

The Intruder

Every new installation by Ana Torfs brings a powerful, cinematic experience. This is also the case with *The Intruder*, an installation of slide projections on a black projection surface and a soundtrack, adapted from an 1890 one-act play by Maurice Maeterlinck. Each new work by Torfs allows me to further investigate the nuances in the differences between film projection and installation, between cinema and museum gallery, between telling and showing. Her work is always on the cutting edge of the divide between the one and the other: slightly uncomfortable, but with ever greater self-assurance. With *The Intruder*, Torfs has forced this in-between to become her absolute terrain.

The commitment of such an installation in a museum context is exceedingly high. A visit to an exhibition is not a visit to a theatrical performance. The looking behaviour of the promenading pedestrian visitor can in no way be reconciled with that of the fascinated member of a seated audience. How can I make the one become the other? This is the problem of all artistic expression that takes place over the course of time. How long will you stop and look when you are itching to walk on?

Torfs turns the problem into a means of radicalizing her distant relationship to telling. What had been a difficulty is thus transformed into an advantage. For Torfs, the way of being in a cinema was equally displeasing – the viewer sucked into the fiction machine. It was not her idea to speak around the world, to her peers. That would not allow her to investigate those things that intrigue her above all else. Consequently, the exhibition gallery has been modified from obstacle to cornerstone, a point of support.

At the centre, there is always the text. For Torfs, the text is not a means of entering the souls of people, but something that has been written down, a thing that has become a graphic object. One does not entice the text to come to life; one reads it. We must stay there, at the reading, literally at the letter of the text. Clamp off the emotional umbilical cord with feelings, meaning, identification, to the point of asphyxiation. It is not enough to understand, and it is utterly impossible to step ‘into’ the text, to put it on like a costume, for identification.

How does she do it? She switches on different strategies. To begin, Torfs had Maeterlinck’s theatrical script, written in French, translated into English. It is not the actors we are seeing who read the text, but other actors. The text is not synchronized with the movements and expressions. In *The Intruder*, the reading of the text is stereotyped, with always the same rhythm, the same intonations, the same forced articulation. As in a Berlitz language course, one reads the dialogues in the exercises.

In the images, the actors ‘evolve’ in a modern villa, in a parlour that looks out onto a garden. The décor is not *belle époque*, but the environment of the ambitious and rich, today – classic modern, strict and businesslike. It does not fit the pathos of the text, but it does fit the anti-pathos of the voices. They are three men, one woman, (and very briefly, a second), a quartet with a brief reinforcement as a quintet. Fascinated, we look at the changes in the frame of the image, the movements of the characters in that frame and in the sitting room, the movements of the characters in relation to one another, and we also look at the objects in the space – chairs, table and door to the terrace.

Ana Torfs has one last surprise in store for us. The moving of the actors in the space is woven together with the succession of slide images. The rhythm with which the slides change is in fact the music of the entire installation. It is indeed the rhythm of attention and concentration that Torfs has imposed on us. Not for a moment does she hesitate to insist on that volume of time for an image. They are images, therefore, in which she believes, which she does not smuggle away in a rapid succession of images. She is not ashamed of her images, nor does she cynically presume that her visitors or audience might not want to or be able to look.

All of these manoeuvres supersede their purely formal aspect. Torfs allows the texts that she gives us to listen to come to life in a manner all their own. With unflinching distance from their original context (no mediaeval atmosphere surrounding Joan of Arc in *Du mentir-faux*, no Biedermeier style for Beethoven in *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*), she presents the original text as archaeological material that can never again be reincarnated, but must only be reconstructed by the objectifying observation of the investigator. While she follows so many procedures that we have to describe as deconstruction, it is clear that that is not what this is about. On the contrary, everything here is aimed, without naïve illusions of the original text being close by, to nonetheless imagine an extremely intensive reconstruction, as close as possible to the letter of the text (given that we can no longer reach the spirit of the original). The passion for the letter proves to deliver a most intense experience, quite different than an imaginary re-evocation, but every bit as exciting – even more so. As in all of Ana Torfs' work, the question repeatedly asked, and which is so clearly answered, is: what is really there, apart from my interpretation?

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Translated from the Dutch by Mari Shields