

Missing Bodies

— ANSELM FRANKE

“Learn everything, forget nothing!”

Karl Liebknecht, *Der Hauptfeind steht im eigenen Land*

(The main enemy stands in our own country)

pamphlet, May 1915

We need to recall the privileged position held by the architecture of the *theatrum anatomicum* as an exemplary performative space in the modern era: here, a rationality that deconstructs, subdivides, and classifies creates its material evidence, marking the border between reality and its other. It is here that the “thing”—purged of all subjective and social projection—speaks for itself, and this speaking is witnessed. In the forensic material, concepts and forms of evidence, signifier and signified, are brought into agreement. The anatomical theater is an apparatus serving this purpose. Its mission is to curb the polyphony of the social, the ambiguities of language, the interrelations between signs and things and those between the present and the past, by delineating the border of indubitable facticity. Photography is a close relative of this apparatus, but the evidences that inscribe themselves in the image are at once also haunted by an excess of that other.

The slide projection at the center of *Anatomy* is set in the famous anatomical theater in Berlin erected by Carl Gotthard Langhans at the time of the French Revolution. Visible in a series of black-and-white images are 17 actors of different ages in varying positions amid the steeply rising tiers built for the audience. The camera’s perspective includes close-ups of the protagonists (whose identities, relations among one another, and position in time remain unknown), but it always returns to the long shot, the view of the tiers, the group picture, interweaving the visual and temporal axes. It operates from the position of the stage,

towards which the architecture of the theater is oriented: the site of the dead body to be dissected. This inversion of the line of sight programmed by the architecture can be read as an insurrection, a rebellion of the dead bodies against the finality of death. They cast their gazes back, demanding a renegotiation of what is evident, of the indisputable fact. The people in the audience tiers are the addressees of this desire. They contemplate the historic body and are called upon to attend its trial.

There is no soundtrack accompanying this slide series. What we hear comes from two monitors showing a variety of images that are, unlike the projected images, moving and in color. We see 25 actors recognizable as our contemporaries who, looking straight into the camera, answer the questions visible in the intertitles. The words are excerpts from the interrogation protocols of the military tribunal investigating the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The actors embody the members of the “Freikorps” or paramilitary unit responsible for the murders as well as additional witnesses. An increasingly complex picture emerges: the reconstruction of the sequence of events and of the poorly concealed murder plot, as well as the subsequent “comedy of justice,” which failed to result in even a single murder conviction. In Ana Torfs’ construction, however, there is no linear development; the narrative remains in a state marked by constant changes of perspective and reaches no conclusion. The conspiracy and the work of the court move into the background while the contours of an act of political murder emerge with increasing starkness.

A third element completes the installation: wireless headphones. They allow the visitor to hear an interpreter translating the German spoken testimonies on the monitors into English.

But how are these three components interrelated? The slide projection runs independently

of the monitors and the headphones. And yet the visitor cannot avoid the impression that they are designed to correspond, an effect engendered by the stereo soundtrack from the monitors and the rhythm of the slide sequence, which time and again appears to be synchronized with the rhythm of the witness interrogation. Still, the more compelling this analogy seems, the less it applies. For the people in the tiers are neither perpetrators nor witnesses nor personnel of that court. There is thus no direct correspondence between the monitors and the slide projection, as is also confirmed by the role of the camera: the witnesses on the monitors speak directly into the camera, which seems to embody the eye of the tribunal. In the pictures from the anatomical theater, by contrast, nothing suggests that the position of the camera is identical with the eyes of the judges—quite to the contrary. There is, then, no analogy between the three levels of the installation, only suggestive transferences between the last two and the first; yet these remain contradictory. It is in the interstices emerging between them that the installation unfolds its peculiar allegorical potential.

Anatomy is not just a work about the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. Instead, it raises questions regarding the presence of history and the negotiation of the line separating life from death, and it does so in a visual situation in space that also reflects on the interrelation between time, space, and history’s impact on the present manifest in media-specific imagery. The two forms of translation into the present—the fragments from the witnesses’ testimony spoken into the camera and the English translation of this tribunal via headphones—represent the two levels of this envisioning and mediatization. Employing montage and interpretation, Torfs subjects this material to an anatomical procedure of sorts, penetrating to its limits, where the event resists positivation in the present and this same pres-

ent dissolves toward the dimension of negativity. The focus is not on a conclusive description of an event but on an unconcluded absence. This dissolution is most palpable in the fragility of the soundtrack, which “translates” the event and opens it toward what not only eludes language but also, and more importantly, haunts it. The negative of history seeks its own concepts and forms of evidence in the present.

It is this domain of the undead, of unconcluded history, that we encounter in the slide projection’s sequence of images: the images, messengers of the dead, fragment the linear flow of time and the identity of the present. Yet far from being the mortification of temporality, their sequence is its intensification. The inverted anatomical theater articulates the desire to regain command of one’s own history, one’s own body. And it is on account of this demand that the “chorus” in the steeply rising tiers of the theater has convened. The dead bodies are missing—and yet they speak. The “chorus” becomes their messenger. The present calls for the translation of this language, its envisioning. It is in this desire that the present constitutes itself as unconcluded, as restlessly non-identical with itself—the very state that emerges in the interstices between the different temporal and linguistic levels of *Anatomy*.

From the German by Gerrit Jackson