

ANA TORFS – ‘ANATOMY’

The government is determined to restore law, order and security, and to put an end to all Bolshevik activities.

Ana Torfs quotes a document dating from the German Reich, which she found in the Secret Central Archives in South-West Berlin, as she was spending a year as a DAAD’s artist-in-residence in 2005.

The starting point for her latest work, developed during that residency and now shown at Argos in Brussels, is the trial of the murderers of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The two founders of the Spartacus League (forerunner of the German Communist Party) were abducted and killed by the Freikorps militia in January 1919 in Berlin. None of the nine officers accused was ever convicted of murder.

After an in-depth research, ‘dissection’, and selection of specific highlighted parts of the Record of the Proceedings, Torfs re-enacts this ‘Comedy of Justice’.

The defendants are shown to us on two twin TV monitors, each encasing a staring face – one is testifying while the other one is silent, thus creating a dramatic tension – but we do not know what the relationship is between the two: the silent one might be waiting for his/her turn to testify, or be listening to the defendant on the other screen - or reflecting upon the reality of the murders of Liebknecht and Luxemburg.

Projected on a life-size screen opposite the TV monitors are black-and-white slides shot in the Anatomical Theater in Berlin, an eighteenth century building conceived by the architect of the famous Brandenburger Tor. While the testifying defendants and witnesses - from a Marine Lieutenant to a waiter – describe the bleeding bodies of the murdered victims in the double video, here we see a group of people looking down onto an invisible or never-occurring dissection. Is it the dissection of the murdered bodies of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, or of this very trial? ‘Anatomy’ points to the different parts of a body, as much as it does to the different perceptions we have of a situation, to the structure of language, and self-reflectively to the different parts of the very work of the artist, which she has knowingly put together in a precisely thought editing process. By associating mute and talking, still and moving, colour and black-and-white images, wide shots and close-ups, Torfs creates a multi-layered perception of the event we are looking at.

Language adds to this mise en abîme, as the words uttered by the 25 young German actors filmed to re-enact the trial are spoken in German but simultaneously (as during a real trial) translated into English by an interpreter. We hear the English voice-over through a dimmed loudspeaker – or we can choose to listen to it in wireless headphones. The English text in the ‘Anatomy’ book is yet another – written- translation of the same German text.

The black-and-white slides of the anatomical theatre projected onto a large screen remind us of a huge trial room, but also, with their frescoes on the back walls, of Dante’s Divine Comedy. As in an endless Beckettian loop, each shot shows us a new setting of the characters within the circular upstairs balconies of the room – we see the whole group of 17 characters as well as different close-ups of each of them as they in turn occupy a central

place. Projected high onto the wall, the large scale image hangs over us, impending as if the characters – most of them acted by well-known German actors – were looking down on us. Are we the onlookers or are they? We might be a part of the dissected body of history they are for ever witnessing.

The book – which is more than a catalogue, and as in the show, is in German and English – contains the selected texts from the trial's Record of Proceedings, and a text written by the artist narrating her working process. It ends with a quote from Walter Benjamin's 'On the concept of History': (...) *This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appear before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole that which has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows towards the sky. What we call progress is this storm.*

Perhaps Ana Torfs' 'Anatomy' points to the bleeding body of history – past, present and future - terrifying, questioning, and still called 'progress'.

Tania Nasielski – February 2007

'Anatomy' is on show at Argos, Brussels, Belgium, from 6 February till 10 March 2007.