

## Intertwined Dualities

— MIEKE BAL

*Du mentir-faux*<sup>1</sup>: such a title presents this work as somehow, dual. The title is composed of two elements, but they are not arranged in the usual binary opposition. Similarly, the work itself is composed of pairs of two elements that cannot be opposed. They are near-synonyms that form pairs of mutually qualifying aspects. This refusal of both opposition and unity is suggested by the hyphen connecting the two. On closer inspection, there seems to be an imaginary hyphen connecting the elements within each pair, as well as the pairs to one another. This connection and the specific kind of duality together present the crux of the matter; more so than the content of the words. Lying, as in fiction; false, as in untrue, deceptive. But fiction cannot lie. Words and images; sound and vision; space and time; black and white; light and darkness; surface and depth; history, with all its “mentir-faux” (lying falsehood), and the present.<sup>2</sup>

Rather than deconstructing each other, the elements of each of these pairs begin to compose something together. Take history and the present; not history versus the present. The story that *Du mentir-faux* presents is historical as well as mythical; a reality no longer accessible, and a fiction we must believe in. It is part of the history of violence and its complexities, of which the character of Joan of Arc is one of the most intriguing examples. It is also part of the history of photography, which promised access to reality and hence, reliable documents of history, and, likewise, the present. Once we see the present as a companion of the past rather than its opposite, we realize that it is characterized by its own incidences of violence, like its disregard of women's voices.<sup>3</sup>

The pair, history and the present, also casts its light, or shadow, on the work itself. Although this slide installation is primarily made with photog-

raphy, its temporality also harbors the medium film. The history of film re-emerges in the present, in the medium that allegedly preceded it.<sup>4</sup>

On a large projection surface, close-ups of a woman's face appear and disappear — another one of those intricate pairs.<sup>5</sup> While the darkness between images endures, the silence is interrupted by the click of the slide that retrospectively shapes silence as a form of sound. Disappearance makes us grateful for appearance, appreciative of the time allotted to seeing. The length of each slide's presence varies, so that neither haste nor a routine-compelled visual laziness can enter.<sup>6</sup>

More intertwined dualities creep in. The images are so similar in light and composition that one is irresistibly drawn to take in the subtleties of the hues of white, enhanced by the interweaving of the blank wall behind the woman in the photographs with the wall on which these photographs are projected. Here, black and white engage in a silent dance of nuances. The duality of distance and closeness is suspended. The viewer's position in the gallery space places the woman in the invisible space between image and reality, or fiction and what we believe to be truth.<sup>7</sup>

Photography allows the artist to create a fiction that lies all the more forcefully, as we are compelled to suspend our disbelief. This woman is alive in the present but the medium did not exist at the time she invokes. Also, she is just out of reach; her eyes remain averted even when the image is nearly frontal. In each series of photographs, the relations between the woman's face and the picture plane vary slightly, visible only through tiny shifts in the light as time glides through the day. It is as though she turns slowly, always towards the light. She is engrossed in a mood that we can almost grasp, but not quite. We can only surmise it on the basis of that intricate combination of image and face.<sup>8</sup> The gap of visual imagination stubbornly remains, even if both the

medium of photography and the slow pace conspire to make the figure feasible. The photographs' high visual quality surrenders the grain of the surface, easily called skin. But the skin of the face and the surface of the image trade places, becoming indistinguishable. The woman's face withholds the nature of her grief, hence, the (historical) cause of it. The tears that appear so sparingly are symptoms of something to which we have no access.<sup>9</sup>

Symptoms are involuntary signs, as distinct from signals, which are signs sent out intentionally. Whether caused by profound grief, as in fiction, or by cutting onions, the crying subject cannot call up tears at will. This questioning of intention as well as expression is yet another of the many levels at which this work glosses the way we tend to think. For interpreting art through the artist's intention is perhaps art's worst “mentir-faux.” And here photography's truth returns through the back door. The work's very formal perfection interrogates the possibility of artistic control. A precious, fragile collaboration must occur between the artist and the woman we so easily refer to with that impersonal, reifying word “model.” Precisely those few tears from which we must remain at a modest distance pay homage to art's refusal to give the artist full control.<sup>10</sup>

But what about words then? Surely, words come into the work, but it is precisely these that do the lying medieval trial records call “mentir-faux.” The slides with close-ups of the woman are interspersed with text slides containing questions from Joan of Arc's inquisition trial. Grammatically, these questions all take the indirect form, most of them starting with the following words: “Interrogated if she...” Joan's answers are not included in the text slides, as it is clear from the outset that she does not stand a chance. Control is as impossible as truth. All dualities are thus resolved in time-based oscillation rather than merging. As a result, rather than unifying in a false harmony at the cost of

complexity, *Du mentir-faux* retains all tensions as precious, but, along with the answers to Joan of Arc's interrogators, refuses the structure of opposition. What remains, instead, is an infinitely rich fabric of possibilities.

#### NOTES

1 *Du mentir-faux* was the first work I saw by Ana Torfs. For me, it remains one of the most forceful, beautiful, and meaningful works of contemporary art.

2 Lying is the foundation of the possibility of signification; a sign is everything that can be used to lie. See Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

3 "Deconstruction" is the term introduced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida for the analysis of the untenable logic of opposition. For a lucid introduction, see Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

4 The implicit questioning of the linearity of history is resonant with the concept of "preposterous history," which I proposed in my *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

5 The projection surface has a size of at least 400 x 269 cm, but can vary depending on the exhibition space where the work is installed.

6 The exact duration of each slide is programmed with an external, digital control unit. The effect is that of a timer. The length of each slide's presence varies between seven and fifteen seconds, in a twenty-minute loop. The slide show is a medium that has historical effects, especially when the sound of the slide falling is used as part of the work. This irresistibly invokes the work of James Coleman, otherwise so different, but comparable in its incomparable subtlety. On Coleman's work, see Kaja Silverman and Helmut Friedel, *James Coleman* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002). On the slide show as a historical medium, see Rosalind Krauss, "First Lines: Introduction to Photograph," in *James Coleman* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1999), 9–25.

7 The alleged connection between photography and truth is no longer seen as valid because of Roland Barthes' influential notion of the index as the primary signifying code in the medium. For a seminal study of the index in contemporary art, see Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," in *October* 3 (1977): 68–81; *October* 4 (1977): 58–67. But Barthes had more to say about photography. See his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

8 Portraiture is usually considered in terms of realism, a discourse that is emphatically irrelevant for Torfs' work. See for an example of such a realistic discourse on portraiture, Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). On portraiture in a non-realistic sense, see Ernst van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 239–56.

9 The use of the face in *Du mentir-faux* contrasts term-by-term with my own video installation *Nothing is Missing* from 2006. See my "Facing Severance," in *Intermédialités* 8, ed. Johanne Villeneuve (2006): 189–210, and a photo spread 211–224. Yet, both Torfs' and my work activate the Deleuzian concept of the face as performative: not what a face says or expresses, but what it does. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (London: Athlone Press, 1986) (esp. 99).

10 I have written about intentionalism and its problems in the chapter "Intention" of my *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 253–85.