

DANGEROUS SEDUCTIONS

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Images from a world that has lost its center. Slanting, tilted perspectives onto drifting, sandy beaches and windy expanses of blue. Everything a ceaseless spinning and tumbling, without stopping, without pausing for breath, without pursuing a goal. Right in the middle of this visual whirlwind the artist herself, always in the picture for only a brief instant, running and panting, gasping for breath from the exertion, and yet entirely in her element, absolutely brimming with confidence. **Heroic Turn** (2001) is one of those rare works which one immediately understands upon viewing, and which at the same time has retained right up to today, four years after its creation, its vigorous freshness and poetic complexity. The point of departure for this video work is as simple as could be. Astrid Nippoldt binds a nearly two-meter-long tripod with an attached video camera to her body, then proceeds while equipped in this way to a huge, former harbor basin in Bremen that is now filled up with sand – an empty field, so to say. That which ensues is an almost burlesque struggle with the elements and the laws of gravity. The artist is pulled by the wind and by the weight of the camera and the technical equipment, which becomes even more unstable because of the long tripod, so that her attempts to gain control over the camera are repeatedly brought to nothing. This is a vigorously competitive struggle for the power of disposal over the images. **Heroic Turn**, as is already conveyed by the wonderfully ironical and to some extent deliberately pathetic title, is concerned with the yearning for images freed from limitations as well as with the recognition that such images may only be attained by establishing limitations. What is of central importance, not only for this work, is the aspect of bodily exertion. The engendering of images lying beyond conventional expectations does not occur incidentally and casually but is the result of a feat of strength which impels the artist right up to the limit of physical exhaustion. It is anything other than coincidental that it often seems as if the camera were imposing upon the artist, not only its weight, but even its own perspective, as if the equipment were endowed with an individual volition. For this artwork is ultimately concerned with the annulment of a strict authorial principle, with the staging of a world view in which both available and unavailable images join a round-dance that derives its energy from the aspects of surprise, puzzlement and danger. Set against this background, **Heroic Turn** may be understood as a programmatic proclamation of identity by the artist, one which continues to be valid today. Even if aspects of media-related self-reflexion – such as the paradoxical involution of author and apparatus – play a significant role in the process, nevertheless there is something else of central importance. Each boundlessly optimistic film fragment – whether wind, sand and blue sky, waving hair and flashing eyes, or chasing and running and brief moments of respite – is a singular and powerful declaration as to the extraordinary power of images and their capability of allowing the seen to give birth to the unseen. The wind which roars through these pictures is not that catastrophic storm which blows towards Benjamin's angel of history, emerging out of a past that he desires to heal, and which at the same time impels him onward into a future into whose hands he is hopelessly delivered by the act of turning his back to it. Nippoldt's wind, which whistles through this present work, remains insistently within the here and now. The artistic self creates its cosmos in an act of longing for the image, a deed which depends fully upon the intensity of present experience, without thereby succumbing in the least to the entrapment of a bloodless solipsism. Even if this work ultimately consists, on the formal level, of nothing other than the reciprocal revolving around each other of artist and camera, of author and apparatus, nevertheless on the level of contents it makes, with every fiber of its being, a self-aware, emotional plea for a visual world consisting of the extraordinary, the non-foreseeable.

Notre Dame from 2002 demonstrates with great clarity this special fondness of the artist for a manner of proceeding which is suggestive and surprising in like measure. The tripartite video projection consists of a gradual approach by the camera towards the nocturnal pilgrimage church Notre Dame de la Garde in Marseilles which, brightly illuminated against the pitch-black sky, looks like a ghostly apparition. This work derives its dramatic quality – alongside a dynamic, predominantly synthetic acoustic background – from the perspective of the camera, which reveals that the church is located directly in front of a steep and fully accessible precipice that is indicated only by a small sign which, because of the extremely bright, blinding illumination of the church, is almost illegible. With the suspense typical of every first-rate thriller, the viewer is gripped by an involuntary shudder as a solitary figure, blinded by the high wattage of the spotlights, gropes his way forward through the dangerous darkness in front of the deadly cliff edge. One of the strengths of Astrid Nippoldt is that she does not further exploit this fundamental dramatic-narrational position, but instead deliberately allows it to remain in an atmospheric limbo. Thus the slowly and weightlessly gliding camera spreads out a dreamlike, hovering mood whose meditative quietude stands in stark contrast to the actual threatening situation. Just as already in *Heroic Turn*, it is a matter here of an equally double perspective. That which we see is on the one hand an image of endangerment, inasmuch as it presents to us the narrow dividing-line between a secure terrain and the constant menace of a fall. But at the same time it is also a dangerous image, namely one which intends to shake up and transform our perception so assiduously oriented towards normality and linear interconnection. This is already indicated by the brief text which the artist wrote herself and which accompanies the work: “Groping one’s way towards the seductive light, then further into the black void, one plunges suddenly into the city and downward into death.”

The seductive urge to enter into the – both oneiric and nightmarish – interconnection which the artist establishes with her images always aims at a productive feeling of insecurity. This ambiguity may be observed in relation to a motif that is of a central importance not only for this film. On a functional level, it appears as the illumination of the church and thereby also refers implicitly to the basic, media-related constellation to which each photographic or cinematic image owes its – illuminated – existence. In the context of the film by Nippoldt, however, the process of lighting becomes an act of blinding. The possibility of identifying the church by means of light as optical emphasis leads to the blindness of the observer who, lured by the light, runs the danger of plummeting into the bottomless abyss. On the other hand, the artist shows us – from a metaphorical point of view – how one’s own identity can, in the process of wanting to see, even being compelled to see, become lost in that which is seen and may perish therein.

In her linking of yearning desire and yawning danger, Astrid Nippoldt reveals herself to be a visual romantic who, with an equal degree of perfectionism and emotionality, searches in fascination for those factors through which the availability of reason is extinguished by means of the image itself. Yet it is never a matter here of a cloudily sentimental approximation. On the contrary, right from the very beginning this artwork is characterized by extreme exactness in terms of both craftsmanship and contents, as well as by a precision which could almost be deemed scrupulous. It is only because the visual framework is so accurately established, because the experimental configurations are so exactly balanced, that the leap of the images into openness and incertitude does not have a kitschy or sentimental effect.

The Serendip Stadium (2003/2004) dares to go quite far in this regard and fully wins its bet. The point of departure for this work was a residence of the artist in Essen on the occasion of her Rotary Club scholarship “Young Art” in the Kunsthau Essen 2002/03. After the failure of the actual scholarship project – a large-scale media spectacle in the Schalke soccer stadium –, which the artist herself significantly characterized as madly and excessively ambitious (“What is certain is that with the grandiose announcement I tripped all over myself,” in:

Astrid Nippoldt, catalogue of the Kunsthau Essen, 2003, p. 38), she came by chance to aim her camera at a trotting-racetrack in a snowstorm. **The Serendip Stadium** is the piece of luck presented by a found, actual situation which, with the help of clever editing by the artist and the contrapuntal use of sound, is transformed into a surrealist film that oscillates perfectly between reality and dream. At first there is nothing more than silently and thickly falling snow, out of which there emerges the shadowy outline of a densely enfolded, hooded figure. Later the camera focuses upon a trotter moving, with neither site nor goal, through the white, cottony-soundless nowhere-land, until the eye of the camera finally comes to be concentrated entirely upon the horse's body, where it finds in the tensing tendons and muscles a captivating image for a physical exertion that is both stunningly beautiful and devoid of meaning or purpose. The polka music accompanying these scenes, which incidentally is original sound coming from the stadium loudspeakers, as is the soft-rock recording of *Dreamer* by Ozzy Osbourne, makes an additional contribution towards transforming into a sleepwalking dance the "catastrophe" of the trotting race's being rendered impossible by the snowstorm. Just as in the previous examples, here also the intrusion of the unexpected is supported at the same time by aspects of yearning for the extraordinary as well as by a delight in aberration, in deviation.

The Serendip Stadium is suffused with an awareness that every apparent failure at the same time offers a great opportunity. This is also indicated by the title, which at first glance seems cryptic. Serendipity indicates namely the chance observation of something which was in no way the original goal of the investigation, but which upon closer analysis proves to be a new and surprising discovery. The word was first used by the English writer Horace Walpole (1717-1797), who thereby refers to the Persian fairy tale *The Three Princes of Serendip*, in which the protagonists of the fairy tale make many unexpected discoveries of this sort. Serendip is, by the way, the ancient Persian designation for Ceylon, the Sri Lanka of today. Classical examples of serendipity are the – as it were unplanned – discoveries of X-rays, penicillin, or the seemingly fantastic discovery of the benzene ring, which significantly goes back to a dream. Seen against this background, serendipity is not only an appropriate description for this unhopd-for happening upon the trotting-racetrack overwhelmed by snow flurries, but also possesses a quite essential significance as a metaphor for the entire work. And the original plan of staging a huge spectacle for the Schalke arena may be viewed with justification as an act of calculated (self-)deception. Inasmuch as from the very beginning the scope of the project is on so large a scale that, from a realistic point of view, it can scarcely be expected to be successful, the search for that which is unplanned accordingly becomes a necessity. The Munich-based artist Johannes Muggenthaler tells in one of his melancholic and beautiful novels of "how one can become fortuitously lost," and in so doing he declares digression to be the artistic principle par excellence. There is something of this poetic-romantic confession in the works of Astrid Nippoldt, an element which in **The Serendip Stadium** condenses into the joy of having found something that one would never have looked for, but which ultimately reveals itself to be much more significant and fraught with consequences than the initial goal. In the process, the film continuously inquires as to the limits of the images. Whereas in **Notre Dame** the ambivalence between lighting and blinding hinted at the possible plunge of the image from a realm of representation into an extinguishment as black as night itself, the whirling whiteness of the snowflakes simulates in **The Serendip Stadium** a pictorial snow which, just like the "white noise" of the television, marks the end of all visual information and the transition into an uninformed nothingness.

This oscillation between an almost magical emergence of the images and the constant menace of their disappearance is also at work in the meditative work **Fog on Nov 2** (2004). For almost seventeen minutes, we see images of Mount St. Helens, mainly at sunrise or sunset. The photographs, which were downloaded every five minutes from a stably positioned web camera and which were mounted as animated stills, cohere into a serial study of slowness and seeming uneventfulness, until suddenly there emerges out of the misty nothingness the peak

of the volcano crowned by wisps of pink cloud, so breathtakingly beautiful as to seem a mirage. These are the moments of surprise which Astrid Nippoldt seeks only in order, on the other hand, to immediately break the spell. The twist, the main point, the hidden surprise never represent the culmination towards which everything progresses, but instead they themselves are only a fleeting instant that itself is returned to the domain of the everyday and unspectacular, the realm of endless repetition and precisely calculated monotony.

It is in **Concorde** (2004/05) that the artist presents in the most polished manner her visually obsessed, yet unremittingly balanced and assiduously composed cosmos. To a degree greater than in any of her other films, this three-minute-long work evinces a delight in the demonstration of perfectly staged rituals in a form which maintains a balance between self-seduction and critical distance. The Place de la Concorde in Paris, which is here the scene of a military air-show, becomes the stage for an intoxicating series of images which tells of the pathos informing an architectural and military demonstration of power, and which thereby to a certain extent gives itself over with great pleasure to just that pathos which it has presented to us. The sparkling bubbles of the fountains at the Place de la Concorde seem like the effervescence of the image itself onto which, however, there immediately settles a blackness which flows down from the pictorial sky, and out of which there subsequently grows up into the middle of the blue sky a pole that leads into the thunderous flying formation of the military machines, which engrave into the azure expanse their streaks of condensation dyed as the tricolor, before a pink hue fills the screen and intimates the conclusion. It is an exactly calculated excess which the artist imposes upon us. An excess of kitschy colors, of roaring, phallic penetration by poles-obelisks-fighter planes. In a strict choreography characterized by rhythmic repetitions, she seeks the oscillating point where the images are capable of telling about their own state of being overwhelmed, without on the one hand collapsing completely within themselves, or on the other hand getting caught in too great a distance. What these images strive for is a heating point which seeks at the same time to preserve an inner coolness: ardent and involved, but not mindless. And thus, between the stagings of pathos, power and symmetry, there are inserted again and again cinematic takes in which the images reflect either their own constructedness or a peculiar, almost surreal emptiness. Like anti-aircraft batteries, cameras and spotlights stare from folding-grille platforms high in the pale blue sky up into nowhere, and an empty grandstand with three blanket-covered chairs and white sacks radiates the immobile melancholy that is so typical of de Chirico.

Concorde is the most artificial work in this oeuvre up to now and also, in comparison to the earlier tribute to Westerns **wy o ming** (2002) or **Afrika** (2005), with its references both to Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* and Japanese India-ink drawings, the least ironical. But this film as well takes up a harmonious position within a total artistic panorama in which the longing of the images to surprise themselves is wonderfully balanced against the extreme precision with which these visual marvels make their deliberate appearance. **Prolog** (2005) offers a consummate demonstration of this capability and, moreover, maintains an extraordinarily self-assured equilibrium upon the dividing line between drunken pathos and casual irony. Through a breathed-upon camera lens directed at night towards the entrance to the World Trump Towers in New York, Astrid Nippoldt generates a Hollywoodesque creation of the world. Accompanied at first by street noise and then by a rhythmic ticking, lights resembling stars are gradually peeled out of the glaring, screen-filling void which is due to the fully fogged-over lens, until finally – supported by a dramatically crescendoing cinematic soundtrack – the now completely clear eye of the camera opens up a view of the entrance to the Trump Tower crowned by the word **WORLD**. Astrid Nippoldt has need of little more than a minute to depict for us how it is possible to create the world out of an exhalation and, with only another breath, to cause it to subside back into misty nothingness. An appropriate “prologue” for an oeuvre about which much will yet be spoken. And an apt conclusion for this particular text.