Family Plot or four ways of seeing the world

'and the question that Gregor Keuschnig had
asked himself a quarter of a century earlier
took on a new validity: "Who can say, after all,
that the world has already been discovered?"'
(Peter Handke, *My Year In No Man's Bay*)

She can't deny it: she had ignored *Family Plot* when she visited *Echolalia*.[1] Twice even. It hung there closed and inaccessible, two rigidly ordered rows of works, reflective glass encased in white frames. It had seemed dark to her. But from the corner of her eye, she had also registered all that bright white. Amid the black she thought she had seen hair, eyes, hats, robes, bodies, mountains, cliffs and ships. And foliage. Yes, leaves most of all; in the bottom row, but in the upper one too, although different there. This work was calling out for attention –generous, open-minded attention. Which was also what the voice encouraged whenever she lay on the mat, her feet folded open like a book. She had to go back.

She stood close to the work and looked at the upper row, her head raised. Her gaze penetrated the glass with curiosity.

Behind the shadowed glass are formal portraits – pin-sharp reproductions of engraved, drawn and painted likenesses of men and, yes, women too. A thin line connects the portrait at the top – with the subject's name beneath – with one, and sometimes several small portraits, captioned only by an abbreviation of the name of the person portrayed. It is a hyphen more than a bloodline; if you line the names up alongside one another, they almost – but not quite – form the botanical name you find beneath each little tree. For anyone peering closely at a formal plant name, therefore, the letter is the law. All one sees is the connection between the printed words, the representation of the individual from whom the plant derives its genus name and that of the one who bestowed that name. The sole play allowed is to shift the letters around: from genus to genitals. What does 'monkey-bread tree' still have in common with '*Adansonia digitata* L.'? To the word-fetishist more than any other, the inclination to take the pointing finger for the plant to which it points is distinctly eccentric. The plant really isn't here, it's somewhere else.

She had stepped back a little, had put a bit of distance between herself and the works on the top row. Now she walked up and down, letting her gaze slide over the glass on which the depicted plants seemed to float; not one allowed itself to be seized and held. From time to time, she looked back or a little ahead, and suddenly one of the plants appeared to her – fleetingly, yet with enormous intensity. Was it down to her position? The way the light fell? Her state of mind? Gone were the solemn gentlemen and ladies, together with their names.

[1] Exhibition of recent work by Ana Torfs held in autumn 2014 at WIELS, Centre for Contemporary Art. *Family Plot* is not, incidentally, always presented in the same way. On this particular occasion, *Family Plot #1* (2009) was displayed above *Family Plot #2* (2010).

The image of the plant – a black and white screen-print on glass – is located on another plane than the name that refers to it. It hovers in front, the robust white frame barely strong enough to hold the two together. It still seems to be developing; it shows the plant as fluid, flighty and highly changeable; not like itself for a moment. Its emergence and its decline fade constantly into each other. It is not some *fait accompli* or a dried-up specimen in a herbarium; always becoming; always moving. Something pulsates in that glass. It is the plant seen through the eyes of an observer who feels no need to pluck it from the flow of impressions; to capture it in an abstract and generalizing network of established notions; to seize, name, dissect or classify it. 'Intuitions without concepts are *not* blind'[2], Bergson says in a sharp rebuke to Kant. An observer like this has ceased to resemble in the slightest the monkey who reaches for the moon in the water with one paw, while clinging to a sturdy branch with the other. He has let go and knows himself caught up in that same continuous shifting as the plant.

She was back at the beginning, 'A' for Adanson. Son of the earth; no, of the world. Her gaze jumped from reproduction to speech bubble; sharply outlined entities on an ink-black surface. She knelt down – to be able to see better, to read better – and then stood up again. No need for the stool, hesitantly offered by a gallery attendant. She had to go around the world! And another, and another still: she was off again. All the way to 'W' for Welwitsch – one more son of the world.

Here too there are pictures of plants to see. Behind the glass now, below and above the images of places, animals, ritual objects, tools, buildings, ships, books, people, encounters and confrontations. They feature in their entirety, but also divided – their different parts often blown up and in cross-section. They are also spoken of in the speech bubbles, where they are collected, identified, described, classified, named, stored, sold, cultivated, used and eaten. They are an object of study; a medicine, an intoxicant or a foodstuff. Purely a specimen of their species; a crop. The flora here no longer belongs to the earth but to a world. And no: this doesn't turn about its own axis, but about a human being – mostly a man; Michel Adanson, Joseph Banks, and many more besides. What do the texts and their illustrations teach us about this human species? That it forms a hierarchically ordered whole, whose members exist in great mutual dependence. It never rests; it is and it sets in motion: people, things, ideas and knowledge. It knows the lust to act and the desire to own. It seizes, stores up, takes away. In ships, chests and cabinets, but also in books, maps, prints and pictures. Reality rendered containable and ready for transport. That's how it was, but the supports here have relinquished their solidity. The words combined in the speech bubbles no longer belong to anyone. Maps, prints and title pages have been cut from the reference books, travel journals and atlases that contained them, the explanatory captions frequently omitted or hard to make out. Negative printing has drained them of their colours, obviously, but also of their distinguishing features. They have ceased to make physically and tangibly present what is elsewhere.[3] No longer burdened by the task of unambiguously referring to something, they show themselves as brilliant images in the dark. Shades and voices; together a

[2] Found in Jan Bors *Op de grens van het denken. De filosofie van het onzegbare*.

[3] Realized thanks to John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.

phantasmagoria.[4] Disconcerting in many respects. Nevertheless you watch and listen; you have to; you want to. O scandalous friskiness; you're under its spell.

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[4] 'Phantasmagoria' derives from the Greek words 'phantasma' (apparition) and 'agoreuein' (to speak in public).