

Understanding of misunderstanding: visualizing metaphors for the untranslatable

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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss the notion of the 'untranslatable' and how it can be visualized and materialized by means of art. Where an art practice can operate as a unique language for the 'untranslatable' both artists and observers can be liberated from communicating meanings. In the spatiality of the distance in-between, translational processes can take place through certain manners, and grow to attain the unified 'pure' language. The remainders of these processes carry a sense of beauty and ambiguity, which can be recognized as medium for visual art. These qualities are, indeed, difficult to articulate in words but able to be experienced. They continue to shift in various degrees and open possibilities for understandings. Having been inspired by my previous trans-cultural art practice as well as Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of Translator" and Derrida's interpretation of this essay, this paper further explores other writings that concern related ideas such as shadows, and methods such as print that can embody metaphors for the 'untranslatable'.

Keywords: The untranslatable, Visualization, Spatiality

Introduction

This short paper discusses the notion of the 'untranslatable', as it forms a part of my PhD interdisciplinary research, which is both practice and theory based, situated in the context of global art-making and academic research.

The word 'translation' has been applied and used in visual art to describe the process of visualization and the perception of images. The art historian E.H. Gombrich writes, "For the artist, too, cannot transcribe what he sees; he can only translate it into the terms of his medium."¹ A viewer of an artwork is also understood to take on a similar process. "Those who look at works of painting and drawing must have the imitative faculty,"² as they understand it according to what they have already known. In addition, it can be said that some artworks 'translate' ideas and concepts into images and forms.

I have noticed that the growth of the global art and academic research cultures require further 'translation' in art. The concepts and contexts of artworks are exchanged and communicated between different natural languages, among artists, curators, critics and observers. In this situation where the English language often dominates, being translatable into English is welcomed as it ensures our understandings are communicated and shared across the networks of institutions and markets. At the same time, mistranslation and misreading also considered 'interesting' as 'creative' interpretation, while they potentially alter a meaning that is true to artwork.

However, as an artist, researcher, and sometime translator, through my practice in the last ten years between cultures and languages, I became aware of something strange but fascinating in these processes of translation. That is the 'untranslatable'. An artwork seems to embody something that resists translation. I mean by the 'untranslatable' that which cannot be exchanged between art and written and verbal languages, or English and Japanese in my own context. Hence, the 'untranslatable' is left after those translation processes, which is not possible to visualize, comprehend or conceptualize. Yet, artwork that is 'untranslatable' touches me as possessing a truthfulness. It is a kind of truth that is not for everyone in a factual sense, but for each individual who is touched by it. It accepts 'I' as I am, and even accepts 'I' as

¹ E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*. Millennium Edition. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 36.

² *Ibid.* 203.

misunderstanding of what I am, in other words, the complexity of being myself (what I am).

This observation prompted my PhD research, which requires that it be based on my practice as well as theory. The investigation and experience of the 'untranslatable' in art could only begin from a personal place, which is highly complex. In addition, as I have just discussed the 'untranslatable' in English, my research is here trying to stay optimistic about the status of being immersed in the curious yet relentless difficulty of translating the 'untranslatable' through the very act of translation. It is because I can be both alarmed by and attuned to the difficulty of the 'untranslatable' that calls me to work through the many struggles of art. Discussing the 'untranslatable' in my writing enables me to draw attention to the fact that not everything can be translated into English, the dominant language of the global art world. My research project is therefore aimed at shedding light on 'what cannot be translated' through processes in visual art, with a focus on developing a methodology that can embody the 'untranslatable'.

Metaphors for the 'untranslatable'

How, then, do I materialize the 'untranslatable' in a visual art practice? This led me to investigate metaphors for the 'untranslatable', which can be found in texts and artworks. I must admit that I will not be able to adequately describe the 'untranslatable' in my writing, simply because of its untranslatability. My research project requires the practice components, which more successfully embodies the strangeness of the untranslatable. However, 'metaphors' expressed in words have offered groundings that allows me to attempt my arguments in verbal and written formats. The metaphors for the untranslatable, as used by Benjamin and Derrida, namely the ceramic vessel the tower of Babel, are also limited to the visual, the spatial and the temporal. They are specifically relevant to my art practice and experience, which generally takes place as durational and spatial visual phenomena.

Walter Benjamin's essay *The task of translator* and Jacques Derrida's interpretation of this essay have been inspiring, as Benjamin's essay considers translation to be rigorous "even if they were untranslatable by human beings." Benjamin questions "the translatability of linguistic construction" and asks, "mustn't they actually be untranslatable to a certain degree, if a rigorous concept of translation is applied?"³ He thinks that there is a "greater (or pure) language", which is untranslatable but can be attained by translation, in other words what he calls the "sacred growth of language". In analyzing the story of the tower of Babel from the Old Testament, Derrida argues that, "The city would bear the name of God the father and of the father of the city that is called confusion"⁴ and that, "He at the same time imposes and forbids translation."⁵ In this way, translation can be a sacred and painful experience simultaneously.

Even though Benjamin and Derrida refer to the biblical texts while I personally do not share their religious background, I relate to how these thinkers observe the 'untranslatable' through translational processes. Benjamin discusses 'literal' translation as an ideal manner.

Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be fitted together, must correspond to each other in the tiniest details but need not resemble each other, so translation... must lovingly, and in detail, fashion in its own language a counterpart to the originals mode of intention, in order to make both of them recognizable as fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language. (Benjamin 1923)⁶

³ Steven Rendall, trans. "The translator's task, Walter Benjamin." (*Traduction, terminologie, redaction*. vol.10, n2, 1997), 152.

⁴ Joseph F. Graham, trans. "Des Tours de Babel, Jacques Derrida," *Difference in Translation*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 167.

⁵ *Ibid.* 170

⁶ Steven Rendall, trans. "The translator's task, Walter Benjamin," (*Traduction, terminologie, redaction*. vol.10, n2, 1997), 161.

This passage reminds me of my curatorial project undertaken in a trans-cultural context between 2010 and 2012. I struggled to communicate the concept of the project, expressed as *Immanent landscape* in English and 内在の風景 in Japanese. With each translation of the concept it felt as though something was missing or incomplete. Indeed, it made sense most, when the two languages were jointed as ‘*Immanent landscape – 内在の風景*’. The exhibition of the project can be also explained as being comprised in a similar manner. The individual works, produced in different locations across three years by eight artists from Japan and Australia, were carefully installed by a proper distance in between, neither being separated nor mixed up, as if they are fragments of one larger work as whole [Fig.1].



Figure 1: The exhibition view, ‘*Immanent Landscape—内在の風景*’, Japan Foundation Gallery Sydney, 2012

Source: photographed by Sue Blackburn

In this project, although the process of ‘translation’ often felt painful, I intuited something in the distance and worked towards it. It can be said that it is in this space of ‘distance’ that my translation, as an art practice, took place. Benjamin writes,

... it is translation that is ignited by the eternal continuing life of the work and the endless revival of language in order to constantly test this sacred growth of languages, to determine how distant what is hidden within them is from revelation, how close it might become with knowledge of this distance. (Benjamin, 1923)⁷

Derrida also considers that the ‘knowledge of this distance’ enables translators to relate to the ‘pure language’. “Though this situation can be consider purely extreme one, it does not eliminate various degrees, latency, intervals or space in-between.”⁸ From their discussions, I can picture a

⁷ Steven Rendall, tarns. “The translator’s task, Walter Benjamin.” (*Traduction, terminologie, redaction*. vol.10, n2, 1997), 157.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Derrida Au Japon*, translated by the author (Tokyo: Housei University Publishing, 2011), 57.

figure of a translator, as being situated in a kind of ‘spatiality’, which is metaphorically visual, being embedded as ‘various degrees’, ‘latency’, ‘intervals’ and ‘space in-between’.

The photograph below was taken when I was experiencing such ‘spatiality’ of the ‘untranslatable’ [Fig.2]. I was looking at a distant scene from the hospital window with my grandmother, and she, who was on the threshold of dementia, misunderstood a mountain in the scenery for another mountain. However, the way she described what she saw felt so beautiful and convincing that there felt something untranslatable yet emotionally true in what I was seeing in the distance through her eyes. In this situation, she was an artist and I became an observer of her view.



Figure 2: The photograph taken in the hospital, Tokyo, August 2012

Source: photographed by the author

Distance and Spatiality

Here, I review Jacques Rancière text entitled *The Emancipated Spectator*. He considers the ‘distance’ “inherent in the performance (...teaching, playing, speaking, writing, making art or looking at it) itself”⁹, and recognized the distance as “an autonomous thing between the idea of the artist and the sensation or comprehension of the spectator.”¹⁰ His argument confirms important perspectives for ‘translation’ in art, which the distance between an artist and an observer can liberate from communicating meanings. The distance, as ‘spatiality’, is empty space on its own, yet because of the emptiness it can open and welcome all kinds of things, including my grandmother’s misunderstanding, and my emotional response. Rancière writes, “The capacity for an individual to translate what she perceives in her own way is exercised through the distance.”¹¹

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. (N.Y.:Verso Books, 2009), 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 14

¹¹ *Ibid.* 16

Based on my experience of co-looking at a distant scene with my grandmother, I created an installation piece, entitled *Understanding of Misunderstanding*. Through interpreting her personal milieu constructed by a history of her hundred lived years, I interwove my short history of engaging with places by connecting horizontal lines and mountain ridges and juxtaposing similar shapes that appear on various imageries [Fig.4]. The sculptures, which are set on an acrylic sheet, created shadows in different shades on a blank sheet of paper, and as well as reflections on the acrylic sheet [Fig.3]. The space between sculptures, shadows and reflections, and the sheet of acrylic and paper mediated and opened 'distance'. In this particular spatiality observers were invited to interpret the work.



Fig.3-4 *Understanding of misunderstanding*, 2013, collage with mixed media, paper clay,

Acrylic board, frame / dimension variable

Source: photographed by the author

In a similar way, the ancient Greek concept of '*chora*' and the Japanese spatio-temporal concept of '*ma*' offer receptive 'spatiality'. The word *chora* can be considered as an empty container, and *ma* can be understood as an empty space in-between. In a sense they imply the similar situation but they are 'similarly' hard to be defined in other languages. These notions therefore imply the 'untranslatable' through their gaps in meanings. Derrida argued in the International conference for the architecture, entitled *Anyone*, in response to those who tried translating these notions into each other.

The place for translation is untranslatable. And if we define *ma* as a place for translation, it's a place for translation, not only translation in the sematic, linguistic sense, but translation as transfer from, for movements, transference of objects from others, and so forth... And you cannot translate *ma* into *chora* and so on and so forth. But there are places of translations, for translations which are not translatable. (Derrida, 1991)¹²

In the context of architecture, Derrida discusses that "Every or any architectural event takes place in a place, in a singular place, which is a place for translation and is a place that is an untranslatable place." I think that this architectural event can take place not only in a 'building' but an artwork, where the 'untranslatable' can be also attained in a particular spatiality: the 'distance' between objects and observers, 'various degrees' of shades, 'latency' felt through the surface, and 'space in-between' movements. In this way, an artwork can be also considered as a place for translational event, structured by its own architecture, and experienced through one's gaze with shifting light.

In 2014, I created an installation piece, entitled *Distancing for Opening*, to be presented in the bookstore for art and architecture. I particularly considered sacred spatiality, as it is designed to be experienced only from the distance with longing. The architecture of print consists of layers of materials that are peeled and grounded. Each layer touches the surfaces of others, from back to front, and from edge to edge. The touched and untouched surfaces demarcate the space for art from the rest. My work, located in the middle of bookstore, dwells to protect sacred. Pieces of timber are stretching horizontally and vertically to hold surfaces [Fig.5]. Shadows and reflections surface across sheets of acrylic, paper and copper [Fig.6]. These obscure medium touch viewers' eyes, at their very height, from the distance.

¹² "Discussion A-1", *Anyone*. Ed. Anyone Corporation. (New York: Rizzoli International Publication, 1991), 90.



Fig.5-6 *Distancing for Opening*, 2014, Oak, Acrylic sheet, Inkjet print on etching paper / 60.5x73x154(H)cm

Source: photographed by Christian Capuroo

Remainders and Degrees

Derrida further discusses the notion of the “” through his exploration into the truth in painting. In his introductory chapter, entitled *Passe-Partout*, he defined what “remains” as “the untranslatable.”¹³ He argues,

¹³ Jacques Derrida, “Passe-partout,” *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington & Ian McLeod. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 4.

But untranslatable, it remains in its economic performance, in the ellipsis of its trait, the word by word, the word for word, or the trait for trait in which it contracts... (Derrida, 1978)¹⁴

This way of reducing the information, which pays attention to every mark and line, is reminiscent of a familiar aesthetic attitude in visual art. When all the unnecessarily elements are removed, the sense of beauty becomes embodied in every trait.

In my studio, I have been experimenting to visualize such remainders. By using sheets of tracing paper and oil sticks, I transfer the layers of colors, applied onto a sheet of thick paper, to other sheets of thinner paper. I continue transferring the colors until there are no more layers that can be transferred. To do so, I put pressure by drawing a short line from the reserve side of a thin tracing paper with a blank ink pen. When the bundle of short lines covers the entire surface of colored area, I change papers to peel off another layer [Fig.7-10]. At the end of the process, the originally colored thick paper is left embossed and colorless [Fig.11]. The 'remainder' appeared to be somewhat beautiful and ambiguous. It looks almost like a skin of something, or a shadow of something, left after some kind of transformation. Through this manner, which applies printing and drawing methods, I intend towards embodying the metaphors of the 'untranslatable'.



¹⁴ Idb. 5



Fig.7-11 (*title to be confirmed*), 2014, tracing paper, oil pen, blank ink pen / 21 x 27 cm

Source: photographed by the author

In my studio experiment, through observing how the ‘remainder’ can be materialized, an emergence of some kind of transformation, like a cast-off skin or a cast shadow, is also witnessed. In his catalogue essay for the exhibition, entitled *Shadow Play*, the art historian Thorsten Sadowsky discusses a shadow and its fleeting existence. He writes,

The shadow is dependent on a minimum of light to make us aware of its fleeting existence. Thus shadows are traces left by an encounter with light; they provide information on the constitution of the shadow-casting objects. (Sadowsky, 2005)¹⁵

This ‘fleeting’ existence of shadow is unable to be touched but experienced through one’s vision. In this sense, the shadow can also be considered a visual metaphor for the ‘untranslatable’ that one cannot grasp. The subtler the shadow is, the more it feels sacred. The more various the degrees of shades are, the more ambiguous and mysterious they look. Yet, speaking of shadows, the cast objects should not be always the untranslatable ‘god’ but any ‘things’ including our bodies, and our sense of being.

Shadows show distorted and different shapes from what we should know about the objects that cast them. Hence, a shadow is not an exact copy but a ‘translation’ of the original. Here, Gombrich’s statement is recalled, that “an artist cannot copy what he sees: he can only translate it with media.”¹⁶ And he continues to write, “... it is restricted by the variation of shades which is subject to each medium,”¹⁷ Hence, I consider ‘shadow’, for what its rich ‘variation of shades’, as a medium for a visual art practice. In addition, in terms of ‘variation of shades’, ‘reflections’ can be also included to this medium. Indeed, the Japanese author, Junichiro Tanizaki, in his short essay titled *In praise of shadows*, observes that shadows as well as reflection, are “various degrees of shades.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Thorsten Sadowsky, “Of Shadows, Doppelganger and Caves,” *Shadow Play*. Edit. Kunsthallen Brands Klaedefabrik (Denmark: Kunsthallen Brands Klaedefabrik, 2005), 25.

¹⁶ E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*. Millennium Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 73.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 73

¹⁸ Junichiro Tanizaki, *Innei Raisan - In praise of shadows* (Tokyo: Chuoukoron-Sinsha, INC., 1975), 32

My work, *Pretend not to see*, emerged from commuting between my temporal residency studio in Yokohama and my residence in Tokyo. In these distant locations I observed shadows and reflections that exist commonly but appear differently, and became aware of the sense of ‘what cannot be translated’ from one location to another. Thus, I employed water and light as ephemeral ‘materials’ and used the architectural features around the studio to structure the ephemeral. By tracing window frames with strings and fabrics, the light coming through the windows was translated into shades: as projected shadows and reflections on the wall and floor surfaces [Fig.12&14]. The seawater drawn from the bay outside of the studio was poured into a water tank, and the footage of the sea projected onto the wall [Fig.13]. As a result of these attempts, different degrees of shifting images in similar shapes surfaced across the studio environment. The entire installation became a device to capture the ephemeral and materialize the intangible shades yet it also appeared empty and open, into which audiences were invited to encounter with ‘fleeting’ existence that is almost unnoticeable.



Figure 12-14: *Pretend not to see*, 2013, string, fabric, paper, wall, floor, window, mirror, water, tank, projector, clay, etc. / dimension variable

Source: photographed by the author

Conclusion

By investigating the notion of the 'untranslatable' and how it can be metaphorically embodied in a work of art, this paper examined metaphors for the untranslatable and methodologies that can embody the 'untranslatable'.

As Benjamin called 'translation' "sacred growth of language" that attains towards "greater (or pure) languages", I have explored translational process in visual art through a 'literal' manners: by connecting pieces of paper or different locations, lines and shapes; transforming ephemeral materials from one condition to another; and transferring colors between different surfaces. In so doing, I intended to articulate art as a unique language and experience that take place in a particular spatiality that is untranslatable.

I have identified several metaphors for the 'untranslatable' applicable to art, such as 'distance', 'various degrees', 'remainders' and 'degrees of shades'. When they are embodied in my artworks, it feels that the works carry a sense of beauty and ambiguity around them, as if they mediate translation receptively. These qualities are, indeed, difficult to articulate in words but are able to characterize the language of art. While the 'untranslatable' remains, in the spatiality between artworks and observers, the possibilities are open for continuously shifting understandings.

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