

Ana Torfs, *ANATOMY*

The title of this conference, *Black spots in history or gaps of language*, refers to two significant points in the work of Ana Torfs. Historical subject matter often forms a starting point in her artistic investigations. In her installations with slide projections and video, films and books she deals with historic figures such as Jeanne d'Arc (for example in her work *Du mentir-faux* from the year 2000), Ludwig van Beethoven (in her work *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* from the year 1998), or Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, the founders of the German Communist Party, in her recent installation *ANATOMY*.

They are all well-known figures whose lives have been a subject-matter of historical writing over the centuries and decades. Still, in her work, Ana Torfs focuses on aspects which are not so much part of these official historiographies. Rather, she centres some features of their personalities and lives which reveal that Jeanne d'Arc, Liebknecht and Luxemburg or Beethoven were outstanding figures not only in a positive sense, as admired political leaders or as an acclaimed composer. Due to their political beliefs, due to his deafness, Jeanne d'Arc, Liebknecht and Luxemburg and Beethoven respectively are also, in a more negative sense, standing at the margins of society. This critical position is made most visible through language – that means, through the way society communicates with Jeanne d'Arc or Ludwig van Beethoven, or how society speaks ABOUT Liebknecht and Luxemburg, as seen in the record of proceedings which forms the basis for Ana Torfs' installation *ANATOMY*. By revealing so much about a society as well as the individual that uses it, language itself is much more the subject-matter of Ana Torfs' artistic practice than historical figures and facts, as the artist herself has repeatedly pointed out.

The installation *ANATOMY* is based on Ana Torfs' research into the case of the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in 1919. Starting from a document of some 1,200 pages in the German Military Archive in Freiburg, Ana Torfs extracted the responses of 25 persons that were interrogated at the following trial in Berlin. The statements of these young persons – defendants as well as random witnesses – reveal not only a most inconsistent and thus unsettling image of the last half hour in the lives of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and the course of events that led to their killing. Moreover, they speak volumes about the social condition of that time, in a country in which the revolutionary powers were

fought with advanced military forces of all sorts, supported by an extremely obedient mentality of the people.

The 25 young men and women (random witnesses and the accused) as represented on the two video screens in *ANATOMY* are confronted with the judge's questions during the trial. Questions and answers are extracted from the document in the Military Archive and reveal Ana Torfs' highly distilling, even dissecting dealing with language. As Dirk Lauwaert has put it, she treats language like an object, which she extracts from its context and exposes it, so the beholder finds it lying bare in front of him "like a motif by Cézanne."¹ Lauwaert's recourse to Cézanne as a forerunner of Cubism is striking as in that specific period in art history, for the first time, the artistic presentation claimed to be a reality of its own, not just a re-presentation of a world given. In a similar way, the highly exposed fragments of texts seem to claim, de-contextualized as they are, a status of autonomy, and, on their part, constitute a meshwork of references between the interrogated persons in the videos and the spectator. As a second part of the installation, large black-and-white-projections in medium shots and close-ups show 17 actors of all ages. These silent images were taken in a setting that both refers to a court room and a theatre: the Anatomical Theatre in Berlin.

Given that constellation in the exhibition, the spectator is involved in two respects: He has to read – or articulate – the written questions on the video screens (at least in the German version of *ANATOMY*), thus creating a dialogue situation with the young defendants and witnesses. (By the way: Here, as in earlier works, Ana Torfs works with a double cast on the two screens, which raises the question: Who is speaking? Is one person speaking for the other, or is this question, in fact, of no importance as language, in the end, speaks for itself?) While he takes up the position of the interrogator as he is confronted with the video images, the place of the spectator in relationship to the large black-and-white slide projections is completely different. Here, he finds himself in the centre of the Anatomical Theatre, at the centralised position of the table where since the late 18th century the public dissections have been executed.

Different from the video images, the persons in the black-and-white slide projections do not communicate with us, nor with each other. They seem to be absorbed in their very own thoughts and emotions, their appearance doesn't tell us much about their social status and the time they live in – they seem to exist from time out of mind. We, the spectators, appear like

intruders into this speechless space beyond time, where men and women are caught in a whole range of emotional expressions, thus conveying a notion of the “permanence of being” – a term coined by film theorist André Bazin in regards to the films of Robert Bresson (to whose conception of a “non-historical truth” Ana Torfs has referred in her earlier work *Du mentir-faux*). So while the written text in the videos stresses the spectator’s act of reading, and while the direct confrontation with the video actors emphasises their act of speaking, it is the pure and timeless ‘act of being’ that is drawn attention to in the slide projections. A space between life and death, so to say, the setting in the Anatomical Theatre functions like a psychological counterpart to the more sociological investigation that the arrangement of the video statements offers.

It is worth to have a closer look at some of the aesthetic decisions that Ana Torfs makes as a director of photography in the video images and slide projections. The black-and-white slide projections repeatedly fade over to white screens, and these blank and perfect projection screens for the spectator’s imagination correspond to the voids of silence that the video actors leave between their sentences, in order to offer the spectator time and space to picture what is being said.

The text in the video sequences refers here – and even more clearly in earlier works by the artist – to the entr’acte titles in early filmmaking. This early period – incidentally, it is roughly the same time in which the murder cases of Liebknecht and Luxemburg took place – is also referred to through the use of the slide projections, a medium which was pretty popular at the beginning of the 20th century as well, along with the early cinematograph. The use of different media in *ANATOMY* opens a field of theoretical references and reminds us that all representation is always, at the same time, a form, and that this form itself already implies a number of meanings and codes that shape our perception.

Looking at the images that Ana Torfs uses for the installation, a book title by film theorist Gertrud Koch came to my mind: “Die Einstellung ist die Einstellung” – the (filmic) shot is always intentional.² *ANATOMY* shows a very reduced number of shots, and the sizes of their single frames is limited to a total of one for the 25 video actors, and between four and nine for the 17 actors in the Anatomical Theater. All shots are most concentrated, neutral and matter-of-fact. The many voices of the video actors speak volumes, as mentioned earlier, about the society they derive from. Reduced and intense as they are, the images in *ANATOMY* compel

us to become aware how confusing and inconsistent – and yet how telling these verbal statements are. After all, it seems, the permanent questioning of language and images that Ana Torfs' work reveals cannot, in the end, be thought of without assuming her faith in our ability to see, to hear and to think.

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(This text was held as a paper at the conference *Black spots in history or gaps of language*, organized by the IBK on the occasion of Ana Torfs' exhibition *ANATOMY* at the daadgalerie, Berlin.)

¹ Dirk Lauwaert: „Reading as a Form of Writing. On the Texts in the Work of Ana Torfs“. In: *A Prior Magazine* #10, p. 89-94: 90.

² Gertrud Koch: *Die Einstellung ist die Einstellung. Visuelle Konstruktionen des Judentums*. Frankfurt/M. 1992.