

The Exhibition *In Between Images* at Galerie im Turm

*But it all began with the young class
celebrating its victory with the
stylistic vocabulary of the defeated.¹*

For we are where we are not – with this quote from Pierre-Jean Jouve, Nina Torp links the three eponymous works presented in the current exhibition at Galerie im Turm. Rather than referring to another location, the title evokes the parallel existence of different times, the presence of the past, which appears in all those places depicted in her works.

What exactly is it that the Pompeii ruins, recent neo-classicist buildings, Palladio's Teatro Olimpico and the Karl-Marx-Allee in Berlin have in common? In Nina Torp's examination they all seem to be treated similarly, as if on an artistic dissection table. With a prosaic approach she lines up these disparate places and buildings in time – as carriers of a "hegemonial tradition of Western vision", to use her own words. Early souvenir photographs of Pompeii and images of antique-looking private homes appropriated from online real-estate advertisements are multiplied and reproduced in the form of two wallpapers, always repeating the same viewing angles and perspectives. Though dating from different centuries, they seem strangely similar.

The new video titled *In Between Images* on the architecture of Karl-Marx-Allee² produced for the current exhibition contains images taken from the Internet. It is based on anonymous photographs of the towers on Frankfurter Tor and Strausberger Platz, designed by architect Hermann Henselmann. Referential pictures of diverse styles from recent centuries are being collaged on top of them. Images of Biedermeier and Empire-style furniture, copied from various art-history books, turn into a video tableau of European design history, recalling Aby Warburg's picture atlas.

Nina Torp refers to the neo-historicist style mixture in the respective sections of the avenue, designed by different architects of the team led by Henselmann. The overall concept of the architect collective, whose final plan was created subject to massive intervention from political functionaries, combines modern urban elements with the directives for the reconstruction of East German cities. These had been issued at the beginning of the 1950s under First Secretary Walter Ulbricht. What was requested was the construction of a representative boulevard, with formal reference to the national building tradition.

This first major urban project of the young GDR is mostly seen in the context of other Stalinist buildings such as the Warsaw Palace of Culture and Science or the Moscow Central University. What is mostly overlooked is that a similar ornamental modernity can be discerned in the USA as well, in the skyscraper boom which continued until the Great Depression. Parallels can be seen for example in the General Motors Building, built in 1920 in Detroit. The fundamental difference between the monumental corporate headquarters and the "first socialist street" is not in the stylistic detail. It is not in their stucco, portals or decorative pillars, but in their purpose, in the structural layout and in the social, economic and political

¹ Hermann Henselmann, Letter to Brigitte Reimann of 3.1.1966, quoted in Bruno Flierl: "Hermann Henselmann. Bauen mit Bildern und Worten". In: Bruno Flierl, *Gebaute DDR. Über Stadtplaner, Architekten und die Macht*. Berlin, 1998, p.178

² The urban complex of Karl-Marx-Allee was built between 1952 and 1958 in several stages. From 1949 to 1961 the street was known as Stalinallee. The Galerie im Turm is located in its eastern part, in the northern tower on Frankfurter Tor.

context of the buildings, which can be identified by their distribution in space. While both are massive and colossal, one is contracted to a limited area of private land, while the Karl-Marx-Allee extends as a loose ensemble over 2.3 km of the urban area. Its two tower / gate icons (inhabited by workers!)³ are rather playful landmarks. Bruno Flierl, in his text on Hermann Henselmann, speaks of a “social client”⁴, meaning the working class incarnated in the person of the party functionary. The Karl-Marx-Allee is a *public* space that should be social, inhabitable *and* politically and ideologically suitable at the same time.

The allegations of a totalitarian architecture and the “wedding cake style” have probably become less frequent in recent years, perhaps in the wake of more sophisticated research on urban planning and cultural studies analysis of the architectural legacy inherited from the GDR. The preservation of the Karl-Marx-Allee as a historical monument was already established in the 1990 Unification Treaty⁵ – what foresight, compared to some other post-unification deconstructions!

But still, what we face today and ever anew is the question of cultural tradition (we should rather speak of conflicting traditions that need to be untangled) and the relationship to the past, as expressed in the current reception and use of this space. A recent variant is the cutification and musealization of ‘GDR history’ that caters to the touristic eye and makes little distinction between the Stasi Museum and a brightly painted Trabi motorcade. A place like Karl-Marx-Allee, which is used, occupied and traversed every day, withstands such marketing strategies to some extent. But the work of Nina Torp is not entirely free either from this exoticizing look at the past – Stalinism as a curiosity, as a chamber of horrors, as a stylistic potpourri.

However, the background to her work is a very specific research interest. The rediscovery of antiquity in Classicism and its reappearance during the short period of Stalinist architecture stands here for the contingent construction of history and cultural tradition, deriving from the specific needs of the time. Simone Hain says: “There are conflicting cultural strategies, strange rituals and ambiguous symbols which also reflect and overlap in the architecture of the “Stalinallee”; it is a long, often fragmented story that has been handed down to us in a form that is far from trivial.”⁶

A common motif in Nina Torp’s work is the observation and production of space and landscape, as for example in her work on the Malerweg⁷, a scenic walk through the Saxonian mountains. Her interest in optical instruments and viewing traditions such as the establishment of the linear perspective in the Renaissance suggests that the artist has identified our way of viewing, of appropriating and representing places as something culturally coded. In particular, her work on the Renaissance theatre by Palladio, the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, seems like a direct confrontation and denial of this viewing tradition. We see her video in a table installation, projected into a structure reminiscent of a stage model. With a hand-held camera Nina Torp crisscrosses her way through the narrow, quirky passages and walkways in

³ The German *Werkstätige*, translated as ‘workers’ here, refers more to ‘average people’, as opposed to the elite.

⁴ *Hermann Henselmann – Bauen in Bildern und Worten*, in: Bruno Flierl, *Gebaute DDR. Über Stadtplaner, Architekten und die Macht*, Berlin, 1998, p.172ff.

⁵ *Die Stalinallee in Berlin*, in: ebd, p.30

⁶ from: Simone Hain, *Warum zum Beispiel die Stalinallee? Beiträge zu einer Transformationsgeschichte des modernen Planens und Bauens*. Beiträge des IRS nr. 15, Erkner, 1999. Translated from German by the author.

⁷ Torp's work *Der Malerweg* (2011) is based on a photographic leporello from the early 20th century, enlarged as an installation.

the backstage construction of the Teatro Olimpico – the entire walk is filmed in one take. At no time does she reveal to the viewer where she actually is: in the *trompe l'oeil* stage designed by Scamozzi, a stage construction of angled, narrowing streets with painted facades, creating the illusion of a spacious cityscape in the background of the frontal stage. Her exploration of the linear perspective literally *traverses* it.

The facades of the Karl-Marx-Allee too appear to Nina Torp as a stage set, a past rushing by in an endless repetition when one is cycling over the spacious sidewalks. Upon visiting several homes on the street during the research for the exhibition, however, it became clear that the ‘workers’ palaces’, although no palaces, are by no means just facades. Their interior shows a love of design and a sense of quality. The finishing of all the details, the layout of the rooms, the proportions, the staircases and even the mailboxes are modestly luxurious, modern and solid, somehow very bourgeois. Young families, volunteers from the first generation that built up and lived on the boulevard, and connoisseurs of architecture, live here today, sharing their knowledge of the inside and outside, the past and present of the Karl-Marx-Allee – material for future projects by Nina Torp, in the backstage area of history.

Naomi Hennig

Naomi Hennig is an artist and curator living in Berlin. She is currently responsible for the exhibition programme at Galerie im Turm.