

Staging Appearances of Power

Karina Nimmerfall's *Power Play* exhibition

Essay for the catalogue "Karina Nimmerfall: Power Play", Landesgalerie Linz, 2007

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Karina Nimmerfall's exhibition carries on from the series of presentations of contemporary art at the Wappensaal of Landesgalerie Linz. In the exhibition rooms, the artist has set up two walk-in space-video installations, and is also presenting a series of photographs relating to the project in the ambulatory. These two installations consist of architectural elements and video projections, with computer-generated three-dimensional models of the projected videos subtly melding with the real, constructed spatial elements. Sparse movements found within the videos are just as subtle, and in the case of the *Executive Office (Contemporary Modern)* installation they are barely even perceptible at first glance.

In terms of content, the piece is the result of the artist's extensive research on the subject of architecture and its representation in popular US film and television productions. In this specific case – as part of a scholarship stay in Dallas – Nimmerfall focused on the television series of the same name, one of the most successful US media exports. The artist was above all interested in the establishing shots that served to introduce scenes within the series: architecturally outstanding, iconic office complexes, "corporate architecture" as it is known, along with luxuriously appointed private residences and interiors. In the first room of the exhibition, *Grand Staircase (Contemporary Retro)* refers to the pseudo-historic opulence and desire for prestige found within the private home, while the second installation *Executive Office (Contemporary Modern)* focuses on a certain stereotyped modernist architecture used by international corporate groups. The computer-generated video spaces developed for the project are based on architectural elements from the TV series, but are synthetic, "updated" generic models of space that the artist has transferred into a more contemporary context.

As in other television productions, *Dallas* drew on the symbolic content and effect of architecture that served to express social and economic power. By going back to this 1980s' series, the artist also refers to the topical relevance of certain visual contexts that have been deployed by the film industry for decades: Even though the series was created as a foil to a specific era of financial prosperity, the power structures it portrays still today bear certain parallels to the current economic and political climate.

The effects of architecture on society have long been disregarded in sociology and architectural theory, with well-founded studies and publications on these topics only recently published, particularly in the German-speaking world¹. The topicality then of Karina Nimmerfall's work is therefore also due to the fact that she deals with this socially virulent issue at the level of artistic and aesthetic analysis. "Space structures social action, and at the same time social action defines space."² This interaction applies to constructed film sets and fictitious plots as much as to real spaces and the everyday actions that take place in them. By drawing on the example of a certain architectural element – the staircase – we can illustrate this principle in the context of *Power Play*, as well as to the specific exhibition setting of Landesgalerie Linz. Visitors to Nimmerfall's exhibition must enter via the museum's monumental staircase, leading up to the first floor and thus also to the Wappensaal. Built on the basis of plans by the German "monument architect"³ Bruno Schmitz, the late historicist building of the Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum Francisco-Carolinum was geared towards prestige rather than functionality even in its basic architectural design. This is seen particularly with the impressive colossal frieze encircling three façades of the building, which with a dominating effect to the exterior lends the edifice its monumental aspect.

The pronounced will to monumentality and prestige characteristic of Wilhelminian architecture during the last decades of the nineteenth century, brought to Linz by the German architect, was from the outset met with a positive response⁴. Inside the museum, in addition to the main hall, it is above all the monumental staircase (with its "Kaisertreppe", or Imperial Stairs), the ambulatory on the first floor, and the glass dome with its decorative lunette frescos that reflect an increased desire for prestige. Also of note, in relation to the size of the exhibition rooms, the staircase can be seen to take up an unusual amount of space. This design fulfilled a demand made by August Tiede, a contemporary of Bruno Schmitz, who with regard to the foyer and stairway design of ideal museum architecture observed the following: "The design of the entrance rooms, hallways and staircase must be of special quality [...]" such that the visitors "may, by means of this befitting composition, enter the mood for viewing the collections."⁵ Following Deyan Sudjic, according to whom the primary task of architecture is either to impress, glorify or intimidate⁶, the splendid staircase of the Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum above all fulfils the first criterion. On second hand, the great prestigious nature of the building also glorified the political and economic power that was responsible for the museum building and its funding⁷. Emperor Franz Joseph I. consequently referred to the museum as the "pride of the province."⁸

Stairs, traditionally being elementary components of monumental architecture, in addition to connecting floors serve particularly to raise certain parts, or even whole buildings up from their foundations. In this respect, stairs also play a special role in staging appearances. In ancient times, the stairs leading up to the podiums of Roman temples would elevate the political or religious representative above the masses, thus symbolically emphasising the speaker's power and influence. Stairs are often still used in stage design and serve to present appearances, both in theatre and on television shows. In the latter case, however, the principle is generally reversed: the celebrity guests appear at the top of the stairs, stepping down to their audience and thus appearing to overcome a distance that is, at the same time, upheld by the media presentation.

Finally we come across stairs as well when entering Karina Nimmerfall's installations. In the first section of the exhibition *Grand Staircase (Contemporary Retro)* quotes the staircase found in the entrance hall of Southfork Ranch (the Ewing estate in *Dallas*) by means of a computer simulation, one that the artist has cleverly integrated into the real, built architecture of this spatial installation. Like the crystal chandelier and other décor elements found within the opulently appointed mansion, the staircase too was meant to reflect the Ewing clan's desire for prestige and high social status. On the show this staircase served also to stage key scenes and thus the appearances of a variety of characters.

The title of the exhibition *Power Play*, a reference to a specific episode from the series, while referring on one hand to the staged film fiction of these locations, could also be interpreted in its relation to the power games being played out not only by the characters on the screen, but also in the private and business dealings of the actors working in the series. Either way it is seen however Karina Nimmerfall above all explores the "sociologically amorphous concept"⁹ of power with regard to its representation in architecture and spatial structures. "Architecture combines the power of fact with the power of symbolism."¹⁰ And throughout history cultural, political, clerical or economic (power) structures have always been manifest in architecture. Even now the mirrored façades of the modern-day city reflect economic and political networks of power. Their materiality feigns transparency, but ultimately merely reflects its surroundings (i.e. the other rival centres of power), while at the same time concealing what takes place behind the windows of these corporate headquarters. Any assumption however that the architectural representation of power appears in certain stylistic forms is wrong, as we cannot talk about the relationship between architecture and power "in categories of outer form, but rather of meanings". Consequently, the frequent past "attempt to equate classicism with despotism and modernism with democracy cannot hold true."¹¹ Karina Nimmerfall's research for the *Power Play* project also bears this point out. While the architectural elements cited in the *Executive Office (Contemporary Modern)* and *Grand Staircase (Contemporary Retro)* installations go back to different formal vocabularies of style, in the context of the TV series they serve one and the same purpose: to exploit the symbolic power of architecture for the purpose of representing and demonstrating power and social influence. And the artist's research also reveals that the choice of architectural style for the locations of popular TV series productions is taken according to certain, recurrent patterns: more neo-classical historicised interiors are usually preferred for private home scenes, for example, while a more modernist contemporary styling usually predominates for offices and corporate headquarters. This would seem to correspond to the often stereotyped allocation of a "cool, sober aesthetic" to modernism and a "decorative opulence" to historicism and historicising forms. At the same time, any design that draws on the formal vocabulary of style from the nineteenth century might also make reference to the middle-class values of this era, one that was characterised mainly by industrialisation and high capitalism.

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¹ Maran, Joseph, "Architecture, Power and Social Practice – An Introduction", in: Maran, Joseph/ Juwig, Carsten/ Schwengel, Hermann/ Thaler, Ulrich (ed.), *Constructing Power. Konstruktion der Macht*, Hamburg 2006. p. 9ff.

² Cf. Maran, Joseph, op. cit., p. 11.

³ Bruno Schmitz' most important building projects included monuments, e.g. the Kyffhäuser monument, the national monument to Wilhelm I. in Berlin, the Monument of the Battle of the Nations in Leipzig, etc.

⁴ Cf. Prokisch, Bernhard, "Zu kunsthistorischen Fragen", in: Prokisch, Bernhard / Dimt, Heidelinde, *Das Museum Francisco-Carolinum, Studien zur Kulturgeschichte Oberösterreichs*, series 4, 1995. p. 36ff.

⁵ Tiede, August, *Museumsbaukunde*, Berlin 1898, p. 6.

⁶ Sudjic, Deyan, *The Edifice Complex. How the Rich and Powerful – and their Architects – Shape the World*, New York, 2005

⁷ Upper Austria Province and the Allgemeine Sparkasse provided most of this funding.

⁸ On the occasion of the inauguration of the museum on May 29, 1895. Cf.: Dürrnberger, Adolf, *Zur Erinnerung an den 29. Mai 1895*, separate print from "Tagespost", Linz 1896

⁹ Weber, Max, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Tübingen 1972. p. 28.

¹⁰ Zimmermann, Gerd, "Architekturen der Macht", in: *Architektur und Macht*. 6. Internationales Bauhaus-Kolloquium, Weimar 1992, p. 213.

¹¹ Zimmermann, Gerd, op. cit., p. 217.