

Fleeting Images

Karina Nimmerfall's Installations

Essay for the catalogue "Karina Nimmerfall: Diamonds on Velvet", Vienna 2004

By Hans-Joachim Lenger

First attempt: Distancings. There are images which seem to pull the viewer in. They elude resistance, surround scrutiny and take it prisoner. The gaze becomes a function in which the image appears to observe its own creation. The viewer's attention is completely absorbed by the image and submits to an endless game, from which it cannot flee. Such images exude a maelstrom, which is less visually, than physically controlling. They gain a kind of tactile intensity that can be felt even when the viewer has turned away, and which continues to take the viewer in. It seems that nothing can escape the spell cast by an image so wholly involved with its self. Other images appear to follow an opposite strategy. Distances are their sole product. If they first appear to evoke intimacy, or even "the most intimate", it is only to destroy the feeling again immediately. They deny the voracious gaze its fill. These pictures are in continuous retreat to an unreachable place in the distance. Any appetite for cliché is rejected. The viewer is not allowed to make himself at home. Instead the beholder is touched, only to be coldly relocated, far away and opposite himself. Essentially, this is a kind of banishment.

The images Karina Nimmerfall's Installations show us follow such logic of categorical distancing. Certainly, the first glance reveals what appears to be familiar, or even trustworthy: An open landscape, for example, its waning light blurring contours; flickering stars, which seem to be made of neon light – a scene fed and accepted in countless movies, advertisements and posters. This scene reproduces itself as a cliché of openness, as the indifference of a longing, as well as an escalation of movement, readied to lose itself in the unintended. It is as if the image, supine to the gaze, flees itself, in the futile search for something to hold on to and finds nothing – even within itself.

Naturally, the viewer expresses himself as an affect. Emotion urges him to follow the images' vanishing points that should carry him away to another place. Granted all indifference, what would remain of longing, if it were not nourished by the promise of emerging in that other place? Thus the expanse of the Midwest came alive with the mere prospect of rediscovering "home". The cold, flickering, neon light in empty streets and bars, which lured lost souls with their deceptive, transient guest rooms, seems to constantly circle the mystery of sedentary life that negates distance and remoteness. But in the end that is the seduction these images possess, and the secret of their triviality.

It is in this sense above all else, that the images in Karina Nimmerfall's installations reveal a lack of mystery. They remove the trivial from its self by out doing it. They force the cliché to go beyond its self. What's more: they place cliché within itself and let it implode. No insincere gloss points up a place to stop and contemplate, no arrival; much less a "settling in" is allowed. Anything that might bear reference to a uniqueness of a place or time has been extracted from these images. They are what they are; no more, no less – in the end that is what makes up their artificiality. These pictures know of nothing that could cause a delay, not even the rough surface, which could abrade their movement and provide resistance. An irreducible, primordial cliché surfaces beneath all the clichéd images. Nothing less than an analytical process stands out at the heart of the work. Robbed of all resistance, which would refer them to the particularity of a place or time, the images pass into a kind of sightlessness, out-of-sight-ness or invisibleness, which corresponds to the movement of their flight and moreover to their escalating speeds.

Second attempt: Inside and Outside. But in what sense are the images actually images at all? And does the escape trajectory they describe only move in one direction? The disappearance loses itself in the remoteness to which it refers. It runs in all directions, particularly penetrating the proximity, which the viewer believes he occupies. It enters the interior surrounding him, like the catalog living-room-landscapes the viewer is familiar with and accepts. But now it becomes more apparent than ever that the interior is void of domestic hominess. The sleek and pure interior exudes an aloofness that spurs on the motif of displacement the most when close to the viewer. The feeling of eviction pours over him and invalidates the differences between an interior in which he might linger, and an exterior to which he might turn. As much as Karina Nimmerfall's installations work with frames, enclosing and confining images, confining and releasing the gaze; they continually break them down as well. This strikes the alleged interior. Things that would be familiar in a living space disintegrate close up, becoming utterly strange – a situation, which at first seemed cozy, turns sinister in an instant.

Although the image-installations possess a "soul", it has become an *animatio*, an animation in a literal sense; in the form of a computer-animation, it has become a general artifact. What began as the images' withdrawal or the movement of their escape arises out of a digital medium. The medium allows the "animation" of the "soul" to arise out of a minuscule manipulation of pixels that imperceptibly breaths "life" into the image. At first all of this appears to be a slight, almost marginal fact. It would be difficult to apply a digital effect as sparingly, or cautiously as Karina Nimmerfall has done. But this detail is the focal point of the work: it concerns the problem of painting post-painting; of cinema after the death of cinema; it deals with questions of the image in the moment of the image's own disappearance; as well as the question of a "soul" that could once be touched by images, whose affects it now experiences as reanimated by technology.

Thus, it is even more inadequate, to simply speak of "images". It is quite clear that these images are only an evanescent moment within the "installations", in which Karina Nimmerfall has allowed them to appear. The viewer is surrounded by walls. He moves among them in rooms where the picture's panorama reveals the exterior. Indeed, these installations encompass the viewer. They provide him with a room that opens his gaze, while simultaneously fixating his back. Entirely as if the assertions made earlier in this text were to be refuted: that there are images that take the viewer in, encompassing him from behind; that there are images, which physically absorb him. Whereas other images only follow strategies of distancing. But don't Karina Nimmerfall's installations retract into themselves? Don't they absorb the viewer as physically as the images do, by surrounding him with a manifest space and refusing to release him? What about the "distancings" in these images, when they have encompassed the viewer, when they have spatially and physically absorbed him?

Actually, Karina Nimmerfall's images, which strive to meet their own disappearance, or are snapshots of their own absence, represent the same standpoint as the space in which they reveal themselves. These artworks are not "installations", if the definition has been made out to be the creation, delimitation and fixation of a particular space. On the contrary, how can space exist, in a place in which the alleged core, the reputed "soul" of the viewer has expired in the cold flickering of digital manipulation? Which perspective allows for the construction of a "room" in which a layover, a sojourn, much less "being at home" can be experienced; when the soul itself has been transformed into a transparent *animatio*?

In this point the installations actually exercise a plurality of movement. The installations thwart images. They remove all the contemplative clues and all semblance of deceptive intention from the "far away". But this withdrawal takes place primarily in their immediate proximity, namely in the innermost self. This is why it isn't possible to construct spaces within the installation. This disintegration infects the room itself. The image traverses and destroys the differentiation between inside and outside from whence it once arose. This distinction is what should provide "the innermost self" a footing, peace, a prospect and a trajectory for movement toward a destination. But all of these dispositions have dissipated; this is what Karina Nimmerfall's installations allow us to experience, understand or rather to remember. Couldn't it be that her arrangement of image and space, directionless distance and cold animation describes the core of even the most prosaic experience?

At this juncture all spectacle implodes and all sensations are extinguished. Spectacle has always thrived on the speculum of a mirror, in which a viewer can observe and recognize himself. Even literally, sensations have always been flogged and stimulated while living on permutations of sense. In this sense, Karina Nimmerfall's installations are subject to every spectacle. They deprive the viewer of the promise of sustainability. These completely unspectacular installations lead the viewer back to, or into "zero", in protest against the kind of sensational effects, which can be created with a digital medium.

Third Attempt: The Media. The media theorist Marshall McLuhan contended that there are both "hot" and "cold" media. "Cold media" are defined as having little detail. The telephone, which transmits the human voice using a minimal technical transfer rate, is thus a "cold medium". Because of its low density, a higher level of activity is required of the listener in order to absorb and process the information, and to grasp its entirety. Film on the other hand is a "hot medium" according to McLuhan. Film is distinguished by a disproportionate wealth of details. Correspondingly, the viewer is less active, as is his imaginative play.

Naturally, McLuhan's differentiation can be refuted. Isn't it possible that high or low activity on the part of the receiver is provided for in a total medial system? Couldn't it be that the telephone becomes a "hot media" precisely because it challenges the listener's imagination, actuates it, and continually enhances it? Couldn't film, on the other hand, be a "cold medium", if it is true that it reduces the viewer's necessary activity to an absolute minimum? – But a discussion of McLuhan's theories is not the matter at hand. The difference between the "cool" and the "hot" is really a better means to approach the game of inapproachability played in Karina Nimmerfall's installations.

Without a doubt, the installations exude a remarkably strange "coolness". They correspond to the "zero" mentioned before.

In reality, the act of releasing the primordial cliché within the clichéd images, as Karina Nimmerfall does, is actually a kind of archeology within the images themselves. She frees the images of their redundancy. To switch off spectacle and sensation, also means reducing the density of information to a minimum; only now can the cliché emerge. With regards to this process it is possible to understand these artworks as an experiment in which the media used are deprived of heat. Subtly, but perceptibly, the animation evokes the pictures' deceptive "life". For the first time, that minimal distance emerges, which prevents the images from being petrified as in death. In this way the installations balance on the brink of a death, in which the remainder of the details are engulfed and make room for total emptiness. But because of this and at the same time: doesn't this precipice require all the more activity on the part of the viewer? Doesn't it demand the utmost from the viewer in the first place? Isn't the viewer's illusion ignited by a promise that continually endangers the image's substance, which almost breaks it, while infinitely developing his imagination?

The spatial installations move along this periphery. They are by no means examples of "media art", whatever one's understanding of what that might be, nor are they a narcissistic game with "digital media". In no way do they contain a gesture of denunciation that calls out for a lost authenticity, for a new reality or a certified truth – a proclamation that might be audible in the emptiness, in the frigid movement of dissolution, and in the cold simulations of her pictures, in souls and in Karina Nimmerfall's rooms. All of that would remain an attitude, in which the beautiful spirit might lament its medial disorientation and request the coziness of utopian warmth. Artistically put: it would be kitsch.

On a completely different track, the installations undergo various medialities: painting as well as sculpture, photography as well as installation, film and the digital order of the computer. But the movement doesn't seize up, no one medium is placed at the "center", some central point from which it might be possible to clarify the situation. It is more likely that the assorted medialities in these installations speak to the viewer, only to say something completely different than what is dictated by technical circumstances, or which would be generated as their effect.

The letters on the bottom line are imperceptible. The viewer is left with a minimum; an initial exposure to the enigma of "the self" that was once called "the soul" and which has never been more questionable than it is today. Karina Nimmerfall's installations encircle this secret – that is the reason they gauge distance, present escape velocities, destroy protective inventories taken of inside and outside, and it is the meaning behind the medialities and their codes. The destruction preserves the question at hand, because it isn't even possible to pose it unequivocally anymore.