

Poetics of Postcolonial Art

The Installations of Ana Torfs

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In Simon Schama's *Rembrandt's Eyes* (1999) we read how Rembrandt acquired a rare stuffed bird of paradise from New Guinea near the Spice Islands in the Moluccas, then part of the Dutch maritime empire. Schama describes it as 'not only an eye-filling wonder of dazzling plumage but the object of intense debate [...] as to whether the creature had legs'. To Rembrandt, the beautiful bird in his curiosity cabinet was an irresistible riddle, and in his studies in ink of the late 1630s, now in the Louvre, he drew it twice - once exactly as it was, without legs; then once more with legs added, supplying the missing detail by his art and imagination.

Equally, in 1644, when Johan Maurits of Nassau-Siegen, governor-general of Dutch Brazil, returned home, he was accompanied by a tribe of Tapuyas, his Native American allies against the Portuguese. In August that year, in his palace in The Hague (today the Mauritshuis museum), they gave a performance of their ceremonial music and dances. Then in May 1652 they appeared in Johan Maurits's reenactment at Cleves of the decisive battle between Rome and Carthage at Zama in 202 BCE, as captured and shackled barbarians in Scipio's victory parade after his annihilation of the enemy under Hannibal.

In both these cases of colonial contact and exchange we encounter what today is known as an installation - in Rembrandt's case, an anatomical experiment on one of the curiosities displayed in his cabinet; and in Johan Maurits's palace, the theatrical mise-en-scene of those 'Indians' in an imperial celebration of his dynasty. Both were part of a wider cultural innovation in early modern Europe. For, as we know from Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* (1991), the discovery of the world brought along new and transforming ways of seeing, thinking, (re-)presenting and handling those exotic new realities.

Today, this fascination with people and objects from outside Europe continues, while being reinvented by artists working in a global context of critical postcolonial discourse. In 1992, for example, in a re-enactment of the colonial realities underlying Greenblatt's thesis, the performance artist Coco Fusco put herself on display as a captured Native American woman, held in a cage on a square in central Madrid - a bitter counterpoint to the lavish Spanish celebration of the discoveries of Columbus in 1492. And in The Hague in 1994 - inspired by Maria Dermoût's novel *The Ten Thousand Things* (1955), which is set



Ana Torfs, *The Parrot & the Nightingale, a Phantasmagoria*, 2014
Installation view, Centro de Arte Moderna (Gulbenkian Museum), Lisbon, 2016

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in the former Dutch East Indies - Renée Green produced *After the Ten Thousand Things*, an ethnographic installation exploring the dynamics of gathering and collecting but also the dispersal of objects and people, as well as the vicissitudes of colonial memory and its traces, which today can be as scattered as the collections that Johan Maurits brought with him as *souvenirs de Brésil*.

Echolalia

Against this historical and cultural background of colonial memories - beyond the horizon, half forgotten, fragmented, often contested - we will now take a closer look at the Belgian artist Ana Torfs and her eye-opening installations which, in their imaginative exploration of earlier globalities, are amongst the more interesting works of art to come out of the Low Countries in recent years. In particular we will consider the following four of her installations exploring (post-)colonial themes - *Family Plot* of 2009-2010; [...] *STAIN [...]* of 2012; *TXT (Engine of Wandering Words)* of 2013; and *The Parrot & the Nightingale, a Phantasmagoria* of 2014.

In 2016 the four were shown together in her solo exhibition, *Echolalia*, in the Centro de Arte Moderna of the Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon. An interesting reference here is to the eponymous work by Daniel Heller-Roazen, quoted on

the back cover of Torfs's artist book of 2014, where he describes echolalia as 'the memory of the indistinct and immemorial babble that, in being lost, allowed all languages to be'. In his view, in growing up we humans lose the unlimited babbling capacity of newborn infants, which may resurface later on when our echolalic brain engages in parroting and repetition, with soundplay, shifts of meaning and playful transpositions, exploiting the ambiguities and polyvalence of language.

The exploration which Ana Torfs undertook in these installations pursues what happens in and through such babbling - the new meanings and imaginings it enables, the new potentialities of art it may trigger. The work of Oulipo writers such as Georges Perec and Italo Calvino is a key reference here, and the process has been described by her Lisbon curator, Caroline Dumalin, as 'worlds unfolded by word', reflecting how Torfs's creations often emanate and evolve from an initial, central word or text.

Acts of naming

Family Plot (2009-2010) presents two different series of elements - twenty-five small black-and-white silk screens (on glass) of tropical plants, with their pedigree in Linnaean nomenclature and a portrait of the important, usually European individual whose name was thus eternalised; each coupled with a larger frame showing a reversed engraving of a world map from the time of those



Ana Torfs, *Family Plot*, 2009/10
Installation view, Museum Kurhaus Kleve, 2015
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Ana Torfs, *Family Plot*, 2009/10
detail
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individuals, surrounded by other reversed engravings and woodcuts from many different sources covering the colonial era, and text fragments in speech bubbles – the whole displayed in a sequence of uniform sets along the four walls of the room.

In a striking counterpoint to this calm, eighteenth-century museum-like order, one of the engravings presents the black writer Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa (circa 1745-1797), who in his 1789 autobiography spoke up for his fellow slaves and advocated the abolition of slavery. This is a reminder that *Family Plot* and its Latin plant names have a history in the colonial past. There are other images like the one portraying Equiano, and they raise disturbing questions about that past.

Take, for example, the ambiguity of the title *Family Plot*. Since 'plot' can mean a piece of land in a cemetery but also a plan or intrigue, which family can she mean? That of tropical plants, as domesticated in scientific botanical taxonomy? Or rather that of the dead white males who appropriated those plants with their nomenclature? Or perhaps both – the history of colonial botany intertwined with the global history of European expansion? But where then does Equiano fit into their dialectic of naming and exclusion, with his aching question of a slave: *Am I Not a Man And a Brother?*

Questions such as these continue to occupy Torfs's viewers long after visiting this installation.

The world of colour

With her second installation, [...] *STAIN [...]* (2012), we enter the world of colour - here the subject of an experimental investigation using four white tables, each holding five differently coloured frames featuring coloured goose feathers and numbered images of all kinds of objects and persons; plus two loudspeakers relaying English notes and comments spoken by Diana Weller in a random loop of ninety minutes.



Ana Torfs, *[...] STAIN [...]*, 2012

Installation view, Centro de Arte Moderna (Gulbenkian Museum), Lisbon, 2016

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The effect on visitors of the diverse visual and auditory input from this installation is to disrupt their perception and shift their understanding of colour. For one thing, *[...] STAIN [...]* suggests that there are no colours without language – although, as it turns out, words are far too indeterminate for an exact identification of colours, so today numbers are used for this purpose. But equally, as this installation suggests, colour does determine perception. Each of the installation's twenty frames comes in a different colour, which affects everything we see – almost as in Rimbaud's poem 'Voyelles', in which each of the vowels A, E, I, O and U adds a distinctive colour, meaning and symbolism. In *[...] STAIN [...]* we find the same evocative power, not least because of its beautiful colours and their exotic names, such as Congo red, Paris violet, Indian yellow, Sudan black, Rose Bengal, Prussian blue, Malachite green, Bismarck brown and so on.

More on these colours and colour names comes from the spoken notes on their history – a history of art and artifice, of human industriousness and technology, of coining words for the new dyes invented in the nineteenth century, but also of competition and profit hunting. As *[...] STAIN [...]* makes clear, the industrial revolution of colour production was at the origin of many of today's chemical and pharmaceutical multinationals, such as BASF, Bayer and Agfa. And part of this process was what happened in the colonies – for example, the war over indigo production between the German chemical industry and Gandhi's indigo workers in India; and the comment about the human cost of this dye from a member of the Bengal Civil Service in 1848: 'Not a chest of indigo reaches England without being stained with human blood'.

Unfolding the double meaning of this installation's title – 'stain' is not only a 'dye' and a colouring technique, but also a 'blemish, flaw or smear' – Ana Torfs brings to light, for her viewers to ponder, how seemingly natural and innocent colours, which delight our eyes, turn out to have a disturbing colonial and political history.

Majestic tapestries

In her third installation, *TXT (Engine of Wandering Words)* (2013), Ana Torfs takes a rather different tack. This installation consists of six large Jacquard tapestries focussed on colonial produce – coffee, sugar, ginger, tobacco, saffron and chocolate. Each of these six key words is shown backwards, upside down and between brackets, above a quote from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, which runs along the bottom of the tapestry. The centrepiece in each tapestry, meanwhile, is a large block of images – five across by five vertical – woven into its fabric, picturing Swift's text engine complete with handles for moving the images inside those blocks. With each of these tapestries thus unfolding into a series of pictures, *TXT* turns into an image machine, making us see what is behind those six key words – indeed, what we need to see if we are to understand anything at all of the meaning of these words.

The 150 images in this installation (and many more if those handles could be turned) are presented without caption or annotation. They are just that: vivid images, of ancient maps, wonders of the world in far away countries, cities, islands, colonial atlases and travelogues, caravans, camels, slaves and ships,



Ana Torfs, *The Parrot & the Nightingale, a Phantasmagoria*, 2014
Installation view, WIELS Contemporary Art Centre, Brussels, 2014
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imperial postage stamps and advertisements. Colonial produce is everywhere, and the coffee tapestry carries a picture of *Max Havelaar* (1860), the Dutch anticolonial novel on the human cost of the coffee produced in its colonies. Taken as a whole, it is a mesmerising installation – six magnificent wall hangings, in a striking and colourful composition, rich in images, woven together into a pictorial history of European colonial expansion and exploitation of the world outside.

Past and present meet here in *TXT*'s link to the longstanding Flemish tradition of weaving imperial tapestries. A display similar to *TXT* can be found in the Museo Capodimonte in Naples, in a large room with seven Flemish tapestries depicting the battles over the city of Pavia in 1525 between the French king Francis I and Holy Roman emperor Charles V, the first to rule over both the old world and the new. These tapestries were presented to Charles by the States-General in Brussels in 1531, and later transferred to Naples by the family of Francesco de Avalos, who held Pavia for the emperor. In other outposts of Charles's empire, in Seville and in Middelburg, there are similar palace rooms with Flemish tapestries which depict, in wool and silk, silver and gold, the story of his victories. Memories of this imperial tradition live on today, reworked and critically interrogated, in works of art by contemporary artists – the 2009 photograph by Candida Höfer of that Capodimonte tapestry room; and the large



Ana Torfs, *TXT (Engine of Wandering Words)*, 2013

Installation view, Sharjah Biennial 11, 2013

© Photo: Ana Torfs



Ana Torfs, *TXT (Engine of Wandering Words)*, 2013
detail

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woven wall map of the Kingdom of Naples in 1786, reconfigured by William Kentridge in 2009 and also in the Museo Capodimonte, its red frontiers overwritten by thick black brushstrokes depicting Don Quixote with an enormous Gogol nose.

In *TXT*'s majestic tapestries and their images the colonial past is met head on. The images are left unexplained, the six colonial key words obscured, their message hidden in plain sight, their impact as strong as Maya pictorial signs. In view of these Oulipian techniques the question at the heart of this installation is: How exactly are words and images related within *TXT*'s engine, with its enormous potential? It is here that the *wandering words* in Ana Torfs's subtitle come into play, beginning with the multilingual etymologies of the nomadic words we use with our everyday consumption of chocolate, sugar and other colonial produce. *TXT* does not offer a static picture book in the word-and-image tradition of Comenius, and it also rejects the view of language in Swift's text engine, that words are only names and labels for things. Instead, this monumental installation insists that, without the primordial impact of those images and without the memories and connections they generate, the meaning of those six key words will continue to elude us and remain beyond our ken.

Web of language

Ana Torfs's last work to be discussed here, *The Parrot & the Nightingale, a Phantasmagoria* (2014), is a multi-sensory installation which combines three components – first, two large projection screens showing a series of black-and-white slides of translucent tropical nature in a loop – second, three LED



Ana Torfs, *The Parrot & the Nightingale, a Phantasmagoria* (Detail), 2014

© Photo: Ana Torfs

displays featuring a video of the interpreter Lissa Zeviar as she translates into American Sign Language a series of fragments selected by Torfs from the travel journals of the 'Admiral', Columbus – and third, we hear a succession of voices giving different English renditions of those fragments. The emission of these visual and auditory streams serves to weave together images, sounds and associations, wrapping the viewer into a complex web of language which recounts and deconstructs the historical realities involved.

Here, Torfs's installation calls to mind Rachel Berwick's *Humboldt's Parrot* of 1997, an installation with parrots who were taught to speak the extinct Maypure language, from the phonetic notes written down by Alexander von Humboldt on his travels along the Orinoco river in 1800. But while Berwick's parakeets are parroting a dead language which nobody knows, Torfs has added a few extra layers of alienation, and so questions abound: Could the parrot and the nightingale be singing to each other? Or is their birdsong being drowned out by those English-speaking voices? But there were no nightingales in the Caribbean. So why then are those fragments translated, and why those different renditions? Is the marvellous new world which the Admiral keeps evoking an echolalic masque for his all-modern, all-consuming lust for gold, riches, possessions and slaves?

In this intriguing set-up, it is as Caroline Dumalin put it: 'The Admiral looks, but he doesn't see. He listens, but he doesn't hear the Other'. The multiple garbling going on in this installation represents an echolalic experiment as opaque as the hieroglyphic performances in the theatre of Antonin Artaud. A real phantasmagoria, that is, a sequence of images as in a dream, a fantastic assemblage of things seen or imagined – as if only such incomprehensibility could do justice to the unknown beauties and realities of that other world which the artist puts before our eyes.

Is that what art – or at least, Ana Torfs's art - is and does with its imaginings, precisely when one cannot decode them?

As we see, all four of Torfs's installations evoke a new and unexpected artistic reality, driven on by an echolalic creativity, through allusion, transposition, hint, footnote, riddle and other triggers of the imagination, and seeking to retrieve the oft-forgotten, only half-remembered events, images, memories and ways of seeing of past globalities. These four postcolonial installations delve deeper and deeper into the colonial past, and scrutinise crucial but little known episodes - ranging from eighteenth-century European labelling and appropriation of tropical nature alongside the unsettling issue of slavery; via nineteenth-century imperialism and its industrial subjugation of the world, including even our colours and their production; through the tradition of imperial wall hangings, reworked in *TXT* as a never-ending pictorial history of colonial exploitation; down to Columbus and the absences and obsessions in his narrative of discovery. Their central theme is how, today, the colonial past is making its presence felt, through Torfs's eye-opening narratives linking plants, colours, conquest, colonial production and enslavement - in a complex artistic language which examines our inability to capture in words or images what actually happened in colonial history.

The point which these installations drive home is to what far-reaching extent the language we use shapes reality around us. The front cover of Torfs's *Echolalia* book features Saussure's well-known diagram of the human communication circuit, but no longer does she subscribe to the view that language is a closed and static labelling system. Instead, we see her cutting out a space in art for new modes of language use - discursive, poetic, learned, metaphorical and imaginative, as the case may be - for coming to terms with the colonial past, whilst simultaneously generating a disrupting view of its heritage in the world we are living in today.

Ana Torfs's beautifully crafted, enchanting, experimental installations start out from established European conventions of art and reality, but then step outside and present us with a multimodal *Gesamtkunstwerk*, made with full use of anything that may serve to evoke what one cannot simply see - whether it is the meanings and insights produced by this echolalic art, the unresolved presence of the colonial past, the shackles of our language, or the legs of Rembrandt's bird of paradise. ■

See also: www.anatorfs.com

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