigate things before they become “creative capital”, i.e. artistically valuable. Mainstream productions, unlike experimental film or theatre plays, have not yet been interpreted or translated into an artistic language – they address the general public, i.e. “regular viewers”, and are designed to work in a rational and efficient way. Generally understandable codes help to sell “ordinary” things to viewers, and I think it is exciting to decipher and interpret these simplified codes. I find it more interesting to investigate new phenomena in the film and advertising industry – for instance the advertainment: where classical product placement is replaced and the advert is incorporated as part of the plot of the TV series – than merely to re-interpret art history or high culture.¹

Rike Frank: How has your relationship to the “image” changed in the course of your work with images?

Karina Nimmerfall: Originally I started studying film and soon realised that I was not so much interested in producing films as in transferring (filmic) images into a new spatial context. Based on my interest in time-based media, combined with questions of sculpture and space, I started designing sculptural spatial systems that created a new spatio-temporality, wanting to allow myself the ability to redefine the relationship to the image; from the reality of film sequences I evolved actual sequences of space that the viewer could experience, by walking around inside the installations themselves. In my current works I have begun experimenting with the possibilities of computer-generated spaces, by elaborating images of spaces, or models, that are generated by joining together multiple pieces of information.

Rike Frank: Talking about “sequences of space”, I would like to come back to the exhibition itself and take a closer look at your collaboration, considering that this is obviously not a traditional two personal exhibition: to what extent did you elaborate the exhibition together? For example, did you decide jointly which works to present and where to place them, or did each of you design her own section on her own? Above and beyond your shared interest in certain questions, how important was it to stage a dialogue between the works in terms of space too?

Karina Nimmerfall: The exhibition project deals with phenomena of fictional reality and tries to describe the interchangeability of realities and their construction (in the media) from different artistic perspectives. In conceiving the exhibition the important thing for us was to point out common questions, to interrelate the various works, and to reveal possible links and cross-references, so as to take advantage of them for the purpose of contextualisation – what we wanted is for the works to intermesh and complement each other. We not only applied this principle in terms of content but also in terms of space: the first room featured works by both of us and was the starting point of the exhibition. Then the visitors found themselves in a sequence of rooms that guided them through the exhibition and in which our works alternated.

Rike Frank: In the room following the joint work you present *Double Location (The Ambassador Hotel)*, a walk-in video installation made up of several projections and a monitor. As in other works, the focus is on mapping a place based on existing media images. The interesting thing here, as I mentioned at the start of the interview, is the visual layering: strictly speaking, these are pictures of pictures of pictures. Film, TV footage and photographs of the legendary Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, built in 1921 and demolished in 2006, is the source material for a computer-generated reconstruction of the hotel lobby in *Double Location*. The original location was already strongly influenced by the eye of the film camera: in terms of its architecture, its physical presence, its spatial experience, and was like an ever-ready stage or a tracking shot become real. Your three-dimensional enactment – in the form of a walk-in space consisting of projections that, in turn, constitutes a stage-like situation – not only shows us as viewers that the documentary-style computer animation of the hotel lobby is the product of both real and imaginary associations; rather, this conveys in a very “real” way that “being on site” implies moving through a series of image spaces – through images of images of images, that include the exhibition space itself and our movement through it. They are visual feedback loops that express our current understanding of “reality”, of an experience of place and “being on site”. At the same time, your artistic processing creates new “spatiotemporal situations”, as you called them: plot, place and time enter new relationships, ones that obey a logic that is only partially “real” and, to a great extent, “media-based”. In all the years of dealing with film and television material, were there ever moments when you would have liked to switch over from reflection to production, and create a TV series yourself?

Karina Nimmerfall: Yes, although I would be more interested in a direct intervention with a TV series. Projects that examine the television medium and use it as a “place” – for example, Stan Douglas’ *Television Spots* or Mel Chin & GALA Committees’ *In the Name of the Place* – are very exciting for me. About two years ago I worked out a concept for an intervention in the style of an advertainment, that we just spoke about – a mini-film that develops based on the plot of a TV series and that works like a kind of sub-plot, undermining the viewers’ expectations.

¹ In 2006 the U.S. American TV channel NBC produced and designed an advertainment – using actors and set from the popular TV show Las Vegas – which morphed the series storyline directly into an ad pitch for the NBC sponsored Winter Olympic Games in Turin, Italy.