

Myth and Boredome – and Myth

Essay for the catalogue "Karina Nimmerfall: Double Location", Kunstverein Medienturm, Graz 2009

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"Camorra villas are pearls of cement tucked away on rural streets, protected by walls and video cameras. There are dozens and dozens of them. Marble and parquet, colonnades and staircases, granite fireplaces with the boss's initials. One, the most sumptuous, is particularly famous, or perhaps it has merely generated the most legends. Everyone calls it *Hollywood*. Just saying the word makes you understand why. It's not difficult to guess the reason for the name, easy to imagine the spaces and splendor. But that's not the whole of it. Walter Schiavone's villa really does have a link to Hollywood. People in Casal di Principe say the boss told his architect he wanted a villa just like Tony Montana's, the Miami Cuban gangster in *Scarface*. He'd seen the film countless times and it had made a deep impression on him, to the point that he came to identify with the character played by Al Pacino. [...]"¹

From Brian De Palma's *Scarface* villa of Tony Montana to Walter Schiavone's look-alike Hollywood villa in Casal di Principe, it's off to the lobby of the famous Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles: whether any Italian-Americans belonging to Mafia organisations ever actually met here, be it for business or private affairs, only the appropriate police authority – if anyone – can reliably say. The lobby with its luxurious appointments, that Karina Nimmerfall reconstructed in a photorealistic 3D animation, transferring it into the walk-in video installation *Double Location (The Ambassador Hotel)*, would certainly have offered an image-making, if not exactly morally appropriate setting for such a purpose. As a backdrop for a typical U.S. Mafia film, the prestigious architecture of the hotel lobby certainly fits all the clichés that Hollywood itself has created and, with a seemingly never-ending stream of productions, perpetuated regarding the Mafia – fountain included. The hotel, built in 1921, closed in 1989, and since then rented out almost exclusively for film productions until its demolition in 2006, was one of the most used film sets in Los Angeles – with upward of one hundred productions a year.

I am sure that the abundant research material that formed the conceptual starting point for Nimmerfall's *Double Location* – including a work that she presented at her *Hollywood ist ein Verb* exhibition co-designed with Isabell Heimerdinger at Kunstverein Medienturm in Graz – featured a couple of Mafia films in which subtle to dramatic scenes were set in precisely this hotel lobby; whether *Scarface* was one of them? If clan boss Walter Schiavone ever left his formerly high-security villa on the trail of Tony Montana, he certainly would have found this hotel to be a joint befitting his social standing. Yet he would not have met Tony Montana there; and Al Capone, upon whom the Montana character was based, and who actually turned up with his entourage on the set of Howard Hawk's original film in 1932 to supervise shooting (and who also hailed from the same region in Campania as Schiavone) is long dead anyway; but perhaps he might have found his actor, Al Pacino: for at that time many Hollywood stars resided at the Ambassador.

But Karina Nimmerfall's work is not about the Mafia. Rather, it is about enclosed space, its perception, and its portrayal in the cinematic medium of Hollywood. In a process of de-montage she empties everything that is ingrained in the image, all the myths and legends that may be created by a single cinema picture, taking it back to the pure existence of the given spatial situation. In this respect her work coincides, in a sense, with a chapter from the bestseller *Gomorra* by Roberto Saviano – albeit from a different perspective. For his story about Camorrista, Walter Schiavone's *Hollywood* villa is about the media representation of space and its effects reflecting back on reality – its potency. The tale of his *Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples' Organized Crime System* describes how strongly the stereotyped cinematic portrayals (of the Mafia) have come to impact reality, how cinema has become a model and a code for a certain (criminal, but also architectural) style. How closely myth and boredom are intertwined, how, driven by the illusion machines, myth-making figures emerge again and again from the dull fog of reality, only to vanish in it again – changing space and reality as they do – may be illustrated by juxtaposing Saviano's literary portrayal of Hollywood and Nimmerfall's media-analytical methodology, made visible in her artistic treatment of Hollywood cinema.

"People say Schiavone even gave his architect a copy of the film; he wanted the *Scarface* villa, exactly as it was in the movie. It seemed like one of those stories that embellish every boss's rise to power, of aura blending with legend, an authentic urban myth. Anytime anyone mentioned *Hollywood*, someone would say he'd seen it built when he was young, a bunch of kids on bikes contemplating Tony Montana's villa as it rose right off the screen into the middle of the neighborhood. [...]"

What unites both positions – Saviano and Nimmerfall – and makes them so exciting is their pseudo documentary style. The trick is to merge fact and fiction and to create mutual relations to the point where the original referent is no longer immediately recognisable: in the spiral (as it were), to come full circle. Saviano does this from the standpoint of the political investigative journalist who wants to reveal, and also rouse. As a visual artist, Nimmerfall, in contrast, stages an intellectual game of how meaning is constituted by representing space, how the referents first construct each other and then begin to condition each other. Her interest is more one of media theory.

Although conceived as stand-alone works, two of Nimmerfall's photographic series *Substitute Locations* (2005) and *Inside Establishing Shots* (since 2006) may be seen as a kind of preliminary stage for her walk-through video installations. These are works that are above all concerned with exploring forms of photographic representation. In technical perfection, she documents locations of the U.S. American television series *C.S.I.*, along with the architectures of well-known film sets and establishing shots from science-fiction films. Above all, in the first of the aforementioned series, Nimmerfall captures her themes in an austere process; the scenes appear objectively detached, the pictures, to begin with, refer merely to the existence of a spatial situation upon which rests the film reality generated from it. But by adding the title *Substitute Locations*, she already highlights its constructed nature; all of the locations she visited are in reality found in Los Angeles, while the television series itself presents a plotline that may take place in Miami, Las Vegas or New York. This surrogate character is worked out and augmented by the information added to the theme, which also go to underscore Nimmerfall's documentary approach: each picture is accompanied by a kind of "fact sheet" containing details of the particular location and its use in the film. The nature of the photograph and the organisation of the presentation follow the aesthetics of conceptual art, in terms of their vocabulary of forms and even the choice of font in the text documents. But interestingly, the aloof documentary character is reminiscent not only of early conceptual strategies: in view of the immediate link to the television medium, Nimmerfall's photo-text montages could equally be exemplary, but also infinitely continuable records from a location scout's archive or excerpts from a photo-based storyboard. With this choice of style Nimmerfall clearly tries to link up with the organisational forms of television: the quality of her work is precisely that she has, on the one hand, found a conceptually stringent form that she sticks to throughout, and on the other hand – depending on the context – allows for all manner of references.

By changing the camera position and taking bolder angles (views from below, views from above, extreme perspectives using wide angle) in the *Inside Establishing Shots* series, with which she already makes reference to the futuristic enactment techniques of modern or post-modern architecture in film, and which are – following the film original – actually depicted in this series, Nimmerfall explicitly refers to the cinematographic format – which has at one point already featured this, in fact, rather unspectacular architecture as backdrop material. The fact that the artist decided to juxtapose two shots, slightly offset in perspective, emphasises this fact. Also with the aid of the accompanying caption, containing information about the location as a film-worthy backdrop, she introduces more subtle ambivalences of meaning into a seemingly impartial representation. This charges the space in the photograph with augmented presence; and the picture thus becomes a kind of enactment – which is precisely the "added value" of this work, as opposed to traditional conceptual art. Nimmerfall works very consciously with the fact that images invariably evoke meaning, and thus, in a very subtle manner, thwarts a paradigm of photographic, documentary image processes found in earlier conceptual art. It is not just about demonstrating how the film industry purposefully uses architectural clichés or about the patterns of representation that come into play by working them out in objective documentary processes – although that is one aspect. It is also, and above all, about drawing attention to the fact that there is no neutral image space, but rather that all space always evokes associations: depending on what information accompanies it (here), by playing with perspectives and by means of (selective) textual information. In this work specifically, Nimmerfall very explicitly examines the game of allocations of meaning by generating constructions of image space – cleverly exaggerated in terms of form and aesthetic – whose fictionalisation in both the mind and the screen format is already inherent, against the backdrop of a factual, theoretical process that has its frame of reference in former strategies of conceptual art. She refers to this process as "Double Vision".

"The mere sight of it was enough to convince me that the legendary villa was actually for real. I had thought about going to see it for myself it dozens of times, but it seemed impossible. [...] Columns supported a double pediment with a cropped semicircle in the center. The front hall was an architectural delirium: two enormous staircases, like marble wings, soaring up to the second-floor balcony, which looked onto the large hall below. Just like Tony Montana's. [...] The villa is a triumph of Doric columns, the interior ones in pink plaster and the external ones in aquamarine."

The story has it that Walter Schiavone's replica of Tony Montana's silver-screen villa in Brian De Palma's Mafia epic must have been a disaster, an eclecticism, a mad mixture of different styles to encode the Mafia status, in a word: a dream architecture that – as its name (*Hollywood*) says – is based above all on visual ideas and not on real architectures.

Nimmerfall also found out that trying to translate the lobby of the Ambassador Hotel into ground plans and a cogent architectural model caused perspectives to appear distorted and proportions displaced. The fact that Nimmerfall does not draw on historical photos or actual plans, but rather on film shots of the room for her reconstruction of the hotel lobby, is reason enough for a documentary approach to fail. In her virtual, animated architectural model, whose spatial organisation refers to film icons (*The Graduate* by Mike Nichols, featuring Dustin Hoffman) as much as to mainstream hits (*True Lies* by James Cameron, featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger), she thus consistently applies the principle of film cutting to generate sequences of rooms that no longer coincide with the actual room layout. In translating this virtual spatial model into a walk-through installation, she placed vanishing points intuitively, by working out certain "lines of reference" (Nimmerfall); then transferring them into a new spatial context, so as to allow the visitor to freely walk around. Atmospherically, the pseudo Art Déco style of her photorealistic 3D animation of the lobby matches the typical American version of a European Grand Hotel, probably coming very close to the "original". The computer-animated journey around the lobby gives a sense of subdued luxury: oversized open hall doors, classy crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, long colonnades, expensive floor coverings, and a marble fountain at the centre of the hall lend themselves to a grand scene, be it in film or in real life. What is remarkable is that Nimmerfall gives precedence here again to an ostensibly detached portrayal; the journey around the room appears to have been shot with a steadicam, and you almost get the impression of someone scanning the scene. The colours in her animation are dull, although the red floor and the off-white walls would make you expect a bright and friendly light. But in fact the scene has a lot of added black: a concession to the dominant colouring of the original films. Special effects like smoke rising from the floor also cause the room to appear cool and almost forbidding. These are the first signs that Nimmerfall is not primarily interested in a documentary project, but rather in investigating the enacted film space.

Despite her objectivity in creating her photorealistic 3D animation (obeying principles of visual isolation and extraction of elements by completely masking film action and focusing exclusively on filmic space) and despite the fact that she always highlights and reveals how the work was created and realised (when she translates the animation into a walk-in video installation the video/film is screened in semi-darkness, the wooden structure of the screen version remains visible, can be circumnavigated and does not disappear in the darkness of a cinema auditorium) this "double location" appears extremely forceful, almost psychedelic. The minimal special effects deployed by Nimmerfall (cf. Jeff Luckey's essay *Slow Special Effects*) sufficiently refer to the cinema as a place of potent imaginative inscriptions, from whose fog we see myth-making figures suddenly emerge, only to vanish once again. The Ambassador – the hotel in which Robert Kennedy was assassinated, that experienced subsequent economic decline, and whose lobby was finally used as the film set for the Hollywood version of *Bobby* (before finally being demolished) – is the perfect setting for this, along with the other countless myths and legends which have grown up around this location.

"I had the absurd sensation that Tony Montana was about to come out of one of the rooms and greet me with a stiff, arrogant gesture: 'All I have in this world is my balls and my word, and I don't break them for no one, you understand?' Who knows if Walter dreamed of dying like Montana, riddled with bullets and tumbling into his front hall rather than ending his days in a prison cell. [...]"

Ed Ruscha already made it clear in his artistic work that Hollywood is a place that thrives on allocations. His artist's book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966) may be regarded as an in-cunabulum in the sphere of conceptual photography publications. In sober black-and-white, Ruscha – taking photos from a car – shot every façade on what is probably Los Angeles' most famous stretch of road. Ruscha's photos are emptied, the pictures do not divulge any stories; they refer to nothing but the pure existence of the urban situation they depict. This work disappoints any projections that Los Angeles may evoke; typical American boredom sets in. In his essay on Ruscha's books of photography, Reinhard Braun once observed that his photos may be compared to John Cage's implementation of everyday noise in the field of musical organisation: in the context of the time of their creation, Ruscha's artist's books would seem to be a project of implementing the visual noise of everyday culture into the context of artistic production; although, in view of the artist's strict stance, it is subjected only to minimal organisation.²

Following this theory, Karina Nimmerfall uses her photographs and film animations to take the notion of "visual noise" to the highest level of tension; for her work is not only concerned with deconstructing the constructedness of Hollywood and all of its mythological inscriptions, breaking them down to the boredom of everyday reality in a documentary process. She also aims to focus on the fact that there is no neutral image space; images, as objectively detached, sober and divested of content as they may at first

appear to be, always have inherent fictionalisations – for the question of seeing is always linked to the question of knowing, even if what an image evokes is extremely mediated knowledge or traumatic traces of the memory of something past.

“I left the villa quietly, trying not to get caught in the brambles and weeds that had overgrown the English Garden so dear to the boss. I left the gate open. Just a few years earlier, getting anywhere near here would have meant being spotted by dozens of sentinels. But now I walked out with my hands in my pockets and my head down, as when you leave the movie theater, still dazed by what you've seen. [...]“

In 2008 Isabell Heimerdinger and Karina Nimmerfall titled their double exhibition *Hollywood ist ein Verb*; the title being a reference to a 1983 pigment on paper work of the same name by Ed Ruscha (cf. Rike Frank's interview with Karina Nimmerfall). With this piece Ed Ruscha already pointed out that Hollywood is a place of imaginative inscriptions. What does it say in the introductory quotation from Roberto Saviano: “Just saying why. It's not difficult to guess the reason for the name ...“ With his work, Ed Ruscha contributed to demythologising Hollywood as a place. The fact that the Hollywood-mask still, of course, impacts powerfully on reality, is what Roberto Saviano describes. That Hollywood's illusion machine and its cinema no longer need a real space of reference to be a place of fictionalisation, and rather that we can already imagine any number of images of Hollywood to start the film in our minds; to construct any number of myth-making figures from the boredom, is the subject addressed by Karina Nimmerfall in *Double Location*.

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¹ All quotations from: Roberto Saviano, *Gomorra. A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples' Organized Crime System*, Picador, reprint edition 2008, p. 244 ff.

² Reinhard Braun, “Butisitart? Der paradoxe Status der Fotobücher Ed Ruschas“, in: *Aufnahmen. Fotografische Recherchen in der Stadt* (catalogue of the Austrian Belvedere gallery), Vienna 1999, p. 99 ff.