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Translation as Means to Invention

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Translation as Means to Invention

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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by

Julie Diane Sadowski

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Introduction.

Issues around translation, in the broadest sense, have become increasingly palpable in the past years of my life. As a Polish person living in the US for the past ten years I have recently been experiencing somewhat of a manic state of becoming bilingual. It feels as I’ve been split in half and floating in a linguistic limbo. In ways I think, talk, dress or even move now, I am no longer fully Polish, nor fully American. In my recent work I’ve been mining the experience of both worlds, superimposing them upon each other with an imagined inter-translatability and porousness of the two worlds.

When it comes to translation it is hard to leave language out of the topic, but I would like to propose to think of it as a process that may lead to invention which may result in a final work as a text as well as an image or an object. For me, a source (just the way an ordinal text is a source for translation in a traditional sense) for translation will be a motivation, in other words things that that drive me to make work and make me engage in the process of translation. Motivations (for me) usually come from things in life I tend obsess over. Those things may vary from something intangible like an idea, a song, or atmosphere experienced by being at a protest or a rave to things more tangible like an adidas shoe model, a rapper, or a building in the City Center of Warsaw that I used to walk by everyday.
1.

With a realization that it is impossible to possess things intangible (especially in a material form) I obsess over, but also taking in consideration the size and vastness of objects that (to me) carry that specific significance, the most satisfying way to collect, preserve and bring myself closer to those things, ideas and experiences is to translate them into images. This significance of the things I obsess over has to do somewhat with a lived experience or at least relating to the history of my life in one way or another. The moment I experience a memorable feeling or a material object is not significant right then, but becomes significant with time, and that is also when it turns into an image. Therefore the experience undergoes a process of a kind of translation right then. This is perhaps generated by a mode of projection which is responsible for adding on and subtracting values from images we produce in our heads out of our experiences. They way images appear in my head is somewhat similar techniques of collage, yet the decisions of what gets cut off or added in are made less if not at all consciously.

I propose further that possessing memories in form of images is even more satisfying than things remembered themselves as the significance of an experience comes with an image and so in that sense this is how it more directly corresponds to the way images appear in the “head”. Therefore my desire is to actually possess the experiences and objects as images. Another reason for this desire comes from this type of process of translation allowing me to superimpose
things, ideas and objects upon each other, which leads to removal or change of hierarchy between the things juxtaposed, forcing an imagined inter-translatability and relationships between two or more elements that are seemingly of different worlds.

This process of experiences transitioning into images is more specifically related to one of the works I am presenting in my thesis exhibition: The Marriott (A Reflection of What?) that consists of a three panel prop wall painted chroma-key blue, and printed images collaged on the surface of the wall. On the middle panel we see an adhered cut-out photograph of the Marriott Hotel in Warsaw in which appears a reflection of the the Palace of Culture and Sciences (PKiN), a building that was gifted to Poland by Stalin after WWII. Side panels of the prop wall are layered with another photograph of mine of a residential building in downtown Warsaw that was in the process of being demolished. That same photograph of the demolished building is used twice on both side panels. It is digitally stretched, and flipped horizontally on the right side in order for both to match symmetrically on each side of the prop wall. The photographs I chose to use for this installation have to do with my fascination with all of the buildings photographed. The Marriott and The Palace of Culture and Sciences are of interest on both an architectural and ideological level. In a way, I see the reflection of the PKiN in the Marriott as a reflection of communism on capitalism or a reflection of east on west (on the ideological rather than geographical level). The demolished building in the other photograph was a generic residential
building that was not interesting in the same way. Photographing it during the process of its demolition had more to do with finding visual pleasure and beauty in witnessing destruction.
Image no.1 Photoshop mock up for the prop wall “The Marriott (A Reflection of What?)
Image no.2 Source photograph for the middle panel of the prop wall “The Marriott (A Reflection of What?)”
Image no.3 Source photograph for the side panels of the prop wall “The Marriott (A Reflection of What?)
Another element to this installation is a Press Release that is intended to be a work as well as a press release. Unlike most press releases it is purposefully placed in a brochure holder attached to the gallery wall near the prop wall. As press releases are usually available for grabs at a front desk of a gallery the brochure holder may be seen as a lower culture object in which a press release (an object of a higher culture) is placed in. This idea of juxtaposing elements from both high and low culture is something that tends to happen throughout a lot of my work. The Press Release is also playing with an idea of indicating a show within another show. Just like the traditional press release it lists all the necessary information at the top, such as place, name, date etc, but the text included in it instead of talking about the work in the show directly is a diary entry I wrote about my experience of going to the Sky Bar at The Warsaw Marriott.

Initially, I wrote this diary entry in Polish as the event was experienced during a state in which I was thinking in Polish. The writing of it came first with no clear intention to use it in my work. After reading and editing it a couple of times I started understanding this experience and also this text as an image. The text I wrote is about a page long and takes me about three minutes to read, but the way the experience appears in my head is much quicker - like a flashback or an image. This relates to the way we transition from perception to memory to imagination - the latter denoting the place of where and how images arise. It proposes modes of imagination and projection as a primary tool for translation.
Imagination produces images, but not out of the blue, at least not in my case. It does it through collaging and selecting things from the archive of my memory and compilation of experiences that are used as material or ingredients for the work. In the “Salon of 1859” Baudelaire writes: “Imagination… decomposes all creation and in accordance with rules whose origins one cannot find except in the furthest depths of the should, it creates a new world”. This sensation of new-ness is of interest to me and is perhaps composed out of the way memory leaves things in and adds things in to the images we produce in our heads.

Thus, the diary entry I wrote became a translation of my experience of going to the Sky Bar at The Warsaw Marriott and later literally a translation of the text originally written Polish to English and the prop wall was made in dedication to the experience as well as the text. Thinking of translation as a profession forces me to think of two or more authors as usually literary works are translated by a second person who is an expert on languages they are working with. Therefore translating this diary entry from my own writing to my own writing seems unusual and perhaps even pointless. Yet translating myself from English to Polish and vice versa is something I do on daily basis, as if I want the two halves of myself to be able to understand each other better. It relates to that manic states of becoming bilingual I mention in the beginning. Thus in the process of translating this particular diary entry I found myself of two minds - transforming words and rearranging some sentences in the way that does not
directly correspond with the Polish version of the text but more with the essence or sensation of the experience as I remember it, which perhaps indicates that the way atmosphere and essence can be described varies from language to language.
In The Task of the Translator Walter Benjamin wrote:

no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife - which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living - the original undergoes a change.”

In this essay Benjamin focuses mostly on issues related to translations of original literary works, and the fundamental purpose of translation as the central reciprocal relationship between languages. I would like to apply his train of thought to translation in a broader sense, for example a challenge of translating an idea into matter, or a feeling into a visual form and vice versa. Without aspiring to the original but perhaps with aspiring to invention through translation. As I can accept the possibility of translating an essence of a literary text into a text in a foreign language, when it comes to art things get more complicated as that reciprocal relationship between languages of ideas, feelings, and matter doesn’t exist, at least not on a structural level. Therefore a task of an artist partially has to do with inventing a language of their own. This is where artists must rely on imagination as mediator between their thoughts, feelings and experiences and the work they make. A new language takes shape at these intermediate junctures.

In The Task of the Translator Benjamin also argues that in order to capture the essence of a text the translator must dig into primal aspects of languages they are working with. I see this as analogous to a necessity to digging into the
primal aspects of the experiences, ideas etc. that one uses as material or a starting point for a new work. It is (to me) also directly related to the idea of thinking through making, without having a clear vision for the outcome. It is allowing yourself to not have a clear expectation of what the work will do in its afterlife. The analyses comes after the process of translation. It also has to do with paying attention to things that could be easily labeled as miscellaneous. It’s like going on a walk to collect observations, which is how I initially pursued making art - with my camera. Now, roaming the street to make photographs or collect found objects feels the same as roaming the internet or a specific archive, and responding with an impulse to what is interesting without a clear idea of what I am looking for or intend to do with it. In relation to writing it perhaps is equivalent to gathering words and building a vocabulary that one might want to use as ingredients. All of this makes a distinction between translation (as process) and interpretation (as analyses). This distinction is important as those two terms are often used interchangeably but in fact relate to two completely different activities where translation is about a birth of a work and interpretation having to do with the afterlife of a work.

One of the first works I made in graduate school was a photographic installation called Dinosaur World. This work is not presented in my thesis show, yet I find it important to mention as it informs the work that resulted in the final year of my graduate studies. It is the first work that demonstrates my desire to expand images onto a larger and more immersive field. It is also less concerned
with the read of the viewer and takes a more idiosyncratic approach. The installation consisted of five photographic prints adhered directly onto a wall pulled right next to each other without any space in between. The starting point of this work was a photograph of words Dinosaur World that I found on a box of dinosaur toys at a local K-Mart. The outside of the box was darkish blue, a touch darker than chroma-key blue and the words were printed in white using some common italicized font. The piece started with an obsession over this image, and a set of associations I had to this photograph. Without having a clear idea of what I was doing or whether this was going to turn into anything I printed that photo in a poster size (18in x 24in) and stuck it to the wall of my studio for a while. Every other day or so I would put different images next to it that somehow corresponded with it. My decisions were not governed by any specific rules or systems. At least not consciously. Sometimes I saw relationships that were purely formal, like the sky in one of the photographs being of a similar blue to blue in the other photograph, and other related to content or aura of the photographs. This was a process of building off of that one Dinosaur World image until it felt like a sort of complete visual sentence, yet the sentence is not translatable to language in a traditional sense. Perhaps it has more to do with ways of seeing. The first two photographs in this installation happen to be made in the US and the other ones in Poland, and somehow the transition between the images felt fluid. The blue of the background of the Dinosaur World photograph later transformed into a backdrop - a painted wall that served as a unifying factor to the piece,
transforming those five photographs into one large image. At the time I made this piece I wasn’t thinking about translation directly, but more about photography as a language that is different from the one that uses alphabet to make meaning. It was also one of the first pieces where I was thinking about a reverse of my projected desires related to living previously in Poland and now in the US.
Image no. 4 Photoshop mock up for “Dinosaur World”
Photography with its highly descriptive and indexical qualities might not seem like the best choice of medium for making works that aspire to go beyond language. As we all know, when we’re looking at a photograph we are prone to put language on it by naming objects, surfaces and textures of what is photographed, which seems to relate to something that Roland Barthes called the “studium” in his book *Camera Lucida*. I share Barthes assumption that every photograph has a “studium”, therefore it can be studied and taken apart (almost scientifically) by naming what is photographed. Barthes argues that something that can not be found in all photographs is a “punctum”, which somewhat relates to an aura produced by sometimes locatable and other times not locatable things in the photograph. It is my conviction that “punctum” is also related to affect and atmosphere that can be located in combination of objects, like for example the way a belt is tight around someone’s waist, but even though the objects can be named, the effect they produce in combination to each other moves beyond language itself. It is something that “moves” us, something that is not translatable to language in a traditional sense and not universally locatable, as it relates to one’s subjective experience of a thing. Therefore it also has less to do with artists intention (as translator), than the viewer (as translator). With an awareness of my lack of control over being able to produce “punctum” I begin to see it as a part of motivation that to me is founded on that “memorable feeling” I describe above. It by-passes denotation, connotation, and in a sense language as such, but it also requires a backdrop of language; in a sense, the “punctum” is activated against
language. Therefore, I am eager to say that I locate the "punctum" in life experiences that drive me to make works in some kind of dedication to those experiences. In a way this also makes me more dedicated to being a practitioner of life first and then becoming a practitioner of art. With an understanding of the inherent failure of reproducing life as art, this still remains the only way I can feel motivated to make anything. This is also why I experience many so called artist blocks or in other words moments of blankness that come from an inability to engage in an obsession with something out of life or the world outside of art.
After making Dinosaur World, problems of language and questioning of desire for universality became more present in my work and I began to research different projects that aimed at different kinds of universalism from American Modernism in visual arts to artificial auxiliary languages such as Esperanto - which I ended up pursuing further and treating it as new material for making work. Esperanto was invented in late 1800’s by Ludwik Zamenhof - a Polish optometrist. I knew about Zamenhof and Esperanto since my early childhood as I grew up in Bialystok - the city where he was born and where he started working on first drafts of the language. The fundamental idea behind Esperanto was creating a universal language that would ultimately lead to world peace as Zamenhof believed that wars and conflict stemmed from inability to communicate in one international language. Aside from thinking about Esperanto as a utopian ideal, I also thought about it in relationship to photography, and more specifically about the way images in general aspire to become the Esperanto of today. In both cases, Esperanto as well as photography well on it’s way to becoming a failed cryptic or misused language. In my research I initially focused on visual materials and aesthetics around it. I wanted to look at how a language and an ideology manifested itself visually.

As I moved forward I noticed a connection to symbols and icons that were used to propagate use of the internet such as doves, shaking hands and the universe. This is when I began to also think of Esperanto as analogous to a
computer code. Esperanto just like coding can be only spoken and written by a handful of people (it is said that around two million people speak Esperanto today). It is also known that there are around two thousand people who are native Esperanto speakers whom I found some youtube interviews with. In one of them when asked how bilingualism has helped them they says:

*You can use it in a store speaking to your parents saying that you don’t like something because… So, when my parents spoke to me in Esperanto, I never answered in Esperanto in fact. So, if I really used Esperanto, that meant that I wanted to say something which I certainly didn’t want others to understand.*

This is a perfect example of how a failed attempt at universality has became something that is completely opposite from its original purpose. Just as the internet initially aimed at universally connecting people but has become a space that tends to foment the most divisive relationships to this world, or rather the land. With questioning possibilities for different kinds of universality ideas about the significance of cultural origins and geographic places come to mind. It’s been a few times now that I heard artists talking about sense of place and culture related to specific geographic locations in the world, and that this will become insignificant for the future generation artists. I understand the current pull toward the space that we occupy within our devices, and how it makes culture more porous, but for geography to disappear wouldn’t the physical world have to disappear as well (including us)? I feel that this conversation is largely generated by the possibilities of the internet and information access, which ultimately is also a conversation about capitalism and globalization. I’d be eager to say that internet is just another place in addition to our physical geographies, but I can’t
help to remind myself that everything that is generated in the internet is linked to physical locations and labor.

In his essay Towards a New Universalism Boris Groys writes:

*Today, one is regularly reminded that the corporations and organizations that operate the internet have real, physical, off-line addresses in territories that are controlled by certain states. As such, they are increasingly used as instruments of surveillance, propaganda, and fake news. Instead of constituting a virtual space beyond state borders, the internet is increasingly understood as a scene of struggle for interstate information wars. Under these conditions the art field is still one of the few public spaces where resistance to these fateful trends remains possible.*

Taking Groys perspective it may seem that my work considering Esperanto enters a critique of the past and its aims at universality. With an awareness that this is how the work might read to the viewer I want to be clear that I did not have a set intention when I first started working with Esperanto as material. I was more curious in looking at what happens to these materials when they are re-contextualized, stripped of its content or social context and time. I was also looking for for somewhat imagined equivalencies to Esperanto in our contemporary world and with an attempt to superimpose those materials upon each other, like placing a range of contemporary images, both found and made by me upon visual Esperanto dictionaries, Esperanto stamps and other archival materials I had available.
Image no.5 “What’s a Body?” (collage)
As I mentioned earlier, when I began to research Esperanto I intended to use mainly images related to the language as material for making collages, but after visiting a small Esperantists fan club in my hometown I was directed to transcriptions of speeches given by Zamenhof between 1904 and 1912 at Esperanto congresses. They were all translated to Polish, so I downloaded, printed and started reading them. With an incredible amount of pathos and pompousness expressed they took over my interest from the visual materials. I could feel the utopianism as I was reading them. I started highlighting sentences that drew my attention the most. I ended up with about three pages of collected text and later translated it to English using a combination of my own knowledge of English and a google translator. After translating all of the sentences I later collaged a new speech out of selection of some of these sentences. I was not sure what I was doing or had no clear intention, but after reading the text several times and sharing it with others it was often pointed to me that what I’ve collaged out of these texts “is a bunch of nothing” but it still passed the feeling of utopianism in it. This is when I began to become more aware of my interest in affect produced by form, and in this case specifically a form of language used in public speaking. This also made me aware of why I wanted to remove content that would provide context for the source of the text. Perhaps I was interested in using it to create a new atmosphere and using only the parts that are responsible for it. In fact, since I’ve become interested in Esperanto I did not make any effort to learn even one word in it, but was constantly researching materials that were
used to propagate it such as stamps, posters, cigarettes etc. Therefore I was always more interested in the atmosphere I imagined around it - the utopian amount of faith and investment people put into it. Yet I arrived at understanding my initial interest though assembling the text first.
Dear ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentleman! Dear Representatives! Dear co-idealists and friends! Ladies and gentleman!

I have never spoken publicly so forgive me if I don’t speak entirely smoothly. The truth is that many of us have mastered the language quite poorly and do not speak smoothly. Everything is happening calmly, without shocks, almost unnoticeably. New words and forms constantly appear. Some strengthen themselves, other ceased being used. Every hour the number of our members increases, every day increases the number of groups.

Life and time guaranteed power to language that not one of us can ignore with impunity. I don’t want to analyze causes of this fact, because that would force me to enter a political territory, which I want to avoid. I am only stating a fact.

Long will last a dark night on earth, but it won’t last forever.

Yes, my dear co-workers! Difficult, very difficult it is to seed, but sweet and blessed will be the fruits. Almost everything is a fruit of labor. This ideal - you all feel it very well.

Prophets and poets dreamt of some kind of distant misty time, but it was just a dream. They talked about it as sweet fantasy, but nobody treated it seriously, nobody believed in it. People are not able to express their feeling to something abstract. Having no experience, they don’t know how great the difference between theory and practice is.

Our case progresses regularly and slowly. In our anthem we sing about a “new feeling, that just originated in the world”. Intricate phantoms pour in through the air of our salon, the eyes can not see them, but the souls can feel them.

Those are images of the future time, an entirely new time.

You have seen everything, therefore I won’t repeat. At this solemn moment, my heart is filled with something vague and mysterious.

Now, let’s imagine that to resolve the question of language a committee, not fictional but truthful, was created. It would resemble an organism without a head and arms, not being able to do anything, standing still. Complete lack of possibilities for natural development.

Therefore, forgive me. I won’t speak anymore. I’m finished. Forgive me this uncomfortable subject I chose. Now, let’s forget everything;

Free array of words and perspicuity, whole language from beginning to end.
When I decided I wanted to use this text in my work I struggled with finding a way to present it as a part of my thesis show. As I kept looking through visual materials I borrowed from the Esperantist fan club in my hometown I bumped into a black and white photograph depicting a group of photographers standing in anticipation. It seemed that they’re an audience waiting for an event to happen and to be photographed. The way they are dressed suggests a distant past. I imagined reading the speech I wrote to this audience in the photograph, and that is what gave me an impulse to really do it. At that time I had two full size sheets of drywall in my studio that I got earlier this year with no clear intention. I painted the drywall chroma-key green and decided to use it as a backdrop for this photograph. I blew up the photograph to the size that would horizontally fit the length of both sheets of drywall and so my audience would become closer to real human size. As I was mocking it up, I cut one of the drywall sheets directly down the middle and put the full size panel in between them. I then cut off the background behind the people in the photograph and adhered my audience to this drywall spreading it over all three panels. I later ended up building a prop wall similar to those used on film and theater sets, and placed the audience from that photograph on the surface of it. With an implied sense of theatricality by the prop wall, instead of performing it live I decided to record myself reciting the speech and play it to my fictive audience out of a speaker.
Image no.7 Documentation photo of prop wall installation “Resignation Speech”
This is also when I began to think of this installation as an event staged out of props which lead me to making a poster (which I hang on a gallery wall near the prop wall) with an announcement for this fictive event. I intended for the poster to serve a similar purpose to the press release that goes with the other prop wall The Marriott (A Reflection of What?). It is a poster that is meant to be seen as an art work as well as a poster. It also indicates a show within a show, provides the title Resignation Speech to the work. It places it in both, a historical and present context by listing dates and Ludwik Zamenhof as the author of the source text and my name as the author of the new text and a translation.
Image no.9 “Resignation Speech” (poster)
Lastly I would like to briefly discuss two artists who have recently been influential to me. Before being interested in art I was dedicated to a practice of documentary photography, but after realizing its limitations I became interested in trying to find ways to use documentary like materials in a more imaginative way, and that is when Hito Steyerl has become an important figure in reshaping the way I think of it now. Discovering her documentary-like film Lovely Andrea in which she goes to Japan in search of a picture of herself as a bondage model that she briefly worked as as a young film student in Japan was somewhat revolutionary for me. The way she created analogies in this film through for example juxtaposing scenes of bondage with scenes from Spiderman cartoon has opened a new way of thinking about documentary. It is somewhat related to my search of the contemporary equivalencies to Esperanto I mention above.
Image no.10 documentation photo of “Adidas #1 (Superstar Made Us Hard)
Another artist who has been the most significant to me is Mark Leckey. The way he talks about images and objects ability to possess him has made me reconsider my relationship to photography and image culture in general. He has allowed me to feel a sense of freedom in using images and objects that before, even though carried significance to me, I would have no confidence in using as art, as if they were lower than what art should be or aspire to. For example using an image of a Adidas Superstar shoe model in my work is somewhat equivalent to how he thinks of a brand Fiorucci in his work. Aside from commodity fetish, he is also interested in the atmosphere commodities produce and how they make and shape us into who we are and also into images of ourselves. Studying his work has also allowed me to engage with my work in more imaginative ways on multiple levels. Before knowing his work an idea of reciting a speech to a photograph placed on a prop wall would not even cross my mind. The way he references and uses a sense of britishness in his work has made me reconsider the importance of my experience of living in both Poland and the US. Being a person of both worlds Poland and the US, East and West has been an important aspect of my personhood, and comparing the two worlds turned into an obsession ever since moving to the US, but it did not become aware in my work until I discovered Leckey's work.
Bibliography

