

Elective Affinities / The Truth of Masks & Tables of Affinities (2000-2002)

A double series of portraits, black and white slides projected in pairs; in each case a man and a woman, counterparts. They are clearly the same man and the same woman each time, but they are nevertheless different: a masquerade. As the clothes, hairstyles and accessories change, so too do the period and the social context you, the onlooker, ascribe to them, and so does their psychology: self-assured or timid, vulnerable or harsh, intelligent or narrow-minded, cheerful or somber... Some characters you would like to get to know, others are repellent. You often think you recognize someone, but you are never quite sure. You also speculate about the couples: can she really be with him, could he possibly fall for her? Sometimes the affinity is obvious, sometimes it is inconceivable. But when it comes to love, you never know... Despite the pared down simplicity of the portraits and the sober black and white, there is also something light-hearted and sometimes even hilarious about the series as a whole, as with those cheap cardboard dolls children dress over and over again in a new paper outfit, managing to alter their appearance in a very simple and yet quite amazing way.

Note what was not used for the masquerade – no color, no masks, no make-up, no poses, no grimaces and not even any real facial expressions. Each model looks straight ahead, impassively: the mixed identities of one and the same anonymous person. At some stage you find yourself wanting to get to know the “true face” of those two people. You try to do this by a process of reduction, but then so little is left: the dimple in his chin, the lines around her mouth, and of course the sex. But then: some characters are quite androgynous, and is that dimple, are those lines really so unique? No, the portraits tell us nothing about the model “behind” them, there is no “behind”, only an empty projection screen. A series of variations without a theme.

Elective Affinities / The Truth of Masks & Tables of Affinities is Ana Torfs’ second slide installation after *Du mentir-faux*, first seen at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels in 2000. Like *Du mentir-faux* – and Ana Torfs’ œuvre as a whole –, this work can be seen as a reflection on the portrait and on the problematic nature of portraiture. And like *Du mentir-faux* and the feature film *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* (Cycle of Trifles, 1998), this new installation is also a reading- and visual project.

A series of tables accompanies the slide projection. Lying spread out on them are the unfolded sheets of a book in the making. It is a sort of report for reading, written in the “I” form and consisting chiefly of extracts and quotes by various writers, illustrated with photographs, plans and sketches. Here and there we find a short autobiographical piece. And in a separate column, a continuous band of press cuttings from the period 1990 to 2001. Also lying spread out on tables are the keys to the installation’s long title. The text opens with a quotation from the first pages of Goethe’s novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (translated into English as *Elective Affinities*), which by analogy with chemistry explains what is meant by a “natural affinity” between people. Many pages further on, Torfs quotes from *The Truth of Masks / A Note on Illusion*, an essay by Oscar Wilde about the impossibility of a universal truth in art. Finally, *Tables of Affinities* appears to be a play on words: a table of affinities – as we learn from one of the extracts – derives from Church law and shows the relationships that a husband and wife bear to each other’s families (the term “affinity” is used here in the sense of relationship through marriage, as opposed to consanguinity). A second sort of ‘affinity table’ – with regard to chemical substances – is to be found in the *Dissertation on Elective Attractions* by the eighteenth-century Swedish chemist Torbern Bergmann. At the same time

Ana Torfs alludes to a more specific sort of “table” and to a more abstract concept of the word affinity.

It is not easy to determine the status of the “open book” Torfs lays in front of us so invitingly. The relationship between text and image (the projected images, but also the printed illustrations) takes place on different levels. The almost endless anthology of often personal histories may have served as a “script” when making the portraits, but then only indirectly. Some quotes stand out because of a general, almost programmed value: reflections on the “method” Ana Torfs used (working via association and suggestion, following affinities and congruities rather than a close-knit, rational structure) or – more broadly – ideas about what a work of art is or should be. As a reflection of what Ana Torfs was reading and was concerned with in the period the portrait photographs were produced, the text also provides insight into her work process. At first the anthology seems to be very loosely structured, the result of free association, of browsing through a poorly organized quantity of data. The link between one extract and the next sometimes lies in a single word. Yet this is clearly not a document, but a carefully composed entity – a work in its own right, also an image in its own right. So the labyrinthian character of the text should not mislead: the web that Torfs spins is not an arbitrary or take-it-or-leave-it construction. Some quotes reveal something about the motive behind the maker’s passion for collecting. Like the one by the seventeenth-century writer Robert Burton “A meere spectator of other mens fortunes and adventures (...) I heare new newes every day (...) I write of Melancholy, by being busie to avoid Melancholy.” Like the Philosopher Democritus, Burton wants “to find out the seat of this *atra bilis* or Melancholy, whence it proceeds, and how it was engendred in mens bodies, to the intent he might better cure it himself, by his writings and observations, teach others how to prevent & avoid it.” (1)

The great majority of the excerpts collected by Ana Torfs are about the political history of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: stories, testimonies and opinions about wars, persecution, exile and the like. A futile attempt to learn something about the origin of the injustice and the violence that confront us on a daily basis through ordering historical questions and collecting memories; or to learn something from those who tried to make a stand against the perversity of history, sometimes just through their thinking and writing. In an apparently endless parade, scores of figures file past the reader, each in his own particular role and context. All too often resistance to evil itself generates evil, and thus many have more than one face.

Or they have no face at all. Torfs quotes at length from “The Monster”, a story by Bertolt Brecht (2). When recording a film about the pogroms in the south of Russia before the First World War, a film crew looks for the best person to play the role of Moeratow, the brutal general who has to answer for the death of thousands of Jews. According to surviving witnesses, the best performance proves to be a show of total banality and indifference. Brutality, it seems, is not apparent from a person’s appearance or manner.

Elsewhere Ana Torfs quotes Witold Gombrowicz: “Man ... is an unfathomable and indeterminate being that has to express himself via certain behaviours, and that as a result of that, appears on the surface – for others – to be far more circumscribed and precise than he is on the inside. From this evolves a tragic, misguided relationship between his secret immaturity and the mask that he wears in his associations with others. There is no option left to him but to adapt his inner self to that mask, as if he is really the one he appears to be.”(3)

After reading the excerpts, you look at the slides with different eyes, not only because both actors suddenly become the protagonists of thousands of historical – and usually tragic – stories, but also because the impossibility of “unmasking” them leaves a bitter taste.

Catherine Robberechts, 2002

(1) Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Oxford/New York, 1989, pp. 4-6 (first English edition 1621).

(2) Bertolt Brecht, ‘The Monster’, in *Collected Stories*, New York, 1998 (first German edition 1928).

(3) Witold Gombrowicz, *La pornographie*, foreword by the author to the French and German editions 1962/1963, pp. 181-183 (first Polish edition 1960).