

Foreword

— DIRK SNAUWAERT

This is the first time Ana Torfs is presenting in Brussels, where she is based, a broad selection from the precise and consistent body of work she has been developing since the early 1990s. *Echolalia* features a new installation, alongside an exhaustive survey of her practice over the past five years, a period during which she has mainly worked outside her native Belgium, sometimes in fairly specific exhibition contexts. The title of the new show – or at least the first, immediately recognizable element of the word – is evocative of this ‘return’.

However, given the meticulous attention Torfs devotes to every detail of the work, its presentation and accompanying publication, the significance of her title for this monographic exhibition is sure to extend much further than that. It has a playful musicality, though it is by no means as light-hearted or as poetic as it might seem on first reading. Echolalia, a concept from psychology and psychiatry, denotes a nervous disorder, the sufferers of which involuntarily repeat a word or phrase spoken by themselves or by others. In a less pathological context, it also denotes the ‘parroting’ of a young child learning to speak. But Torfs here is not referring so much to a compulsive, overdetermined reflex, as to the linguistic confusion and errors of translation that arise during the discovery of the ‘new’, to the moments when we bump up against the limits of our imagination and knowledge and the reflections of what we know already become the blueprint for new descriptions and definitions: language and iconography as interacting echoes.

As in her previous, comprehensive exhibition project *Album/Tracks* (K21 Düsseldorf and Generali Foundation Vienna, 2010), the artist seems to suggest with this title that the surface tension and visual relationships that characterize the optical image are stretched and transcended in her work. And that the relationship with (spoken) language, voice and polyphony, and the way knowledge arises and is transferred, play at least as important a role in this. Torfs belongs to a generation of women artists who, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, chose film and projections as their preferred medium with which to dissect narrative strategies from the traditional artistic genres and deconstruct them. However, such is her wealth of historical references, her stylistic plurality and the precision with which she employs the various techniques to achieve different solutions, that this narrow categorization becomes entirely inadequate.

Ana Torfs is less interested in unravelling and deconstructing narrativity in signs and symbols than in how a semantic system is composed: how it is structured internally, and how it is adapted throughout history in the face of new content and new conditions. Substance

handed down from the past – the material that Torfs draws on in her erudite quest – is rendered usable and meaningful over and over again in an always unfinished attempt to grasp the complexity of things: an attempt in which any element of system or order is invariably revealed to be an illusion.

The exhibition unfolds from the earliest installation in this selection, *Displacement*, the deconstruction of a film history icon. It then develops via a multiplicity of themes (migration, culture shock and appropriation, to name a few) into a kaleidoscopic spectrum of variations on the story of modernity. The role of naming and taxonomy in these projects recalls Foucault's *The Order of Things*, where he examines knowledge and how it arises, and in particular his definition of *epistemes* as 'the fundamental codes of a culture – those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices'.¹ What Torfs provides here is an archaeology of knowledge: how things are named and described in order to grasp them, and how these attempts invariably run up against their limits in the perception of the 'radically other', which falls beyond the categories even of the 'strange' and the 'exotic'.

Seeing these different projects together will very likely make it clear that Torfs has never allowed herself to be restricted in her work by the patterns or the narrative nature of the image or representation; instead, she has always sought out the discontinuities and limits in the scope of knowing. By having every image, word and phrase systematically evoke the next – a practice that underpins the very principle of montage, which is about signifying and repeating – she weaves them into a text that seeks to know the complexity of the world.

Like the exhibition, this publication testifies to the shifts and changes in Torfs's work in recent years. It goes without saying that such an ambitious venture could only be brought to a successful conclusion thanks to the contribution of many people. We are grateful to the lenders, to the team at WIELS – Kwinten Lavigne and Caroline Dumalin – and to everyone who, together with Ana Torfs, helped shape the overall project, especially Jurgen Persijn. We are likewise indebted to Cera Partners in Art for supporting the production of the new work *The Parrot & the Nightingale, a Phantasmagoria*. Our warm thanks also go to BNP Paribas Fortis, for making this publication possible, and for its regular and generous support of WIELS.

(Translated from the Dutch by Ted Alkins)

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 19.