

## Elegies on the World Wide Web

— DORIS KRYSSTOF

Ana Torfs' first engagement with the Internet as a medium of art was inspired by an invitation from Dia Art Foundation to create a work for their series *Artists' Web Projects*. In early April of 2003, she traveled to New York for a first meeting, full of ideas. Tony Oursler, Francis Alÿs, Marijke van Warmerdam, Allen Ruppersberg, and more than thirty other artists had already realized projects for this platform, initiated in 1995. What would Torfs' contribution be? When she arrived in New York, everyone was shocked and worried. A few days before, US forces had invaded Iraq. Torfs' decision to put Hanns Eisler and Bertolt Brecht's *Hollywood Songbook* (1938–1943)—a powerful historic denouncement of war—on the Web was, first and foremost, an immediate reaction to the current political situation.

In Ana Torfs' web project, entitled *Approximations/Contradictions*, which has been available at <http://www.diaart.org/torfs/> since December 2, 2004—at first glance, it may appear to be a minor and perhaps secondary work—Torfs has condensed the universal theme of human existence in times of war and peace into a true showpiece (Kabinetstück). The techniques she employs are characteristic of her approach to art: fundamentally filmic aesthetic, a site or local situation as the point of departure for extensive research, process-oriented collaboration with selected actors, focus on portraiture, and use of historic literary material. Ana Torfs' Internet project must, in fact, be regarded as a key work: it is the first to offer direct evidence of the influence of Bertolt Brecht, one of the artist's most important sources of inspiration. Brecht's ideas and techniques of representation—key words, such as “epic theater,” “gestural presentation,” “thinking in contradictions,” and “Verfremdungseffekt”

(distancing effect) will suffice—have been put to productive use in many of Torfs' works, lending a Brechtian mood to her entire oeuvre.

The *Hollywood Songbook* is a loose collection of art songs composed by Hanns Eisler around 1940 based on his impressions of life in exile in Santa Monica (Los Angeles). The lyrics are taken from a great variety of sources, ranging from Anacreon to Goethe and Hölderlin. Most of the texts Eisler set to music, however, were written by his friend and longtime collaborator Brecht, who described in pithy verses, experiences of war, death, and loss as well as his hope of peace, but also everyday life in Californian exile. Ana Torfs' selection of 21 of the 47 songs—the collection did not take the definite shape generally accepted today until after Eisler's death in 1962—focuses on the settings of poems by Brecht, which are interpreted here by 21 selected singers and actors, most of whom live in Belgium.<sup>1</sup>

A decisive additional aspect enriches Ana Torfs' Internet adaptation of the *Hollywood Songbook*: the singers, filmed in close-up with a video camera, perform not just one but three different renditions of the same song.<sup>2</sup> Shots recording a simple and, as it were, private vocal performance are contrasted with recordings of heightened theatricality, indicating the role individual interpretation plays in the performance of a song. During their “small” private recitals, the singers wear simple white T-shirts and pay less attention to the camera than to the act of singing itself; in the “theatrical” version, by contrast, they appear with their hair styled, wearing makeup, and dressed in attire appropriate to their roles (though not in costumes strictly speaking), and present their songs directly facing the camera. As their outward appearance has changed, so have the singers' attitudes and the expressive quality of their singing. The subjective aspect of musical performance is equally recognizable in the shots showing the pianist, Piet

Kuijken. Again, the camera remains focused on his face; facial expressions and expansive gestures reveal his emotional involvement as he plays his instrument. By contrast, the black title cards displaying English translations of the German lyrics that appear to the left of each recording offer purely factual information—and can be seen as another reference to Brecht's epic theater. The gradation of different modes of musical realization is finally evident when we compare the third versions of each song,<sup>3</sup> where we see the singers mentally preparing, silently running through their songs as the piano accompaniment is playing, focusing inward and memorizing their vocal performances in highly individual ways; occasionally, we see small flashes of mimetic impulse, as though the silent singing were about to transmute, with the next breath, into sound breaking forth. By including such specific aspects from the domain of vocal training and rehearsal, Ana Torfs' version of the *Hollywood Songbook* once again demonstrates the distance between an actor and his role, a distance Brecht's theatrical work exhibited time and again in order to impel the audience to regard the illusion of dramatic presentation with a critical eye. The singer Irmgard Arnold plays a special role with respect to this defamiliarization of classical modes of vocal performance; she worked with Eisler in the 1950s, and delivers a precise and authentic realization of his artistic intentions.<sup>4</sup>

Ana Torfs deploys a variety of techniques of transposition, superimposition, and translation. Her vocal music project transforms the intimate art song from Eisler's musical wartime diary into an online presentation that perfectly matches the spirit of the original. Via headphones and the screen of a computer, Brecht's poems, with their powerful imagery and striking rhythms, and Eisler's memorable music, which fuses borrowings from sources ranging from Schoenberg to

marches to popular entertainment music, form a gripping audiovisual ensemble. The universal themes that echo in the *Songbook* would seem to predestine it for global dissemination via the Web, whose fundamentally open and democratic structure coincides with the artistic and political vision in which the *Hollywood Songbook* is rooted. Against the officially regulated national art of the Nazi dictatorship, but also against the pressure to conform that the culture industry, epitomized by Hollywood, exerts, this multifaceted collection articulates a free, critical, and pluralistic art. *Approximations/Contradictions* thus gives voice to a utopian idea Eisler expresses in a draft for a preface to the *Hollywood Songbook*: “A society that understands and loves this sort of songbook will be one in which people can live well and free of danger. It is in confident expectation of such a society that these pieces were written.”<sup>5</sup>

From the German by Gerrit Jackson

#### NOTES

1 Vera Coomans – Der Sohn / Olivier Thomas – An den kleinen Radioapparat / Esmé Bos – Speisekammer 1942 / Kobe Baeyens – Auf der Flucht / Koen De Cauter – Über den Selbstmord / Marijs Boulogne – Die Flucht / Jim Denley – Gedenktafel für 4000 Soldaten, die im Krieg gegen Norwegen versenkt wurden / Claire Haenni – Ostersonntag / Patricia Beysens – Der Kirschdieb / Kris Dane – Hotelzimmer 1942 / Madiha Figui – Die Maske des Bösen / Viviane De Mynck – Die letzte Elegie / Simonne Moesen – Winterspruch / Irmgard Arnold – Elegie II / Cécilia Kankonda – Elegie III / Hilde Vanhove – Elegie IV / Zahava Seewald – Elegie V / Filip Jordens – Panzerschlacht / Dett Peyskens – Vom Sprengen des Gartens / Bruno Vanden Broecke – Die Heimkehr / Lucy Grauman – Die Landschaft des Exils.

2 The project’s homepage links to the three different interpretations of each song via the performing artist’s name, the song’s title, and the horizontal line between the two. In the bot-

tom left corner, a button marked “credits” leads to the singers’ biographies. Cf. Sara Tucker’s introduction to *Approximations/Contradictions* at <http://www.diaart.org/torfs/intro.html>

3 This version is strictly speaking the first one, since the visitor to the site reaches it by clicking the first element in the overview list (the performing artist’s name).

4 During her research into the *Hollywood Songbook*, Ana Torfs found Eisler’s favorite performer, who was then more than 80 years old and living in Berlin, and persuaded her to participate in the project. Irmgard Arnold, who appeared on-stage at the Komische Oper in Berlin until 1989, serves in the project as a sort of contemporary witness; historic Eisler/Arnold recordings were an inspiration to the other participants. The fact that a virtuosic vocal praxis is secondary to the presentational force of individual expression is evident: the songlike performance occasionally moves into the register of sprechgesang or, thus in Jim Denley, into that of desperate exclamation. Ana Torfs’ great appreciation of the individual performer’s personality is also manifest in the fact that they collaborated on substantial aspects of the project (from the assignment of the different songs to the singers to the selection of attires).

5 Hanns Eisler, as quoted by Albrecht Dümmling, *Ins Paradies vertrieben. Zum Hollywooder Liederbuch von Hanns Eisler*, CD booklet, DECCA 452917-2. [Trans. G. J.]