

Du mentir-faux

The work *Du mentir-faux* consists of a slide projection work and a book. The slide projection shows a long series of black-and-white portraits of one and the same young woman. Her face conveys suffering. From time to time, the series is interspersed with texts containing questions. Something in the young woman's pose, style and hairdo sparks a feeling that is confirmed when we glance in the accompanying book: we're looking at a portrait of Joan of Arc – a theme to which Ana Torfs had already devoted a short video in 1988. These questions, so tormenting the protagonist, turn out to be quotations from the reports of the inquisition trial carried out against her in the 15th century.

The book, with an introductory essay by Dirk Lauwaert, comprises, apart from a selection by Torfs from these trial reports, an autobiographical text by her own hand, in which she bears witness of her fascination for the figure of Joan of Arc: not as the political or national symbol, but rather as the all too physical, self-willed yet ultimately defenceless victim of an all powerful system.

Particularly interesting is the graphical design Torfs chose for her text: in accordance with medieval manuscripts the core text, Torfs' account of how the work was established and how this process relates to her personal history, shows added "glosses" in a smaller typeface. The relationship between both "trails", however, is not quite as one would expect. In this case it is not only the author herself who makes "comments" on her own text: the intimate main text can be perceived just as easily to be "comment" or "interpretation" as its surrounding glosses, which in fact deliver more factual information.

The more the reader moves back and forth between both trails, the more he or she will be awakened to the fact that any outright attempt at "interpretation" of "facts" can do nothing but founder. Joan of Arc appears as the constantly receding focal point of an inextricable tangle of accounts, testimonials and biased interpretations, out of which no "truth" can be deduced. What ultimately remains is a series of questions: not the perverted questions of the inquisitors – for they had prepared "her" answers in advance – but rather open questions, which have to remain unanswered.

In that case, who might this Joan of Arc be we are faced with on the slides? The more you look at the portraits, the more the process of identification, to which you feel naturally inclined as a spectator at first, begins to splutter. In the reductive setting, the utmost simplicity of the pose, you ultimately fall back on what you had forgotten all about for a

moment: there is someone who requested a model, a young actress, to pretend...

The title of the work is a reference in itself to this tension between fact and fiction. *Du mentir-faux* ("About Lying Falsehood") is not merely a parodist allusion to the tautological style of medieval texts, so alienating to contemporary readers (Joan of Arc's prosecutors kept making use of notions like "mendacious fiction" or "mendaciously pretending"), it is also a reference to the title of a novella by Louis Aragon, *Le mentir-vrai*, in which he recollects his childhood and reflects on the inevitably fictional character of such an undertaking: "Je crois me souvenir, je m'invente." (I think I remember, but I'm inventing)

Dirk Lauwaert also discusses the true story as fiction in his essay, but rather to indicate that it is, in the case of Joan of Arc, precisely in this fictional nature that a different kind of "truth" emerges: "The tale of the heroine is forever a looking back and therefore a tale that reconstructs, a 'falsified' story (or a story 'correctly' told at last). The properly told tale provides proof to the people."

By making Joan of Arc into the subject of her investigation, Ana Torfs elaborates on some of the themes that keep reoccurring elsewhere in her body of work as well: the relationship between text and image, or rather between reading and visualising, the issue of the portrait (is it possible to seize a "truth" on the person who is portrayed?) and – more broadly – the tension between fiction and reality.

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Translated from the Dutch by Robin d'Hooghe