Atmospheric Passages between Reality and Imagination.
On the film work of Astrid Nippoldt
by Doris Krystof
from the exhibition catalogue *It's always night, or we wouldn't need light*, Villa Merkel, Esslingen, 2009

> *This is the nature of film: foreknowledge, intimations (…) It is a totally false assumption*
> *that film creativity involves 'creating'–instead, film 'distinguishes' normal,*
> *real relations from non-normal relations. Through omission, it isolates the essence.*
> *Or it predicts, setting up the filming equipment in the right place–like a hunter–long before*
> *the event happens. And when all else fails, it uses reconstruction to recreate 'unseen experience'.*
> Alexander Kluge, Geschichten vom Kino, Frankfurt/M 2007, p. 270

In the beginning was the light. A radiant cloud, like an aura, on the dark screen – a brilliant concentration of light that comes together and gradually takes shape, becoming circular lamps. In Astrid Nippoldt's film, it takes less than a minutefor the world to emerge from pure light – that is, before a smooth panning shot reveals the word WORLD, installed on a building. A few bars of music are heard, and are joined by the distant sound of traffic and dogs barking–then the camera stops dead, the image becomes clearer, and the film ends. Astrid Nippoldt has filmed a short sequence through a breath-misted lens of a detail of the nocturnally illuminated Trump World Towers in New York City, in a Clip Art-style demonstration of how, "you can create the world with a breath and then, with another breath, let it sink back into the mists of nothingness" (Stephan Berg, 2006).

This night-time street scene, which lasts just 50 seconds, is essentially a concise cinematic prologue to Astrid Nippoldt's theory of film. The 2005 video work *Prolog* condenses many critical aspects of the artist's philosophy in an almost emblematic way: a quintessentially filmic view of the world, work with light and shadows, an interest in transformations (both media-related, temporal and historical) and, finally, a clear impulse to initiate a narrative combined with the simultaneous suppression of that impulse, with an artfully created arc of tension (often utilising sound) following close on the heels of this capricious interruption of the narrative. With a dash of laconic style, Astrid Nippoldt's work embraces the great and the small, the heavy and the light, the sublime and the banal with seeming effortlessness.

Astrid Nippoldt's works–which, while not always as concise as *Prolog*, are rarely longer than 15 minutes – centre on the power of images. They investigate the conditions under which film is created, and its origins in photography – preserving film's connection to what Alexander Kluge calls "real relations". In cinematographic installations like *Fog on Nov 2* (2004), *Grutas* (2006), *Getaway Inn* (2006/07) and *Stalker* (2009), and in photograph series like *Parioli* and *Incomplete Story* (both 2009), Nippoldt transforms reality while invoking the world of film as a medium–referencing both the technical processes of film and individual historical films. Even the title of her slideshow *Stalker* (2009) recalls Andrei Tarkovsky's 1980 film of the same name – a film which takes the viewer to a mysterious place. Astrid Nippoldt uses a young stag venturing out of the undergrowth to signify a mysterious zone, a transitional place. While the clicking of the projector carousel

imitates the loading of a firearm, this highly symbolic animal increasingly comes into the (photographic) line of fire in each frame. At the same time, any kind of final action is indefinitely postponed by the looped picture show: somewhere beyond filmic narrative and photographic representation, a space is created that oscillates between reality and imagination. The dynamic nature of film images and the static nature of photographic images make the video installation *Getaway Inn* a particularly complex synthesis. Supported by an economical soundtrack that fits the images precisely, the filmed images of a glittering night-time garden party create a bizarre, somnambulistic atmosphere that recalls Alain Resnais' *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year in Marienbad*) and other New Wave films. *Getaway Inn* has no dialogue – the fragmented events of the film take place on the pictorial level, accentuated only by a minimalist four-part harmony. One image shows a man at the steering wheel of a car holding a hand in front of his face to protect him from the photographers' flashlights – holding this pose as if he is frozen. Another film image – which also moves almost imperceptibly – shows another man gently placing his hand on the back of a woman in a black dress, until the woman slowly moves away to the right. *Getaway Inn* consists of twelve of these scenic fragments, arranged by Astrid Nippoldt into a loose sequence of images joined together by conspicuous fade-ins and fade-outs. She also uses camera techniques like zooming, time lapses, over-exposure, aperture adjustment and jump cuts to purposefully manipulate the images – until the flawed, worn, time-lapsed, badly-lit and out-of-focus material at the limits of visibility appears to dissolve completely.

Astrid Nippoldt's subjects are never staged–she always uses existing seen or found material. In various ways, the image she creates often extend into the realms of sketchy imaginings (and often possess undeniable painterly qualities) but there is always a clear connection with reality behind the formal play of colour, light and moving forms. The dreamlike wandering scenes of *Getaway Inn*, for instance, were filmed in the Villa Massimo in Rome, an artist residency of the Federal Republic of Germany where Astrid Nippoldt spent 2006 on a scholarship. Generations of German artists have been inspired to create art based on this place (and especially on the villa's enchanting garden), but Astrid Nippoldt's densely atmospheric film sequence incorporates cultural criticism by picking up on the commercial renting out of the grounds in the last few years. Rather than making the contrast between the state's chronically underfunded art support programmes and the glamorous high society world which is increasingly using the Villa Massimo premises as its party location an explicit theme of her work, Astrid Nippoldt applies her artistic philosophy of "unearthing" pictures to this chance to see into another world. During a party, her film camera sweeps the garden, operating on the same level as the numerous paparazzi and discovering pictures in a seemingly accidental way. The really interesting thing about these pictures is the way that they capture people in unintended poses of self-presentation. As in *Prolog*, the world appears behind blinding light – sometimes real, sometimes imaginary and sometimes a mixture of both.