

Portrait of the Artist as an Etymologist

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‘Language is the archives of history’, and the etymologist who explores the layers of sedimentation accumulated there ‘finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry’. So writes Ralph Waldo Emerson in ‘The Poet’, and his memorable formulation articulates the view of language embodied in Ana Torfs’s *TXT* (*Engine of Wandering Words*), and helps us understand what is so distinctive about that work. It is certainly not unusual for works of contemporary art to originate in and give form to a dialogue with a text or texts, whether fictional, historical, theoretical, scientific or other. It is much rarer, however, to find artworks whose conceptual interlocutor and plastic material is language itself, as opposed to the ideas or realities a particular combination of words can be made to express or conjure up. But such is *TXT*, a work organized around six isolated words: saffron, coffee, tobacco, chocolate, ginger and sugar. Over the years, Ana Torfs has shown herself to be a keen and imaginative reader and interpreter of texts; in *TXT*, conversely and not without a tinge of irony, she comes across as an Emersonian etymologist instead: she treats words as ‘fossil’ poems, approaches language as ‘the archives of history’, and creates a *dispositif* that extracts six commonly-used words from the restricted economy of communication, governed as it is by the closed play of sign and referent, to make us see them as ‘brilliant picture[s]’.

Those familiar with *TXT* know that there is nothing metaphorical about this description: the work consists of six Jacquard tapestries, each of which literally unfolds a word into a series of pictures. Significantly, these pictures are not freestanding, but placed on the ‘engine’ whose functioning and founding logic are laid out in the text that lines the bottom of each tapestry, snaking its way from one to the other, connecting them. The engine and the text come from Jonathan Swift, who describes in *Gulliver’s Travels* a machine composed of wood blocks about the size of a die evenly spaced on wires connected to handles placed along its edges. In Swift, though, the inventor of this contraption has glued pieces of paper, each containing a word, to the faces of the wood blocks: he has programmed, as we would say today, the engine with ‘all the words of their [the Balnibarbi’s] language’. Ana Torfs has replaced the words with pictures and systematically omitted every reference to ‘words’ or ‘language’ in the passage just cited, which appears in *TXT* as follows: ‘and on these papers were [...] all the [...] of their [...]’ (see ‘Tobacco’). And yet this work, which replaces words with pictures and is careful to omit any reference to words or language, is entitled *TXT* (*Engine of Wandering Words*) – the latter, incidentally, is an expression we shall not find in

Swift, but which perfectly describes the machine in the book. The work exists, then, in the tension suggested by this seeming paradox: the operations by which *TXT* constitutes language itself, and not its use, as an object of art are the same that orchestrate language's disappearance in, or metamorphosis into, pictures or images. If I started with Emerson, it is because his view of language may help us find our way through the dialectic between word and image at work in *TXT* without succumbing entirely to paradox. It remains for us to see how this dialectic plays itself out.

The way Ana Torfs appropriates and deploys Swift's engine focuses our problem on the following questions: how does one turn a word into an image? And what sort of relation is established in *TXT* between the word and its figuration? Needless to say, this can be a simple affair: you turn a word into an image by depicting whatever it is the word names. This is a challenge in the case of abstract concepts such as love or betrayal, since they can be figured in hundreds of different, and stereotyped, ways. But it is usually a no brainer when we are dealing with such things as saffron, ginger or tobacco, all of which have stable referents. In either case, and without being derailed by sceptical or postmodernist challenges, the relationship is one of equivalence: this is or equals that. Another possibility is to turn the word itself into an image, thus releasing or revealing the art immanent to its script. This attention to the graphic dimensions of language can – though it need not – forego any relation to a referent, hence its relative ease in working with language's most atomic element: the alphabet itself (think of Franz Erhard Walther's alphabet sculptures).

Ana Torfs does neither of these things in *TXT*. The words themselves are, in each instance, the least conspicuous thing about the work. Placed in parenthesis, and written backwards and upside down, the words not only seem almost to merge into the tapestry, they are also visually dwarfed by the imposing engine above, and the two perfectly symmetrical and pitch black lines of text under, them. We'll look in vain to the text for clues about the words: it is not about them, and they don't appear in it. As for the pictures on the engine, they are no less enigmatic in their sheer scope and remoteness. Scanning them, we see variously-sized sailing vessels from different ages, a good many maps and cityscapes, busy markets and trading tools such as weights, astronomic and navigational tools, navigators and explorers, mythological figures, images of forced labour, passages of text (an add announcing '250 fine healthy NEGROES' for sale in 'Tobacco', or part of a page from Flaubert's *Dictionary of Accepted Ideas* in 'Coffee'), and more. The word itself is the most discreet element in the configuration of the tapestry. And so too is the thing it names in the profusion of images on the engine: we see cocoa but not chocolate; sugar cane but not sugar; the *Crocus sativus* but not the crimson threads of dried saffron we are familiar with; workers at a tobacco plantation – absent the word, it could be any other kind of plantation – but no cigarettes or cigars (I leave it to you to find the pipe); coffee shrubs and sacs of coffee beans, not explicitly identified as such, but coffee itself is nearly invisible. Ginger alone is immediately identifiable – though here, too,

I think we would be at a loss without the word – and ginger, of course, is the only one of the six that is not transformed from raw material to coveted commodity.

This is not to suggest that *TXT* is some sort of detective game, likely to be won by the viewer with the deepest iconographic pockets. What concerns us is the relationship between the words themselves, and the images that have replaced words on the engine. Even assuming that our iconographic sleuth could connect all the images to each other – and the functioning of the engine warns us against assuming outright that they are connected, or can be – it is clear that their relation to the word would still need elucidation, since an unproblematic equivalence is not a possibility. So how are we to explain it? We could say that, brought together and helped along by images of compasses, sailing ships, trade and forced labour, these words outline for us a composite picture of imperial, crusading and colonial Europe, depending on when and through what routes these wandering words, and the commodities they name, reached our shores and entered our languages. What the images on the engine show is that saffron, coffee, et al., are spoils of conquest, and one of the effects of the work is to suggest the exploitation that, today as yesterday, continues to ensure that we are comfortably, and cheaply, supplied with these goods. Ana Torfs explains that what drew her attention to these words is the fact that they are ‘loanwords’, a technical term for a word that undergoes little or no transformation as it migrates to another language. Isn’t that the stock complaint levelled at immigrants? Aren’t we always being told that their problem is that they insist on their otherness, that they are reluctant to adapt and embrace the culture of the country that has graciously welcomed them? In contrast, these six loanwords are the immigrants we have completely naturalized, the ones we have forgotten are immigrants. The combination of word and image in *TXT*, then, achieves what Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky argues is the proper function of the metaphor: it de-familiarizes. The pictography of *TXT* avoids any readily identifiable image of the commodities themselves because its purpose is to recover and confront us with the foreignness of these words. In so doing, *TXT* inscribes them anew in a litigious political context: this is the history, and what is still at stake politically, behind the smiling black faces on our Oxfam and Fair Trade coffee bags.

We could say, then, that the relation between the six words and the pictures on the engine is governed by the metaphor, which is not the same as saying that it is metaphorical. The metaphor is, literally, a carrying over; it provides transport or passage by creating an analogy between two unrelated elements. In this case, language and images. We could also say that the relation is associative. What Ana Torfs has done in *TXT* is widened to its breaking point, and maybe beyond, the circle of associations each of her words can bear. Here, the words function as subliminal master signifiers that guide our reading of the elements and spell out or adumbrate their ‘political’ message. I think there is truth to both of these possibilities, but I also think *TXT* embeds these two in a slightly deeper game. Even assuming we are right in saying that the metaphor governs the relation, we are still left with the task of explaining

why the metaphor makes sense, why it works. In other words, we still have to explain the condition of possibility, as philosophers would say, of this carrying over. Association can help us thematically, but it cannot explain what binds these two unrelated elements, language and images. At this level, all association can tell us is the well-known fact that words conjure up images, and vice versa, and that they can be associated and combined to create a variety of resonant or dissonant effects. But the engine, as Ana Torfs uses it, is not a machine of informed association; nor is it, as it is in Swift, a machine of entirely random associations. It is a machine of substitution. In this context, it is important to revisit the strange choice to spell the words backwards and upside down: not ideal for the viewer, but perfectly legible to the pictures on the engine. We might even say, in fact, that the words mirror or reflect the pictures; certainly the parentheses around each word is suggestive of that, reminiscent as they are of the way we sometimes sum up a whole sequence of events or ideas with one parenthetical statement. What this tells us is that the metaphor and the play of associations are effects of the *dispositif* Ana Torfs creates in order to recover, not simply the history behind the words, but, more profoundly, the fact, as Emerson puts it, that ‘language is made up of images’. That is the work of the etymologist.

We live in an age when understanding a relation seems invariably to mean establishing an identity – a sin the art world is particularly susceptible to. To say that ‘language is made up of images’ is not to collapse the difference between them, but an effort to explain what enlivens language, so that it can be said, as Emerson says of Montaigne’s *Essays*, ‘cut these words and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive’. Most of the text at the bottom of the tapestries concerns the functioning of the engine and the motivation behind its creation. Significantly, though, Ana Torfs also includes, in ‘Ginger’ and ‘Sugar’ (the last two tapestries in the series, if we follow the progression of the text though not, and this is important, the way the work is displayed), two notions Gulliver encounters at the ‘school of languages’, which he visits immediately upon parting with the creator of the engine. One of the professors at the school has a scheme to eliminate all parts of speech – verbs, particles, etc. – except for nouns. It’s only natural, he reasons, since ‘all things imaginable are but nouns’. Another takes this idea one step further and argues that ‘words are only names for *things*’, and consequently it would be much more expedient to replace words with the things themselves, that forever elusive object of philosophers. In the book, Swift has a good time making fun of the followers of this view, whom he portrays as ‘sinking under the weight’ of the packs they must carry in order to communicate. He is of course satirizing those rationalists who see language merely as a tool for attaining truth, and who thus fail to realize that truth is not extrinsic to language (or to images, forms, numbers, etc.), but that language is the form of truth in which we understand. The rationalists Swift has in mind look at words and see awkward approximations for clear and distinct concepts, approximations that invariably keep them at one remove from reality, from ‘*things*’. And he saddles them with the ‘things’ they so

desperately want. If *TXT* cites the theory but not its satiric putdown, it is because it is itself a perfectly calibrated rejection of the absurd the notion that words are ‘only names for things’.

This absurdity, in any case, gives us a clue for how to understand the ‘deadest word’, which Emerson’s etymologist recovers as a ‘brilliant picture’. We would be hasty to assume that the ‘deadest word’ necessarily belongs to a dead language, or that Emerson is thinking exclusively of archaic or obsolete terms, of words that have for one reason or another fallen out of use. The story is more complicated than that. For Emerson, the ‘deadest word’ is either the word that has become an abstraction, and thus lost touch with anything tangible, with the set of gestures and practices that once enlivened and grounded it, or the word that has become so tightly bound to its referent that its horizon has shrunk to the size and shape of the thing it names. Saffron, coffee, tobacco, chocolate, ginger and sugar are dead words in this sense. And it is to disabuse us of the notion that language is an imperfect representational system for things, one that must either be improved or, as Swift’s professor suggests, abandoned altogether, that Emerson claims that ‘language is made up of images’, not of things. Emerson would never deny that a word is indeed a name for a thing. But it is also more than that. A word is a tomb: it remembers. It is a cipher or token, a fossil (Borges calls it a ‘talisman’) that retains the movements, exchanges, sufferings, glimmers and struggles of a people or peoples; a mineral deposit upon which are imprinted the routes through which it has travelled and the memory of the voices that have uttered it. Ana Torfs cut the words, and they bled.