

Dissection (Every Place Has a Story)



Elective Affinities/The Truth of Masks & Tables of Affinities installed in the exhibition Album/Tracks B at Generali Foundation Vienna, 2010

How can the montage of elements not only create a new meaning and context, but dissect the form of narration? In what way do facts, fictional text and newly produced images connect and how can a distance be produced in order to allow an analysis of the material and its language? The relation between text and image and the processes of correlation, displacement and translation of contentual or formal elements are an essential interest in Ana Torfs work. Existing materials from various media are re-narrated in slide installation, film, video or photographic series as well as xerography and silkscreen, rendering visible the method of displaying.

While narration is subject to the mode of mediation, language depends on the narration's media as a form of transmission. Yet works are exhibited within a specific context: they are perceived after, before or in a direct spatial relation to another work, requiring a translation into the space of presentation with regard to its surroundings. To what extent does the spatial installation of works change its appearance, influencing its reception? Does the spatial sequence of works contextualize and manipulate their interrelations differently in each exhibition? Taking the movement of a visitor as the constitutive mode of experiencing an exhibition and connecting works, two different spaces (K20, Düsseldorf and Generali Foundation, Vienna) almost seem to create diverging narrative structures in themselves. Is each exhibition not only a mode of display, but also transmission into a new configuration? To what extent do such renegotiations mirror a body of work and re-narrate an examination themselves?

“What we first call history is merely an account.”¹

DISPLAYER The method of montage produces connections between fictional and non-fictional situations or material facts. At the same time, montage can reveal a new narration. In your work you often present differentiated constellations of image and text material, in which you seem to question the validity or “truth” of the images and texts you’re showing. By working with historical documents—i.e., for your installation *ANATOMY (2006)*, the trial records regarding the murder of Dr. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg before the Military Field Tribunal at the Berlin Criminal Court—it seems that you focus on the different ways reality is documented, represented, and eventually read. How important is the actual process of assembling the given material—such as images, stories, historical documents or literature—and translating it into another format in relation to your selection of the material?

ANA TORFS In my most recent work *FAMILY PLOT (2009/2010)*, I worked with existing images, but several other works are based on existing texts, such as trial records, in *ANATOMY* and *DU MENTIR-FAUX (2000)*, or the conversation books of Beethoven in *ZYKLUS VON KLEINIGKEITEN (1998)*; but it might just well be film dialogue (*DISPLACEMENT, 2009*), or a play (*THE INTRUDER, 2004*). These texts are just starting points, among other starting points, leading to installations with a strong visual impact. The image is primordial in all my installations, and it’s the first thing that will strike the viewer when visiting an exhibition of my work.

Michel de Certeau’s quote, with which you opened this interview, suggests that history is never objective; the subject/author/speaker always reverberates in the language. There is no such thing as a clear divide between the naked fact and the interpretation; or taking this a step further, between fact and fiction. In the end “(hi-)story” is coloured by language, there is no way around that. In one way or another, I’m interested in the strategies of narration, always bearing in mind that even history is a story, told by someone.

Neither language nor images are entirely reliable. The ephemeral projections of my slide installations create a distance between the viewers and what they see, making them aware the picture of the world they perceive is always subjective. My slide projections show static individual images; but displayed in sequences and ongoing loops, they may suggest a process in time and motion, which places them halfway between photography and film. My photographic series *VÉRITÉE EXPOSÉE (2006)*, can be read as making a programmatic point: different vantage points, different truths. The 24 different prints allude to the often quoted line in the Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Le Petit Soldat (The Little Soldier, 1960)*: “La photographie, c’est la vérité, et le cinéma, c’est 24 fois la vérité par seconde.” (Photography is truth, and cinema is truth 24 times a second.)

It is also important to mention that the texts I work with are interesting for me in the first place as “language”. Most of them also have a connection to a voice: they are meant to be spoken (dialogues of a film, a play); meant to be sung (songs of Eisler/Brecht, for my web project *APPROXIMATIONS/CONTRADICTIONS, 2004*); they were originally spoken (transcripts of a trial); or they replace the voice (conversation books used by friends of Beethoven to communicate with the deaf composer).

Generally, I spend a lot of time on the texts I choose to work with, whether they have a fictional or documentary origin. They are kind of “dissected”. Though I didn’t write these texts myself—they are objets trouvés—I “sculpt” them into a new and concise configuration, a transformation process that is just as slow and intense as writing. The translation of the original language of these texts can also be considered as part of this alteration process.

For *ANATOMY*, which I made during a DAAD artist-in-residency in Berlin in 2005/2006, I read the whole Record of Proceedings of the **Strafsache wegen Ermordung von Dr. Karl Liebknecht und Rosa Luxemburg vor dem Feldkriegsgericht des Garde-Kavallerie-(Schützen)-Korps im Großen Schwurgerichtssaal des Kriminalgerichts in Berlin**, a typewritten document of some 1,200 pages, in the Military Archive in Freiburg. I selected the statements of 25 different persons, defendants and random witnesses, who knew details about the exact way the founders of the German communist party were murdered, and processed them into a script.² By presenting different versions of what happened on the night of January 15, 1919, a fragmented and continuously shifting picture of the last 30 minutes in the lives of Liebknecht and Luxemburg is revealed. My whole text selection is no longer than 25 pages, less than 2% of the original document. I left out the names of the witnesses, and identified each person only by age and title, so that they become more abstract figures, and at the same time more “present” in every possible way. In my script, I also listed the testimonies chronologically; totally different from the original trial records which, time-wise, jump back and forth continuously. Minute by minute, we come closer to the deaths of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, with one act devoted to the murdering of Karl Liebknecht, the other act

to the murdering of Rosa Luxemburg. I knew of the existence of these trial records at least four years prior to my Berlin DAAD artist-in-residency. But the decision to work with them was made only after a visit to the Anatomical Theatre in Berlin, which features so prominently in the slide photographs of *ANATOMY*. I had discovered this location by chance, a few months after my arrival in Berlin in early 2005, on a website listing “hidden treasures” in the German capital. Visiting that remarkable place, led me to the title of the work, and to the concept for the installation: an anatomy. The first meaning is “dissection”: “the art of separating the parts of an organism in order to ascertain their position, relations, structure, and function”; but in a broader, more figurative sense, it also means “analysis”: “a separating or dividing into parts for detailed examination.”³

For my slide installation, *THE INTRUDER (2004)*, based on *L’Intruse*, a one act play from 1890 by Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck, an incredible amount of text was omitted; obsolete characters were left out, etc. I invited Gila Walker to make a new English translation of the original French text. The last English translation dated from 1894. In this way, I wanted to actualize the play and bring it closer to the work of such authors as Beckett, to which it relates in many ways. But I never start “dissecting” a text when I’m not on the track of a global concept, in which counterpointing image and text is essential, without the one or the other having the upper hand. A play is a text that was written to be performed, to be animated, to be staged. So another important step in the transformation process from the text to my installation, *THE INTRUDER*, has to do with the search for actors, for a location. The five British actors I worked with

for the voice recordings are different people than the actors I chose to use in the series of slides. The text—transformed into a sound recording with five voice actors—is only one ingredient of a spatial installation that includes projected images and English text slides with Maeterlinck’s stage directions; five voices audible via four loudspeakers placed around a fixed distance from the projection socle; and a black projection surface. When you see the installation, your attention shifts constantly between looking, listening and reading. The relation and/or tension between text and image is very important in all of my works. The off-screen voices are not synchronously connected to the actors we see in the images. After all, a slide photograph can’t “speak”. The illusion of actors speaking in an image can only be created with moving images—film or video—not with slides.

“The modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text”⁴

Barthes emphasizes the possibility of a meaning that arises almost accidentally, instead of an author’s message that is aimed at a viewer. Thinking about not only the composition of text, but also the creation of images: What position do the mediums of photography and film have in your artistic practice?

First of all, the history of film and photography are, for several reasons, important reference frames for me. I made only one film, however, **ZYKLUS VON KLEINIGKEITEN** in 1998, and that work is as “photographic” as possible: static images, actors that almost don’t move, no synchronous sound. Dirk Pültau described it as a combination of radio play with cinematic tableau.⁵ Though I often work with the photographic camera, the medium as such is not the point for me. I do have a preference, however, for the so-called reproductive techniques such

as lithography, photography, film, video silk-screen and inkjet printing, Xerox copies, etc. What I’m really interested in is the creation of series—series’ of images that are related to each other; this could be the ongoing loop of a slide projection, as much as a photographic series—the images are always interconnected in many ways, they tell a story, however deconstructed or abstract that story may be.

When a found narration, such as a trial record, is translated into images, these act as a transmitter and in this respect illustrate a past event. Hence, even a specially produced image functions as an additional documentation of the past and resembles something found. What is the relationship between the found text and its translation into images? To what extent could the resulting action be described as a reenactment?

I don’t like the word “narration” in combination with the word “found” in this context. I work with very different texts, but not always narrations, so I’d prefer to use the word text instead. Strictly speaking, there is no author involved in the transcript of a testimony, for example—a trial record could be considered found footage. After I transform them, they become narrations, but certainly not always in the rough way I found them. A theatre play or a song text is something of a completely different order, however.

Constructing or shaping, finding a “form” for the material I work with, is primordial. I’m interested in stories—our society is a recited society—but I want to stress the mechanisms of narration, deconstructing it somehow. Despite the presence of text in my work, I try to create strong visual experiences in the first instance, with a focus on the relation or tension between text and image, between reading and visualizing, between listening and looking.

I don’t think my installation **ANATOMY** “illustrates” or “reenacts” the trial from 1919 it is based on. I asked young actors who were approximately the same age as the witnesses to embody these specific testimonies (speaking German), and filmed their performances on video (in colour), in strictly framed close-ups in front of a white background: a very abstract and at the same time contemporary image, an “open” image. They all wear contemporary (coloured) shirts, representing young people of today, not reconstructing historic characters from 1919. The actors were handed the text in advance, so they could memorize it, with a single instruction: do not attempt to act a part, and leave out *Bewertung*, as they say in German—judgement or evaluation of what you are saying. Everything was recorded very quickly, without much rehearsal. The actors were instructed to face the camera directly the whole time, a genuine ordeal at times. They were also stimulated to leave a lot of “white space”; i.e., silences between the sentences: voids for the spectators to fill in, offering them time and space to picture what is being said.

These testimonies in German on video were translated “live” by an English court interpreter, as she was hearing the statements for the very first time, and her “interpretation”—which can be heard in the installation over wireless headphones—shows how agile language really is. The English interpretation brings the historical text back to the present with an incredible directness.

Another part of **ANATOMY**, a series of black-and-white slide photographs realized with 17 other actors between 24 and 81 years old (some of them very well-known) representing an audience, were taken at the Anatomical Theatre in Berlin. These slides form a more metaphorical counterpoint to the “dry” or

“distant” interpretation of the filmed testimonies visible on the two monitors.

I certainly don’t consider the images I make as a documentation of the past, and certainly not as resembling something found. I don’t think that **ANATOMY**, with its complex relationship between the images (slide and video) and the sound (direct sound in German, and in English interpretation) resembles the original trial from 1919, quite the contrary. I did not do any research to find out what people looked like, what the Berlin court looked like. The architecture of the Berlin Anatomical Theatre, where I made the slide photographs, evokes a very suggestive atmosphere somewhere between a stage, a Greek amphitheatre and a court of law. This location is ideally suited to my search for abstraction: the scene of so many dissections and analyses, it reflects various aspects of my own artistic process as I take a scalpel to the material I chose to work with.

Even though I take historical texts as a starting-point for some of my installations, the ultimate goal or the result is not “historical”. I want to create space for the imagination, for thinking, now. Realism is not what I’m looking for. It all comes back to the same thing: creating distance, abstraction, and counterpoints.

“How much or how little do you need to tell something...?”⁶

Language obtains an initial role as a transmitter of a story or history, so that narration should often be understood as an interlinking of information that originates in different events and sources. In your series FAMILY PLOT #2 (2010), the emblematic use of speech balloons indicates language as a performative act.

In **FAMILY PLOT #2**, history is explored as a series of personal worlds, and as something told by anonymous narrators: those who

“speak” are explicitly identified. I don’t indicate any sources or references. Subjectivity is at issue again, and its problematization.

I used a similar method in my photographic series **LEGEND** (2009). The Latin verb “legere” originally meant “to gather”. In time, the verb came to signify “to gather with the eye, to see”, and that led to the sense “to read”. From this verb came the Latin noun *legenda*, used in the Middle Ages to mean “a thing to be read”. The work refers to both meanings of the word legend: of a mythical tale, a story of undocumented veracity; and the explanations of symbols in maps, and explanatory remarks in illustrations and captions.

I photographed nine landscapes on La Gomera, the second smallest of the Canary Islands. Assigned to each are five legends or captions, with a variety of information about the Canary Islands. The photos, which resemble a view through a telescope, and the engraved metal plates with the text quotes—put between quotation marks, without indication of sources—stir associations with nineteenth century research expeditions and the presentation of their findings in natural history and ethnology museums. Historical, political, and economic facts are presented, but also “legends” in the sense of legendary or mythical reports. The network of associations and facts yields a multifaceted image; yet despite the abundance of information, it is impossible to get the picture “in focus”.

The speech balloons in **FAMILY PLOT #2** and the quotation marks in **LEGEND** point to the same thing; these are found texts, spoken or written by someone at some time in a remote or near past (even yesterday is the past already). The words in the text bubbles of **FAMILY PLOT #2** are not clearly referred to as “quotes”, although the presence of the balloons makes it clear that it’s found footage. But those text balloons only have a minor presence in comparison to the images I

selected for **FAMILY PLOT #2**, a series of 25 inkjet prints that first and foremost resemble a pictorial atlas, a collection of historical engravings from very different sources.

You use images as well as texts in FAMILY PLOT #2, but both remain fragmentary. Yet the world map and the combination of a number of personalities produce a subsumption and contextualisation. To what extent is it possible to refer only to fragmentary material and still produce cohesion? Likewise, how is it possible to conserve openness or achieve something that amounts to more than the found materials?

FAMILY PLOT #2 is in the first place an encompassing image project. But it also belongs together with **FAMILY PLOT #1** (2009)—it does not exist on its own. Though I have a long-standing fascination for botany, gardens, and gardening, I couldn’t have imagined doing a project in this context until, during an artist-in-residency stay on Gotland, I stumbled upon the Swede, Carl Linnaeus, the famous “Father of Modern Taxonomy”. In 1741, Linnaeus had explored this Swedish island in the Baltic Sea in search of medicinal plants and plants for dyeing cloth, as well as useful raw materials, on behalf of the Swedish parliament. In addition to Linnaeus’ literary talent, expressed in his travelogue about Öland and Gotland, his binomial naming system captured my interest. I became fascinated by what one could call “linguistic imperialism”, by the colonial history hidden in the name of a plant. Before Linnaeus, many naturalists gave the species they described long, awkward Latin names, which could be changed at will. The need for a workable naming system was intensified by the large number of plants and animals that were being brought back to Europe via naval expeditions to Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Linnaeus introduced the systematic use of

binomial nomenclature in Latin, giving plants and animals a generic name and a specific epithet. His naming system accompanied Europe’s expansion and colonization of the world (ignoring existing indigenous names, for example). Many of the “newly” discovered exotic plants were named after their—usually white, Western—discoverers, or were dedicated to important European figures, such as the genus *Banksia*, which was named after Joseph Banks, President of the British Royal Society; or *Nicotiana* (tobacco), which honoured the French diplomat Jean Nicot. Naming is always an act of appropriation, which poses questions of identity that generate the plot of (hi-)stories. But this is only one aspect that resonates in the title, **FAMILY PLOT**. The word “plot” can mean the plot of a story, an intrigue; it also can mean a piece of land, a ground plan, or a graphic representation, such as a chart. As always in my work, following the hints contained in the meaning of the title opens up essential aspects of the concept.

FAMILY PLOT #1 shows, in a very playful and graphical way—mimicking a genogram, a pictorial display of a person’s family relationships—how Linnaeus and his many followers retold the story of the elite of the Western World through their well-managed naming system. It’s also a slightly erotic work, with its close-ups of flowers and fruits from a wide range of plants, a wink to Linnaeus’ own sexual classification system. Rather than including the entire plant and its construction in his taxonomy, he classified all plants into 24 groups, based solely on sexual characteristics: the number of pistils (the female reproductive units) and the number of stamens (the male reproductive units). This method was so controversial at the time that he was accused of botanical pornography. Similar to a family tree, **FAMILY PLOT #1** presents alongside Linnaeus, 24 photograph-

ically-reproduced historical portraits of name patrons, and set smaller next to each of these, the name of the botanist who gave the name including a diagram of the nomenclature process. This “documentation” is visible underneath a black-and-white silkscreen on glass of the plant or fruit in question. The viewer’s gaze oscillates between a confrontation with the tradition of the portrait as an expression of power and the stylized beauty of nature. All the depicted persons are looking toward Linnaeus, in the middle. The spatial arrangement follows the alphabet, beginning with *Adansonia digitata*, named by Linnaeus after the French botanist Michel Adanson (1727–1806), and ending with *Welwitschia mirabilis*, named by the British botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker, in honour of the Austrian botanist Friedrich Martin Josef Welwitsch (1806–1872). Although my starting point for was a linguistic interest in plant names, and not the name patrons and their world, I became fascinated by these biographies from an era when the order of things was being systematized. After more than a year of research, in mid-2010, this led to a second series of 25 prints.

Every print of **FAMILY PLOT #2** features the header “THE WORLD OF...” followed by the name of each name patron of the 25 plants selected for **FAMILY PLOT #1**, to indicate not only each of the then-known land masses, centrally represented by historical world maps (remember that a plot also means a chart or a map), but also aims to depict the connections and mutual relations of the person’s “world.” Copper and wood engravings from various sources are used as these are the reproductions that shaped Europe’s view of the rest of the world since the invention of the printing press.

As always, I set my own system onto these universes, standardizing diverse materials by use of black-and-white aesthetics, reproducing

all my found materials in negative. Slavery, one of the topics, is a possible reference point for this black metaphor; these worlds appear as history's dark hours. In the depictions of Black people, reversing the selected engravings is very striking: through this method, their skin appears white. Inversion abstracts the gathered materials and harmonizes very different images. When looking at the series, which at the Generali Foundation covered a wall of 30 meters long, 25 "worlds" unfold before the eyes of the viewer. From a certain vantage point, you can make a connection between the plant and the world of the person to whom the plant was dedicated, leading to many associations, making it impossible to regard the pictures of flowers and fruits with an innocent eye.

"History is coloured by language"

Your installation DISPLACEMENT deals with the possibilities of narration or renarration.

I actually call the work a "remake", not a renarration, which would only refer to a text, while **DISPLACEMENT** is the renarration of a film, and it definitely consists of images as well. This type of renarration is generally called a remake.

The installation provokes the viewer to piece the fragments together on two different levels. By using slides—also text slides—and sound, you offer a setting that is activated by the perceptions and associations of the viewer who connects each single image, text or acoustic information into a conceptual montage. DISPLACEMENT's script is based on the dialogue from Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio In Italia* (Journey To Italy, 1954). Defragmenting the montage the visitor also discovers Rossellini's narration. How important is this "white space" that is constituted by gaps between fragments in your art works, and also between your work and its references? Which role does the

idea of vacancy play in the spatial installation of your work?

Silence is very present in all my soundtracks. All the actors I have worked with were asked to think very consciously about the creation of silences, but even then I have to add extra silence during the editing. The artificial silences are created to give the audience time to fill in the gaps. It offers space and freedom for interpretation, opening possibilities for visualization and imagination.

There is also my search for abstraction, the search for a kind of nakedness or sobriety, stripping the image of what is superfluous, thus creating imaginary space for the audience, the beholders of the work. The audience should play a significant role in reworking and producing the meaning of the work. A text, a book, a work of art, they all are sites of intersection. There is no final "meaning" but rather a network of associations. Meaning depends on a visitor's particular frame of reference, his or her familiarity with a set of stories or images.

However paradoxical this may sound, my research and my references don't really matter, nor the long preparation time I spend on certain works. What counts is the work I present, not the background information, though I often write about my research in autobiographical texts that become part of a book, or even part of the work—for example in the **TABLES OF AFFINITIES** (2002). I mean that a visitor doesn't necessarily need to know that **DISPLACEMENT** is a photographic remake of **Journey to Italy**. My installation is an independent work that exists on its own. I bought the rights to use the original English dialogue of Rossellini's film, but I actually used only a very small percentage of evident I couldn't keep those fragments that pointed to the very specific history of Naples, the city featuring in **Journey to Italy**. I based the new dialogue required on "found footage", with text clippings from tourist guides, newspapers, and travel magazines (for example, the fact that

Ingmar Bergman landed on Gotland in 1961, on location hunting for his film **Såsom i en spegel (Through a Glass Darkly)**.

At the same time, I'm interested in the potency of history in the present and the handling of testimony and relics from the past (and I intensify this theme, which is also central to Rossellini's movie, by acknowledging the film itself as an "historical artefact"). It's also one of my favourite films. So in this case, I found it important to announce in the press release about the work that **DISPLACEMENT** can be considered a photographic remake of Rossellini's film.

To what extent do you think the viewer plays a performative role, in the sense of being a conceptual actor, who acts according to a script manifested by the installations and their choreography?

I don't like black boxes for my work, with horizontal rows of seating, imitating a movie theatre. I prefer spaces in which the visitors can circulate freely. I also work with loops, in which the visitor can enter or leave at any point. The visitors don't need to sit, and if they wish to, the seating furniture gives them the option of various viewing angles. Unlike in the cinema, visitors may change position and perspective. It's an open space for reflection and narration that is offered, in a metaphorical and literal sense.

DISPLACEMENT, for example, consists of large black-and-white images projected onto opposite walls. On one side, giant, frontal portraits of a man and a woman alternate with the white text, "every story is a travel story". The portraits appear and disappear in slow fades, which largely determine the lighting and atmosphere of the space. A kind of "travelogue" plays out on the other side. The landscapes and interiors aren't exactly exotic, but you can't really place them either. Each image is overlaid with a text, such as: "Day 6 – Late afternoon – Man and woman driving to hotel". For the most

part, there are no people to be seen in the photographs, yet almost all the images contain traces of human presence: infrastructure, windmills, radars, bunkers, industrial installations, art, archaeological remains, and so forth. As in **ANATOMY**, the text the work is based on is only one ingredient within a complex installation with many layers, which can only be uncovered by spending time inside the exhibition space, looking, reading, and listening. Also in **ANATOMY** there are various possibilities of perceiving the work. The visitor can sit on the bench and just look at the two television monitors, but he can also switch viewing points completely, by either looking at the monitors or at the huge slide projections on the wall, left of the monitors. The visitor can also choose to stand next to the three-meter long socle and listen with headphones to the English translation of the German testimonies by a court interpreter. He can connect this sound as well to the slowly changing slide projections, without even looking at the young actors on the video monitors. This creates constantly shifting relationships, since the video and slide loops have different durations.

The exhibitions at the K21 and the Generali Foundation offer two alternative strategies for displaying your works and two modes of perception that create differing experiences and other possibilities of contextualization. At K21 in Düsseldorf, you collaborated with the Belgian architect, Kris Kimpe, to develop the exhibition architecture. The space was cut into grid squares and paths that isolated the exhibited installations. The individual spaces were connected via corridors that allowed different paths through the exhibition and various linking of works. While you used white boxes that allowed the viewer to move within each installation, you also created space for decisions about movement

and connections. Could you elaborate on the development of this exhibition's architecture? What role does the space take on as a media between work and viewer for the conception of your exhibitions in general?

The space for temporary exhibitions at K21 is located in the basement. This basement is one huge open space of 1100 sqm—except for a black box in the middle of it—with walls reaching 5.5m high. The Ständehaus, a former parliament building, within which the K21 opened its doors in April 2002 after a drastic redesign, dates from the end of the nineteenth century. When taking a look at the floor plan of the basement, one immediately notices the neo-classical, symmetrical structure of the original building, including a semi-circular space, known in the K21 as the apsis.

Until that point, for each temporary exhibition in the basement of K21, new spaces had been made to measure using a prefab system, consisting of movable metal structures covered with plywood. These freestanding walls have a standard thickness of 45cm—a very conclusive aspect, which is important to take into account when working with the architecture of a show at this location.

At the end of 2008, Kris Kimpe, a close friend, had suggested that he wanted to work with me on the floor plan for K21. Early in 2009, I showed him my drafts and we discussed some of the core ideas I had in mind for the exhibition architecture: long, empty corridors to create distance (and time) between the works, no use of colours in the entire basement, typography showing the titles of each work on the white walls of the corridors, entries to each space reaching to the ceiling etc. I also told Kris that I did not want to use the existing black box in the middle of the basement, but would close it off instead and use the area around it as a central seating area. I also wanted the apsis to be part of the space, though it was

excluded in most of the temporary exhibitions I had seen at the K21. It's the only room in the basement where daylight enters through the circular windows and where one can see the outside world, which makes this room very special.

I would like to stress the fact that it is not as if there is something like the architecture of **Album/Tracks A** (2010), and then works, as if these were two separate entities. I don't believe that one can create exhibition architecture first and then put works into that architecture.

Most of my slide installations had been shown already on several occasions in solo and group shows. I have a quite precise idea of how to exhibit each of them; they have many architectural spatial characteristics of their own. The architecture should develop from the works and their particular needs and not the other way around. At the same time, I also think it is important to take into account the existing architecture of the place where one will exhibit. For every exhibition one has to start from zero again, taking into account the typical features of the venue in question. K21 and the Generali Foundation have a different scale and each has its very distinct architecture—even the empty basement of K21 has very specific characteristics. As a result, **Album/Tracks A** and **Album/Tracks B** (2010) looked very distinct.

The most difficult thing was to decide which works I would show at K21 and which ones at the Generali Foundation. From the beginning I saw these two shows as complementary, with a partly different selection of works, offering a complete overview of my work to the present day, including three new works. The 10 works I finally selected for K21, covering a period of 17 years, are very diverse. Some installations need to be shown in relative darkness, like **BATTLE** (1993/2009) and **THE INTRUDER**

(2004)—these two works also have very integral soundtracks—while others, such as the photographic series **VÉRITÉ EXPOSÉE** (2006), **FAMILY PLOT #1**, **LEGEND** and “à...à... **AAAH!**” (2000) need artificial lighting. Consequently, it was obvious that Kris and I needed to create compartments in the open basement space, so that each work could be presented in an optimal way. At the same time, I didn't want to lock the works up in hermetically-sealed black boxes. Though the exhibition space is divided into several rooms, these are rather light and open, thanks to the large, high entrance for each white space. Kris suggested that we give the entrance ways in some of the spaces recessed walls that were 90cm deep (2x 45cm, the size of the prefab system used in K21). It's a very interesting architectural detail: It creates a movement and invites the visitor to enter the space. The movement from “outside” to “inside” almost follows the pattern of a slow fade from light to black. The boundaries between inside and outside become blurred. At the same time, these entranceways, which were built in the spaces of **DISPLACEMENT**, **ANATOMY** and **DU MENTIR-FAUX**, filter the bright spotlight from the surrounding corridors.

In total, there were 10 “rooms” to visit in K21, a room for each work, though the open rooms for the photographic series' **FAMILY PLOT #1** and **LEGEND** were not specially built for the occasion and should rather be considered as large corridors. The seating area, however, in front of them, does give these spaces a special allure. It also makes it possible to look at these photographic works from a distance, from the perspective of the long bench, and to perceive them as a whole. When you come closer to the wall, in effect performing a “zoom” movement, the work changes completely: only then can you read the textual information. The beholder actively constructs the meaning of the work, and the more time he spends with it, the

more rewarding and rich the experience will be.

“What's in a word”—a linguistic interest that is one of the recurrent starting points in all my works—is also reflected, in a subtle way, in the exhibition architecture. It's no coincidence that I'm interested in the etymology of the two words that I chose for the title of these two exhibitions and of the closely connected catalogue, **Album/Tracks A+B** (2010), in which these words and their etymology figure in white ink on the black endpapers.

The word Album interested me because of its origin in the word albus, meaning white or whiteness. In ancient Rome, an album was a blank tablet on which the principal events of the year were noted, a list of names was kept. The endless white walls in K21 could be seen as a metaphor for the unwritten, empty page, for the white projection surface. When entering the exhibition hall via the central staircase, one could see nothing but whiteness... **FAMILY PLOT #1** could only be discovered when going to the right, together with words (the titles of the works), in large typography on the walls. But I was also interested—as this was my first big overview exhibition—in the actual meaning of the word album as “anthology”, a collection of pictures, or a book with blank pages used for making a collection. Track, the second word of the title used in plural, with its manifold meanings, completed the concept. The long “paths” between/leading to the works could be referred to as tracks to follow, for example. I was also very much interested in the meaning it has of detectable evidence (footprints, the wake of a ship) that something has passed; and also the course along which something moves or progresses; a way of life, or action; paths along which material as music or information is recorded; a sequence of events—a train of ideas; an awareness of a fact, progression or condition; to lose track of the time...

In general, I prefer exhibition spaces that are open and intimate at the same time. I like the idea that you can focus on a work, but I also don't want the visitors to feel locked in sound-proof dark rooms. Even though the plywood walls are 45cm thick, the voices of **BATTLE** and **THE INTRUDER** are still audible throughout the exhibition, but it is not disturbing at all. On the contrary, the constant murmur, like the high entrances, creates a kind of transitional space between the works, which can make the visitors curious to discover them.

“Every story has a place. Every place has a story”⁸

With the complementary exhibitions Album/Tracks A at K21, and Album/Tracks B at the Generali Foundation, you presented your first extensive institutional exhibitions. For each venue you developed a particular exhibition concept. At the Generali Foundation in Vienna, there was a focus on a linear progression of the works that communicated a dramaturgy similar to a suite of acts in a play or film. Especially ELECTIVE AFFINITIES/THE TRUTH OF MASKS & TABLES OF AFFINITIES (2002) seemed to be a pivotal part of the exhibition in Vienna: Slides are projected on two huge freestanding walls that were placed in the centre of Generali Foundations' main space, and opened up towards ELECTIVE AFFINITIES' reading tables. The frontality of the projected portraits mirrored the representation of the actors on two video monitors in ANATOMY, a work you installed in the same central space, but more to the front, nearer to the entrance of the space. Moreover, the pictorial language of ELECTIVE AFFINITIES' 36 digital prints, which you displayed on the floor and next to the reading tables, are revisited in the photographic dyptic ECRAN I + II (2002). Beside such formal similarities, the

approach towards the exhibition of all elements creates sequences and connections between the single works that almost seems to create a narrative structure in itself. In which way does the exhibition at the Generali Foundation mirror the body of your work in regards to the way you induce interrelations?

Also at the Generali Foundation, I started to think about the exhibition as an investigation into the possibilities of the space as such, in connection to the works I wanted to show. The exhibition venue, built in 1995, is not only smaller than K21, but it also features very specific, contemporary architecture, with many angles and a long grey concrete wall dividing the two major spaces. When entering the Generali Foundation's exhibition space, there are strictly speaking only two directions to follow: to the left or to the right. But is also important to indicate that the whole space is very open, with many large passages, and this allows for a very organic exhibition. But again, an exhibition concept depends in the first place on the presented works. I was also told in advance that, whatever the exhibition that is shown in Generali Foundation, 99% of the visitors walk immediately to the right when they enter, straight to the big main space, continue to the back of it, and return via the narrow space left of it. Instead of fighting these given elements, I wanted to work with it.

It seems quite logical that the perspective lines created by the deep, almost triangular space—which I reinforced by the spatial characteristics of **ELECTIVE AFFINITIES/THE TRUTH OF MASKS & TABLES OF AFFINITIES**—really makes you want to walk to the back, to the illuminated tables, via **VÉRITÉ EXPOSÉE**, in which you can see **DU MENTIR-FAUX** and **FAMILY PLOT** reflected already, and then come back to the front of the space via **FAMILY PLOT** and **LEGEND**. The venue

invites a circular movement, a loop. But even though 99% of the visitors are said to follow this path, there are other possible trajectories. When you enter the Generali Foundation you could first walk to the left of the entrance door, where I installed **DISPLACEMENT**, followed by the other space on the left where I installed the photographic series “à...à...AAAH!”. You could also take a seat at the reading desk, or spend some time with the web project **APPROXIMATIONS/CONTRADICTIONS**. But probably, after having bought a ticket on the right side of the entrance door, most people would automatically walk straight to the central hall on the right, attracted by the huge slide projections of **Elective Affinities** and **Anatomy**. The existing architecture of Generali Foundation is somehow very compelling...

ELECTIVE AFFINITIES/THE TRUTH OF MASKS & TABLES OF AFFINITIES is not only a pivotal work in the architecture of the exhibition as you describe it, it's also a kind of key work. The relationship or tension between text and image is a central aspect of my work, and it is especially evident in this two-part installation. First of all there is a double series of portraits of a man and a woman, black-and-white slides projected in pairs on two freestanding walls of which one is positioned in an angle of almost 90° in relation to the other. Laid out on 14 tables behind the slide projections we find the unfolded sheets of a “book-in-the-making”, a sort of “reading diary”, in which I assembled literary, (auto-) biographical, and historic textual excerpts and images in an associative arrangement, including selections from the two books from which the work takes its title: Goethe's **Elective Affinities** and Oscar Wilde's **The Truth of Masks: A Note On Illusion**.

The seemingly endless masquerade of the two models in the slide projections—they never show their “true faces”—can be linked at will with these text fragments, but it can also be

regarded as a playful interrogation of concepts such as “truth” and “identity”. This installation can be seen as programmatic regarding how perception of my works might function. Every visitor enters an exhibition with a certain reference frame, and makes “projections” when seeing the open images I present to them. The slide projections function as mental spaces for your imagination. Not by accident does every slide of **ELECTIVE AFFINITIES** fade to bright white light, making the white wall (albus, album...) on which it is projected visible in all its brightness, almost blinding. After taking a look at the texts and images on the reading tables, we see the slide projections with different eyes, not only because the two actors suddenly become the protagonists of thousands of stories, but also because our inability to “unmask” them leaves a bitter aftertaste.

When I showed this work for the first time in 2002, as part of the exhibition **ForwArt** at the Royal Library in Brussels⁹, I was well aware that it made no sense to present a book together with the slide projections. People don't come to an exhibition to read books. I thought about alternative ways to present the materials I had assembled. Most of the books that are produced wherever in the world are printed on paper sheets of 70 x 100 cm, the so-called unfolded sheets. It is strange to discover that the pages of a book only become arranged and orderly, after these sheets are folded and cut. In the exhibition, these sheets mix the 16 pages of one quire, enabling no more than a fragmentary reading. Hence, there is no prescribed order by which the visitor is supposed to examine the materials assembled on the reading tables of **ELECTIVE AFFINITIES/THE TRUTH OF MASKS & TABLES OF AFFINITIES**; our gaze criss-crosses the photos and texts presented on the sheets. During the seven weeks the **ForwArt** exhibition was held,

Etablissements d'en face projects, a Brussels art foundation, made the production of an extra edition possible. Sheets had been printed on wafer-thin paper and folded into quires. Every week one uncut quire was sent to a limited number of national and international destinations. After having the folds of the leaves slit, it allowed a chronological reading of the text as a whole, as a second stage of my 'book-in-the-making.' It was a reading diary in the end, a real network of materials that I composed into a story with a very specific form, which occupied me more than two years.

While your exhibition Album/Tracks B at the Generali Foundation seems to resemble the process of a linear narration similar to the experience of reading a book, Album/Tracks A at K21 appears more open to differing forms of access. Following the analogy of a book, Album/Tracks A appears to be structured like an archive where the visitor has to find his or her own approach through connections in the hypertext. How far was the double-exhibition a chance for you to analyse the different possible modes of perception your work inspires? Considering the exhibitions' titles Album/Tracks A and Album/Tracks B: In what way do you bring together images and text and how do you compile them? Taking the album as a given format, what kind of film or image is produced and to what extent is it understandable as an album?

I would never compare the experience of visiting the exhibition in Vienna as similar to reading a book, as if the exhibition consists of texts to read, in a well-defined order. I think visiting **Album/Tracks B** is a far more complex activity than reading a book due to the different time-based works, with the overwhelming presence of continuously changing projected images, in ongoing loops. And similarly, I don't know why the experience of visiting the exhibition at

K21 would resemble the visit to an archive, as it seems to be a very empty archive at first sight, with only whiteness to be discovered when you enter... Whatever the architectural conditions where I present my works, every visitor has to find his or her own way of dealing with my work—the presence of long white empty corridors does not make the difference. But I gave your metaphors some thought and maybe, somehow, there are elements of a book, especially of an album (and its different significations) in both exhibitions. In a book, turning the pages one by one, you don't know what you will discover next, until you turn the page. From this viewpoint, I would even say that the book metaphor is more to the point for **Album/Tracks A** in Düsseldorf, with the endless white corridors (albus, whiteness) on which the titles of each work are indicated in huge letters on the walls, as triggers that open up the imagination for the first time, before seeing any of the images, a process that is much more related to reading a book... The titles on the walls also function like chapters of a book, of which the pages with images only pop up, once you turn a page, or enter a room. **Album/Tracks B** than is a book with images (album as an anthology, a collection of pictures), of which all the pages are open at the same time. Thus it less resembles a book than a scroll or a loop. When you enter the central hall in the Generali Foundation, you can see all the works at once, or catch a glimpse of them. There is certainly nothing that resembles the linearity of a book in the Generali Foundation, there are too many things going on at the same time, having to choose the whole time: Will I look at this, or at that, and at that? I would also rather use filmic terms to describe the experience of a visitor in the Generali Foundation. The exhibition invites a kind of non-orthodox way of looking much more reminiscent of zapping on the television, using your body as a camera, making panoramic and telescopic

movements, close-ups onto details...

Maybe **Album/Tracks B** in Vienna much more resembles an archive, stuffed with layers of materials that need to be discovered. The strict grid in Düsseldorf, although there are more empty corridors to follow, offers a quieter circuit, leaving every work much more on its own, and contrary to your analysis, makes me think much more to the linearity of a book, where the pages unfold one by one, notwithstanding the fact that you can read this book in several ways, depending on who's reading it.

“Act of reading reaches the past”¹⁰

As if to emphasize this problematic difference between the format of a public presentation and a printed publication you explicitly produce books that refer to single works; e.g., the publications that accompany DU MENTIR-FAUX or ANATOMY. What are the transformative steps that translate a single work or an exhibition into a publication? In regards to the perception of your work, how important is a translation into written word and pictures, first in the context of the exhibition and second in retrospect?

I prefer to make artist's books, autonomous publications that are not merely documenting an exhibition or a work. However, after 17 years—the oldest installation, only exhibited in Düsseldorf, dates from 1993—I think it was time to look back and create a “classic” catalogue. But **Album/Tracks A+B** is far from being a translation of the two exhibitions on the occasion of which it was published. It does not even include installation views made in Vienna or Düsseldorf. The catalogue consists of one general essay and short texts—by 10 different authors—but first and foremost, I show images...

Following a very strict grid, the short essays about each work are preceded by varying sequences of images: first the image, and then

the text. The sequences of images give an idea of the time-based aspect of my work—whether it's a series of photographic prints you need to discover in all of its aspects and relations, or a slide installation. The whole book is structured by an alternation between black and white: installation views on black paper, the text on white paper.

Exhibitions are always very limited in time, so it is important to offer the public other ways of discovering the oeuvre of an artist. A catalogue can never replace the exhibition, however, it's always a different translation of the same materials. It can only give an idea of the works, especially by showing many installation views, taken from different point of views, in various venues.

I don't consider my publications **DU MENTIR-FAUX** (2000), **ANATOMY** (2006) or **BEETHOVEN'S NEPHEW** (1999) as references to—and certainly not as documentations of—the works they are related to. They are autonomous artists' books that were produced parallel to the exhibition (or screening in the case of **ZYKLUS VON KLENIGKEITEN**) of the works in question. I would rather say that these books are different translations or transformations of the same materials. My book **DU MENTIR-FAUX** is not documenting the installation with the same name. There are not even installation views included. It's simply a different work. The book features an autobiographical text—I have always loved writing, and several of my publications contain texts I edited or wrote. I chose a very particular graphical design for it: in accordance with medieval manuscripts the “main” text, my account of how the work was established and how this process relates to my personal history, shows added “glosses” in a smaller typeface. The relationship between both “tracks”, however, is not quite as one would expect: the intimate main text can be perceived just as easily to

be “comment” or “interpretation” on its surrounding glosses, which in fact deliver more factual information.

These publications were not made after the works in question were created, but actually at the same time. They are simply “translations” of the same material. For me it’s a challenge to work with books. If I had the production budget, I would also have produced books in connection to the various materials I worked with for **THE INTRUDER, DISPLACEMENT** and **FAMILY PLOT**, also for **LEGEND**. While I’m working on a new installation there are so many tracks and side roads I follow, that don’t become part of the installation as such, but that are interesting to find a place for in a different medium, such as a book.

The interview is based on an email correspondence in May 2011.

1 Michel de Certeau quoted by Ana Torfs in an interview with Els Roelandt for BAM in 2006, <http://www.bamart.be/pages/detail/en/619>: “Ce que nous appelons d’abord l’histoire n’est qu’un récit” (L’Ecriture de l’histoire, 1975/The Writing of History, 1975).

2 The script is published as “A Tragedy in Two Acts”, in the book Anatomy, which I made in connection with the installation. DAAD, Berlin 2006.

3 Webster online dictionary.

4 Roland Barthes: The Death of the Author, 1968.

5 Dirk Pültau: “The blind singer and the absent composer” in: A Prior #10, p.116. <http://www.aprior.org/articles/79>.

6 Ana Torfs in an interview with Els Roelandt for BAM, 2006 <http://www.bamart.be/pages/detail/en/619>.

7 idem.

8 Text on a lithograph edition that Ana Torfs created on the occasion of the exhibition Album/Tracks A in K21 in Duesseldorf.

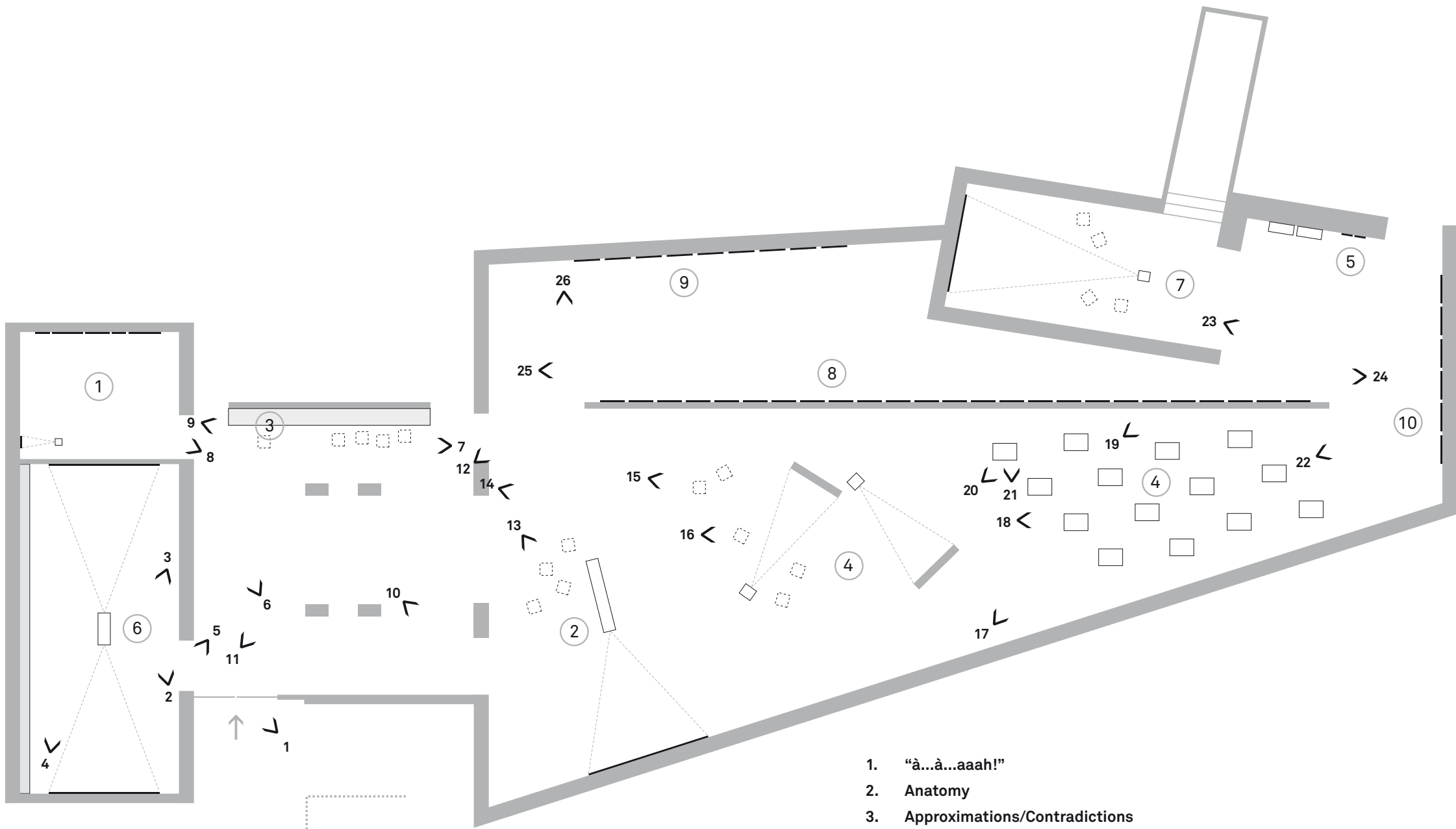
9 Group exhibition curated by Lynne Cooke, Chris Dercon, Robert Fleck and Hans-Ulrich Obrist.

10 Dirk Lauwaert: “Reading as a form of writing” in A Prior #10, p. 92. <http://www.aprior.org/articles/78>.

A walk through B

Ana Torfs – Album/Tracks B
Generali Foundation, Vienna
September 3 – December 12, 2010





1. "à...à...aaah!"
2. Anatomy
3. Approximations/Contradictions
4. Elective Affinities / The Truth of Masks & Tables of Affinities
5. Écran I & II
6. Displacement
7. Du mentir-faux
8. Family Plot #1 & 2
9. Legend
10. Vérité exposée



02a



08



02b



03



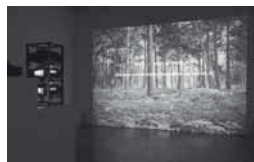
09



10



02c



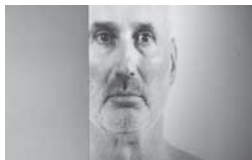
02d



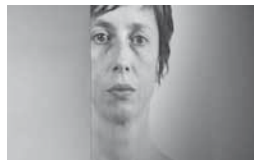
02e



04



05a



05b



06



07



11

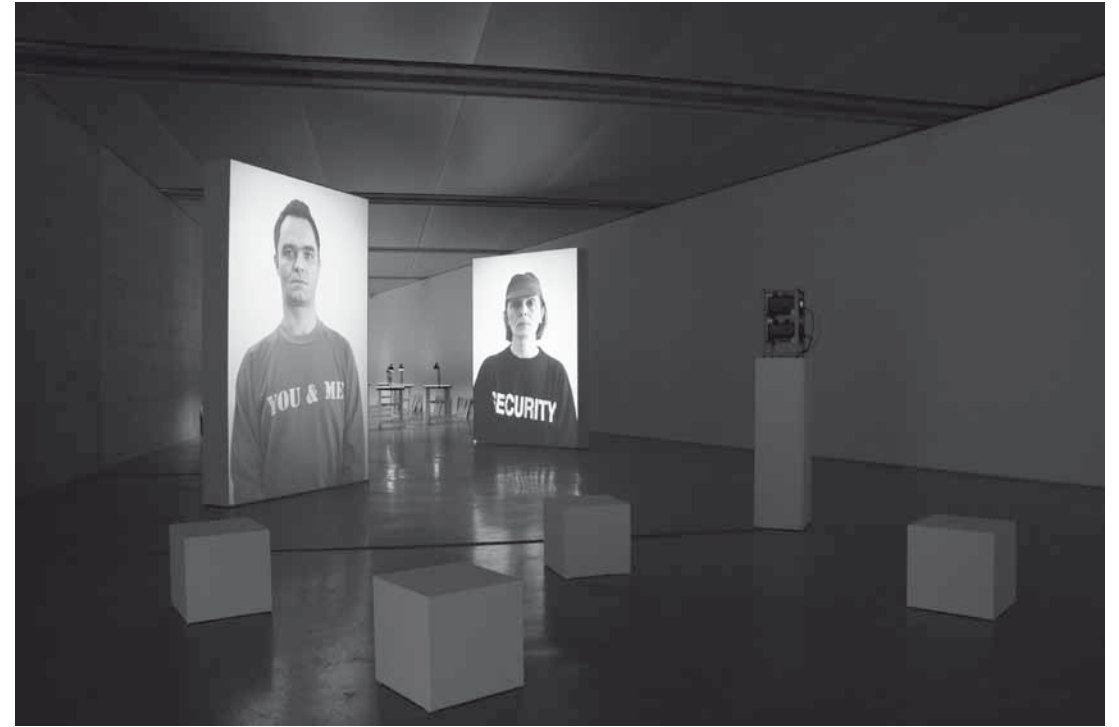


12





14a



15



14b



16a



16b



16c

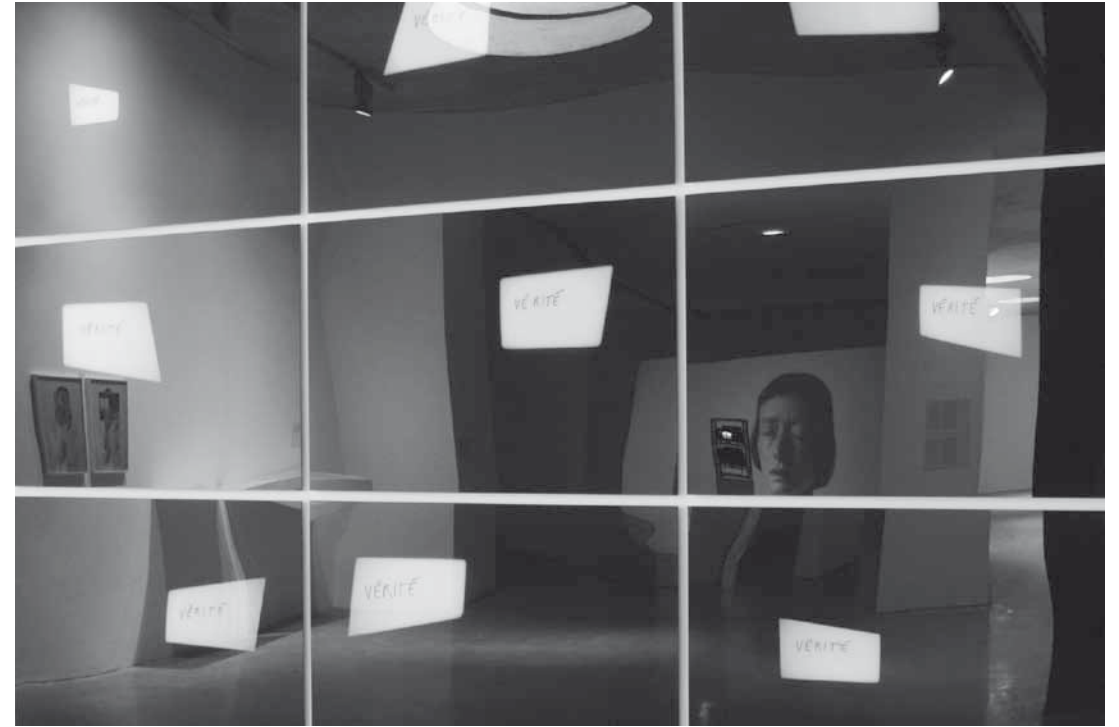


16d





17



22



18



19



20



21



23





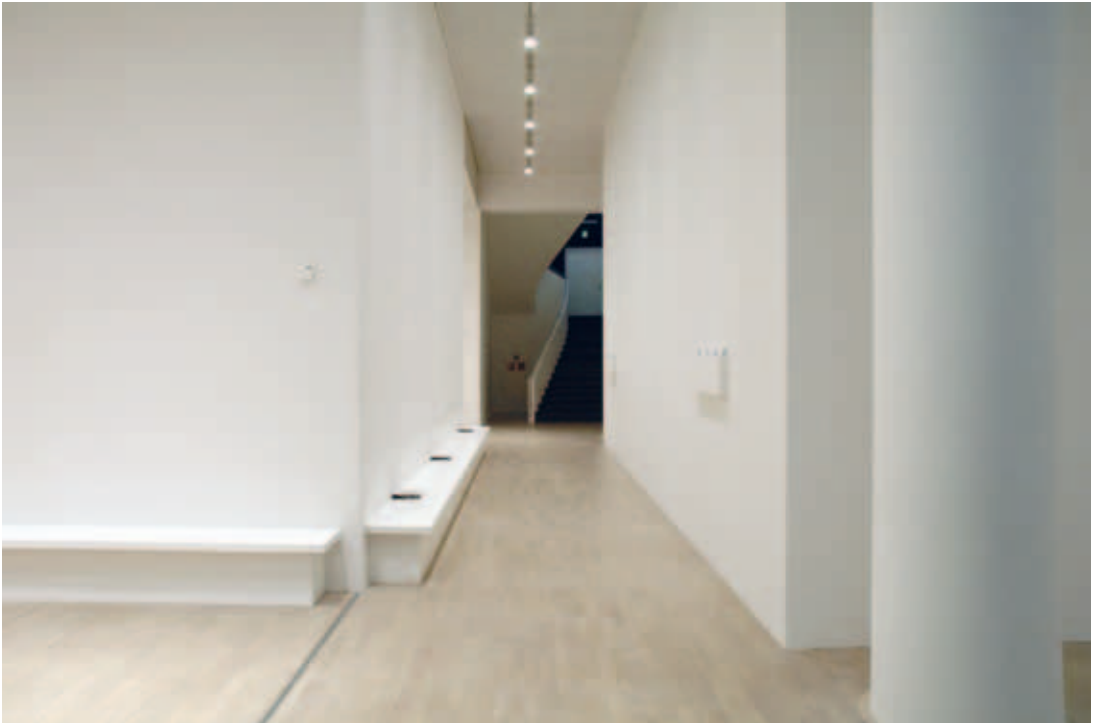
25

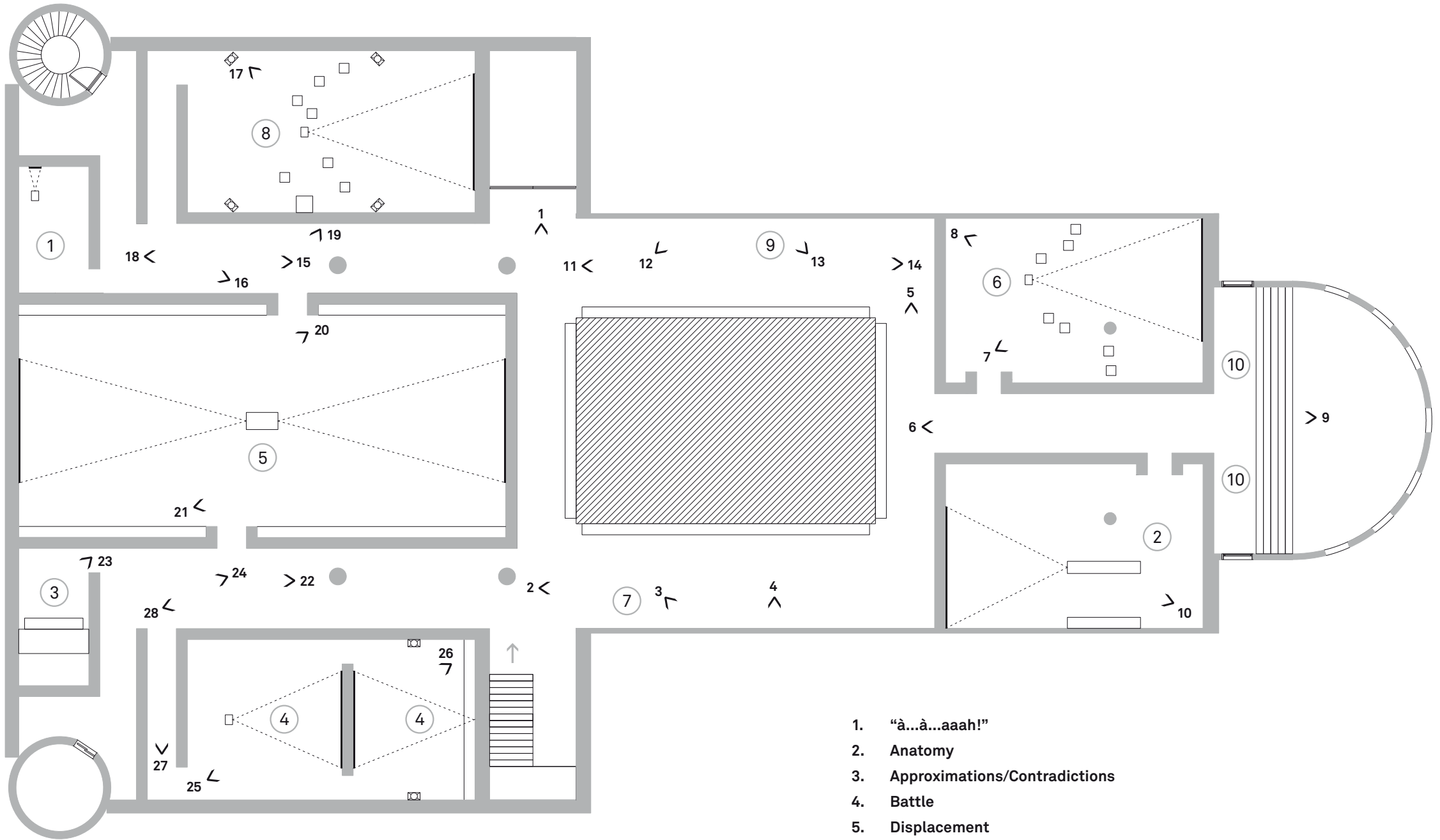


26

A walk through A

Ana Torfs – Album/Tracks A
K21 Ständehaus, Düsseldorf
February 27 – July 18, 2010





1. "à...à...aaah!"
2. Anatomy
3. Approximations/Contradictions
4. Battle
5. Displacement
6. Du mentir-faux
7. Family Plot #1
8. The Intruder
9. Legend
10. Vérité exposée



02



07



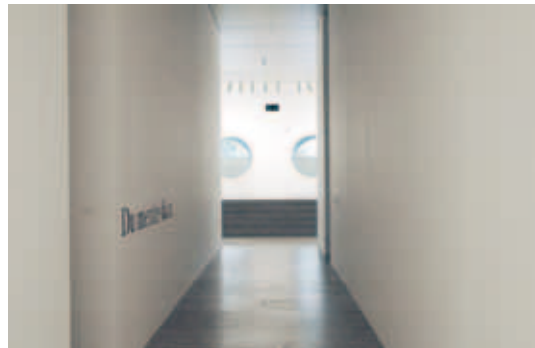
03



04



05



06



08

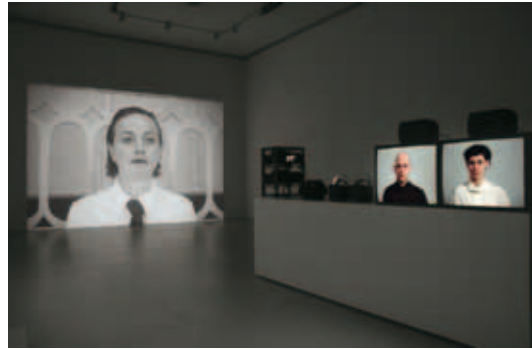




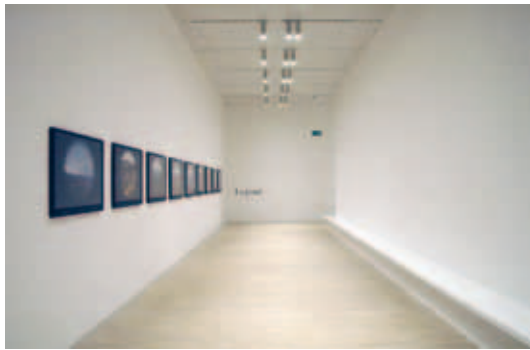
10a



10b



10c



11



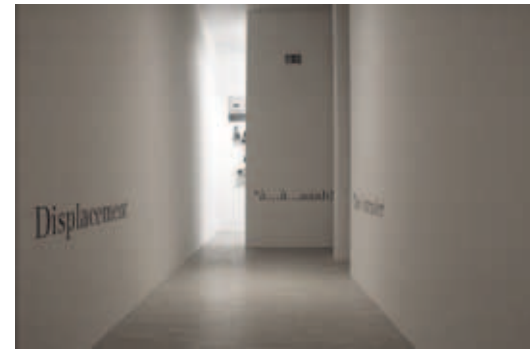
12



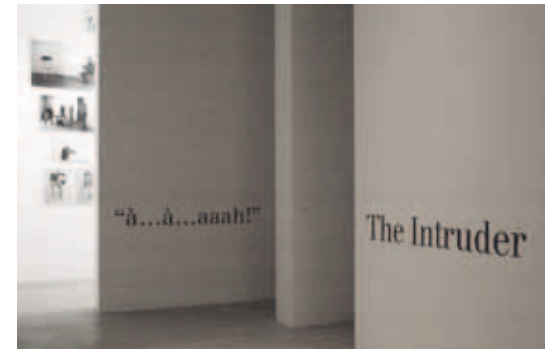
13



14



15



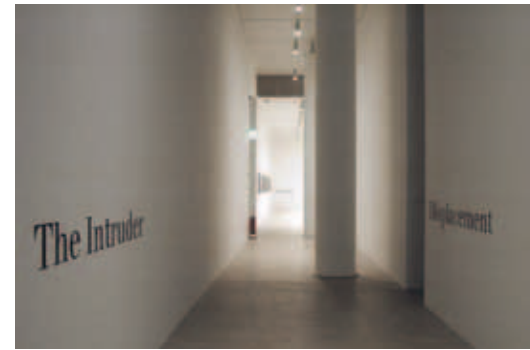
16



17a



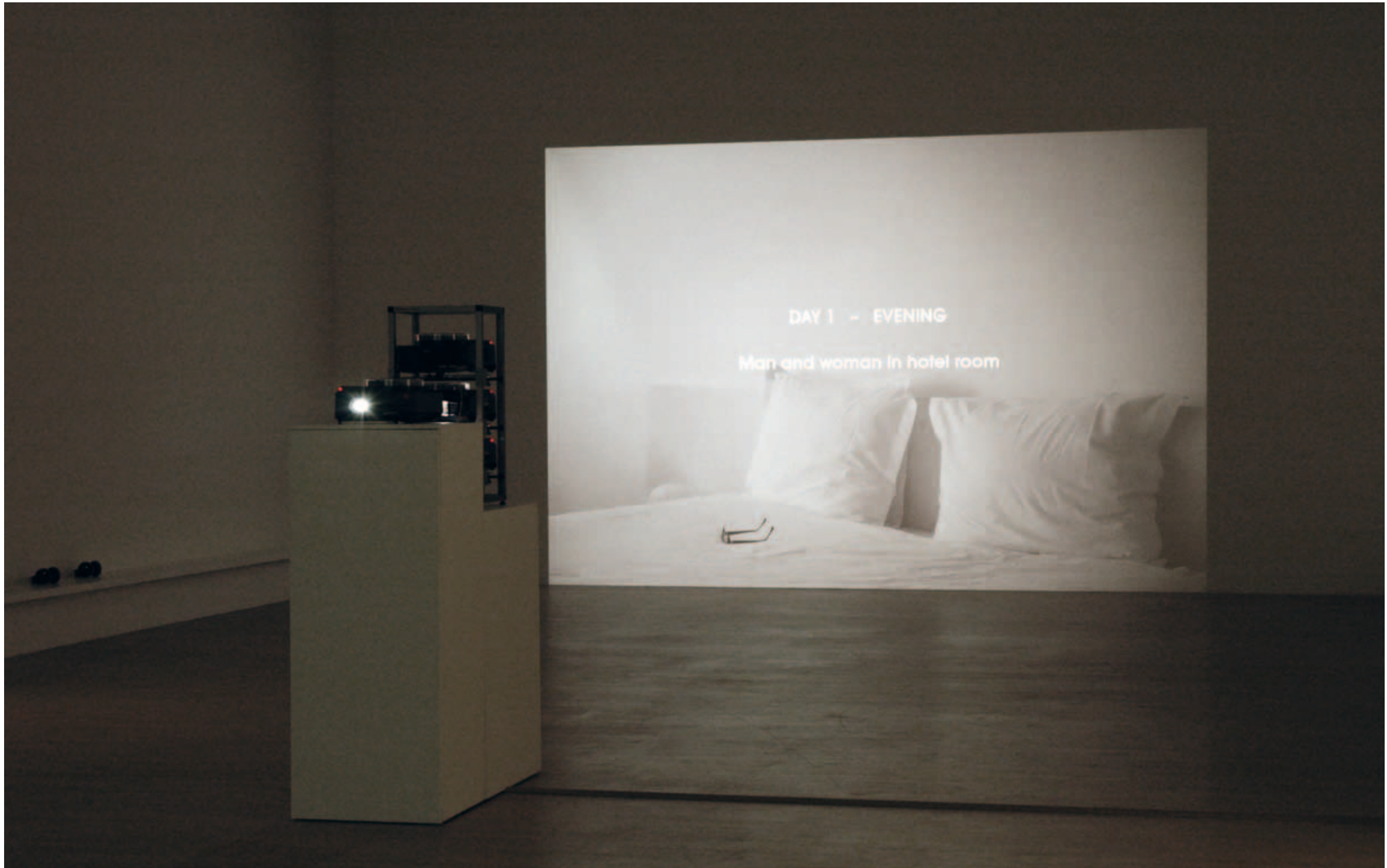
17b



18



19





20b



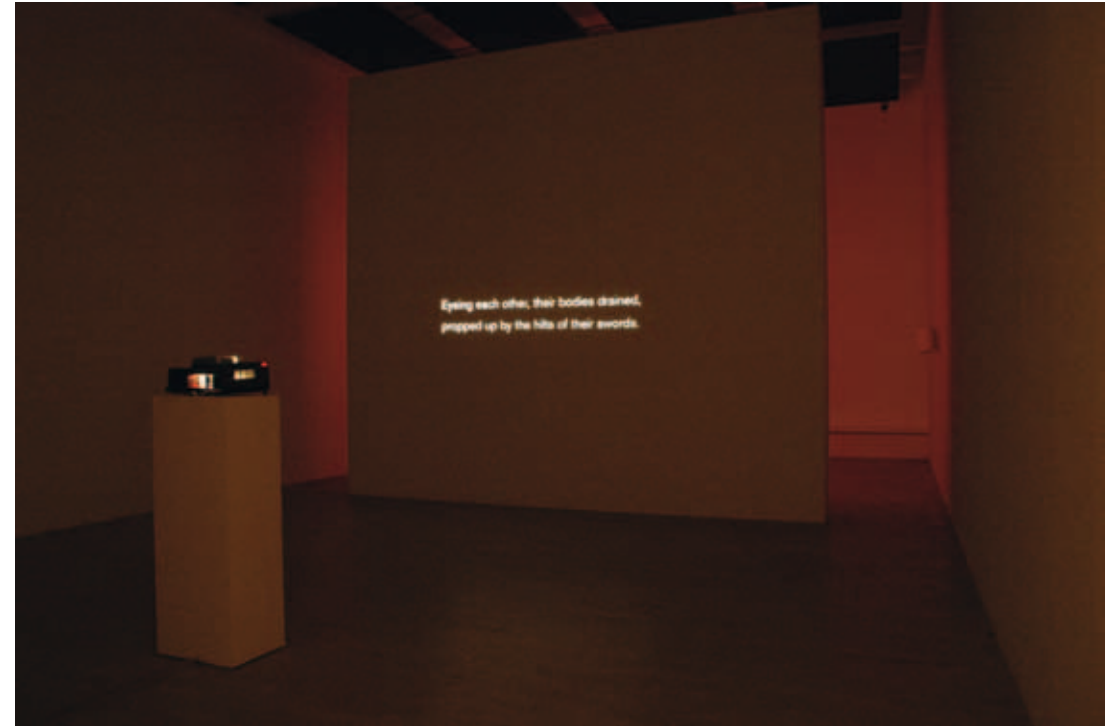
20c



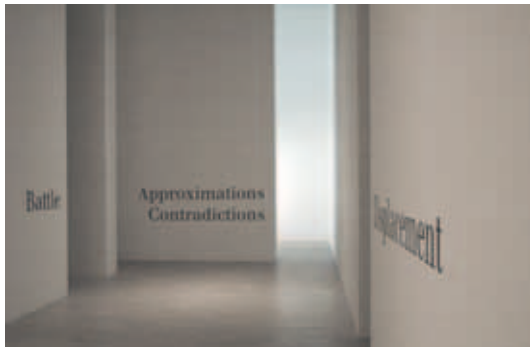
21a



21b



25a



22



23a



23b

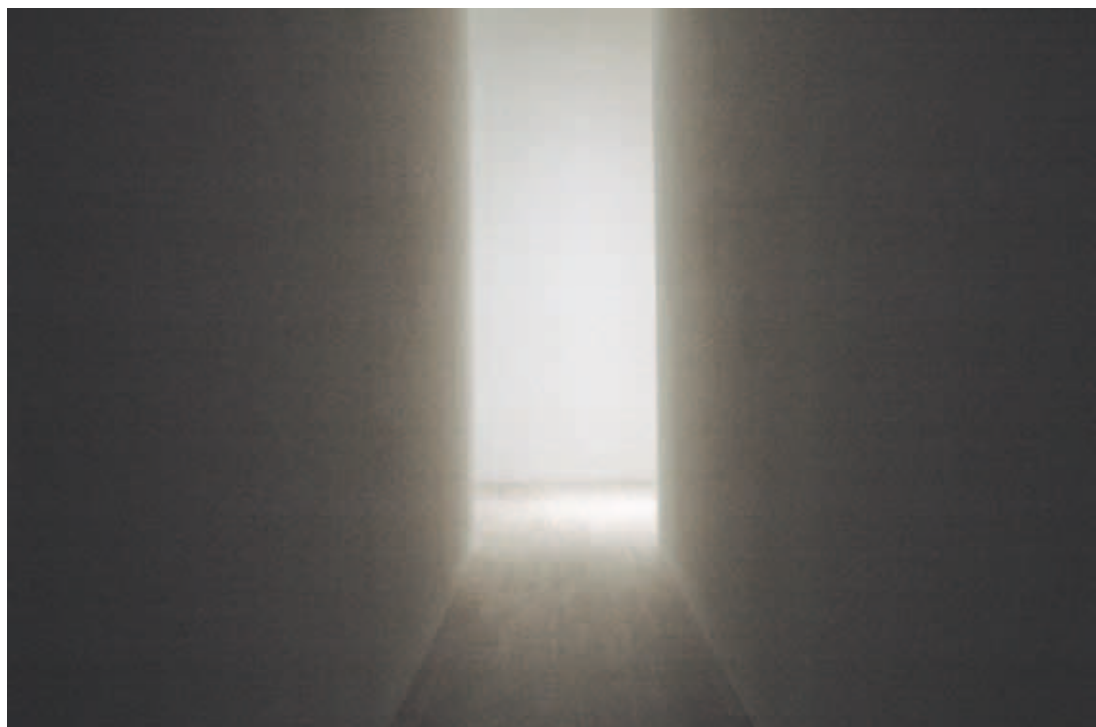


24



25b





27



28

