

Tarjama/Translation: un/Layering cultural intentions through art

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The world needs more translation and less didactics. How can translation lay the groundwork for better cultural understanding? Can the project of translation be redeemed to provide emancipation from binary logic and hegemonic discourse? Can we escape essentialist and even racist discourse through mediation and translation? Ultimately, could the efforts of artists be seen as acts of translation in their intentionality? And can we understand the concept of translation as a conscious political act?

In *Tarjama/Translation*, our curatorial attempt was to redeem the project of aesthetics beyond national and identitarian specificity. The selected artists strive to link aesthetic and poetic developments with a broadly conceived politics. Issues such as historical memory, nation-building mechanisms, dispossession, the physical and psychological impacts of wars and selected internal conflicts are only a few topics that have been addressed by many contemporary Lebanese artists, such as Akram Zaatari, Rabih Mroué, John Jurayj, Walid Raad, Lamia Joreige and many others. And in the Palestinian context, we increasingly see an analysis of belonging, identity, nationalism, diasporas, borders, land/geographies and narratives of conflict by artists such as Emily Jacir, Khalil Rabah, Sharif Waked, Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti. However, artists' thematics are not exclusive to their location, but serve as the starting point of an investigation that has broader significance.

According to Walter Benjamin in his celebrated text on translation, "The Task of

the Translator,"¹ two languages will always be set apart from each other. Each word and phrase in every language has a historical metamorphosis that we cannot disregard. Even with translations, time and distance serve to divide languages, but separateness calls on translation to be a redemptive force, but one that does not claim exclusiveness or higher truth. "Translation keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation, how close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?"² According to Benjamin, translation is the search of that common denominator, that "intention"³ that is "pure language."⁴ But what does Benjamin mean by these terms? The larger task of the translator approaches "original" notions of a Heideggerian understanding the world. Here we have an attempt at the translation of an intention, not a communication and redemption to an idea of a call for purity. For we could go as far as claiming that the purest commonality shared by all languages is that of existence. And the political force of that existence is to reclaim a larger understanding.

To this end, we may also recover the importance of Benjamin's injunction that a translator must expand her own language by means of the foreign language. The intertwining of languages is looked at through the lens of translation as a project of self-assertion and comprehension of our being. For this is where the purer language lies, in ourselves, amidst the many synonyms, anomalies and configurations of our realities. Literality and fidelity should be broken in translation. The world, its literatures, its

stories are not meant for literal renditions. Benjamin spoke of the original language and its translation as fragments of a larger vessel, and said that translation should not block the light of the original language, but continuously allow for growth of meaning. If translation, according to Benjamin, is not merely communication, but a means of delving into the mind of things to retrieve the intention, then we may further claim that the ultimate aim of translation is to uncover, depict or transmit poetics. We begin to comprehend that art is not intended for pure communication, but that it transmits something that goes beyond subject matter. The only essentialist character art beholds, within this understanding, is that which retains aesthetics or poetics.

The work of the artists in *Tarjama/Translation* fluctuates between various points of departure and arrival, be it of places, spaces and geographies, intertwining harmonies of cultures, histories, times, societies and people. The artists do not merely communicate, but they also explore and build new dimensions to the word "beyond." They do so imbued with poesis, but not without lack of awareness of the political impact of their work. And a larger consciousness remains pervasive in their work. For their art is no fleeting experience—its ripples will allow comprehensions to diverge, cultures to flourish and come closer together, histories to grow and understanding of our world to deepen, all encapsulated in the bigger idea of translation. The artists use multiple layering schemes, be it visual references or historical, or cultural practices that lead

¹ Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator." *Illuminations: Essays & Reflections*. (Schocken Books, 2007), 69–82.

² *Ibid.*, 74–75.

³ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

into each other. The intention here is to create a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of complexity. Its many strengths lie in its ability to heighten the referents it works from, and extract the essence that shines through with full force. Many of the artists in this exhibition follow this way of working, among them Lara Baladi, John Jurayj, Khalil Rabah, Sharif Waked, Michael Rakowitz and Emily Jacir.

In Lara Baladi's *Sandouk el Dounia*, we can see a box of boxes. It literally contains tens of images of photographic shots that Baladi has taken of performative subjects. She had spent months on end fabricating contexts, choosing "sets" and "characters," sewing outfits and taking a thousand photographs. Here stories, references and even myths create an intricately woven layered psychedelic narrative. We start with Dolly, her main character, who is wearing a white woolen sweater—a reference to Dolly the first cloned sheep that forever lingers in our memory—and a short blue skirt that somehow hints at the futuristic. Like all mythical characters, Baladi's Dolly is apparently born from a "higher level," which literally means, within this context, being delivered from a satellite dish. She goes on to create more of these *métissages*, these hyper-breeds and in betweens. Faeries, jinns, *ifreets*, mermaids, manga characters and even goddesses all become identities caught up in a polymorphous story. A new world of imagination vs. real is conjured. Even through this medium, we find that Baladi is capable of a fluid translation. She places the whole collage story within a large tapestry, transposing the art of photography on top of that of tapestry making. Tapestries have historically been used as renditions of larger documentation of times and happenings. Baladi seemingly wants to create a monumental visual

transcript of stories of an un/real story of our era, transgressing geography and even concepts of time. Here the artist portrays the project of conflation between realms of the imagination and visual junk. This is a project of mapping, one that deflates codes of the visual to understand the surroundings and contexts that clearly point to the shaping of the psyche and perceptions of the self.

Sharif Waked has long practiced juxtaposing and intermingling references, especially historical and cultural ones, in a play of gestures and a rendition of new visualities and perceptions. In *Chic Point*, an ingenious piece of video art made at a crucial time for the Palestinians, when the coercive checkpoint was very prevalent, the artist redraws this visual reality by merging new codes: a) men's fashion shows, and b) Israeli military checkpoints. In the resulting combination, he creates fashion for Israeli checkpoints—all hinting at absurdities. In his calligraphic rendition of *Get Out of Here!*, Waked juxtaposes several layers of meanings and histories, referring again to this contact zone of the military checkpoint. He uses the old style of Arabic medallion calligraphy, the *tughra*, which had been primarily utilized in signage and originated during the Ottoman Empire. The specific design of the *tughra* he appropriates, known as the Diwani, references the imperial monogram of Emperor Sulayman the Magnificent. However, he uses the banal Arabic statement of "Yalla ruh min hon!" ("Get out of here!"), which is always (mis)pronounced by Israeli soldiers at military checkpoints in Palestinian cities, as a statement within the sign. This linguistic, cultural, historical encounter is no coincidence. Sulayman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566) reigned over an empire that extended from Baghdad in Asia to Belgrade in Europe, to Cairo and Algiers in Africa,

spanning Jerusalem and Damascus. He was known for being a patron of the arts and culture, himself being a man of letters, a military strategist, a great judicial expert and a protector of Jewish rights, for within his vast empire there had been many incidents of anti-Jewish sentiments that he denounced in a formal decree. Here his *ruh*, which conveniently translates from Arabic as "soul" besides meaning the verb "go," is summoned as witness, a witness of times of anguish, cultural strife and stagnation and practices of bigotry and racism.

Khalil Rabah's work negotiates monumentalities marked by time. His project has long been one that questions authorities and voices of nationalistic discourses. The markers and definitions of nations—be it their institutions, like museums, or mouthpieces, like the press—become like putty in this artist's hands. He makes museums and breaks them. His conceptual institution the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind could be in Athens near the Acropolis or it could be in Berlin, where it holds its fake 75th anniversary. The same museum celebrates a deal with the fabricated company the United States of Palestine Airlines. And that same Palestine would of course have a newspaper titled *United States of Palestine Times*. And two years later he will inaugurate a biennial in a pseudo state—Palestine—and then that same biennial will transgress geographies and negotiate permutations of nations entirely. The way Rabah insists on the continuum of his histories of place and objects seems contrived and yet at the same time genuine. The nation deemed "authentic" comes to be constantly interrogated with jolts of irony. What does it mean to sift through a national newspaper, such as the *New York Times*, juxtaposed with a place like Palestine? Rabah here is as interested in the

USA as he is in Palestine, bringing to our senses hegemonic discourses and all their fabricated permutations. He also seems to question the format and historical authority and autonomy of these adopted mediums: dictionaries, museums, newspapers, etc. The arena of fiction becomes a tool for navigation and investigation. However, one thing remains persistent, irrevocable, and unwavering: the unexplainable motive and drive to assert one's identity, but which Rabah keeps on questioning with equal force and strength. The undecided realm of the process of nation-building also provides a venue to project dreams, fantasies and illusions.

In John Jurajj's wide canvases we see streaks of color that range between the popsicle and the political in a disturbing yet alluring fraudulent "gaiety." The overdose of oranges and pinks hints at excess. The viewer cannot but feel captivated in a web of "sweetness." He draws the spectator in to reveal juxtaposed realities, places, times and even stereotypes. From one end, we see allusions to political upheavals in Lebanon, from the bombing of the U.S. marine barracks in 1983 to the remnants of the building that was witness to the assassination of Lebanese President Rafiq Hariri in 2005. Then we run into iconic art pop elements of reproduction such as Andy Warhol's. Lately, Jurajj has experimented with materials such as colored mirror—the color becomes deliberately embedded in the material. All the paintings on view here are thresholds or mirrors, whether he is using the medium explicitly or not. He explores his own identity through multiple narrations and variants that go from paradoxical political standpoints to multiple art

historical referents. Where does the realm of the identity stand between the myriad contexts, politics, geographies, sexualities, societies and even ontics of perceptions?

Michael Rakowitz's *Return* is a long-term project in which he attempts to restore the import-export business of his grandfather, Nissim Isaac David, an Iraqi Jewish refugee, an enterprise that had ceased long ago. However, Rakowitz applies the business model to his current time, to "return" geographically and historically to more than one juncture. He chooses to import fresh dates from Iraq to the United States, to the shop that he had opened in Brooklyn. The video documentation of this social interventionist project records the process of "return" that the title so brilliantly captures. Translation can become a point of returning into realms and histories as a way of unraveling new codes and meanings. There is the constant reminiscence, which is dominant in the act of return. Can we ignore the fact that this piece was done at a time when Iraq was being ravaged by a war perpetuated by the United States? However, what remains the most poetic is how Rakowitz manages to easily anchor his project of cultural mediation to inundated codes of reference inherent in food: culture, nostalgia, import-export/Iraq-U.S., circulation, sharing and exchange. Here dates are the *golden* gold as opposed to the black. They are the forsaken industry. In Iraqi culture, dates are virtually sacred—thanks to their nutritional value—and even possess mythic status. When fasting, you break the fast with a date. Those same dates are found in many houses in Iraq as offerings in pots of hospitality for guests. Rakowitz tries to "revive" these traditions within an

absurdly violent context, sharing handfuls and bags of sweet dates with strangers that become friends.

The work of the artist Emily Jacir makes for an appropriate finale for this essay, due to her ability to unmask layers and layers of political realities and "translate" them into tones of truth, of utter poetics. She utilizes translation as a complex formula for conveying realities and succeeds in various ways, capturing the human and emotive, while veering away from the essentialist, the didactic and the sensationalist. It would be much too mediocre to place this artist's projects in the specific realm of the Palestinian only. Palestine here is also a metaphorical playground of lost projects of cultural reciprocity, continuity and vivacity. Emily Jacir is on a journey to find them. This is evident in her well-known project *Where We Come From*, in which she documents only the realized answers of the question she asked Palestinians inside and outside their homeland: What could she do for them if she entered Palestine? The voices of the participants become a narration of a larger historical humanity, a story of deprivation at large and a redemption and fulfillment. She then set out on a three-year journey of delving into and reclaiming a parallel life of a deceased artist, Wael Zwaiter, assassinated by the Israeli Mossad. Zwaiter's obsession with translating *Alf Laila wa Laila* (*A Thousand and One Nights*) is reiterated a thousand times more with every attempt Jacir makes to narrate his story. The point that is always missed in *Material for a Film* is the cultural project that the translation of *Alf Laila wa Laila* stands for; the untold stories, the cultural and historical revival/survival and continuity, what it means

to encapsulate loss, and how we extend ourselves to the other through the mediation of the self. We have in our hands “material” for understanding the world better, yet we tend to overlook it. The artist shows us the way and walks us through it.

In *Untitled (Servees)* (2008), a site-specific audio installation in Jerusalem in front of Damascus Gate, which was once the center of the regional transport network of *serveeses* taxis with direct links to every Palestinian center, as well as Beirut, Amman, Baghdad and Kuwait, Jacir has *servees* drivers perform the calling of destinations from Jerusalem to these now impossible-to-reach locations. Yet the sound echoes the monumentality of the gates of an entrapped city. The sound piece becomes a historical monument in itself, and an aspiration that does not want to budge, a dream that cannot be revoked of the many places we can go to from here. For here existed the point of departure to a more extended world.

This all brings us to the piece on view in our exhibition *TRANSLATE ALLAH*, placed on the façade of the Queens Museum of Art. Here another monumentality is expressed—be it the museum and all it stands for, cultures or histories—to the word “Allah” that has been lost in translation, wreaking wars and havoc, and fabricating politics that claim “clashes of civilizations.” Here the intention that should be absorbed is within the Word—that of the spoken authority of the word—and its unflinching capacity for rendering truths. It is no secret that Walter Benjamin was fascinated with how religions anchor themselves, from the very beginning, to the power of the word.⁵ In this understanding of religion, it is illuminating to see how Jacir, the artist, allusively evokes

that same power and voice of authority, for what higher platform holds the truth? Here it is important to highlight the context of the word “Allah”: Allah is simply the Arabic word for God, and for Arabic speakers of all faiths—Islam, Christianity, Judaism and others— “Allah” precisely *is* “God.” Five hundred years before Muhammad, Arab Jews and Arab Christians called God by the name Allah. And even today millions of Arab Christians use the word “Allah” in their Bibles, songs, poems, hymns, writings and worship, as they have been doing for over nineteen centuries. How has the history of this word been misconstrued; where has it been lost? In addition, Jacir obviously refers to the larger capacity of translation and the role of art and culture in bridging the fissures and healing chasms or overcoming “clashes.” She intentionally uses the word “translate” in the affirmative, and as a verb, one that should move from intention into action. However, it is for us to comprehend the place where the artist stands; toward God, one that stands for a larger entity or concept who has the capacity to absolve us all.

⁵ Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913–1926*. Ed. M. Bullock & M. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 1996), 62–74.