Distant Voices, Distant Views

— KASSANDRA NAKAS

> In 1758, the Swedish natural historian Carl Linnaeus named the olive-green songbird *Serinus canaria* for its native home, the Canary Islands. The tiny bird had become a popular pet in Europe since Spain conquered the islands. Often arriving in European ports with sugar, Spain's main export product, they were also called sugarbirds.
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> Ana Torfs, *Legend*, 2009

For the photographic installation *Legend*, Ana Torfs travelled through the island of La Gomera in September 2008. The second smallest of the seven Spanish Canary Islands, this volcanic isle is located off the West coast of North Africa, in the Atlantic Ocean. The act of travelling as a physical and mental movement and the experience and perception of a place are important issues in Ana Torfs's work, and this installation may be taken as a highly concentrated and focused involvement with a special place. The nine photographs that compose *Legend* were all taken on La Gomera. Their ample landscape format almost suggests a cinematic view. Evenly installed in a row on the wall, they invite the viewer to deliberately pace them off, were it not for the small-printed text fragments that accompany the photographs. As viewers lean in to read the sentences, they discover that the letters are not actually printed, but (laser) engraved onto separate, anodized aluminium tags: one tag for each text fragment and five tags for each photograph, placed horizontally beneath the image and embedded in the wooden frames.

The combination of photography with text is a familiar artistic practice, and not just since Conceptual art brought the semantics of image and word to centre stage. Yet, the material quality of this constellation in *Legend* provides additional semantic strata that enrich the work's overall subject. Among the word's different meanings, two are of special significance to the artist: 'Legend' denotes both a story coming down from the past whose truth is popularly accepted but cannot be checked, and the verbal part in combination with an object or an image, be it an inscription or a title on an object, a caption, or an explanatory list of the symbols on a map or chart. Both definitions relate to the work's form and content: the written captions accompany the photographs, along with the 'stories from the past' they tell (which will be referred to later in the text).

However, the word's etymology seems to be no less fundamental for the artist, and for an understanding of the work. Ana Torfs draws our attention to the term's history by pointing out that it stems from the Latin *legere*, which means 'to gather, select, read'. With this in mind, the unusual materiality of the 'captions' or 'legends' under the photographs takes on

a special meaning. Their separate arrangement in isolated, embedded tags emphasizes their heterogeneous origins. The different 'stories' they tell are all 'gathered' and 'selected' from different narratives and sources, yet they all refer to the same subject – to La Gomera and, in a wider sense, to the whole archipelago of the Canary Islands as a group with a connected history. The labels present these stories as if in a museum, displaying the findings of a natural scientific expedition.

In their accumulation, the legends also stand for the cultural heritage that forms the history of the Canary Islands. In that, it just seems logical that the tags should be meticulously set in the wooden frame: they adapt the same (quasi-volcanic) colour and seem almost organically connected with it. These tags are part of the image's frame just as much as the stories they tell frame our knowledge, and perception, of the islands. The interaction between what we see and what we know, what we think and what we feel (and what we believe) when we are confronted with a place (and its hidden history) or a story has been an ongoing topic in the work of Ana Torfs. Just as much, the very act of seeing and perceiving is an issue that she constantly reflects upon in her practice, and *Legend* quite evidently testifies to this concern.

In this work, the viewer's gaze is framed and focused on La Gomera's surface. Taken from an elevated vantage point, the photographs show the incredible variety of the island's geology and vegetation, from the 'arid, desert-like south [...] to the moist forest slopes of the central highlands', as one legend reads: we see rocky hillsides and Mediterranean palms, densely wooded valleys and fog shrouded peaks. The vignetting of the photographs alludes to early photography and film, and implies that the image centre shows a 'hot-spot' of special relevance. And yet, no visual action takes place. Rather, visibility itself is the centre of the image, as the motifs play with historical conventions of seeing and perceiving: The low saturation of the photographs's colours intimates the colourized prints of the nineteenth century, a time when the meditation on stereoscopic images of long-distance journeys stood for social entertainment and the act of taking (visual) possession of the Other. In this sense, the scopic view through a telescope or a camera always was (and remains) a powerful, colonizing one.[1]

The idea that visibility is more a cultural *dispositif* than a natural fact has been widely discussed since Foucault published *Discipline and Punish* in 1975. The question of seeing and being seen depends on social conventions and technological possibilities, much more than on individual will.[2] What we see is highly formatted, as the vignetting also indicates: taken from a distance, the photographs provide a telescopic view; while in earlier days this would have been the prospect from an expeditionary ship sailing off the island's shore, today's viewing habits more readily suggest the technical eye of a surveillance camera. The 'objective' distance of the view goes hand in hand with the neutral tone of the legends. The texts, taken from different sources, convey a dense and compact rhetoric. The five captions for each of the nine photographs refer to different histories and to various cultural, scientific and political contexts of the archipelago's past and present. Mythological accounts are repeatedly

cited, emphasizing the Canaries's fabled location at the 'westernmost edge of the known world' in ancient times, continued in descriptions of La Gomera's site as the starting point for Columbus's voyage to the New World, the Canaries's inglorious 'pioneering' role under Franco's military dictatorship, and their use as a gateway to Europe for thousands of illegal immigrants each year – it was only in 2008 that the new satellite system Sea Horse started tracking immigrant vessels, thus inhibiting further immigration.

Repeatedly, hints to the archipelago's conquest echo the discovery of the New World, as in this caption: 'The conquest and colonization of the Canary Islands can be seen as a "dress rehearsal" in which the Spanish practised what they actually performed later, on a much larger scale, throughout the Americas and other continents'. Added to this are accounts of the Canaries's extreme variety of animal species and plants, its population history, scientific discoveries and a number of other aspects, thus creating a multifarious meshwork of references that discursively 'encompass' the islands as the vignetting of the photographs. At the same time, the interweaving of the legends also recounts the many movements back and forth, to and from the island: expeditions and emigrants swarming out, conquerors and immigrants landing, the different layers of 'inhabitants' and visitors, along with the mythic images of them: 'According to the Roman author Pliny the Elder, the Canary Islands were named after the fierce dogs that lived there (the Latin word for dog is *canis*). He also wrote that the isles were plagued with the rotting carcasses of monstrous creatures that were constantly being cast ashore by the sea'. Accompanying the deserted landscapes of the photographs, the texts give a highly animate impression of the archipelago's history and its present, calling to mind that a story of conquest is always also a story of repression and loss.

Given the long literary tradition of the sea as a narrative space, as exemplified in the *Odyssey*, in *Moby-Dick* and innumerable others, the gesture of literally weaving such a meshwork of stories and tales around a group of Atlantic islands seems more than apt – indeed, especially so in the case of the history-heavy 'Fortunate Isles', 'Earthly Paradise', 'Elysian Fields' or 'Purple Islands', as the Canaries have been called throughout the centuries. And again, as in other works, such as *Displacement* (2009), it is Ana Torfs's precise selection of image and text that creates a powerful narrative. The Canary Islands might well be a particularly rewarding subject for the artist's investigation of a place's semantics and psychoemotional potential. Yet, her mode of visually and verbally reducing and condensing given data unfolds a highly complex account, one that reminds us, more broadly, of the fact that what we (superficially) see is often much less than what we actually get.

1. Geoffrey Batchen discusses the historical coincidence of the conception of photography and the invention of the panopticon, as a technique of surveillance in the early nineteenth century in his contribution 'Guilty Pleasures' in: *CRTL [SPACE]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, eds Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne and Peter Weibel (Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Art and Media/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 447–459.
2. For a recent discussion of this topic see Dietmar Kammerer, *Bilder der Überwachung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008), pp. 103–142.