

The World Observer
Gabriele Mackert, 2006

“The moments of silence are like the dark phases in the projection and help to mediate a sense of the passing of time.”
Robert Barry 1983 in a conversation with Robert C. Morgan.

Sometimes I think Ana Torfs is searching for the impossible, for the authentic image, for an image that does more than simply exist, but is. Ana Torfs is someone who wants to help things to go beyond their mere existence and become phenomena. She is a special kind of world observer. Wandering through a world of image excess, in her photographs she finds moments of halting and pausing. All emanate calm, an almost majestic gravity, which can be attributed to their high dose of concentration in the composition. Although not heroic, the images are, in this sense, highly emotive.

Torfs is extremely precise in the figurative and literary processing of her slide projections, which are usually large format, and has developed her own density and complexity in terms of content and structure. In layered or parallel projections accompanied in many cases by a soundtrack and intertitles, Torfs presents strict mise en scenes with a consistent, stage-like presence. Through the combination of photographic images with text—whether spoken or written, literary (*The Intruder*, 2004) or documents (*Du mentir-faux*, 2000)—Torfs creates visual and linguistic metaphors for intellectual concepts and produces complex cultural, philosophical, psychological, and social contexts. Condensed in this way, the characters, faces, postures, gestures, gazes, voices, props, and spaces seem precisely calculated and reveal a profound composition.

With Torfs' work, nothing seems light and easy (even though the photos for the slide projection *Du mentir-faux* have been taken within a few minutes). The result is anything but random shots. Each of the photos seems as though it has its own cosmos: strictly arranged but with endless opportunities for development. By playing with the possible variations of the images, Torfs presents the minutest nuances before the eyes of those who have the patience and curiosity to see the images emerging, as it were. Although Torfs' pictorial worlds make an almost surgically precise impression, her narrative structure remains open. This is, possibly, also the extremely subjective content of these images. The beholder's personal associations and memories automatically fill in the narrative gaps of the projection and the photographs—such as the strikingly neutral, uniform white background. Occasionally, the images recall past events and elicit numerous associations stored in our visual memory. Nonetheless, they remain implicit, strangely non-concrete: not a particular scene, not this person or that, not here or there.

Actually, these images are not tied to any particular place. Torfs' slide projection *The Intruder* begins with an introductory text slide: “The action takes place in modern times,” which specifies only an intellectual concept and not a definitive date. By locating the plot, which develops tenaciously (if not to say, drags itself) from image to image, and also from sentence to sentence, in modern times, she thereby evokes various virulent fields of tension.

Torfs is not concerned with the illusion that the viewer's immediate experience (in the midst of the projection space and also in the midst of the plot) provokes, but (always) with critical reflection on the mechanism of reception. At certain moments, every perceiving subject is a perceived object. The subject, too, is located in the viewing field. For Torfs, it is additionally one of reflexive analysis, which constantly accompanies the perception of images and words. The sober, enlightened way in which Torfs examines the images' structure presents their construction, which thereby enables an awareness of their mode of reception. The anti-illusionist effect of the visible and, above all, audible slide projector in the picture space supports this process.

Tightly associated with that and nonetheless clearly different is the issue of the subject constellation. Torfs' installation *The Intruder* based on an early theater play by Maurice Maeterlinck—the only Belgian Nobel prize winner—shows the protagonists isolated and paralyzed, spellbound in the grand ambience of modern architecture, most likely from the 1960s. They wait for the unknown like marionettes, as though pulled from Oskar Schlemmer's pictures. The mood inspired by Maeterlinck's text clearly radiates a desire for a quick end; being stuck in front of the sick room of the beloved wife/sister/daughter might have placed the family together, but did not bring them together—but that, too, is not (or no longer) discussed here. In her slide projection, Torfs creates a paradoxical atmosphere subtly transporting the sense of unpleasant captivity that the people experience in this grand ambience. For example, there is the monotone recitation that comes across as unnatural and torn out of context. Just like this language, which actually has no speaker, no past, and no future, these people, too, are severed from history, which is happening around them: there is no forward and no backward here. The worst case scenario has occurred, namely, that of standstill. In this, no one wants to be assigned to a role, a function, or an opinion.

In some ways, the behavior and gestures of the grandfather are like those of a stereotypical sleep walker. As the blind man, he is that member of the waiting family who naturally feels the disaster approaching and embodies an almost classical conflict of modernism; between pure reason and intention. Naturally, there is the question of how we can trust our senses (in this case, seeing and hearing). Additionally, viewers in the current reception situation are asked what they will do with the information that reaches them. The questions posed by Jeanne d'Arc's inquisitors, documented in indirect speech in the trial protocol in

Du mentir-faux, provoke something similar: “Interrogated if the saints which appeared to her had hair,” “Interrogated how they spoke if they had no limbs,” “Interrogated whether she had held or kissed the crown,” etc., are there on the intertitle cards, hinting at the silent film era. The more detailed the questions, the more absurd seem the criteria, intellectual interests, and dogma of belief that they stand for. Is this the way to track down the truth?

The modernists and their successors torpedoed images with system, with collage and juxtaposition, with appropriation and variation. They deconstructed a lot. They confronted images with text and inquired about seeing or actually reading. They stopped the images and confronted them with unhurriedness, for example, or with movement or standstill. Since her studies in Brussels, where she realized her first work on the theme of Jeanne d’Arc with the video *Jeanne la Pucelle*, (1987) and since the making of her feature film on 35 mm *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* (1998), Torfs has fallen back on cinematic images only for her web project *Approximations/Contradictions* for Dia Art Foundation (2004). At the moment, her work focuses on photography, yet that is not to say “still images.” Torfs allows the images to flow extremely slowly into one another or follow from one another. At times the differences in the successive images are minimal, giving rise to the impression of a slight movement. Even *Du mentir-faux*, where the portraits are broken by intertitles exhibits this dynamic. Elsewhere, in *The Intruder*, there are scene changes like in film. The projection’s narrative thread does not develop from the illusion of movement, but from the individual images’ inherent depth of movement.

For Torfs, cinematic experience is fundamental. Perhaps it is possible to say in the words of her fellow countryman Marcel Broodthaers, who not only led the way for many Belgian artists but also has a particularly strong presence and has thus left a difficult legacy: “The starting point for my perspective is an understanding of film that rejects the concept of movement. The film strip is a site for the preservation of ideas.”(1) This also corresponds with Broodthaers’ definition of slide projection as “photo-film,” which expresses the idea of non-static photography not only in a transferred sense, and develops from the area of photography. In that slide projection already sets the photographs in rhythmic motion, this suggests a context of meaning for the image’s internal communication and inquires into the possibility of producing sense. For Broodthaers, cinema is a laboratory in which we are able to experience time and movement as having become constituents of the figurativeness itself. Cinematic thought will be carried further there where the image rests, where it is contemplative, for example, in the intensified presence of pure acoustical or visual situations in modern film since neo-realism. Here it is about images that are not simply poor imitations of the halting of movement, but rather, that make present dimensions of time that the movement is, for its part, an expression of. The individual take becomes independent from the greater context of meaning of a (linear) narrative. In that, the intervals between images gain in importance. This implies a reflection of time, which, as a separate dimension of representation, likewise becomes more independent since it is no longer tied to a movement.

When the moving image approaches the unmoving, the viewer is confronted with the time of his or her own film experience. Variations of unmoving images fluctuate between film still, tableaux vivant, and painting. This leads to an intensified reflection on cinematic representation and to the film’s three-dimensionality. Such an approach to the three-dimensionality of the unmoving image necessarily refers back to the time-relatedness of cinematic representation. The stilling of the picture clip, freeze frame, seems to be the filmmaker’s reconciliation with the film’s traditional 24 images per second. Jean-Luc Godard even claimed that it is the truth: “Photography is truth. Cinema is truth twenty-four times per second.” (2)

Gilles Deleuze understood cinema as a history of thinking images: cinematography as mental and creative apparatus. In the midst of these processes, cinema enables an intensified understanding of a reality that it has had a part in creating—that of modernity. Deleuze shows that cinema does not function by presenting us with unmoving images and, additionally a process for embossing them with movement, but instead, delivers a movement-image directly. He shows that cinema erases the psychological difference between the mental reality of the image and the mental reality of movement. The cinematographic images are neither “permanent settings” like the forms of the classical world, nor “unmoving cuts” of the movement, instead, “moving cuts”; images that move. Deleuze thereby called them “movement-images.” (3)

Giorgio Agamben expanded this analysis and in his text “Notes on Gesture,” from 1992, attempted to show that Deleuze’s statements concern even the status of the Modern image. Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, too, must accordingly cease to be considered unmoving and eternal forms. They can be considered fragments of a gesture or photograms of a lost film, which is the only place wherein they truly make sense. “And that is so because a certain kind of *litigatio*, a paralyzing power whose spell we need to break, is continuously at work in every image; it is as if a silent invocation calling for the liberation of the image into gesture arose from the entire history of art.” This hereby destroys the mythical rigidity of the image. It is no longer possible to talk of images, but only of gestures. “Every image, in fact, is animated by an antinomic polarity: on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture ... on the other hand, they preserve the *dynamis* intact ... which is not at all an immobile archetype as common interpretations would have it, but rather, a constellation in which phenomena arrange themselves in a gesture.” (4)

With her works, Torfs moves in this field: the perceptive blind person, but also the visionary heroine from *Du mentir-faux* are such points of crystallization, the two counterparts in *Elective Affinities/The Truth of Masks* (2002) who move through a broad palette of different performances, or also the photographs from the series “à ... à...aaah!”, which have arisen in recent years and have now been put together in a new arrangement for the GAK Bremen exhibition. And there is always the suspicion that like in

modern acting—Torfs works at times with professional models—the play *contains* and *produces* truth, rather than just *pointing to* a truth that lies outside of it. As a result of Torfs' strategy of extreme stylizing, coupled with the actors' spontaneity, this effect of presence seems to touch on the truth of being or to enable access to questions about what existence is. The truth produced by fiction is more impressive than that of documentation.

Torfs is economical with her means. Black and white are the colors of her cosmos, which unfurls a highly sensual presence precisely for this reason. The (frontal) portrait is a universal picture type. Behind this radical reduction to a single (so to speak) take, I suspect a basic refusal to manipulate images and also the story. The succession of images in a slide projection might perhaps suggest the illusion of a chronological sequence, yet in such takes, time can develop its very own poetry.

(1) Marcel Broodthaers, "Le D est plus grand que le T," in: Marcel Broodthaers, *Cinéma*, Barcelona 1997, p. 58.

(2) Jean-Luc Godard in *Le Petit Soldat*, France, 1960.

(3) Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (transl.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1986.

(4) Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in: Hemma Schmutz and Tanja Widmann (eds.): *Dass die Körper sprechen, auch das wissen wir seit langem.* (that bodies speak has been known for a long time*.)*, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne, Vienna 2004, p. 109.