

Sound, Body, Language

— MICHAEL GLASMEIER

Ana Torfs created the first version of her installation *Il Combattimento* in 1993—on invitation from the City of Antwerp, then European Capital of Culture—as a direct response to the space of the hall of mirrors in the former Royal Palace (1745).¹ The piece was subsequently shown in Brussels, The Hague, Hanover, and, most recently, in Berlin in 1996.² It shows, in full length, a visual interpretation of Claudio Monteverdi's short opera *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, an outstanding, emotion-laden piece including sound effects, first performed at a Venetian palazzo during carnival in 1624. In the libretto taken from Canto XII of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered, 1570–1575), a work whose broad influence on the arts of Mannerism has yet to be acknowledged, Clorinda, disguised as a knight, engages in a senseless, unequal swordfight with the object of her love, Tancredi, also hidden inside a suite of armor—a fight she loses. Only at the “moment of death” does the “death-bringing recognition” occur, before being “transfigured” by Clorinda's baptism: “The heavens open, I go in peace.”³ The raging fury has an end.

Monteverdi conceived this dramatic composition for a small, intimate occasion with a select, sensitive audience, the guests of a Venetian patrician. Three singers, five string instruments, and a cembalo were enough for the composer to create a pulsating rhythm of affective extremes. In the space of a good twenty minutes, Monteverdi develops a tableau of love and violence, of profound melancholy and great panic. And he sticks to the drama of the Tasso text: soprano for the words of Clorinda, tenor for Tancredi, and tenor for the narrator, who has the most lines to deliver. But the instruments do more than amplify the individual words and content evoked by the text. They

go further, leading into the realm of gesture or supplementing the words onomatopoeically, as in the case of the swordfights, the chases, and the noise of the horses.⁴ In this piece, Monteverdi uses his new “stile concitato” or “agitated style” proclaimed in 1638,⁵ which allows him to give musical expression to the most violent emotions, primarily anger.⁶ He effectively invented musical rage, and in its wake musical war. To let the listener experience this, the composer uses constant ups and downs of anger, moderation, and humility to unleash an early baroque emotional rollercoaster. This is what defines the tension and the deeply passionate dimension of this outstanding small work. In contrast to the fierceness or melancholy of the music, however, the composer intended that the singers on stage hardly move. It is more like pantomime, with the occasional transition to a tableau vivant (such as Tancredi in armor on a horse).⁷ The threefold duplication of mimesis, which Monteverdi exemplifies here and which he later further multiplied by the creaking possibilities of stage mechanics in his operas, serves affect and catharsis in the sense of an emulation of antiquity: mimesis of emotions in language, in music, in gesture. But this does not necessarily mean that everything must happen at the same time and in parallel. Monteverdi himself points this out when he writes “that the words deviate quite a bit in time from the instrumental accompaniment.”⁸ Even if the composer is aiming for a “unified whole,” the fact remains that there will always, necessarily, be divergences between words, music, and gesture. And these gaps are occupied by tension, creating the kind of inner turmoil that characterizes a work of art, the break between the various idioms of voices, instruments, and bodies that shapes a distinctive aesthetic. To date, however, this aesthetic has not been studied, most probably because the nineteenth century brought forth the all-encompassing concept

of “Gesamtkunstwerk,” the “universal artwork” that makes all breaks disappear and places the emphasis on overwhelming impact.

But Ana Torfs works with precisely these breaks and fractures. In 1993, her initial version of *Il Combattimento* had a clear and concentrated focus on the singers. We see three video portraits that sing. Or rather: three portraits that sing and listen. Or better still: three portraits that take turns singing while the other two listen. These portraits form a triptych, with the narrator large and face-on in the center, Clorinda on the right, and Tancredi on the left in profile. Torfs, then, does not unleash an overwhelming technical firework display—which is, after all, perfectly possible in the video medium—and she also does not reconstruct or restage. Instead, she radicalizes Monteverdi's pantomime minimalism in the sense of the physiognomy of the singing and listening bodies.

In the course of digitizing the original material in 2009, a new version emerged entitled *Battle*, which goes a decisive step further. Subtitles, which would usually be positioned directly in the projected image to provide an English translation of the sung Italian, now lead a life of their own in a different medium, that of a slide projection. The musical space as a temporal element connecting everything together now finds itself divided into two halves—one with the singing faces and one with the linguistic “translation” as text slides that shift according to what is sung. The sound of the slide projector further underpins the musical dramaturgy: where the action peaks, there are fast shuttling noises, whereas in the melancholy scenes the fragments of speech naturally slow down. The result is a mechanical sound composition on the basis of the mannerist dream of a possible scenic unity of instrumental sounds, singing, and gestures. In Ana Torfs' installation *Battle*, the modalities of this possibility change into equivalencies of sound, body, and language and their

particular media forms. As a consequence, our focus on the music changes from space to space. With the triptych, it is on breathing, artistry, effort, or facial contortions, whereas in the slide space, concentration is on the sequences of words, their dynamics and mannerist audacity.

With *Battle*, Torfs amplifies the incredible complexity of a masterpiece by Monteverdi beyond historical performance or musicological archive work. Under her directorship, the media work in their concentration on the inner dramas of sound, body, and language to expose their equivalence and show Monteverdi in our time as a master of difference, thus also more generally highlighting the rich complexity of perception.

From the German by Nicholas Grindell

NOTES

1 Also see my in-depth essay “Stimme, Stimmung, Stimmen. Kunsthistorische Aspekte zu Momenten bei Ana Torfs,” in Michael Glasmeier, *Das Ganze in Bewegung. Essays zu einer Kunstgeschichte des Gegenwärtigen* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2008), 303–331. Sections of the essay appear here in abridged and reworked form.

2 *Il Combattimento* was co-produced by the Flemish Radio and Television Network (VRT). A special one-screen version was produced, aired on January 29, 1994, and since then shown on numerous occasions, amongst others the *Biennale de Lyon* in 1995. However, since the artist has digitized the original material, this version is no longer distributed either.

3 Quoted from the booklet for the seminal recording—along with the recording by Rinaldo Alessandrini (Concerto Italiano)—of *Ottavo Libro dei Madrigali* by La Venexiana under the direction of Claudio Cavina, 3 CDs, Glossa Music, 2005. [Trans. Nicholas Grindell]

4 On Monteverdi in general, see Silke Leopold, *Monteverdi. Music in Transition*, trans. Anne Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), with additional bibliographical information.

5 In the foreword to his eighth book of madrigals, in which the

score for *Tancredi e Clorinda* was published for the first time.

6 It is surprising that Monteverdi, who, like many other composers of madrigals, set works by Tasso to music, should have chosen this section of *Jerusalem Delivered* to develop his sensational new “stile concitato.” This text, on which Tasso worked continually in the mental asylum and during his restless wanderings in bitter poverty until his death in 1595 in Rome, appears as a life project of its author, a permanent quest for self.

7 In a preliminary remark on the score, Monteverdi gives a stage direction: “After some madrigals have been sung without gestures, suddenly from the part of the room where the music is to be played, Clorinda enters, armour-clad and on foot, followed by Tancredi, armour-clad and on a horse, upon which Testo [the narrator] begins to sing. They should make their steps and gestures in accordance with the text, no more nor less, whereby they must observe the tempi, the beats, and steps carefully, and the instrumentalists the excited and soft sonorities, and the narrator must watch out that the words are spoken at the right time, in such a manner that everything is united into a homogeneous whole in the imitation...The instruments...must imitate with their bow strokes the passions of the text, which the voice of the Testo must sing clearly and firmly and with good diction, as his words deviate quite a bit in time from the instrumental accompaniment, so that one understands the text well. He is not allowed to make any ornaments or trills other than in the stanza which begins with ‘Notte’. Otherwise the pronunciation should be in accordance with the passions of the text.” Quoted from Leopold, *Monteverdi. Music in Transition*, 193. On the tradition of tableaux vivants in Antiquity and the Renaissance, see Philine Helas, *Lebende Bilder in der italienischen Festkultur des 15. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1999).

8 See footnote 7.