"Art shares certain critical approaches with other theoretical disciplines, which in turn can lead to interdisciplinary discourses around relevant social and political issues." INTERVIEW with Karina Nimmerfall

What would a Hollywood movie be without a stylish architectural setting? All too often your average blockbuster stages its showdown against a breathtaking backdrop. What many viewers do not know: often these backgrounds are modern classics themselves. John Lautner's unique octagon house "Chemosphere" in Los Angeles (1960), for example, "starred" in several movies – from Brian De Palma's "Body Double" (1984) to Charlie's Angels, where a setting was directly inspred by the Chemosphere, to Men in Black (1997)

In *The Glass House*, Karina Nimmerfall examines modern architecture and how it is staged in films – strangely enough the monumental dream houses of glass and steel are often used to stage the filmic evil. Just think of the fascinating architectures of James Bond's counterparts! Combining details from different buildings by Californian modernists such as Neutra and Lautner as well as with images and video projections, Nimmerfall created a fictitious model in an installative space which points to the contrast of film and reality, viewers' expectations.

The Glass House (Modern Contemporary), 2010
Sculptural installation (mixed media), 96 x 207 x 127 cm, Installation view, Kunstpalais Erlangen (D), 2010

Having an interdisciplinary educational background in Visual Arts and Art History, the artist bases her work in a well thought through conceptual framework. She developed a research-based artistic practice which reflects vastly on relevant social and political, as well as on artistic and medial issues.

In the following interview with deconarch.com, assembled during a long and thorough email exchange, Karina Nimmerfall describes how *The Glass House* – and other works – came to be, why she is interested in architecture and spatial installations, and explains about the theoretical backdrop of her works.

all illus. (c) Karina Nimmerfall

INTERVIEW

I noticed your work for the first time when I read about *The Glass House*, a sculptural model of several houses used as film settings, which combines your different interests. It is sort of a "filmic montage" transferred to a static model. What inspired *The Glass House*?
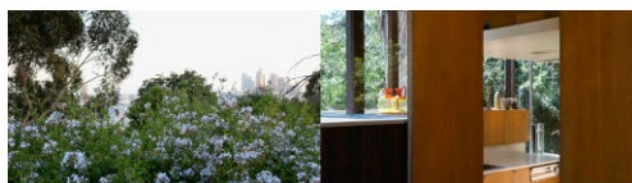
Starting point for many of my previous projects has been the examination of media image strategies and specifically the selective use of certain architectural subjects. I think I was always more interested in the idea of architecture as "mass medium" (Beatriz Colomina) and within this context, the representation of architecture in the media, than in architecture itself. *The Glass House* evolved from the negative connotations associated with modern and contemporary architecture, as it is commonly depicted in Hollywood cinema – a phenomenon standing in complete opposition to the ideas that the pioneers of modern architecture envisioned.

The Glass House, 2009
Sculptural installation (mixed media), 96 x 220 x 126 cm, Installation view, Artforum Berlin (D), 2009

This observation is not entirely new – the filmmaker Thom Anderson dedicated a passage in his film *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003) to this phenomenon and there is a good essay by architecture historian Joseph Rosa on this topic – but I was specifically interested in a visual investigation around the representation of modern and contemporary architecture in film, its psychology of space and strategies of use found within its narrative structures.

I started out by collecting cinematic images of modern and contemporary buildings previously serving as backdrops for vacant morality throughout film history – for example, Richard Neutra's Lovell House from the film *L.A. Confidential*, John Lautner's Jacobsen House that was used in *Twilight*, or also the famous Vandamm Residence, as seen in *North by Northwest*, which was based on Frank Lloyd Wright building details and conceptualized solely by set designers. These images were then being translated into a series of architectural models. Within this process I combined multiple architectural fragments with new appropriated images and video projections, in order to transfer the former filmic depictions into a 3-dimensional sculptural space where actual and projected architecture overlap. The construction of the models was not based on documentary recordings, but instead followed exclusively mediated representations and spatial descriptions found within the films. I was interested in creating experimental architectural and cinematic spaces with shifting perspectives and simultaneous views that reevaluate one's relation to mediated images and conventions.

You started with spatial installations, including filmic projections, and then developed projects, which left the filmic medium behind. How do you find your subjects and the corresponding media?

Starting point for my projects is usually the examination around the impact of image production on architecture and urban settings, and relating to that, on a variety of concepts surrounding the construction of reality, memory and history. In the course of my artistic practice, interests have moved from investigating design and lifestyle magazines to television productions, by way of Hollywood films. More current projects deal with issues of architecture as power structures, exploring the reciprocal relationship of architecture, media and politics, as well as their conditions within a cultural and ideological system of representations.

1953. Possible Scenarios for a Discontinued Future, 2012/13
Architectural 3 channel HD video installation (mixed media), Video stills from installation

Architecture is popular for photo motives, yet it is not that common as main topic for film and video – or, if at all, it is only used as background setting, probably because architecture is "stiff", while film is dynamic. Are architecture and the moving image compatible? Why are you interested in the combination of filmic and architectural subjects?

I would actually argue the opposite. With my project *The Glass House*, I was aiming to point out that architecture in film is never just a backdrop, it is always used to support the narration of a film – a phenomenon that was already observed by the French architect and designer Robert Mallet-Stevens in 1925 when he wrote that "It is undeniable that cinema has marked influence on modern architecture … Modern architecture does not only serve the cinematographic set (*décor*), but imprints its stamp on the staging (*mise-en-scène*), it breaks out of its frame; architecture 'plays'" (Referred to by Doris Berger, in: *Karina Nimmerfall, The Glass House*, ed. Danièle Perrier, Künstlerhaus Schloss Balmoral, Bad Ems 2011, page 2).

More generally speaking, not only that architecture is a very popular subject for many other contemporary artists, architecture and film have historically a long and reciprocal relationship since the beginning of cinema itself. In his essay *Montage and Architecture* the filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein already links in the late 1930s the architectural ensemble to film, and Le Corbusier chose very specifically the moving image to visually represent his buildings, as we can see in *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui* directed by Pierre Chenal (1930/31). Referring to Le Corbusier's project for Pessac (Bordeaux), architectural historian and theoretician Sigfried Gideon

Vertical Villa (Part Two), 2009
Sculptural installation (mixed media), 145 x 430 x 159 cm, Installation view, Kunstverein Kassel (D), 2009

remarks at the same time that only film was capable of representing new architecture. Architecture historian Beatriz Colomina even suggests that the views Le Corbusier created within his architectural designs are cinematic themselves, by saying that "the house is no more than a series of views photographed by the visitor, the way a filmmaker effects the montage of a film" (Beatrix Colomina, The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism, in: *Sexuality & Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina, Jennifer Bloomer, Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, page 114).

These are only a few examples, yet many scholars and research studies have been focusing on this topic. As an artist, this intriguing but also complex relationship of architecture and the moving image, and within this context, especially the reciprocal relation of architectural space to its visual representations, have always been of interest for me – as to many theoretical thinkers such as Colomina, the architecture historian Antony Vidler, and also Guiliana Bruno, to name only a few. Their thought processes have always been inspirational for my practice, and have helped to expand my thoughts and push my work further.

These thoughts provide your work with a very conceptual and theoretically based framework. How do you communicate this?
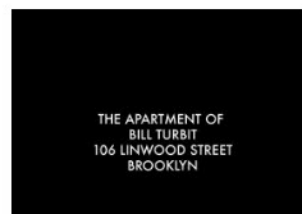
From the photo-text series: Cinematic Maps, 2004 – 2006
2 inkjet prints in passe-partout, framed, 37 x 57 cm each

My artistic practice in the past years has never focused solely on the realization of art works, but has as well followed an interest in artistic research. Through an interdisciplinary educational background in Visual Arts and Art History, I have developed a research-based artistic practice that always contained an interest in the theoretical implications of art. In this context, I am not interested in applying the work of theorists into art, but I think that art shares certain critical approaches with other theoretical disciplines, which in turn can lead to interdisciplinary discourses around relevant social and political issues.

What is it that interests you in working on and with architecture, with spatial situations?

My work developed from a strong interest in the relationship of architecture, media and the perception of space within our world, based on representations and information. Originally, I started studying film, and soon realized that I was not so much interested in producing films, but instead transferring (filmic) images into a new spatial context. Based on my interest in time-based media, and combined with questions of sculpture and space, I started to develop sculptural video installations that created a new spatio-temporality, wanting to allow myself the ability to redefine the relationship between space, time, image and the viewer: from the continuity of former film sequences, I evolved actual arrays of space that the viewer could experience, not only by viewing, but by walking and participating in a space.

Within the context of my research-based artistic practice, usually one project leads me to the next. The research made for my recent image-text based series *Index of Livability* (2011) for example – which investigates the lesser-known involvement of the renowned architect Richard Neutra with public housing in Los Angeles – not only lead me to the related sculptural film installation 1953. *Possible Scenarios for a Discontinued Future* (2012/13), about Richard Neutra and Robert Alexander's never realized

From the 18 part photo-text series: Index of Livability, 2011
2 inkjet prints in passé-partout, framed, 40 x 76 cm each
Installation view (Detail)

master plan for Elysian Park Heights at Chavez Ravine, but it also opened connections, references and questions, suggesting a causal and more broad relationship between Cold War politics, media and urban planning, which could not have been examined in a single project. Now the project is forming the starting point for a much larger investigation, where I cross-link housing projects with different historic and cultural backgrounds, aiming to propose new hypotheses and challenge common representations.

New hypotheses – could you elaborate that?

More recent trends in the architectural discourse acknowledge the fact that modernist large-scale housing had been attacked because of the political fear of its left-leaning, socially conscious ideas. Using a trans-cultural reference my research unfolds from Richard Neutra and Robert Alexander's never realized master plan for a new modernist form of utopia – a city within a city, for a population of 17.000, at the site of Chavez Ravine, a location found just northwest of downtown Los Angeles. The project was inevitably abolished in 1953, after causing a vicious local public housing war, initiated by private developers, real estate lobbyists and the power of the media.

Deploying Red Scare politics and propaganda, this local battle not only marked the end of the idea of a "community modernism" (Don Parson) of the U.S. political left-wing, but it also eventually affected housing programs throughout the nation, exemplifying the end, as well as the beginning, of a new era.
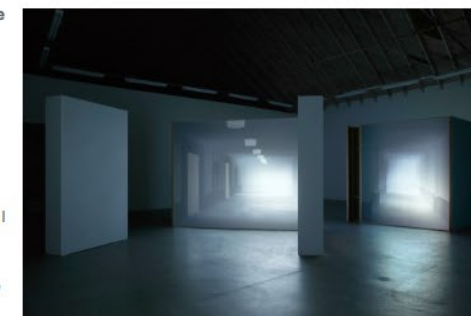
While modernist public housing programs in the United States were attacked by Red Scare propaganda campaigns and considered a threat to democracy, in West Germany the same conception was sponsored by the US State Department as "soft power" weapon against socialism, in order to promote a new, democratic western country: Responding to the major redevelopment plans of the GDR in East Berlin, in 1953, an international architecture competition was launched by the West German government in order to redevelop the heavily damaged historic Hansa district in West Berlin. Advertised as "The City of Tomorrow" and featuring some of the most well-known architects at that time (including Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, Alvar Aalto, Arne Jacobsen and Oscar Niemeyer, amongst others) the housing development promoted modernism as a state-supported, but democratic alternative to socialism, by offering the tenants the security of public housing. How can the same modernist housing conception function as political propaganda for two completely opposite ideologies and what does this say about the actual architectural design and its critique? Crosslinking multiple housing projects developed around the year 1953 might produce a new perspective over the topic – one that is not intending to give answers, but is instead creating a network of relations and elaborating questions that might not have been yet considered.
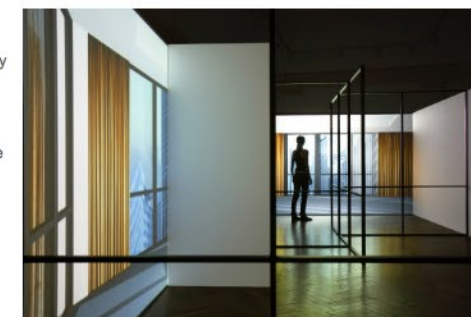
Executive Office (Contemporary Modern), 2007
Architectural 3 channel video installation (mixed media), Approx. 1200 x 500 x 225 cm, Installation view, Landesgalerie Linz (A), 2007

Who – or what – inspired you? Are there role models you would name as references?

The strategy of image-text combinations used in my photo based work, refers back to the conceptual art of the 1960s, especially to the serial, cartographic documentation systems of the artist Douglas Huebler. In this context, however, I was always interested in an updated form of the concept, which goes beyond the context of art and reflects the impact of the ongoing medialization on our society. Important for the development of my installations, and the attempt to combine physical and medial levels of perception, was both the concept of the "expanded field of sculpture" (Rosalind Krauss) of the 1960s and 70s and also the Expanded

Double Location (The Ambassador Hotel), 2008
Architectural 3 channel video installation, mixed media, Dimensions variable (approx. 200 x 520 x 225 cm), Installation view, Las Cienegas Projects, Los Angeles (US), 2011

Cinema of the same timeframe that radically challenged the concept of cinema – in particular the sculptural *Cinema Pieces* by Robert Whitman, where the artist animated every day objects with film projections, playing with real and fictional constructions of perception. Or also the early experiments of Dan Graham, in which he deals with different levels of perception of space, time, media and physicality. Making an impression on me back then was also the French artist Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, whose atmospheric spatial installations of the early 1990s established an interface between mental and actual space, creating a so-called "Third Space", a phenomenon I was always interested working with.

Dear Karina, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts!