Beauty in Doubt
On Ana Torfs' Work with Pictures and Texts
— KASSANDRA NAKAS

Elective Affinities / The Truth of Masks & Tables of Affinities is the name of an installation by Ana Torfs from 2002; one of her most recent works is called *Family Plot #1* (2009). Like all the titles she chooses, these references to Goethe's novel from 1809 and the Hitchcock movie from 1976 are well-considered paratexts whose wealth of associations lends the visual work an additional linguistic dimension. Beyond this, however, these two titles relating to family ties suggest an inner, generic coherence within Torfs' oeuvre, a network of aesthetic, thematic, and conceptual affinities.

All of her works are characterized by reduced, clearly structured images, regardless of the media employed. Language — spoken, written, sometimes even sung — also plays an important role. Language, in written form, as text material subjected to in-depth processing, often forms the basis for Torfs' installations. In some cases, these texts are historiographic and/or biographical in nature, as with the court minutes in *Du mentir-faux* (2000) and *Anatomy* (2006) or Ludwig van Beethoven's so-called conversation books in *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* (Cycle of Trifles, 1998). But language does not enjoy primacy here: in Torfs' works, it, too, becomes a site of images, through which stories and histories are evoked and recounted. How these images are made, their material and visual quality, is of special importance here.

Torfs' earliest installation already reveals the level of conceptual rigor in her mode of presentation. In *Battle* (1993/2009), she translates Claudio Monteverdi's early baroque drama *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* into a video triptych. Monteverdi himself planned this musical, affect-laden portrayal of a sword fight as a largely static tableau, with occasional scenes acted by Tancredi and Clorinda. In Torfs' version, the dramaturgy is further minimized, with the two figures seen only as heads in strict profile, each looking inwards at the narrator who is seen face forward in the center. In this position and extreme profile, they recall the figures in early Netherlandish paintings who contribute to a portrayed religious event by symbolically bearing witness and vouching for the credibility of what is portrayed (as well as being an early form of portrait). This reduction on the visual level — in the potentially "almighty" medium of video — focuses attention all the more strongly on the emotive sounds of the instruments and the aroused voices of the singers who render the fight comprehensible in music. Language also becomes image in quite concrete terms: 77 text slides are projected onto the back of the same wall; the flow of the text (a new English translation of the libretto), accompanied by the noise of the slide projector, corresponds to the rhythm of the music.[1]

The extreme formal reduction of *Battle* lends the piece a timeless aesthetic that is characteristic of Ana Torfs' work in general. This is particularly evident in a dramatically more complex work like *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*, which can be read both as a filmic genre picture of Viennese society around 1820 and as a biographical-psychological study of Ludwig van Beethoven.[2] This 35 mm film was based on a selection Torfs made from the 139 conversation books after reading their more than 4,000 pages. These books were used by the increasingly deaf composer to communicate with the world around him for the eight years from 1818 until his death in 1826. The off-screen voices speaking the parts of Beethoven's family and friends develop a polyphonic web of language whose solemn rhythm not only reflects the everyday life of the frail composer, but also sheds light on cultural and political aspects of the period. The same cannot be said for the setting of this black-and-white film: the seemingly static images recall early silent movies, as well as the cinematic landscapes of Jean Renoir, or the group portraits since seventeenth-century painting known as conversation pieces.[3] In these culturally and historically loaded settings, the specific historical context of the original text is erased, an effect amplified by the total invisibility of the central character. The figure of Ludwig van Beethoven is the blind spot around which the conversations and dramatic action unfold, far removed from the realm of biographical anecdote. In long pauses, the actors' voices echo, creating nuances and undertones: in a touching, universally valid way, *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* makes clear that language is treacherous and that Beethoven's deafness, as well as his genius, ultimately made him an archetypal outsider.

The impression of a dehistoricization of the biographical or documentary source material is due, first of all, to the procedure of double casting used by Ana Torfs in many of her works. The spoken dialogues in *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*, in *Displacement* (2009), and in *The Intruder* (2004) come from off-screen voices, thus detaching them from the (silent) actors in the images. This procedure occasions a paradoxical simultaneity of presence and absence that puts what is seen and heard to a credibility test: Who is speaking? Who or what do we see? Who is speaking here for whom, and who or what do we as viewers believe? Second, the artist subjects her source material, which initially catches her interest for very different reasons, to thorough processing.

Her radical and painstaking abridgement of the 1,200 pages of court records concerning the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht for *Anatomy* and her condensing of Maurice Maeterlinck's dramatic text for *The Intruder* betray, along with an almost surgical precision in her approach, a great love of language.[4] The metaphor of surgical analysis is especially appropriate in the case

of Torfs' installation *Anatomy*, for which she extracted the testimony of 25 defendants and witnesses from the records of the inquiry into the murder of the Berlin revolutionary leaders. This analytical view that exposes the essence of things is radically transposed by the artist onto the entire structure of the work. Shown on two video monitors are neutrally filmed, mug-shot-like frontal views of the young defendants and witnesses making alarmingly indifferent, contradictory statements, with the judges' questions set as intertitles. Reading the judge's cross examination, viewers are bound to distance themselves from the testimonies of the men and women into whose faces they can look so directly, while at the same time, remaining aware of the tragic futility of what historians later termed a "comedy of justice." Forced to ask themselves who they believe, they are drawn immediately into the action. A similar effect is created by the headphones through which viewers can follow an English translation of the interrogation as they walk around: in keeping with the court interpreter's emphatic voice, they recall the public staging of international law in Nuremberg or The Hague; here, too, the viewers "take part" in the dramatic action, obliged to use their own minds and reflect on their emotions as "witnesses" to what is said.

In *Anatomy*, the spatial interaction of video images with large-format black-and-white slides taken in the anatomical theater in Berlin exemplifies a fundamental quality of Ana Torfs' art: along with the dehistoricization and updating of specific historical or dramatic source material by formal reduction and work on the text, the projection of its human existential dimension steps into an abstract, timeless space. An entire range of muted feelings and emotional states can be deciphered in the silent faces of the actors posing in the early-classicist auditorium. While sunlight falling through high windows marks the passing of time, men and women stand and sit motionless and isolated in the steep banks of seats — a situation *à huis-clos* in which the protagonists' facial expressions reflect the ongoing essence of life. As a result, the fatal events as told in the testimonies on video are elevated to a visually abstracted, densely psychological sphere of universal validity in which the anatomical theater, as a location, becomes a space between life and death.

Ana Torfs has pointed out that the anatomical theater as a "theater of knowledge," where from the seventeenth century on, public dissections were conducted, corresponds to her own artistic mode of investigative exposure and study of a (text) object.[5] In the case of *Anatomy*, this highlights the hopeless quest for truth inherent in any engagement with history, and with language as a whole, far beyond the legal context. Not only language, but also images appear in her work as uncertain truths. Her frequent use of slide projections bears eloquent witness to this. They create ephemeral images that amplify the distance between viewers and what they see. While Torfs' works always include a focus on the procedure of perceiving, the act of seeing, and the question of belief, her use of (slide) projections always also possesses a metaphorical dimension in the sense of a psychological device that grasps what is perceived as a subjectively determined "image of the world" — and which is necessary to generate new mental images.[6]

This is strikingly illustrated by her slide installation *The Intruder*, based on Maurice Maeterlinck's one-act play *L'Intruse* (1890). Four slightly larger-than-life figures occupy a stage-like living room whose every last corner is visible in the images photographed mainly as medium shots. But the room's open, light-flooded atmosphere is dampened by the matt black surface onto which the pictures are projected. This mode of presentation lends the work a specific visual quality that seems to "swallow up" the action portrayed, making it look dull and controlled, thus corresponding with the piece's key motif, the family's uncertain waiting.

In Torfs' statue-like constellation of figures, Maeterlinck's static theater finds itself congenially translated, while projection as a psychological metaphor is eloquently expressed in the figure of the blind grandfather: interpreting external changes in the house and garden as evil omens, he is the only one to have a presentiment of his daughter's imminent death, prompting his sighted relatives increasingly to consider him insane. Perception of the outside world as a projection of one's subjective inner experience, a philosophical and psychological topos of the nineteenth century that Maeterlinck combines here with metaphysical motifs, is mirrored in Torfs' large-format pictures of the blind grandfather. His enormous face interrupts the calm flow of pictures and destroys the illusionist space of stage and plot. This abruptly explodes any offer of identification made to the viewer; by displaying the portrait in such a prominent way, "seeing" is revealed as a mode of perception that is not entirely dependent on the actual sense of sight and which, more importantly, is linked with belief.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the slide installation *Du mentir-faux* — which with Joan of Arc, revolves around a great visionary of European cultural history — focuses, at least on the level of language, less on the mythologized tale of her suffering than on the church's doubts (and despair) over her religious faith. The title (which translates as "About lying falsehood") alludes, among other things, to the charge of idolatry, a belief in "false" images, leveled at the young woman by medieval inquisitors. Joan herself became a political idol or role model in her own lifetime, and this is among the subtexts referred to in the clerics' questions Torfs selected from the medieval trial

protocols, which, as projected text slides, alternate with large-format black-and-white portraits of a woman. In *Du mentir-faux*, the woman's conspicuous pageboy haircut and the mention of her name by the judges are the only references to the historical figure. As in the original trial document from 1431, the questions are formulated as indirect speech, making them read like a fictionalized narrative. As part of the endless series of artistic and mass-media takes on the story of Joan of Arc, a national myth that has had an unmatched hold on the collective imagination for centuries, Ana Torfs returns to point zero. In order to see this woman as the Maid of Orleans, we must have complete trust in the text and read the pictures in the sense of the words. In the manner of a profession of faith, this approach blends medieval questions of religious belief with postmodern suspension of disbelief,[7] an attitude on which today's consciousness industry (especially cinema) is based. In doing so, Torfs quite plainly reveals the constructed, even artificial nature of this "faith": in the face of this extremely isolated and reduced image of women, all attempts to get under Joan of Arc's skin by questioning, to visualize her via language, are doomed to failure from the outset.

The eminent role, in terms of both aesthetics and content, played by the portrait and its genre-theoretical implications of depiction and faith in images in Torfs' work (since the "first" portrait, the *Vera Ikon*), has been acknowledged on various occasions.[8] In its potential function as a target for projections, we encounter it again in both slide projections of *Elective Affinities / The Truth of Masks & Tables of Affinities*: a man and a woman appear in fixed poses but with varying appearances. The 162 half-length portraits present the body itself as a socially coded picture: they reveal not the irrefutable core "behind" a mask or costume, but the truth that resides within the disguise itself, a truth that we project onto the figures. Whether or not we interpret the two people as a couple depends on their outer appearance in any given case — a deceptive guarantor of connectedness that is easily disrupted by external stimuli, as in the novel from which the work takes its name.

The second part of this installation explicitly addresses the image of family affinities that runs through Ana Torfs' oeuvre like a network, relating individual works to one another.[9] On 14 tables, the artist presents notes and working material, literary fragments, and ideas, spread out in the form of unfolded sheets of a so-called "book-in-the-making." In addition to reflections on identity and deception (as in Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and Oscar Wilde's essay *The Truth of Masks*), main recurring themes are the political history of Europe and its dark sides, such as war and persecution. Occasionally, as in *Du mentir-faux* or *Anatomy*, injustice and violence play overt roles. But even in works such as *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* and *Displacement*, the political present and past of a country (the Austrian police state under Metternich, the strong military presence in Gotland) lie beneath the main story like an unconscious narrative.

The slide installation *Displacement* once again demonstrates the quality of the artist's images, as strange panoramas of the Swedish island take on an extraordinarily dramatic charge. The long-shots of Gotland's expanses, abandoned military buildings, or the inhospitable non-places of the local air traffic and shipping infrastructures become visual equivalents for the psychological state of the nameless married couple who in this photographic remake of Roberto Rossellini's film *Viaggio in Italia* (*Journey to Italy*) (1954) also embarks on a journey of self discovery. The travel motifs are juxtaposed with huge close-ups of a man and a woman. Although immediately identifiable as the "damaged" couple in the story, they are also simultaneously the viewers' opposites and doubles, looking them in the eye and seeing what they see. The act of viewing, of seeing as perception, thus becomes an important component of the installation.

In all of Torfs' installations, the photographic narrative form corresponds with an emphatic temporalization of the images, which emerge as projections from blinding white or pitch black, always bearing their imminent disappearance within them. More so than images that are permanently present, they appeal to the viewer to engage with them for the duration of their presence, to adapt to their rhythm, to believe them. In the associative interplay of image and text, in the accentuation of their constructed nature (they always reveal themselves as "made"), and in the fictionalizing de- and reconstruction of stories and histories, the works also constantly confront us with the question of whether we believe what we see or see what we believe. The austere formal beauty used by Torfs to convey this skepticism sometimes makes us forget the lightness and openness on which her approach is based. On the fourteen tables that make up *Tables of Affinities*, the associative character of this approach, and its openness to chance, are spread out before us. Besides the obvious meaning as a piece of furniture, the work's title ironically refers to the second meaning of table as an illustrative diagram or scientific tableau, thus playing off a historically established form of knowledge against such an unstable value as (family or thematic) affinities.

Ana Torfs returns to the issue of the reproduction of knowledge — and its relation to ideology — in the image-text series *Family Plot #1*. The 25 panels paraphrase Carl von Linné's taxonomic tableaus, an exemplary Enlightenment-era attempt to establish the "order of things" not only in terms of classification, but also in terms of cul-

tural history. In his system for the identification of plant species, the Swedish naturalist introduced a binary nomenclature oriented on the model of human given and family names. In the politically and culturally expansive eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this system (still in use today) led many "new" species around the world to be named after their respective, mostly European "discoverers" or to be dedicated to important personalities. *Family Plot #1* evokes this imaginary community of a European elite, whose representative portraits on panels are superimposed with alluringly beautiful black-and-white close-ups of exotic flowers and fruits. The title's association of a conspiracy brings the dark side of this family drama into play, the hegemonic exclusion of the "Other," even in supposedly objective disciplines such as botany, while the family tree, as depicted here, turns the laws of biology upside down on account of its (almost) exclusively male shaping.

In its extensive use of existing (color) images, its serial format, and its specific content, the piece reveals a new, playfully humorous aspect in Ana Torfs' oeuvre. But we also find here the themes she has analyzed and given form to again and again in her work: the ongoing influence of history in the present, the representative power of the image, and the (fragile) relationship between language and pictures.

From the German by Nicholas Grindell

NOTES

1 Setting up the installation in this way means that slide and video projection (i.e., writing and dramatic action) cannot be seen at once.

2 The following year, the still photographs and texts from this film formed the basis for Ana Torfs' book *Beethoven's Nephew/Le neveu de Beethoven/De neef van Beethoven/Beethovens Neffe* (Brussels: Yves Gevaert Publisher, 1999).

3 On the history of this sub-genre of portraiture, see Mario Praz, *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America* (London: Methuen, 1971).

4 A love further reflected not only in Torfs' wide reading interests, but also in the new English translations she has commissioned in the context of her work. Aside Battle, this was also the case for *The Intruder* and for *Approximations/Contradictions* (2004), a web project based on the *Hollywood Songbook* composed by Hanns Eisler between 1938 and 1943 during his exile in the United States.

5 For example, in the publication accompanying the exhibition of the same name at daadgalerie Berlin, ed. Friedrich Meschede (Berlin: 2006), 55.

6 On metaphors of projection, see Jutta Müller-Tamm, *Abstraktion als Einfühlung. Zur Denkfigur der Projektion in Psychophysiologie, Kulturtheorie, Ästhetik und Literatur der frühen Moderne* (Freiburg: Rombach, 2005).

7 The concept of "willing suspension of disbelief," coined by the English Romantic poet and literary critic Samuel T. Coleridge, refers to the willingness of a reader/spectator/viewer to accept unrealistic or illogical aspects of a fictional work in order to engage with its content.

8 See, for example, Catherine Robberechts, "Impossible Portraits," in: *Uncertain Signs, True Stories*, ed. Angelika Stepken, exh. cat. (Karlsruhe: Badischer Kunstverein, 2002), n.p.

9 The reappearance of actors in different works, and the development of a theme (Beethoven, Joan of Arc) in more than one of the artist's projects, can also be read in terms of such a generic coherence.