**Images of Condensed Rhetoric**

— GABRIELE MACKERT

Framed photographs may be rare in Ana Torfs' oeuvre, but the photo camera has nonetheless been one of her most important instruments for years. From her photos, within precisely arranged spatial installations she frequently creates slide projections with series of images running in parallel or with multiple projections. In 2003, however, she exhibited an extensive selection of individual photographs as a spatial arrangement entitled *"à…à…aaah!"*.[1] Here it seems as though Torfs is adding footnotes on the development of her work. Going over everything once again. Starting afresh. With the "a," of "a to z," but also the "à" of homage and the "aaah!" of unjaded wonder. One of the photographs is a reference to the artist's self-annotation: in a stage-like tableau *Retour aux sources* assembles a youthful harlequin, an empty slide projection screen in the background, and a child, lying face down, holding a pen, immersed in a gigantic, old hard-back notebook. The image contrasts the authenticity of childhood with references to studies, roles, and projections: When do we lose our light-heartedness, our playful creativity, our unreflective certainty? When do the burdens of experience and recollection begin to weigh down on our spontaneity and creativity?

"Z" might represent the fact that there is no going back. The photographs seem to mark stages of this inevitable journey through the alphabet. Taken separately, they form a series — even if this series is designed to be expandable and can be presented in a variety of combinations and constellations. Each of the individual "footnotes" treats an artistic theme or topic. The subtitle of Torfs' 2003 exhibition — *Écrans, Dark Pictures, Redites, Essais de frontispice et autres vignettes* — already indicates the presence of a multiplicity of different assessments, purposes, or potentials: As screens for imagery, studies for title illustrations, and other decorative pieces based on already existing visual and textual material, the photographs cultivate a sense of offhand understatement. But along the way, under the title *Dark Pictures*, they also sneak their way into a grand tradition — this subtitle refers to the radical scorn William Hogarth heaped on the tradition in art, the old masters and styles, in his last engraving created in 1764, which shows "Old Father Time" exhausted amid a scene of devastation.[2] The photograph entitled *The Invasion* similarly offers a grotesque contemporary interpretation of a Hogarth print,[3] as though engaging with history and precursors were a self-imposed finger exercise of sorts.

In another photograph, a blindfolded man tries to feel his way around what seems to be an empty room, his hands grasping thin air. Its title *Trompe-l'œil* is an apparent euphemism for the incapacity of perception. In the dyptich *Révolution*, another man gazes directly into the camera. In both pictures he is holding an upside-down bucket hung on the end of a stick: in the left image the word "refusé" can be read on the bucket, while in the right one, "refuser." The revolution to which the title refers consequently takes place somewhere between the feeling of having been rejected (or refused) and the act of refusal. In another photograph, a man offers a toast to a slide projection displaying the word "vérité". Here, at first glance the title *Toast* appears to be a very apt description of what the picture shows. The man, turning his back to the beholder, raises his glass in honor of truth. Yet even this almost descriptive title does not cancel the irritating aspect of this photograph. Is truth nothing but a technical reproduction or, precisely, subjective projection? Plato's Allegory of the Cave is an obvious association, and hence the interpretation of the photo as an allegory of the relativity of our cognition of the real world and its origin in the idea. Unlike in Plato, however, the man making the toast can perceive the source of light. The scene is nonetheless suffused with the melancholy mood of a forlorn last dance.[4]

Ana Torfs has her protagonists act in enigmatic constellations. These photographs are obviously staged, carefully and in an almost purist aesthetic, in virtually empty (studio) spaces and with few props. We thus quickly recognize that the models represent the principle of "rhetorical figures." Individual expressions and emotions are abandoned in favor of arrangement in exact positions. Although these tableaux vivants seem to be constructed to create lucid arrangements, they are hard to read. They celebrate composition; with their particular symbolic artificiality, which recalls various forms of genre and history painting, they almost too conspicuously exhibit their awareness that they are works of art. The fact that the word "person" derives etymologically from "persona," which originally designated a "mask worn by an actor," characterizes Torfs' preference for "portraiture" as much as her awareness that all interpretation is relative.

Accordingly, obviousness is a central theme in the photographic series *"à…à…aaah!"*. Torfs' photographs are allegoric variations, staged with the intention both to invite interpretation and to thematize this process of exegesis and cognition. The different levels of linguistic information within and next to the photographs reinforce this reflective turn, signaling: these pictures are condensed rhetoric. Catchword-like titles, such as *Le Faux Pas*[5] and *La Comédie humaine*, carry so much tradition and such wide connotations that they accompany the photographs as exclamation points of sorts. With this very subtly ironic and confusing play of associations, Torfs counts on viewers who take delight in the enigmatic.

One photograph bears the title — surely also designed to reflect back on the work — *La Narration (une histoire extraordinaire)*.[6] It shows a cozy

scene: five women of various ages and a boy sit on a sofa, congregated around a book. Michel de Certeau defines history as a narration, namely in the sense of a representative ritual organizing the engagement of history, a ritual that wavers between fiction and reality.[7] *La Narration*, then, would be the (hi)story of the people thus assembled as well as the event itself, for reading, or the reading, seems to be both a trans-generational bond and also a particular occasion for a family tradition. The women are dressed almost festively.

The photographs are accompanied by the slide projection *Après Coup*, which serves as an additional frame. This après coup, "after the fact," presents a sequence of what might in this case be "trouvailles" from a treatise on the art business: once more, words, such as "pictures to see," "pictures to sell," or "exhibition," "art," "transformation," "conscience," "confusion," "provocation," "gaucherie," "appropriation," "exclusiveness," appear as text slides and inevitably serve as annotations to the photographs.[8]

From the German by Gerrit Jackson

NOTES

1 Torfs showed this ensemble of photographs for the first time — together with the slide projection *Après Coup* — in her exhibition *"à…à…aaah!" (Écrans, Dark Pictures, Redites, Essais de frontispice et autres vignettes)* at Het Kabinet, Ghent. The first part of the exhibition's title — *"à…à…aaah!"* — was subsequently adopted as a title for what is conceived as an open work group whenever it is exhibited as an installation. Each of the photographs, however, is also considered a work in its own right, with its own title.

2 William Hogarth, *The Bathos, or the Manner of Sinking in Sublime Paintings inscribed to Dealers in Dark Pictures*, 1764.

3 William Hogarth, *The Invasion: France*, plate one of a set of two engravings, 1756, published in 1822.

4 See also Sabine Folie's interpretation of this photograph in connection with Stéphane Mallarmé: Sabine Folie, "Writing Turned Image. An Alphabet of Pensive Language," in: *Un Coup de Dés. Writing Turned Image. An Alphabet of Pensive Language*, ed. Sabine Folie (Vienna: Generali Foundation; Cologne: Verlag Walther König, 2008), 233, 234.

5 *Le Faux Pas* caricatures the arrest of Louis XVI of France and his family, which foiled their 1791 attempt to flee to the Austrian Netherlands under assumed civilian names.

6 The subtitle *une histoire extraordinaire* — which can also be read as a reference to the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, first translated into French in 1856 by Charles Baudelaire — alludes to the possible content of their reading, but also to surprising or even unimaginable turns in the development of this extraordinary narration. (Charles Baudelaire, *Edgar Allan Poe. Histoires extraordinaires*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1856.)

7 Cf. Michel de Certeau, *L'Écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); English edition: *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

8 The original French text on the slides reads: "images à voir," "images à vendre," "exposition," "art," "transformation," "conscience," "confusion," "provocation," "gaucherie," "appropriation," "exclusivité."