

Out of the Picture

— CATHERINE ROBBERECHTS

The Intruder might well be Ana Torfs' most beautiful—though by no means her best-known work.¹ The piece's somewhat “discreet” existence makes it all the more intriguing. It consists of projected slides and a soundtrack. We see a series of portraits of four people, and catch a fleeting glimpse of a fifth. These “actors” appear on screen in various combinations; sometimes we see just a single figure. They are in the living room of a modern villa with sober, design furniture and a view of a garden. Their faces betray little expression or emotion. They have nothing to do, they rarely look at one another and they seem wrapped up in their own thoughts most of the time. The interior evokes a similar “opacity”: the space could just as well be a waiting or conference room; it tells us nothing about the activities of its inhabitants, if that's what they are. Yet this is by no means a cold or sterile presentation: the black-and-white images projected onto a black surface, their delicate rhythm, soft transitions, and slow fades, create an effect that is actually very warm—almost melancholic—while the format of the projection and the spatial set-up seem to invite the viewer into a nearly physical intimacy with the characters.

They are given a voice in the soundtrack through a series of dialogues adapted from the one-act play *L'Intruse* (The Intruder) written by the French-speaking Flemish author Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949)—the only Belgian so far to have won the Nobel Prize for Literature (1911). Ana Torfs commissioned a new English translation of the play and then had the slightly amended text performed—or better, “read”—by professional voice actors, with considerable emphasis, precise articulation, and no attempt at naturalism.

Torfs did not work with this text for the first time in 2004. She had already produced a radio

play based on *L'Intruse* as early as 1985,² in what she considers to be her “first consciously created ‘work.’”³ It was followed 15 years later by an eponymous photographic piece:⁴ two white surfaces on a grey background, like an open book, with a sentence from *L'Intruse* on the left and a black-and-white group portrait on the right. Maeterlinck's text has clearly never been too far from Torfs' mind since the beginning of her career.

The young Maeterlinck himself described *L'Intruse* as the first part of “a little trilogy of death”⁵ telling of how death intrudes into a closed family circle. The work is commonly ascribed to Symbolism (with its focus on the instinctive and intuitive, its penchant for suggestion and allusion, and its fascination with the unfathomable aspects of existence). It has a fairly dark, “Gothic” streak, albeit with a touch of irony: in the wake of a difficult birth, a family watches over the young, ailing mother and her sickly child (incestuously conceived, it is hinted at). As night falls, the figure of death enters the house, claiming its victim at midnight.

Various authors, on the other hand, have noted the innovative nature of Maeterlinck's early plays and the way they foresee modern theater.⁶ This is static drama, lacking any real action or intrigue. More than that, Maeterlinck's “studies in dramatized waiting,”⁷ with their fairly pointless dialogues, tending towards the absurd, radically seize upon the theater's conditions—space and time—as their true subject matter.

Ana Torfs did not want to produce her own “staging” of *L'Intruse*; nor does she invite the viewer to become absorbed in the story. Such a tendency to identification is hindered in all sorts of ways. As Dirk Lauwaert has already emphasized, the text is central, yet more so as “a graphic object.” For Torfs, “one does not entice [it] to come to life; one reads it. We must stay there, at the reading, literally at the letter of the text.”⁸ While

linked with the text—in a narrative sense, too—rather than illustrating it, the images form a kind of “second track,” and the viewer has no option but to continually explore the space that lies between reading (aloud) and looking; between narrating and showing. Sometimes the two tracks move very closely together, in a way that recalls a photo-novel; at others, the images begin to lead a life of their own: through the rapid transitions, the figures seem on the brink of movement, and an autonomous drama develops in some sequences. Meanwhile, the black text slides with directorial instructions, which are inserted among the images from time to time, continuously bring our concentration back to the fact that everything here ultimately derives from a printed text.

The exploration of this relationship between image and text, between reading and visualizing, is at the heart of Torfs' oeuvre. Yet in her treatment of Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* that probing achieves an exceptional stratification and tension. This has to do with the essence of *L'Intruse* itself: many of the themes and approaches that Maeterlinck treats or rehearses in the play are echoed in Ana Torfs' own work.

One such constant theme is the conditions of the work and its reception: not just the space and the passage of time, to which we have already referred (the striking of the hours is explicitly emphasized in the text), but also the sensory activity that the viewer must deploy in order to discover the work. The principal character in the play, the elderly grandfather, is blind, making hearing and seeing central themes of the text. The viewer, too, is immediately invited to reflect on the reliability of his or her own perception: the grandfather might be blind, but he is the only one who “sees” disaster coming. And he regularly accuses the others of being unable to “look” properly. The question of what an image actually shows us and what it actively doesn't show us is one that Ana Torfs

articulates constantly throughout her work. *L'Intruse* is a play, moreover, in which everything of any real importance occurs “elsewhere”—off stage: there is no visible sign of the dying mother, the sickly child, or the approaching figure of death; *L'Intruse* “is as much about the unseen space and its contents as it is about the visible dramatic community, as much about what lies ‘à côté,’ ‘en dessous,’ and ‘entre les lignes’ as it is about what we see.”⁹ This movement toward abstraction can also be found repeatedly in Torfs’ work.

Might it be argued that *L'Intruse* is a “programmatic” text for Ana Torfs? And can *The Intruder* therefore be considered some kind of key work? If so, it is rather amusing that the installation has until recently remained somewhat “out of the picture” in terms of the reception of her work.

From the Dutch by Ted Alkins

NOTES

1 The installation’s “premiere” at Roomade in Brussels in October 2004 lasted only ten days, after which it took over a year to find a further venue. Initially there were also just a few commentaries on the installation published. This work has garnered increased attention only as of late, with the exhibitions at K21 and Generali Foundation.

2 The play was broadcast once during Koen Brams’ program on the student radio station “Scorpio” in Leuven.

3 See p. 186 in this book.

4 *L'Intruse* (2000), digital print on aluminium, 93 x 140 cm.

5 See Paul Gorceix, “L'Intruse. Introduction,” in *La Belgique fin de siècle*, ed. idem (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1997), 686. In the original, “une petite trilogie de la mort.” [Trans. Ted Alkins]

6 See, for example, Patrick McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Pascale-Alexandre Bergues, “Présentation,” in Maurice Maeterlinck, *L'Intruse/Intérieur* (Geneva: Slatkine, 2005).

7 McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre*, 169–170.

8 Lauwaert, in *The State of Things—Brussels/Beijing*, ed. Luc Tuymans and Ai Weiwei, exh. cat. (Brussels: Bozar, 2009), 168.

9 McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre*, 190.