

Translation as Significance

LEEZA AHMADY

Translation is basic to humanity's existence. We are distinguished by our brain's ability to translate thoughts into language. The human sensory system is intricate, conducting the stimuli we receive from the environment to the parts of our brain that process this information. Yet in the speed of our encounter with globalization, we are flooded with what contemporary Chilean philosopher Dario Salas calls "dead information"—dead because the average person cannot possibly process the quantity and velocity of stimuli he or she encounters every day.

If translation can be considered to be a method for processing information, it is the skill by which one set of information is connected to another so that it is comprehensible. More eloquently said, to translate is to render significance: the *meaning*, and the *importance* of something at hand. The desire for meaning is essential to human nature. Our identity as a species depends on it. Objects, places, images, sounds, etc., are merely bits of information unless we process their relevance in relation to our life.

The best contemporary artists are perhaps also the greatest translators. They create works of significance by transforming experience, perception and thought into acts and materials of communication. Artists scrutinize and use everything at hand—matter, culture, society, beliefs, and concepts—as material for translation. Time and again, they give us profound insights into matters that are sometimes beyond the limitations of materiality and skills. They are able to do so due to their tenacious effort in instigating inquiry.

Discoveries in the fields of linguistics, psychology and other sciences have not only greatly transformed our ability to communicate, but these disciplines also

explain our need for communication. Yet there are realms of failure within the phenomenon of translation. Differences in cultures and inside each individual present serious barriers for communication. By challenging the conventional translation of texts, ideas and other norms from one language to another, from one value system to another, the artists in *Tarjama/Translation* proffer new prospects for empathy and understanding.

Tarjama/Translation is an unprecedented and timely exhibition bringing significant works of art from cities around the world (Cairo, Dubai, Tehran, Palestine, Beirut, Sharjah, Kabul, Almaty, Istanbul, London, Berlin, Paris, Gwangju and more) to the doorstep of New York audiences at the Queens Museum of Art, with satellite screenings at New York's Asia Society and the Chelsea Art Museum. In this exhibition, translation occurs in multiple forms; sometimes conscious and other times as a byproduct of an artist's exercise. We hope that every work in the exhibition offers viewers an opportunity for expanding their consciousness. In this manner, the exhibit is a presentation of artists engaged in various acts of translation: reading between the lines, probing the obvious, and burrowing through the camouflage of appearances to contemplate matters of cultural specificity and universal relevance.

The works of Pوران Jinchi and Nazgol Ansarinia suggest that some things may be untranslatable. Their works pause the "automatic-pilot" mode by which we respond to certain authoritative texts. On a beautiful scroll that rolls down from ceiling to floor, Jinchi has painstakingly transcribed only the short vowels of a single chapter of the Qur'an to address multiple problems in translation. By deliberately excluding

the consonantal text, Jinchi contemplates ritual itself as a medium for translation. The work is also a metaphoric reference to the experience of millions, who connect to God's words without understanding Arabic, the language in which the sacred Qur'an is written, and which is required for its recitation.

Ansarinia, on the other hand, dismantles another kind of language, the contents of a post-September 11 U.S. security report. By rearranging the document's vocabulary as an alphabetized dictionary and breaking the ordering of and relationships between the words, Ansarinia calls attention to the processes of meaning production. The work is presented in a series of four books. Parallel to her treatment of the text within, the cover of each book illustrates a different arrangement of the elements of the U.S. Presidential Seal.

Other strategies for translating meaning are also deployed by artists in the show. Almagul Menlibayeva, Alexander Ugay, Lara Baladi, Akram Zataari, Wael Shawky and Yto Barrada, for instance, apply performance-based actions, fictive narratives, staged events and environments juxtaposed with documentary footage, historical and cultural memorabilia, and in some cases appropriation of works by forgotten or nameless artists, journalists, musicians and other significant individuals from the past and present.

Artists Esra Ersen and Rahraw Omarzad scrutinize collective social behaviors. As no one is born in a void, we are all subject to social programming. Esra Ersen's *I Am Turkish. I Am Honest. I Am Diligent* installation explores the administration of control and addresses the way identities are shaped and transformed in specific contexts

or power structures. Her presentation in Queens builds on her previous work with two groups of pupils, one in a school outside Münster in Germany and the other in Gwangju, Korea. These projects entailed that the children wear Turkish school uniforms for a week, and write down their own experiences while Ersen videotaped their various activities and interactions. Their notes were then transferred directly onto the uniforms. For *Tarjama*, the artist once again translates the transformation of identity and experience to New York viewers and school groups, by exhibiting both the uniforms and video footage.

In a series of mostly silent short videos, Rahraw Omarzad and other members of Center for Contemporary Arts Afghanistan (CCAA) address a variety of subjects related to societal conditioning, including the effects of standardized education on the individual psyche. For *Tarjama*, the curators have installed CCAA's humorous and perplexing videos on a monitor inside a recycled security booth. Only one person at a time may enter the small booth to view the works. This spatial restriction and manner of presentation is a reference to the dire circumstances in which artists produce works in Afghanistan. It is also a celebration of these artists' creative and intellectual stamina to overcome those limitations in order to "create poignant responses to war, loss and recovery that speak equally of trauma and hope, paradise lost and found." Some artists, such as Dilek Winchester, tackle the task of translation literally. In her work titled *Turkish Novel: On Reading and Writing*, the artist attempts to translate actual texts from the first Turkish novel that only a few generations ago everyone in Turkey could read. But now, almost no one can. Until 1928, Turkish was written with a version of the Perso-Arabic script known as

the Ottoman Turkish script. In 1928, as part of his efforts to modernize Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk issued a decree replacing the Arabic script with a version of the Latin alphabet, which has been used ever since. Nowadays, only scholars and those who learned to read before 1928 can read Turkish written in the Arabic script.

Central Asia is famed for its turquoise-blue-tiled mosques, mosaic-filled tombs and minarets reaching towards the sky, reminders that a few centuries ago, Samarqand and Bukhara (Uzbekistan), Isfahan (Iran) and Balkh (Afghanistan) were artistic centers for the entire Islamic world. The color blue thus symbolizes the region's past glory and dreams for the future. In their photo installation *Blue Period*, Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev question how power shifts from one appearance to another without actual substantial change. In their photo installation *Blue Period*, they ingeniously capture the transformation of Kazakhstan after the fall of the Soviet Union. Beautiful portraits of people, buildings, monuments, markets and grocery goods document the country's peaceful and informal movement to replace Soviet red with the bright and hopeful color: turquoise blue. Like their Soviet predecessors, Central Asian governments use such symbols of pride to revive national historical memories in order to fashion new propaganda campaigns to legitimize and perpetuate their authoritarian rule. *Blue Period* is a poetic commentary on the theatrics and subtleties of change that asks: How much change in a society is organic? And how much is manufactured rhetoric?

Another common theme for artists in the show such as Mitra Tabrizian, John Jurayj and Farhad Moshiri is the effect produced by the enormous ocean of information channeled to people through popular

culture. In particular, these artists take on the instruments of popular media: television, newspapers and the World Wide Web.

Daytime television has always been a subliminal host for highly desirable consumer products on the market; yet globalization has accelerated this phenomenon on a dazzling scale. Farhad Moshiri is the first Iranian artist to galvanize the international art market with million-dollar prices. He is also known for his masterfully ironic works that employ the amalgam of traditional Iranian art forms with those of consumerist globalized popular culture, prevalent in his country. In collaboration with Shirin Aliabadi, Moshiri reedits scenes from Iranian soap operas in a video titled *Tehran TV Disoriented*. Moshiri cuts out scenes from various contemporary Iranian shows, pasting them alongside scenes from shows of prior decades. The result is an odd and humorous *telenovela*-collage conveying how such seemingly innocent melodramas have become potent negotiators of social etiquette and indoctrination in society.

Farhad Moshiri's *Chocline* and John Jurayj's *Marine Barracks* provoke reflection about the age-old paradox of the sublime and the decadent in art. Edvard Munch's *Scream* and Andy Warhol's *Green Car Crash* are forever gripping due to our inclination to be spellbound by images that are both terrific and daunting. Explosions, dead bodies, suggestive horror narratives and other similar decadent subjects have strong sexual appeal in the frameworks of both high art and popular culture.

Selected from a series of paintings titled *Sweet Dreams*, *Chocline* is rendered by Moshiri using a cake-icing dispenser to sculpt the figure of a dead body on canvas with thick, colorful and delectably lifelike pigments in the shape of mini cupcakes. (Usually these kinds of cakes are served to guests in Iranian

households on special occasions.) The body is outlined mimicking the dramatized chalk-lined bodies portrayed in detective movies and television shows. The work is displayed on the floor to emphasize both the hypnotic and addictive nature of today's globalized economy of images.

As curators, we have attempted to stress certain key issues frequently omitted when considering regions as closed totalities—the often disregarded fragments that make up the whole. Connecting the Middle East and Central Asia, for example, is a way of bringing attention to the widespread confusion about what constitutes “Asia,” “Central Asia” and “the Middle East” today. Historically, Iran and Afghanistan were considered part of Central Asia. Despite the fact that they share a great many historical, cultural, linguistic and spiritual ties with the other Central Asian nations, they have been linked to or severed from them according to the political whim of superpowers. When the Shah was overthrown in 1979 by Islamic revolutionaries, Iran was suddenly plucked out of Central Asia and from then on, described as a part of the Middle East. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, only the five ex-Soviet republics (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan) have been referred to as Central Asia. For many years, Afghanistan simply hung in limbo—nowhere in particular—until the events of September 11 shot it definitively into the Middle East, at least for a while. Recently it has been also referred to as being part of South Asia.

For many people, the fact that the Middle East is a vast territory within Asia is also surprising. In the United States, the term “Asia” conjures up China, Korea and Japan, and only very recently India. Some even refer to the Middle East as Western Asia. Still, vast areas of Asia remain missing from the

picture. In addition, the media's addiction to sensationalist stories and the general ignorance and naïveté of policy makers end up influencing the cultural and geographical nomenclature of the Middle East.

These considerations have led us to organize an exhibition that questions these lines of division. We hope that the array of works in *Tarjama* demonstrate the difficulty of attempting to define such a complex and intricate phenomenon as the Middle East in a closed fashion. While regional references have their uses, all categories usually tend to narrow perspective. Moreover, the artists featured in *Tarjama/Translation*, like many successful artists in the world today, live and create works across many continents. Their profession requires that they travel incessantly. Thus they exist as modern metropolitan nomads. And a major reason for adjoining the regions of Central Asia and the Middle East in this exhibition is the fact that they are currently the most underrepresented artistic communities in New York, and perhaps in the world at large.

Tarjama/Translation is meant to serve as a small but important survey of works made by a group of extremely active and internationally recognized artists, each practicing an exceptional command of aesthetics and genres specific to themselves. Viewers are invited to reflect on the differences and similarities in the exhibiting artists' strategies and means of expression. They might notice, for example, that many of the Arab artists tend to use books, the Internet, newspapers, and other text-based artifacts in an archival and perhaps documentary fashion; interviews, conversations, speeches, etc., are also part of mainly narrative-based works. In contrast, artists from Central Asia—Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and

including Turkey and Iran, are more image-prone, heavily relying on metaphoric means such as fantasy, ceremony, satire, staged performance and other deconstructive devices to make works that are equally engaging.

To understand the subtleties of such nuances, a more in-depth critical analysis of the two regions' particular intellectual and cultural heritage may be useful. Historically, the written language as a high art form characterizes the Arab world's aesthetic tradition. Central Asia, on the other hand, is embedded in centuries-old traditions of storytelling, street theater and weaving. But while specificity plays a role in most works produced by contemporary artists, all significant works of art must also have broader relevance.

All the artists, however, refrain from offering conclusive solutions. Most works are open-ended, with numerous markers and clues to help viewers decipher their own meaning. After all, the world is filled with agents and institutions trained to make definitive statements: the government, the army, the media, not to mention celebrities. Viewers are therefore encouraged to relate to the exhibition not just for how a work might translate an artist, place, culture or system, but what it communicates with regard to larger contexts and dilemmas of the world, and in artistic practice itself.

Significance, like gold, is hermetic; one must dig for it beneath the surface.

Leeza Ahmady March 27, 2009