

Reflection and Narration

by Johannes Meinhardt

from the exhibition catalogue *It's always night, or we wouldn't need light*, Villa Merkel, Esslingen, 2009

Astrid Nippoldt's video and photographic works in the Villa Merkel exhibition in Esslingen are particularly interesting because they – with the exception of “Grutas”, a three-channel video installation dating from 2006 – can be read in two ways (and suggest this quite clearly): they can be read as narrative, as is generally the practice today, as fragments of picture stories that the viewers' imaginations can make into complete narrations; and they can also be read as reflections on video and film as media (and secondarily also on photography as a medium, which is seen and used in the form of film stills), as a reflection on visibility and our view of visibility right down to the physiological conditions of seeing, and as a reflection on the specificity of projected images (which can also take the form of photographs).

There is a great gulf between these two readings: each mode of perception largely excludes the other, and yet they are held in suspension very lightly, almost casually, without any visible theoretical effort. This gulf can also be seen as the gap between a modern approach, for which the reflexivity and self-analytical articulation of a work of art is crucial, and a postmodern approach, that has forgotten not just Modernism but also the way in which Postmodernism addressed Modernism, seeing nothing more in visual works of art than images that cohere as narrative or that viewers can put together as narratives, histories or stories.

For example, from the point of view of narrative, the sixchannel video installation *Getaway Inn*, 2006/07, which is shown in a two-channel version, offers a series of short, unconnected scenes in which various undefined social events take place in prestigious surroundings (the Villa Massimo); only short sequences were shot at these events then edited together, showing eye contact, glances being exchanged – longing glances at naked legs or naked backs –, and also occasional physical contact (and all in slow motion). Identifying with the people involved and empathizing with the short scenes makes it possible to build these up into imaginary narratives that can be interpreted in terms of cultural theory or feminism.

But a narrative reading of this kind disregards a number of striking phenomena: starting with the fact that the same video film is clearly being projected in mirror image on the other side of the set of galleries – with a time difference that makes it impossible to be aware of the reflection immediately. Furthermore, perception is constantly made more difficult or disturbed by the fact that sudden flaring and light reflections occur, or conversely the image suddenly disappears into darkness – and this sudden disappearance into darkness and the disturbance of visibility by flare, this demonstration that sight depends on light and on correct light levels is already indicated in the exhibition title: “It's always night, or we wouldn't need light.” It is only light that reveals things and space; but light itself fades out of perception as the medium that reveals the world. This demonstration is made even clearer by the fact that almost all the scenes are lit very strongly from the side; the source of this light remains invisible, but it must be coming through doors, windows or other apertures, as in Vermeer. This leads to hard illumination with high contrast, and produces shadows

on faces, backs and legs, and also a twilight shimmer, modelling what is visible, especially bodies or faces, affectively and constantly changing them markedly (and thus also the 'expression' of these bodies).

Comparably with this, the 2004 film installation *Fog on Nov 2* can be embedded in a narrative and 'understood' in this way. Astrid Nippoldt had downloaded and edited together images of the Mount St. Helens volcano taken every half hour by a fixed webcam. This camera had been installed to watch the volcano, which seemed to be on the verge of an immediate eruption. So the images clearly had a purpose and were intended to establish the reality of the volcano. But Astrid Nippoldt had edited the material by using above all sunrises and sunsets and situations when the mountain was rendered invisible by mist, clouds or twilight. This meant that what was visible changed constantly, especially the colour quality, which often seems to be transformed into fields or sometimes even dots of colour – a study of the real, intangible, fleeting and changeable visibility of a subject that is always the same (Monet's series worked on a comparable set of questions).