Elective Metamorphoses

— FRIEDRICH MESCHEDE

Ana Torfs' installation *Elective Affinities/ The Truth of Masks & Tables of Affinities* (2002)[1] consists of two slide projections and fourteen tables on which the loose, unfolded sheets of a "book in the making"[2] are displayed, each illuminated by a single lamp. The latter evokes a library, with a presentation of selected printed matter. The title's double reference to affinities, that is, relations and references, makes it clear that the work is one of great complexity, marked above all by a high degree of visuality. The tables present a text archive, which due to its dimensions alone would demand a considerable (impossible) amount of time for reading.[3] Also visible there are photographs of people holding books so close as to illustrate the exact opposite of reading: their faces disappear behind the book and all one sees is their hands showing the opened cover, so obviously holding it in front of the person's face that the pose of hiding is evident.

This archive appears as the associative sum of its elements, texts, photographs, notes, ephemera —"related matter" assembled by Torfs for the purpose of this presentation. The archive is accompanied by a double slide projection of portraits, 162 black-and-white slides showing a man and a woman from the waist up. Or should this introductory description of the work have begun with the projected portraits? This question remains open, and with it the direction and the order in which the elective affinities are to be read. The series of slides with the two individuals also has no specific beginning, and the viewer soon realizes that it is an endless loop. Having watched the projections changing for a while, one notices that it is always the same man and woman who alter their appearance from slide to slide. Two people have adopted a wide range of roles, portraying different characters. Over time, the couple's unchanging apathetic gaze emerges as a continuum within these changing roles. Depending on the elaborateness of the outfit, it is sometimes hard to believe they are the same individuals. It is astonishing to see how much an ever-changing iconography of clothing inhibits immediate recognition. The slide show is punctuated by the acoustic clack of the projector as the next slide is loaded, each image then fading out, leaving the screen empty for moments—as if the projection dissolves into a bright space.[4] In this round of portrayals, different moods are evoked by the changing attire. The couple will appear in winter clothes with coats, then dressed for summer in sporting T-shirts; sometimes the choice of clothes is elegant, other times casual. One is reminded of strict business clothing, touches of official portraiture, or the opposite: casual snapshots. Poverty and wealth seem to manifest themselves in appearance; elements of styling or neglect arouse our interest. In the course of the projections, Ana Torfs uses these costume changes to present us with a sociology of the portrait via an iconography of garments. This is the confusing element: although one knows it is always the same actor and actress, Torfs develops a spectrum of social differences conveyed solely via appearances in particular sets of clothes. In some cases, hairstyles and other accessories further amplify the social content. So what is the truth behind the mask as mentioned in the title? How suggestively does the sameness impose itself with every change, and how does everything change when it is always the same person?

After looking at the projection for a certain time, the serial use of the chosen format and the choice of black-and-white inevitably call to mind another work from the history of photography: August Sander's *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (People of the 20th Century). His concern, in the first half of the last century, was to create a comprehensive image of the society of his time, as expressed in the great variety of different characters and the attributes of their trades. Sander documented the social status of his subjects and structured his "portrait archive" according to social categories then undergoing a process of upheaval. The individual's job/function is given, but not his/her name (with the exception of Sander's portraits of celebrities from the field of culture and the arts).

Ana Torfs takes this basic method and converts it into an entirely different concept of portraiture. She seems to be referring to Sander's era however, when a photograph depicted on the unfolded sheets shows a figure holding up a book entitled *Deutsche Menschen* (German People)[5] in front of her face, its Gothic type a clear hint. Further elective affinities—either deliberate or associative—begin here. In formal terms, Torfs' portraits of the same actor/actress are the opposite of Sander's concept, but like Sander, the artist focuses on the individual via the type of clothing as an expression of social position. With every new slide, one begins to decode possible social status and profession, but Torfs also continually tries to evade this. Seldom does she use clothes with a text message, only once really, when the man wears a sweatshirt with the word "Security" and the woman one with the words "You & Me." Later, when these two items of clothing are reversed, with her wearing "Security" and him "You & Me," a principle of entropic erosion of difference becomes clear. As the clothes change to fit the seasons, in the alternation of historical costumes and modern fashions, between the distanced official-looking stance and the circumstantial appearance of the accessories, what is fascinating about viewing this installation is that eventually, one is no longer able to grasp either the changing of the pictures or any continuum in the portrait subjects.

We find ourselves in a darkened room, the slide projections illuminate us, too. Everything becomes a line-up like in a criminal identification process. We have to identify someone, but each image of these elective metamorphoses poses the question: Who are we really?

From the German by Nicholas Grindell

NOTES

1 This installation was first shown at the Royal Library in Brussels in the context of the exhibition *ForwArt, a Choice*, September 27 through November 11, 2002, curated by Lynne Cooke, Chris Dercon, Robert Fleck, and Hans-Ulrich Obrist.

2 There exist three different editions of this so-called "book in the making." For details on these editions, please see the list of works in the appendix.

3 During a visit to the exhibition space, Torfs' "book in the making" can only be discovered in fragments as one's gaze crisscrosses the texts and photos on the reading tables. The second edition, also issued on the occasion of the exhibition *ForwArt, a Choice*, consisted of seven uncut quires of sixteen pages each. During the seven weeks of the exhibition, each week one quire was sent to a limited number of national and international addressees. After having the folds of the leaves slit, it allowed a chronological reading of the text as a whole. This text is "a sort of report for reading, written in the 'I' form" (Catherine Robberechts), which the artist has enriched with many quotations (e.g., from Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and Oscar Wilde's *The Truth of Masks*) as well as a selection of press reports from the time between 1990 and 2000. See Catherine Robberechts, "Elective Affinities/The Truth of Masks & Tables of Affinities," in *ForwArt, a Choice*, ed. BBL/ING group (Brussels 2002), 173–180.

4 The images dissolve into bright white light, contrary to ordinary slide projections, where they fade to black.

5 Detlef Holz, *Deutsche Menschen. Eine Folge von Briefen*, (Luzern: Vita Nova Verlag, 1936) is a collection of letters, assembled and commented by Walter Benjamin. With this book, published in 1936 in Switzerland under the pseudonym "Detlef Holz," he wanted to confront National Socialist Germany with an example of an enlightened and humanistic bourgeoisie. The letters and comments had already been published in 1930/31 in the German paper *Frankfurter Zeitung*. The title *Deutsche Menschen* (German People) had also been chosen in order to be able to smuggle the book into Germany, bypassing the national socialist censorship.