

“Never Trust the Artist. Trust the Tale.”

An Email Correspondence

— GABRIELE MACKERT, ANA TORFS

Gabriele Mackert: I would like to start our email correspondence¹ by asking about the “beginning,” not in the biographical sense of the word, but more essentially, in terms of what stimulates your artistic practice. Is it a complete idea, a detail, or might it simply be an atmosphere? Do you immediately know what you’re going to do with this “initial impulse”? Is the subsequent process one of developing or realizing that?

Ana Torfs: I don’t really have a fixed working method and my spheres of interest are also not fixed (one gradually changes in the course of growing older). The (often) long period between crystallization of a concept for my projects and their finalization also allows for continuous transformation. Sometimes I keep on making changes until right before the planned presentation of a new work. But chance, coincidence, plays a major role, too. My new installation *Displacement*, for example, was created on the occasion of a production-in-residence in Gotland. Although I had already received an invitation from the Baltic Art Center in November 2006, I didn’t want to leave straightaway. I thought it was important to take into account that I would go to Sweden — I had never visited a Scandinavian country before — but I was also convinced that I should make a project that could not be realized in Belgium.

The first tracks I followed were letters — love letters — from the famous British writer Mary Wollstonecraft, who took a boat journey to the Scandinavian countries in the summer of 1795. *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796) was the title of the publication that resulted from that. For a few weeks I also searched for information about the “last days” of René Des-

cartes. In early September 1649 he left for Stockholm, where he was invited by Queen Christina, to teach her philosophy. He caught pneumonia however and died on the 11th of February 1650, only a few months after his arrival. But somehow I didn’t feel satisfied with these starting points and I decided to concentrate instead on Gotland.

My trip to this impressive island, in the summer of 2007, convinced me of the possibility of a remake of Roberto Rossellini’s *Viaggio in Italia* (*Journey to Italy*) (1954), one of my favorite films and a key landmark in the development of modern cinema. *Viaggio in Italia* was released less than a decade after the end of World War II, which had left clear traces in Italy. It’s not only a modern road movie, an exploration of Napoli with several tourist guides, and the story of the disintegration of a marriage, but also one of the first films proposing an “essay”: the images are linked together by the abstract logic of thought rather than by conventions of classical narrative storytelling.

I gradually detected manifold correspondences between the historical Napoli that is featured in *Viaggio in Italia*, and Gotland. It is interesting to note in this context that Rossellini did not write a script for *Viaggio in Italia*. He simply provided his producers with a list of tourist destinations in and around Napoli. When I arrived in Gotland I immediately told my Swedish hosts that I was considering doing a remake of *Viaggio in Italia*, and I showed them a list of tourist destinations that I definitely wanted to visit. But I did not yet know exactly how I imagined this remake, though by this time, I knew Rossellini’s film practically by heart.

While I was exploring this desolate island by car, the new work began to take form step-by-step. I tried to recollect all the scenes of *Viaggio in Italia* and imagine which Gotland locations would be suitable for which scenes. Though I had carried my camera only as a means to prospect the island’s visual possibilities, I knew almost immediately

that the photographs I was taking would form the basis of *Displacement*. After a few days, my images began to reflect the point of view of “a man” and “a woman,” observing the different spaces or landscapes from different angles.

One of the first things that struck me while I was driving around, were the traces of military presence everywhere: bunkers, barbed wire, radar, watchtowers, etc. Though I knew vaguely that Gotland was a military defense zone during the Cold War, I had no idea that the omnipresent military hardware had only very recently been dismantled. During my sojourn, I photographed at diverse locations, such as an airport, a boat terminal, limestone quarries, pine woods, coast lines, an Italianate villa, a golf course, a summer house in Suisse style, several bronze age grave yards, a military defense museum — a collection of images hovering between artificial (manmade) and natural landscapes or locations — always taking into account the shifting point of views of the two archetypical protagonists.

Back home I developed a system to catalogue the approximately 5,000 photographs I had taken in Gotland and I tried to construct a “travelogue,” strictly following the structure of *Viaggio in Italia*. The dialogues of the film’s English edition for which I had acquired the copyrights form the point of departure for the audio narration of *Displacement*. But of course I couldn’t keep those fragments that pointed to the very specific history of Napoli. 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 1960, on location hunting for his film *Såsom i en spegel* (*Through a Glass Darkly*)). I continued to alter the script that would serve as the basis for the sound recording of the five voices, made at the end of August 2008, until the last moment. Thus I could include some very recent news

items, such as the strife between Russia and Georgia, which escalated that same month of August: a conflict that could have consequences in relation to Swedish defense policy, Gotland being geographically situated only a very short distance from the borders of several post-Soviet states.

But it is very important to add that I didn't want to create a realistic or documentary image of Gotland: I wanted to achieve something on a more abstract level. All of *Displacement's* travel sequences are completely fictional, composed of images taken on different parts of Gotland. I don't mention the name Gotland even once in the whole audio narration. I describe the destination—in the words of an anonymous narrator's voice—as “an island in the far north of Europe.” The words spoken by the same voice, an adaptation of a quote by Michel de Certeau,² give an indication of the conceptual framework of *Displacement*: “Every story is a travel story. In standard modern Greek, the word metaphor means transport. It denotes the act of moving people or goods from one place to another. Stories can also be considered as metaphors. Everyday stories traverse and organize places, they select and link them together, they make sentences and itineraries out of them.” It's also not a coincidence that the “story” of *Displacement*, though set in an ongoing loop, takes place in seven days, like in Rossellini's film. But both works also share thematic and structural similarities with Dante's *Divina Commedia*.

G.M. Your answer gives insight into your profound examination of cultural history, in which each element seems to function in itself as a metaphor of constructing history and of production of knowledge through language. The unfolded sheets of your so-called “book-in-the-making” in the installation *Elective Affinities/The Truth of Masks & Tables of Affinities* present text explicitly as an open system of references, which confronts also

the audience with these questions of studying, selecting, and forming of information. The wide range of cultural backgrounds you mentioned provokes the question of the relationship between research and art, especially because your work is obviously not situated in the recently popular genre of documentarism (whether political, social, or ethnographical).

A.T. Of course profound research is important in the development of my work, but it's not the only starting point. *Displacement* only began to take form while I was photographing in Gotland. The images I took—what I saw, rather than what I read—were the real trigger to continue in the direction I had in mind. The same goes for *Anatomy*. I knew of the existence of the trial records relating to the murder of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg at least four years prior to my Berlin DAAD artist-in-residency. I mentioned them in the so-called “book-in-the-making” you refer to in your question. But the decision to work with these documents was made only after a visit to the anatomical theater in Berlin, which features so prominently in *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. For *Du mentir-faux*, the real incentive to work with the trial records of Joan of Arc's condemnation came from Dominique Licoppe, a young actress I had first met at the end of the 1980s. We had lost touch, but when our paths crossed again in 1997, she made me think of Joan of Arc (her hairdo?), but she also reminded me of the figures in the paintings of Piero della Francesca, a contemporary of Joan of Arc. I invited Dominique for a photo-session ...

But indeed, I've often based my works on existing material like trial records in *Du mentir-faux* and *Anatomy*, the conversation books of Beet-

hoven in *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*, but it might just as well be lyrics of Brecht/Eisler songs (*Approximations/Contradictions*), a theater play (*The Intruder*), or the dialogues of a film (*Displacement*). Generally, I spend a lot of time on these texts, they are kind of “dissected.” I keep polishing the selection and the order of the chosen fragments, after which they take on new aspects. The translation of the original language of these texts can also be considered as part of this transformation process. Though I didn't write them myself—they are objets trouvés—I “sculpt” them into a new and concise configuration, a process that is just as slow and intense as writing. The resulting artwork is not “historical” or “documentary,” on the contrary: constructing or shaping, finding a “form” for the material I investigate is primordial. I'm interested in stories—our society is a recited society—but I want to stress the mechanisms of (cinematic) narration, deconstructing it somehow. Despite the presence of text in my work, I try to create strong visual experiences at the forefront, with a focus on the relation or tension between text and image, between reading and visualizing, between listening and looking.

The “construction” aspect is also clearly visible in the carefully chosen titles of my works, which give the audience a first orientation for interpretation, for guidance of their perception. *Anatomy* is not a documentary work “about” Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, nor a survey of the trial records relating to their assassination. The first meaning of the word anatomy is “dissection”: “the art of separating the parts of an organism in order to ascertain their position, relations, structure, and function” (Webster). In a larger, more figurative sense it also means “analysis”: “a separating or dividing into parts for detailed examination” (Webster).

At the end of 2005, I read the 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 document of some 1,200 pages, in the Militärarchiv in Freiburg. I selected the statements of 25 different persons, defendants and random witnesses, who knew details about the exact way both founders of the German communist party were murdered, and processed them into a *Tragedy in Two Acts*: through different versions of what happened in the night of January 15, 1919, a fragmented and continuously shifting image of the final minutes in the lives of Liebknecht and Luxemburg is revealed. I asked young Berlin-based actors with approximately the same age as the witnesses to embody these specific testimonies and filmed their performances on (color) video, in strictly framed close-ups. But I was not interested in a historic reconstruction or re-enactment, to use that fashionable term. All actors wear contemporary clothing, representing young people of today, not reconstructing characters from 1919. They look us, the beholder, right in the eyes. An intimacy arises in which all the attention goes to the actor and his face. 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, was taken in the anatomical theater of Berlin. These slides form a counterpoint to the “dry” or “distant” interpretation of the filmed testimonies visible on the two monitors. What interested me was creating relationships between those two different types of images, but also between the sound of the spoken testimonies on the monitors—the original German version, but also the English interpretation—and the (mute) projected images taken in the anatomical theater. What is witnessed by this strange audience visible in the slide photographs? What do these images conjure up? Open ques-

tions, to be filled with meaning by every beholder.

The title *Du mentir-faux* (About Lying Falsehood) suggests that this slide installation is dealing with lies. Joan of Arc’s prosecutors kept making use of notions such as *fiction mensongère* (mendacious fiction) or *feindre mensongèrement* (mendaciously pretending): confusingly tautological to readers today, but these terms were used in inquisition courts to describe idolatry, the central charge of the case against Joan of Arc. The word idolatry derives from the Greek word *eidololatreia*, a compound of *eidolon* (image or figure), and *latreia* (worship). Joan was condemned for having worshipped false images, for making herself into an idol of masculinity by wearing men’s clothing. In the text slides of *Du mentir-faux*, I obviously focus on the inquisitor’s questions relating to idolatry. But *Du mentir-faux* also refers to the title of Louis Aragon’s novella *Le mentir-vrai*, in which he recollects his childhood memories and reflects on the inevitably fictional character of such an undertaking: *Je crois me souvenir, je m’invente*³ (I think I remember, but I’m inventing). *Du mentir-faux* is not a work “about” Joan of Arc, nor “about” the trial records of the condemnation of Joan of Arc, but rather, a work focusing on the force of fiction. How convincing, real, or true is an image that lies: images made with an actress, asking her to pretend to be Joan of Arc, asking her to pretend to cry?

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. The photograph *Toast* and the closely related series of Xerox prints *Vérité exposée* also refer to this: the word “vérité” is written on twenty-four different prints of projection surfaces that I photographed, each representing a different viewpoint. But there is also an allusion to the often quoted dialogue from Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Le Petit Soldat* (1960): “La photographie, c’est la vérité, et le cinéma, c’est

vingt-quatre fois la vérité par seconde.” (Photography is truth. And cinema is truth twenty-four frames a second.)

I considered tackling the importance of “repetition” or “remake” in my work (similar to the repetition of a motive in painting, somehow problematizing the ever so precious idea of “originality”) but that would lead too far, I’m afraid. Ben Jonson, the English Renaissance writer, poet, and actor, practiced the “notebook method,” treating classical literature as bundles of fragments that could be appropriated and re-used by readers and writers. In *Repetition, an essay in experimental psychology* (1843), Kierkegaard suggests that repeating is to modern men what remembering was in ancient times. Kierkegaard’s remark that real repetition is remembered forwards has to do with this paradoxical fact that repetition changes the repeated.

G.M. What about your formal repertoire? You mentioned repetition and the relation or tension between text and image. Is the dramaturgy of black-and-white that you have used throughout the years something like a signature for you?

A.T. Yes, I have worked a lot with black-and-white, but I have also used color, for example in *Battle*, and in my web project *Approximations/Contradictions*. It is as though video—a rather young medium with a very short history—asks for color, while the much longer history of photography and cinema, which are two very important frames of reference for me, seems more connected to black-and-white. These remarks are very relative though: ever since black-and-white film exists, people have tended to “paint” the images, like in the œuvre of Georges Méliès, for example. Black-and-white doesn’t even exist in slide projections. There is always a hue in gradations of blue or brown affecting the images, caused by the color temperature of the surrounding light in the

exhibition space and by the color temperature of the projection lamp. In *The Intruder* slides are even projected on a black projection surface, creating images with different hues in the range of brown and bronze, reminiscent of daguerrotypes.

Black-and-white, in any case, produces a more timeless or open aspect, less evidently connected to a certain decade or time period. It probably has to do with my strong predilection for distancing strategies. Black-and-white is more artificial or abstract, with its countless shades and grades of grays, its lights and shadows: not a copy of reality, but clearly an image of reality that someone has made. But artificiality also implies that one is conscious of the image one is making, by framing, for example, and the possibilities of what is not shown: the off-screen. Beethoven is not visible in *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*. We don't see what is dissected in *Anatomy*. We don't see who's entering the house in *The Intruder*. We don't see any bloody wounds in *Battle*. I like so much the scenic madrigal of Monteverdi, on which *Battle* is based, because the tragic action is told primarily by a narrator, in the third person, and "through" his face we "see" what happens: it's all about projection and imagination.

G.M. Your favorite color spectrum of black-and-white seems to have as much media critical impact as reminiscential, but it's also characteristic as a method for distancing reality. What atmosphere do you connect with black-and-white more precisely: is it retro visionary, enduring existence, or does it seem to be more focused? What about heroic and dramatic aspects?

A.T. Though my work often relates to something from the distant or recent past (even yesterday is already the past) I'm not interested in making a work that is or looks "historic," if that's what you mean with retro. I'm interested in a certain kind

of "condensation." But that's also not typical for the works in black-and-white. I tried to find the same level of abstraction in my works with color, such as *Battle*, with its very graphic use of red and black. Heroism doesn't interest me at all and though some images may have a sublime or ritual quality, I don't think they are heroic, "exhibiting or marked by courage and daring" (Webster), unless you mean "of great intensity" (Webster). The word dramatic "applies to situations in life and literature that stir the imagination and emotions deeply" (Webster), so one could consider my work in a certain sense to be dramatic, but in a very undramatic way. Though in a lot of my work dramatic things seem to happen or have happened — murder in *Anatomy*, deafness and isolation in *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*, tragic death after child birth and blindness in *The Intruder* — the way I film or photograph it is not dramatic at all.

Though the presence of black-and-white images is not the result of a dogma or doctrine, I could not imagine *Du mentir-faux*, *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*, *Displacement*, or *The Intruder* in color: for me these works are deeply indebted to the history of a certain history of film and photography — art as a system of perpetual repetitions. In the research period for *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*, for example, I collected a large series of reproductions of nineteenth-century photographs and of paintings of so-called conversation pieces. *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten* is surely not aiming at a historic reproduction of Beethoven's time. All the scenes were filmed in parks and houses in Brussels, not in Vienna. The actors are dressed in costumes that date from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1970s, evoking an idea of what is past, rather than reconstructing the Biedermeier period. Realism is not what I'm looking for. It all comes back to the same thing: creating distance, abstraction, and counterpoints.

Another constant element is the search for a

kind of nakedness or sobriety, stripping off the image of what is superfluous, thus creating imaginary space for the audience, the beholders of the work. As a matter of fact, I'd prefer not to talk about my work at all. "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale."⁴ 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.

G.M. As we mentioned already, you often work with text (text to read or to listen to from off-screen voices) but the protagonists themselves seem to keep silent in most of your works — or they sing. Dominant are "still" life portraits so to say, as the portraits are not presented in action, but face the camera in a calm rest. What does this silence imply for you?

A.T. Maybe it would be better to put it in another way. I think, instead, that I'm dealing with what is asynchronous rather than with silence, as such. After all, a figure on a projected slide photograph can't "speak," regardless of the off-screen voices you connect to the images. One can only create the illusion of synchronous speaking or singing actors with film or video, with moving images. Synchronous means: "happening, existing, or arising at precisely the same time" (Webster).

I would also like to stress that the actors in my images do not only sing synchronously, as in *Battle* and *Approximations/Contradictions*. In the video part of *Anatomy*, young actors also speak in synch with the moving video images, but the German testimonies they embody can also be considered as asynchronous when connected to the "mute" slide projections. On top of that, there is also the synchronous English translation (by a

court interpreter) of the German dialogue, which adds another sound layer audible via wireless headphones. You can wander through the exhibition space, connecting the English interpretation to the silent slide projections, which creates constantly shifting relationships, since the video and slide loops have different durations. Something similar happens in *Displacement*: you can look at this work in complete silence, creating your own story with the indications of time and action which are superimposed on every image of the travelogue. But when you put on the wireless headphones you can connect the off-screen English dialogues of the audio narration at will with what you see, which are slide projections on two opposing walls.

In *Zyklus von Kleinigkeiten*, a film with “moving” images, the actors could have spoken synchronously with the images, but I was looking for something else. Beethoven, as he grew completely deaf, always carried small notebooks, so-called conversation books, to give his daily interlocutors the chance to write down whatever they wanted to tell him. Beethoven’s reply is mostly absent from the notebooks, as he usually answered with loud voice: he was deaf but not mute. The real challenge was to find a way to “translate” what appealed so much to me in the conversation books: the distance between the world of those who hear and those who don’t; the tension between what is heard, seen, written, read, and imagined.

In *Du mentir-faux* there is real silence, except for the clicking sound of a slide falling in the projector and the continuous “breathing” of the ventilation system of the two slide projectors. The text slides are projected in separate sequences between separate sequences of images. The text is not an explanation of the image. Though the text slides contain a selection from the questions asked to Joan of Arc during the fifteenth-century condemnation trial, the images are those of an

actress in contemporary dress. The image is not an illustration of the text.

At any rate, silence is very present in all my soundtracks. Every actor I worked with in a sound studio was asked to think very consciously about the creation of silences, but even then I still have to add extra silence during the editing. It surely helps that every actor comes to the studio at another moment and every sentence is recorded separately: this way they don’t get the chance to react to each other’s sentences. 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.

G.M. Your work is distinguished not only by a lack of concurrence in (historical) time but also in language. Normally this would lead one to the stereotype question of the trilingual culture of the young nation Belgium. But I would like to focus instead on your education in this context. Your degree in Communication Sciences at Leuven University (1981–1986), was followed by an education in Film & Video at Sint-Lukas University College of Art and Design in Brussels. One might speculate that you didn’t set out with the idea of becoming an artist right from the beginning, but instead, it was a profound, lucky detour. What was the impact of these two studies on the formation of your mental map and your way of creating?

A.T. First of all, when I was twelve years old I started to follow weekly lessons in “voice art” or “enunciation”: the art of speaking clearly so that each word is heard and understood to its fullest complexity and extremity. It concerns pronunciation and tone, rather than word choice and style. We were a small group of youngsters in this class, boys and girls between the ages of eleven and fourteen. Some followed the classes to solve a

technical speech problem, but most of them were there, like me, to fulfill some vague, emerging acting dream. I liked these lessons very much: an investigation of the possibilities and limits of one’s voice. At sixteen I mastered a more or less perfect pronunciation of the Dutch language: the way actors were supposed to speak. After two years of “voice art” lessons I started “declamation” lessons as well, which one could understand as “interpreting poetry” for an audience. These declamation classes were meant to prepare for real drama classes, but by the time I finally started with them, I had gradually lost interest. I probably discovered that classic acting, or “immersing” oneself in a realist way in a role, was not really my cup of tea. At the age of eighteen, I still considered taking an entrance exam at a drama school, but my parents wanted me to begin something like a university degree.

I would have preferred to study Germanic Philology or Art History, but both departments were available at Antwerp University, not far from home. Since I absolutely wanted to have a place of my own, I chose Communication Sciences, which was only available at the universities of Leuven or Brussels. I chose Leuven, where the masters course focused on film history and journalism. I must admit that most of the university courses were not very exciting or stimulating, with only a few inspiring professors. My real “education” however, lay elsewhere. At the time, Stuk, a cultural center with a fantastic theater and film program, was located on the grounds of my faculty. I remember the legendary *Nights of the Experimental Film*, for example, which photography and film theorist Dirk Lauwaert organized there. In 1983, Stuk started *Klapstuk*, one of the most innovating dance festivals in the world, where they had on the program young Belgian choreographers, such as Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker, together with well-known international performers, such as Steve Paxton,

Lucinda Childs, and Trisha Brown. Stuk also organized all kind of workshops, for example, a video workshop, given by Chris Dercon. All the participants got access to an old black-and-white video camera to make a tape at the end of the course. I worked with two actors on a filmed interpretation of a fragment of Jean Racine's *Britannicus*, a theater play I have always really liked. I also took up drama classes again, organized by Stuk, and given by actors from the so-called "school" of Jan Decorte, a very important Belgian theater director, who one could say, represented the "Brechtian" influence in Belgium. At Stuk there were also darkrooms, and I began to photograph intensively when I was twenty.

In 1985, Chris Dercon was invited to make an exhibition for the second edition of the *Klapstuk* festival. He asked if I would assist him during the summer months for the preparation of his show, which I gladly agreed to do, although I had just started to write my Master's thesis that Summer, about the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, largely following ideas about intertextuality proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin and Gérard Genette. Dercon, also teaching at Sint-Lukas University College for Art and Design in Brussels, asked several of his students to film his exhibition, which included works by Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Thomas Schütte, Aldo Rossi, etc. Meeting these students and Dercon's enthusiastic plea for Sint-Lukas must have influenced my decision to abandon every idea of wanting to go to a drama school and in September 1986, after having finished my thesis, I moved to Brussels. The first two years at the film and video department of Sint-Lukas were wonderful, especially meeting soulmates and inspiring professors like Jef Cornelis, Dirk Lauwaert, and Chris Dercon. The atmosphere was excellent, with many possibilities to experiment. Though it was an art school and we had a lot of freedom, it was regimented, with strict divisions between the depart-

ments. When I finished my studies in 1990, I was tired and demotivated—four years at an art school is incredibly long after having already spent four years at a university. I needed time to catch my breath; trying to survive in a period when little or nothing was organized for young artists as it is now.

G.M. In retrospect, everything you refer to seems to fall together with an amazing consistency. Did your artistic (student) work generate something like a style or a thematic focus right from the start? I'm only familiar with your student work *Jeanne la pucelle* (1988), which has merely the trial text in common with your more recent slide projection *Du mentir-faux*. Nevertheless, this video is already influenced by a sort of structural minimalism of chamber plays and a certain affinity towards the staging of an indifferent cinema.

A.T. There are indeed a lot of correspondences between my student "exercises" and later work, in both thematic and stylistic choices. But I think that I should first mention a radio play, with emphatically speaking French voices, which was made with the help of some friends in 1985. If one can speak of my first consciously created "work," it would be this one. Like my later slide installation *The Intruder*, it was based on Maurice Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse*. I always felt strongly attracted to his early plays, with their Beckett-like sentences and a radical modernity of language.

Jeanne la pucelle was made at the end of my second year at Sint-Lukas. It was based on a book by French historian Régine Pernoud, *Jeanne d'Arc par elle-même et par ses témoins* (1962). Young actors, most of them friends, interpreted fragments from the testimonies of the two trials relating to Joan of Arc.⁵ Colorful tableaux vivants were precisely framed and filmed frontally. All of the actors wore everyday dress and the scenes

were filmed in contemporary locations, most often in the apartments of the friends involved. They had to learn the French language passages I had selected by heart, though it was not their mother tongue, consciously displaying their heavy accents. In one way or another, in many of my works there is a treatment of language as something that is not "evident." Though I really like *Jeanne la pucelle*, the dissatisfaction with the technical result probably made me return to the same trial documents, more than ten years later, in *Du mentir-faux*.

Earlier that year I also made a tape in black-and-white, counterposing text material I found about Méry Laurent—the legendary nineteenth-century painters' model whom Manet painted several times—with a fictional "portrait" of a young contemporary woman who undresses. I also worked with Yasunari Kawabata's story *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* (1969), a poetic meditation of sexuality and death. I used color Super 8 and asked six or seven young girls to take a pose (naked or half undressed) from Balthus paintings I had selected. These "moving" but static images were transferred to video and superimposed with text fragments from the story. The figure of the "model," continues to fascinate me. In the long period of my studies I had been a model at an art academy, and I loved to study paintings to find good poses to try out during the long posing sessions.

For my final presentation at Sint-Lukas, I made *Marco Polo, une histoire de brodeurs* (1990), based on Polo's famous travelogue *Livre des merveilles du monde* (1298). I was very fascinated by this publication, in which one finds an attempt to both record and invent the "real" East. In the first pages, a narrator claims the book is free of fabrication, stating that Marco Polo has recounted all the great wonders seen or heard of as true during his journey. But the narrative is actually a reconstruction, written in French by Rustichello da Pisa, a writer

of chivalric romances, to whom Marco Polo told his story while they were sharing a prison cell in Genoa. His contemporaries saw the book primarily as what its title says — a book of wonders, rather than a factual account — and Rustichello's trade as a writer of romances has caused some recently to question how much of the book is true. My work's subtitle, *une histoire de brodeurs*, refers to this as well: a "brodeur" means someone who tells things that are not to be taken seriously because he embellishes the story to make it nicer than it is. My Marco Polo is a very playful, artificial and colorful work. I looked for contemporary exotic locations in and near Brussels, such as a Japanese garden, a Chinese restaurant, etc, and I asked Chinese, Russian, Mongolian, and other immigrants to interpret a role, in their native language, later adding the voice-over of a French narrator. After its creation, *Marco Polo, une histoire de brodeurs* was immediately selected for the competition of the World Wide Video Festival in Den Hague, but the lack of an English translation was probably what made it difficult to show it elsewhere. I was also not completely satisfied with some of the scenes, though there were beautiful fragments in it, but anyway, I have not looked at this work again since 1990.

G.M. What are you working on right now?

A.T. I'm finalizing the first part of a new photographic series, called *Family Plot #1*, which also indirectly owes its existence to my visit to Gotland in 2007. 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 my research for *Displacement* I stumbled upon the figure of Carl Linnaeus, the famous Swedish "Father of Modern Taxonomy." 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 from 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. We owe the name of our species, *Homo sapiens L.* to Carl Linnaeus, who published the term in 1758.⁶ Although he was not the only naturalist to use binomial names, he was the first to introduce this with consistency and precision in his magnum opus *Species Plantarum* (1753). The very earliest traces of this new scientific system, which is still in use today, were already visible however in Linnaeus' *Öland and Gotland Journey* (1745). On May 15, 1741 he set off on a journey of scientific exploration to both islands on behalf of the Swedish parliament, in search of medicinal plants and plants for dyeing cloth, but also for other commercially useful natural resources, such as clay suitable for making china (porcelain) in Sweden. During my sojourn in Gotland I bought a beautiful English facsimile edition of Linnaeus' *Öland and Gotland travelogue*, which comprised little drawings he made on the spot. I was impressed by his literary talent, but then I forgot him and his legacy until, at the end of 2008, I started to research the history of an impressive botanical garden that I had visited in Cienfuegos, Cuba, in early 2005. It was established in 1899 by Harvard University on the sugar estate owned by a certain Edwin Atkins, an American citizen from Boston. While the garden was primarily devoted to the improvement of sugar cane for commercial purposes, it was also a site of research in other areas of tropical agriculture and botany. In January 2009, I found a publication dating from 1993, containing a list of the more than 1,500 binomial names of all the species growing in this botanical garden. I was intrigued by certain names and I found out that with the

name *Washingtonia robusta Wendl.*, the German botanist Hermann Wendland was paying homage to George Washington, first president of the United States. The name *Solandra grandiflora Sw.* was a tribute by Swedish botanist Olof Swartz to Linnaeus' pupil Daniel Carlsson Solander, who moved to London in 1760, thus promoting the Linnean classification system in England. The more I studied this list the more I was fascinated, and I decided to make a work starting from the official names of very well chosen botanical species and the "naming story" behind them. One could also consider the naming politics of the Linnean systematics as a form of "linguistic imperialism": it accompanied and promoted European global expansion and colonization (ignoring existing indigenous names, for example). Naming is a statement of possession; it raises questions of identity that generate the plots of stories.

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. Instead of looking at the totality of a plant, Linnaeus concentrated on one particular characteristic: the number of stamens (the male reproductive units) and the number of pistils (the female reproductive units) — and organised all plants in 24 groups accordingly. This was so controversial at the time that he was accused of being a botanical pornographer ...

G.M. Your intertextual approach seems to be a recurrent theme. In terms of media, you have acquired a substantial diversity over the years. How will this continue?

A.T. It is always difficult to say, but I'd like to explore more and more the possibilities of photographic and printed series, like in two new works I will present in Düsseldorf and Vienna: *Family Plot* and *Legend*. It would also not be illogic for me to start exploring three-dimensionality, for example, in sculptural works. As a matter of fact, all my installations are precisely staged in space, and in some way they have sculptural aspects. It's funny that you mention that I explore different media. I'm always surprised to hear that quite a few people, especially in Belgium, continue to define me as a video artist, although I have not worked with video — in the strict sense of a videotape that you project on a screen — since 1993 ...

NOTES

1 Written between April 13 and July 6, 2009.

2 Cf. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

3 Louis Aragon, *Le Mentir-vrai* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 12.

4 D.H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) (New York: Penguin Classics, 1991), 8.

5 The first trial was the *Procès de condamnation de Jeanne d'Arc* from 1431, while the second, less known trial, was the *Procès en nullité de la condamnation de Jeanne d'Arc* (1455–1456).

6 In a binomial scientific name, a person's name, in most cases abbreviated, appears after the genus' and species' name, referring to the person who first coined the name and published it in a specialized magazine. The scientific abbreviation of Linnaeus' name is L.