Towards a curatorial translation zone

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ABSTRACT

In a globalizing world, the act of translation is potentially everywhere (Bassnett 2014; Blumczynski 2016, in Vidal 2022). It involves a creative process of transfer, interpretation, and transformation across sign systems, cultures, and worldviews – an act with profound socio-political implications. Within the visual arts field, it describes the practice of artists and curators who work increasingly internationally as 'material-semiotic actors' (Haraway 1988: 595), engaged in renegotiating semiotic and cultural frameworks while questioning the socio-political status quo. Yet, what are the limits of translation? What is lost or gained in this "necessary but impossible" act (Spivak 2022: 69)? Who translates in 'power-differentiated' contexts (Haraway 1988: 579-80)? This article outlines how artists and curators explore the possibilities and limits of translation within contemporary art to put forward the poetics of the untranslatable (Cassin 2014; Glissant 1990). It develops the concept of (mis)translation and positions the curatorial space as a translation zone (Apter 2006) – a dynamic, impermanent site of semiotic and cultural renegotiation, where hybrid languages, new forms, knowledges and relations can emerge (Bhabha 1994). In doing so, it embraces a 'kaleidoscopic totality' of world views (Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant 1990).

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Introduction: definitions of translation

Translation is a dynamic process of semiotic and cultural renegotiation – that can also be called *(mis)translation* – and a fruitful activity for artists and curators seeking to challenge the socio-political status quo and the limits of our worldviews, which are so embedded in language and signs. Rather than mourning what is lost in translation or lamenting the untranslatable, I explore the creative possibilities that emerge within a 'curatorial translation zone' in contemporary art.

In the visual arts, 'translation' has become a widely used metaphor to describe the conversion of a concept into form, the shift from one medium to another, and the movement of artworks and exhibitions across the globe. It signifies an act of transfer, interpretation and transformation. For artists and curators working across media, disciplines, locations, languages, and socio-political contexts, translation is not merely a tool but a means of interrogating those very structures and systems.

More broadly, translation is central to daily life as we navigate and consume information and objects from around the world. As Piotr Blumczynski asserts, "translation is – at least potentially – everywhere" (in Vidal Claramonte 2022: 8). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term originally comes from the Latin *translatio*, meaning 'transferring.' It can be understood through three interrelated concepts: a transfer from one place to another, an interpretation in different terms, and finally, a transformation into a different form.

Exhibitions, events and talks, which invite the movement of people and objects across different locations, can be understood as forms of transfers in the first sense of 'translation.' A curator can 'translate' an artwork in many ways – through a loan, within a group show, in a different country – requiring subtitling, contextualization and interpretation for new audiences.

All translation is, fundamentally, a process of communication: a transfer from sender to receiver across place and time (Otsuji and Pennycook, in Vidal Claramonte 2022: 7). Semiotic theory has emphasized the role of audience interpretation in communication (Barthes 1977), a concept I will explore further in the next section. Within this framework, artists, curators, and audiences can all be seen as 'material-semiotic actors' to use a term coined by Donna Haraway (1988: 595).

Consequently, the second key sense of 'translation' is 'interpretation.' Lawrence Venuti asserts that "every text is translatable because every text can be interpreted" (In Torop 2020: 266). Interpretation can be defined as: firstly, the act of explaining or the resulting explanation; secondly, a personal version of something; and thirdly, a variation of the original, whether into another language, sign-system, or medium. The roles of author, translator, and reader – or artist, curator, and audience – are equally important and deeply entangled in the process, which is

far more than a simple transfer. Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal argue that translation is also an experiential activity, shaping and transforming all parties involved (2024).

The third understanding of the term translation, therefore, emphasizes transformation – it is also a creative act (Malmkjær 2020). As an ongoing process of authorship, of rewriting semiotic 'texts,' translation can be seen as a form of creative expression. Edwin Gentzler argues that "all writing is rewriting, copying a new form of creativity, […] modifying a text becomes authorship" (in Vidal Claramonte 2022: 21). For instance, an artist's concept can be translated into different media: first a sound piece, then a video, a textile work, and finally a sculpture. Creativity lies at the heart of translation, which makes it such a compelling metaphor for the work of artists and curators. Within the visual arts, translation is "one of the most vital forces available to introduce new ways of thinking and introducing significant cultural change" (Gentzler in Vidal Claramonte 2022: 64).

Despite its rich semantic possibilities, translation is also a limited process. One of the main insights from Walter Benjamin's seminal text *The Task of the Translator* (1923) is his critique of 'faithfulness' in translation: "It is plausible that no translation, however good it may be, can have any significance as regards to the original" (1970: 71). A translation may result in an inferior imitation or a radically different iteration.

Moreover, translation is not a seamless transfer, as languages exist within complex systems and are shaped by specific socio-political contexts. In 'Translation as Culture,' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques the unequal terms of translation concluding that "translation is necessary but impossible" (2022: 69). This paradox extends to the curatorial space, which I will argue functions as a 'translation zone' – a space of semiotic and socio-political re-negotiation, akin to the space of comparative literature outlined by Emily Apter (2006).

As I have argued, translation is an act of communication, that involves transfer, interpretation and creative transformation. However, it has limits, making it 'necessary but impossible'. My research focuses on artists and curators who make these exchanges between sign-systems and contexts visible, exploring the possibilities of (mis)translation.

In this article, I analyse intersemiotic and intercultural processes in translation. I explore the limits of translation, what may be lost or gained in these processes, the question of the untranslatable and a possible universal language. I then examine who translates and who holds the power to translate within the field of contemporary art, with particular focus on the roles of artists and curators. Finally, I explore translation as a dynamic process of epistemic renegotiation – or (mis)translation – and introduce the concept of a curatorial translation zone.

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Intersemiotic movement

Translation has traditionally been seen as a linguistic process – a process of carrying meaning from one language to another. Rather than privileging artists working with text-based media, this article adopts a broader semiotic understanding of 'text' in contemporary art. In this section, I draw on Roman Jakobsen's influential essay 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation' (1959) to examine intersemiotic translation movements, encompassing interlingual and intermedial shifts. I also consider Mª Carmen África Vidal Claramonte's argument that translation is an intersemiotic activity that is "multilingual, multimodal, and multisensory" (2022: 1). In other words, translation involves a shift between media (drawing to sculpture), stimulates different senses (vision to sound), uses different scales and modes of engagement (text to performance) and different temporalities (photograph to multi-channel video). Artists are primed to be translators in all senses of the word, using processes such as quotation, homage, and adaptation. In the process, they also provide meta-reflections on the codes, context, and frameworks they operate.

Umberto Eco also challenges the notion of carrying meaning over between two languages; he highlights the complexity of meaning, favoring the term 'interpretation' to describe the process, placing emphasis, instead, on the audience's reception (Eco 2003: 13). As we have seen, this interpretative dimension is central to translation. During the second part of the Twentieth Century, Translation Studies developed in parallel with Semiotics, conceptualizing translation as a dynamic, interpretative act, albeit grappling with a dilemma: the impossibility of considering formal equivalence over sense, of 'domesticating' or rendering 'foreign' a text, and ultimately of replicating an 'original.' Influential philologist Wilhelm von Humboldt famously observed that "all understanding is at the same time a misunderstanding, all agreement in thought and feeling is also a parting of the ways" (von Humboldt in Steiner 1998: 181). Meanwhile, Lydia Liu argues that translation theory has emphasized transferring meaning or sense too much. At the heart of translation theory since its inception lies the enduring problem of "presumed commensurability or incommensurability amongst languages" (Liu 2019). She urges us to consider, instead, the 'absence of sense' as a starting point for translation, shifting focus toward the transfer between codes and the encoding technologies, such as 'scripts' and 'media.'

While Eco, Spivak, and Liu highlight the challenges of defining meaning, semiotics provide frameworks for analyzing how meaning is constructed. Drawing on Saussure's foundational work (1966), Roland Barthes (1977, 1991) outlines how every text-based or visual sign consists of a dynamic relationship between signifier (the mental image) and the *signified* (the concept). In the visual arts, both artworks and exhibitions function as advanced sign systems, semiotic texts open to interpretation and translation.

According to Barthes, the relationship between signifier and signifier is often arbitrary, yet society tries to fix these through processes of cultural connotation and myth-making (1977). Connotation emerges through repetition and reinforcement; culture is shaped through 'language,' and inversely, 'language' is culturally connotated. Curatorial and artistic translations operate in this sea of encoded signs and objects between languages, cultures, and socio-political contexts. In fact, the arts help affirm symbols, myths, and ideologies, as per the work of the photographer and designer of the 1955 *Paris Match* cover examined in Barthes' essay 'What is Myth Today?' (1991). Yet, in counterpart, creatives such as artists and curators also have the power to make this myth-construction apparent.

In 'The Death of the Author' (1967), Barthes focuses on the receiver of the message. He argues that no text has a single stable signified in semiotic terms. Instead, meaning is constructed through interpretation, with the (male) reader emerging as the unifier in its reception (1977: 146). He famously argues that the "death of the author" paves the way for the "birth of the reader" (1977: 148). Venuti's earlier reflection that everything can be translated as everything can be interpreted (Torop 2020: 266) builds on these ideas. Freed from the constraints of authorship, artists as translators test the limits of sign-systems and power structures, inviting endlessly re-interpretations from their audiences. By extension, this also frees the curator from needing to provide a definitive 'reading' of an artist's work since intersemiotic and intercultural translations are neither stable nor final.

Jacques Derrida extends Barthes's ideas through his concept of *différance*, arguing that "A linguistic system is essentially negative in that it comprises only differences amongst signifiers and differences among signified elements, not similarities" (Thomas 2011: 149). Translation, then, operates within a system of signification based on "similarity, difference and mediation," as Stecconi suggests (Harding and Carbonell i Cortés 2018: 19). Texts and artworks function as complex sign-systems, structured through differences and deferral, rather than fixed meaning. Spivak's evocative image of 'language-textile' in 'The Politics of Translation' (2022: 38) extends Barthes's idea of a semiotic chain, emphasizing that language, and by extension, translation, is fundamentally relational, based on difference rather than repetition or continuity.

How, then, to tackle Barthes's assertion that "everything has a meaning, or nothing has" (1977: 89)? As have seen, this paradox lies at the heart of translation theory, as per von Humboldt's claim that all understanding is at the same time misunderstanding (in Steiner 1998: 181), and has been explored in different ways by various schools of semiotics. If, as per Spivak and Liu, meaning is no longer a helpful concept, and if, as Venuti claims, every text can be translated because every text can be interpreted (Torop 2020: 266), perhaps Barthes's statement should be re-read in these terms: everything can be interpreted and/or nothing can. This formulation emphasizes that the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive and aligns with the Derridean notion of *différance*, in which 'everything' and 'nothing' exist in a state of interdependence.

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Emily Apter explores the dilemmas of translation through the lens of comparative literature, framing translation as existing on a spectrum where everything *and/or* nothing can be translated (2006). She terms this the 'translation zone.' Expanding on this notion, I propose the concept of the curatorial translation zone, where meaning is not fixed but relies on the input and reception of artists, curators, mediators, viewers and critics and other actors in the field of visual arts. These participants function as 'material-semiotic actors' (Haraway 1988) in a sea of encoded signs. Consequently, translation becomes an arena of experimentation with meaning-making at what Spivak describes as the "selvedges of the language-textile" (2022: 38).

Intercultural movement

Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) inspired a 'cultural turn' in translation theory through its analysis of identity construction, social agency, and national affiliation. This seminal publication, which has influenced many artists and curators, examines how meaning in Western hegemonic discourse is structured around binaries – self and other, colonizer and colonized, among others – thus reinforcing hierarchical dualities. Bhabha calls for the subaltern subject to reinscribe meaning, to disrupt these binaries to create a space of ambivalence and difference, akin to Derrida's notion of *différance*. By disrupting them,

> [it] opens up a space for translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. (1994: 25)

For Bhabha, translation is a powerful tool for reforming meaning and challenging fixed identities, where the neither/nor is renegotiated. The resulting space of translation he calls the "Third Space of enunciation" (1994: 37).

In his critique of neo-liberal multiculturalism, Bhabha argues that while efforts to reflect a more diverse and inclusive society may attempt to incorporate the perspectives of other cultures, they often fail to fully understand or acknowledge the complexities of representing them. He cautions against the trivialization of difference through what he calls 'cultural pluralism' and 'spurious egalitarianism' as per his critique of *Les Magiciens de la Terre* show at the Centre Pompidou in 1989 curated by Jean-Hubert Martin – one of the first major cross-cultural, cross-temporal, global shows (1994: 245). This critique remains relevant to many recent international projects, such as art biennales. Referencing Walter Benjamin, Bhabha calls for a "'foreignness' of cultural translation" (1994: 227). In other words, a cultural translation decanonizes the original,

putting meaning in motion and fostering hybridities that are *neither one nor the other*. In short, Bhabha views cultural translation as an opportunity to reformulate fixed notions of culture and to redefine the terms of its discourse.

Spivak, however, approaches the term 'cultural translation' with caution. Whilst she agrees with Bhabha's critique of culture as a fixed container of identity, she argues that the unequal terms of globalization prevent genuine cultural exchange. As a result, she warns translators against becoming 'native informers' who open their culture to being appropriated by others. Spivak cautions: "When we move from a linguistic translation into cultural translation, we are providing ourselves with an alibi… culture is the last thing that can be known or translated" (2008: 3). In essence, as culture is an abstract site of difference – as per Bhabha's definition – Spivak contends it cannot be translated. Like James Clifford, who described the museum as a 'contact zone' (1997), she frames translation as a site of struggle, where intimacy with the 'other' can occur, nonetheless, through a deeper embrace of difference.

In the field of contemporary art, artists have been exploring cultural translation, treating objects as hybrid carriers of histories – I will return to this topic when analyzing Kader Attia's notion of 'Repair.' Meanwhile, curators are increasingly aware of diverse audience demographics and varied modes of engagement. More frequently, they integrate meta-reflections on their own curatorial and cultural translations within shows, critically examining the limitations of their frameworks, for instance, the institutions they might be working in. Ultimately, both artists and curators are increasingly striving to establish what Bhabha calls the Third Space of enunciation (1994: 37), a space of perpetual translation, a possible curatorial translation zone as exemplified by Amilcar Packer's show at CRAC I will outline further in the article. Yet, despite growing self-reflection, questions remain: Have the terms of the exchange between artist, curator, and audience become more equitable? And, are those in positions of power also becoming better listeners?

The limits of translation: from the untranslatable to (mis)translation

Having explored intersemiotic and intercultural movements in translation, I now turn to its limits. Returning to Benjamin's critique of the possibility of being 'faithful' in translation, I will explore whether something is 'lost' or 'gained' in translation. Let's consider first the notion of loss. According to Derrida's concept of *différance*, which extends the chain of signification, Spivak argues that while each new sign erases the previous one through difference, its trace remains. She refers to this 'trace' of anterior writing *archi-écriture* (1976: xiv). Rather than identifying a point of origin, this concept suggests an infinite trace – a perpetual construction of the sign through self-deconstruction.

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If we cannot speak of loss since traces of anterior writing always remain, can we speak of gain in translation? In theory, yes, each translation provides a new version of a text in perpetual re-formation. Citing poet Octavio Paz, Susan Bassnett observes that "every text is unique and, at the same time, it is the translation of another text" (2002: 46). In other words, no translation can be definitive, each is a version within the 'textile' of signification to use Spivak's metaphor. Ultimately, translation entails both loss and gain, but rather than viewing these as opposing forces, it is more productive to conceive of translation as a process of continuous transformation as per Spivak's reference to *archi-écriture*. More valuable still is Benjamin's notion of the 'afterlife' of translation, which opens limitless possibilities to artists and curators.

Rather than focus on loss and gain, could one consider the 'untranslatable'? Emily Apter tackles the question alongside Barbara Cassin in their monumental *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2014). In the preface, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood argue that the untranslatable does not mean the impossibility but rather the 'interminability of translating: the idea that one can never have done with translation' (2014: vii). This idea aligns with Derrida's reflection: "nothing is untranslatable; but in another sense, everything is untranslatable; translation is another name for the impossible […] it is easy for me always to hold firm between these two hyperboles which are fundamentally the same, and always translate each other" (1998: 56-57). Spivak's more clear-cut summary is "translation is necessary but impossible" (2000: 69).

If the possibility of translation always remains, can we conceive of a universal language? Both Umberto Eco and George Steiner have argued that a theory of Darwinian diversification of language holds more credibility than the utopian dream of a 'pre-Babel' common language (Steiner 1998: xiv). In his writings, Édouard Glissant critiques universal concepts, viewing them as remnants of imperialism. Instead, referring to the myth of Babel, he asserts that "It is given, in all languages, to build the Tower" (1990: 123). Building on this idea of 'polysemic vertigo,' Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant champion Creole as a radical example of a 'kaleidoscopic totality' expressed through art (1990: 901, 892). They propose:

> we recommend to our artists this exploration of our singularities, that is because it brings back to what is natural in the world, outside the Same and the One, and because it opposes to Universality the great opportunity of a world diffracted but recomposed, the conscious harmonization of pre-served diversities: DIVERSALITY. (1990: 903)

Like Derrida and Bhabha, Glissant recognizes the importance of difference and relationality in constructing knowledge. "In binary practice, exclusion is the rule (either, or), whereas poetics aims for divergence – which is not exclusion but the accomplished

surpassing of a difference.“ (1990: 96). He emphasizes how identities, like languages, can “‘ change by exchanging’ in the energy of the world” (Glissant, Chamoiseau, and Plenel 2021: 38-39). For Glissant, exchange, circulation, and linguistic diversity are essential to the vitality of the universe. Difference enables exchange, while hegemony, stasis, and monolingualism stifle change. From their side, Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant urge us to consider the concept of ‘kaleidoscopic totality’ and ‘diversality’ rather than the idea of a universal language (1990).

Glissant’s influential writings call for a space of discourse that embraces rhizomatic relations and polyphonic vertigo, allowing for complexity, opacity or irreducibility, and, at times, incommunicability. In this space, translation and untranslatability intermingle amidst order and chaos, fostering radical new languages. Crucially, Glissant opposes reductive synthesis and argues that exchange is enriching. Concerning the visual arts, he declares: “You, we, must multiply the number of worlds inside museums” (Glissant and Obrist 2021: 204).

As I have argued so far, there are limitations in all the following statements: everything has meaning vs. nothing has meaning; everything vs. nothing is translatable; gain vs. loss in translation; connection vs. division through translation, etc. These oppositions reflect the paradoxes inherent in the translation zone. What emerges consistently is the redundancy of a sacrosanct ‘original,’ as well as the idea of universal mutual translatability (Ricoeur 2006). A potential way forward may be ‘infidelity to the original’ as Spivak puts it (2022: 142) – or what Sarat Maharaj describes as ‘perfidious fidelity’ (1994) – engaging in the ‘afterlives’ of texts, as Benjamin suggests. Consequently, artists and curators are uniquely positioned to experiment with linguistic and cultural translation processes: they can (mis)translate. (Mis)translation is one of the key creative possibilities within the curatorial translation zone.

Who translates in the contemporary art field? The artist as translator

After analyzing the possibilities and limitations of translation more broadly, I will now examine how artists and curators engage with (mis)translation in contemporary art. I will begin by exploring the broader language and discourse of the art world.

In a globalizing world, translation is potentially everywhere to return to Blumczynski and Bassnett’s reflections (Vidal Claramonte 2022: 9; 84). As the art scene expands internationally, language is central in establishing the symbolic and financial value of artworks, exhibitions, and artistic and curatorial practices across geographies. To borrow a definition by Michel Foucault, the resulting art world discourse operates within a set of rules of limitation, inclusion, and exclusion (1971), and it is driven by its ‘material-semiotic actors’ to return to Haraway’s term.

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A satirical take on this supposed art world discourse is presented in an article by Alix Rule and David Levine published in *Triple Canopy* in 2012, where they infamously coin the term 'International Art English' (IAL). They describe it as a delocalized and artificial form of rhetoric, heavily influenced by French Poststructuralism and the vocabulary and syntax of the Frankfurt School. They argue that beyond its function to reach an international audience, IAL's main aim is to preserve an air of authority to "consecrate certain artworks as significant, critical, and indeed, contemporary" (Rule and Levine 2012: 6).

Despite the article's shortcomings in providing a thorough analysis of the 'language' of the contemporary artworld, two points are worth noting: first, the role of language in bestowing symbolic value and, ultimately, commodifying artists' work; and secondly, the notion of English as a 'universally foreign language' (Rule and Levine 2012: 5). While it is undeniable that English is the lingua franca of the art world, it is also shaped by its key players across the globe. In short, the English employed in the art world is shaped by and consolidates its discourse, to return to Foucault's term.

Having briefly touched the broader context of artworld discourse, I now turn to the role of artists and curators as related cultural producers, as authors and translators working between signs, cultures, and contexts through their respective and different forms of 'text.' While other 'translators' exist in the field, such as public and private funders, art schools, sales platforms, galleries, advisors, the media, collectors, etc., this paper focuses on the curatorial sphere.

Over the past forty years, in parallel with globalization, there has been an exponential increase in artists working internationally, thereby translating their work across different countries, contexts, and languages. In the process, they perform semiotic, linguistic, physical, cultural and epistemic translations – that is, intermedial and intercultural movements outlined earlier – both within their artistic practice and in interpreting their own work.

The curator plays an equally important role in this process as an associated translator supporting the transmission process, as a mediator and interpreter. In theory, there is no hierarchy between an artistic and a curatorial translation, they are 'associated' in the sense of being rhizomatically connected, in line with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept (1987: 7). A curatorial translation can take place before, after, or at the same time as the artistic 'translation.' For example, a curator's interpretation usually follows the artist's concept, though both can also happen concurrently, and an artist can also follow a curator's prompt. Nevertheless, 'power-differentiation' remains at play between artists and curators, as Donna Haraway notes (1988: 579-80), as well as other actors in the visual arts field, such as the host institution or organization.

Let's first turn to artists' works, which span media and disciplines, creating complex sign systems as we saw in Barthes's semiotic analyses. Barthes claims that "art is a system which is pure, no unit ever goes wasted, however long, however tenuous may be the thread connecting it to one of the levels of the story" (1977: 89-90). Artists also add layers in the process, in writing or conversation, discussing their work and that of others to reveal their influences and references.

Complex linguistic, cultural and epistemic translations, are exemplified in Sky Hopinka's *wawa* (2014). This video interweaves an interview between Hopinka and anthropologist Henry Zenk, discussing Zenk's experiences interviewing community elder Wilson Bobb about the Chinuk Wawa language in 2013. Chinuk Wawa is a northwest Pacific Creole and jargon, developed for trade purposes between indigenous and non-indigenous people, drawing from the Chinook language. *Wawa* also includes film and audio recordings of Hopinka teaching Chinuk language lessons, reciting Chinuk vocabulary, footage of a Chinuk phrasebook, and the re-enactment of an interview between Zenk and Bobb from 1983.

Wawa is, in turn, legible and not to non-Chinuk speakers, as it both offers and withholds translation. Zenk's speech is sometimes understandable through English subtitles and when Hopinka re-enacts Bobb's responses in English. At other times, however, English subtitles are absent during Chinuk dialogue. Gradually, Hopinka disrupts clear divisions between past and present, between languages, and between cultures, transforming the complex audio-visual piece into a palimpsest.

Wawa critiques our expectations as global artworld audiences who anticipate a full translation into English. It reflects on linguistic revival in the context of indigenous languages having been repressed, with English forced upon communities through residential school systems in the USA and Canada, for instance. The work interrogates the intentions of those with settler-colonial ancestry, such as anthropologist Zenk's attempt to learn Chinuk, and it considers the linguistic, cultural, and political divides between English and indigenous worldviews. As such, wawa, is a meta-reflection on the dynamics of translation. Aware of the double edge of preserving a language but also the potential of becoming a 'native informant' as termed by Spivak, Hopinka navigates the act of translating and withholding translation (2022: 197). His work exemplifies (mis)translation – a process that enables translation while remaining faithful to a different worldview.

Spivak's oeuvre warns against the cultural imperialism of English and seeks to give voice to the subaltern, furthering her conclusion that "the subaltern cannot speak" (1988: 104). She views translation across borders not as a mere convenience for legibility but as a form of activism. In 'The Politics of Translation' Spivak argues that translation should be seen as "the most intimate act of reading," a process of moving towards the other and loving the original (2022: 208). In the same way that Spivak describes

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translation as a double bind, "necessary but impossible," Hopinka tests the limits of legibility in *wawa*. His love for Chinuk is apparent in his teachings of the language and personal implication in its future transmission. However, a meta-critique of the power imbalance between Chinuk and English is also evident in the work. Following on from Roman Jakobsen's elaboration of the Italian saying *'tradutore, traditore'* [translator, traitor] to "translator of what messages? betrayer of what values?" (1959: 238), and Spivak's term 'native informant,' artists can choose what to translate and critique the process to avoid betraying their own values.

Through invitations to exhibit internationally, artists also translate their work geographically, emphasizing processes of cultural translation. For instance, Kader Attia revisits his concept of *Repair* in different venues. Drawing on Michel Foucault's writings, Attia sees *Repair* "as an underlying principle of development and evolution in science and religion… [since] the biggest illusion of the Human Mind is probably the one on which Man has built himself: the idea that he invents something, when all he does is repair."[1] Instead of the capitalist drive to replace in the name of progress, Attia links physical repair, cultural repair, and reparation as essential processes of post-colonial reflection and healing. He pairs 'continuum' with *Repair*, suggesting that knowledge can be repeated, rewritten, or repaired ad finitum.

In his site-specific commission *Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder* at Whitechapel Gallery in 2013-14, Attia explores *Repair* in relation to collected systems of knowledge, such as books gathered in an 'infinite' library and objects in a cabinet of curiosities. He sees *Repair* as analogous to the process of art and, by extension translation: "art is just an endless process of constant evolution… [and] of constant reinvention" (Butler and Attia 2014: 23). Attia translates his concept between exhibition venues and contexts, while also incorporating these epistemic and cultural movements back into his practice. He acknowledges the context and history of the exhibition space in his work – at Whitechapel, for instance, its history as a former public library. His work centers on *Repair*, but it also embodies a continuum of this notion; in other words, he translates and is translated.

The curator as a translator

Let's now examine more closely the role of a curator, which involves defining the framework of a project and its participants, including possible audiences, conceptualizing and inviting artists to exhibit, and making decisions about placements in the space, the catalog, and the production of events. The curator also writes interpretation

[1] Kader Attia: Continuum of Repair: The Light of Jacob's Ladder at Whitechapel Gallery [accessed 7 February 2024]

and press copy, introduces shows, and leads discussions. Both written and spoken language are used for interpretation in curatorial work, creating new 'texts' and extending the 'language-textile' as per Barthes and Spivak. The term 'curating' also comes from the Latin word *cura*, meaning to take care of; in short, a curator 'cares' for the audience, work, and artist.

Building on Harald Szeemann's definition of the curator as a 'generalist', Hans-Ulrich Obrist expands by adding:

> the curator is administrator, sensitive art-lover, preface writer, librarian, manager, accountant, animator, conservator, financier and diplomat. To which we added: fundraiser, teacher, editor, blogger, web-master, documentarian and most important of all, someone, who has conversations with artists and other practitioners. Curators are agents of trans-disciplinarity. Last, but not least, there is the notion of the translator. (Miessen and Basar 2006: 17-18)

Like Attia, Obrist suggests that translation – as a metaphor for epistemic movement – is an essential component of both curatorial and artistic practice, acknowledging their roles in transmission and as part of a continuum of 'Situated Knowledges,' as per Haraway (1988).

Whilst the curator often sets up the terms of the translation, the public completes its reception. For instance, the public response to Attia's Whitechapel Gallery commission was divided. Some praised the immersive Jacob's ladder effect and Attia's ability to weave on the array of different knowledges in the space, while others found it challenging to connect all the threads with Attia's concept of *Repair*. This mixed reception highlights the challenges of carrying over artistic terms into institutional language, be it in the form of spoken or written interpretation. For example, only 200 words were allocated to describe the project on the text panel and website, which is jointly produced by the curators and internal team members, in other words, several 'material-semiotic actors' as per Haraway. Whilst curatorial translation may not be realized on all levels, Attia's work reflects on the power dynamics at play within the project, continuously testing them in new situations. His work is 'untranslatable' in Cassin's sense, meaning that one is 'never done' with translating it, opening up the curatorial translation of Attia's work for infinite revisions (2014: vii).

Whilst the curator has gained power since the 1990s, when it was consecrated as a professional vocation and championed by figures such as Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Okwui Enwezor, their agency remains limited. There are many other 'material-semiotic actors,' as I have already mentioned, including the institution itself, as seen in the case of Kader Attia's show at Whitechapel Gallery.

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The curatorial space as a translation zone

According to Emily Apter, a 'translation zone' is "a zone of critical engagement' that transcends national boundaries and cannot be reduced to a post-national concept" (2006: 5). Apter argues that translation engenders a subjective and epistemic shift:

> Cast as an act of love, and an act of disruption, translation becomes a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalising citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pregiven domestic arrangements…Translation failure demarcates intersubjective limits, even as it highlights the "eureka" spot where consciousness crosses over to a rough zone of equivalency or crystallizes around an idea that belongs to no one language or nation in particular. Translation is a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change. (2006: 6)

Although Apter is writing from the perspective of comparative literature, her description of translation could be applied to contemporary art, its 'authors' and 'readers' being artists, curators, and visitors. For example, exhibitions frequently aim to test people's 'intersubjective limits,' question the status quo, and call for 'political change.' In this context, 're-formation' and 'change' emerge as key terms within these subjective and epistemic shifts.

Vidal Claramonte also highlights epistemic shifts that occur in translation:

> Art addresses issues in which translation is immersed. These issues include schizophrenia between the defense of the local versus the global in the defense of indigenous artistic practices. It also highlights issues of identity in the context of international flows, diasporas, and migrations, with nationalisms and ethnicity (James Elkins *et al.* 2010), the deconstruction of historical discourses based on dichotomies, hierarchical organization and centers of power, to favor 'transnational, pluralistic, horizontal, polyphonic and multidimensional historical-artistic narratives' (Anna María Guasch 2016: 21). (in Vidal Claramonte 77)

A curatorial translation zone, based on Apter's concept, serves as a space where the paradoxes of translation can be addressed. It prompts us to reconsider our 'semiotic technologies' as per Donna Haraway (1988: 579). Drawing on Derrida's concept of *différance*, translation addresses both the 'and/or' of meaning, evoking rather a condition of 'schizophrenia,' as cited by Elkins in Vidal. The false dichotomies of binaries, such as the local/global, center/periphery cited above, the Western/Other

divide unpicked by Bhabha, and the imperial/subaltern by Spivak, are challenged in this space. Analogous to Bhabha's Third Space (1994), the curatorial translation zone is a space where cultures, nationalities, identities, subjectivities, histories, politics and worldviews are reinterpreted.

Haraway argues that the formation of knowledge is situated and subjective, where meaning can be read in multiple ways, where knowledge is not necessarily readily transferable between 'power differentiated-communities' (1988: 579-80). She states: "Translation is always interpretative, critical, and partial. Here is a ground for conversation, rationality, objectivity – which is power-sensitive, not pluralist, 'conversation.'" (1988: 589) In this sense, the curatorial space as a translation space is vital: it offers a platform for negotiation, aware of its 'material-semiotic actors' and their 'situated knowledges' within specific socio-political contexts.

Like Spivak, Haraway also cautions against the globalizing tendency of "translation into resource," where bodies, objects, languages and culture are all bound together (1988: 593). Instead, translation can serve as a means to address the 'schizophrenic' post-colonial and migrant condition, it can address the gaps between histories and languages and power-differentiation. Translation can open a space of resistance, of possibility. As Glissant proposes, through negotiation, "I can change by exchanging with the Other, without losing or diluting my sense of self" (Glissant, Chamoiseau and Plenel 2021: 111).

The Third Space, the interstitial, marginal, schizophrenic zone, this zone of crossing, of exchange, all resonate with the concept of the translation zone outlined by Emily Apter. When applied to the field of contemporary art, the curatorial translation zone becomes a space of polyphony, criticality and pluriversalism. It allows semiotic actors to sit side by side in their 'difference' rather than being co-opted by a monoculture or Anglo-American hegemony. In this context, the notions of self and other are continually reformed, alongside the broader transformation of language and belief systems. Notwithstanding, the curatorial translation zone must always acknowledge its specific socio-political contexts, as Haraway stresses.

An example of a curatorial translation zone is the show curated by artist Amilcar Packer at CRAC, Altkirch in 2022. He describes his project in the following terms:

> *The Four Cardinal Points are Three: South and North* is an essay. More a trial than a test. More notes than text. We could say it's an assemblage, collage, composition, configuration, kaleidoscope, juxtaposition, conjugation, image, constellation, cosmovision. We could say a dream and an invitation. Out of habit we say exhibition.[2]

[2] https://www.cracalsace.com/fr/607_les-quatre-points-cardinaux-sont-trois [accessed 21 August 2024]

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It is the outcome of Packer's collaborative, research-based practice and his PhD, which explores the relationship between matter and epistemology, aiming to "confront the colonial, racial, and cis-heteropatriarchal matrix of structural and systemic violence." [3]

In the show, Packer assembles objects from different time periods along with works by 13 artists. These include drawings by Yanomami people from the Amazon basin, including Naki Uxima Uxiu Thëri and Taniki Xaxanapi Thëri – created in dialogue with Swiss-Brazilian photographer-activist Claudia Andujar – along with her notes on their symbolism and translations. Also featured are performances by Afro-Brazilian artist Ayrson Heráclito – a Candomblé Ogã of Jejê-Mahi matrix, artist, researcher, and curator – and other works.

These objects co-exist with minimal interpretation, primarily through labels, allowing viewers to form their own readings. However, a rich education and engagement program accompanies the show: three performances during the opening weekend; a collaboration between a local school class and the Peruvian radio Apu; a weekend symposium on 'critical matter' led by Packer; an online tarot reading and screening by artist Denise Ferreira da Silva; a screening of the *Pearl Button* (2015) by Patrizio Guzmán and a talk with artist Emma Malig at a local cinema.

The exhibition brings together multiple languages, worldviews, and belief systems from Latin America – Spanish, Portuguese, Yanomami, Candomblé, etc. Objects and artworks are transferred into different contexts, prompting a critical re-examination of historical, scientific, political, and artistic frameworks. Most importantly, Packer reflects on the semiotic tools at his disposal, employing different modes to engage his audience while deliberately leaving room for interpretation and dialogue. He openly discusses his role as a translator and the significance of 're-presenting,' 're-materialising,' and 're-imagining,' in short, of 're-appropriating.' Packer's project functions as a temporary assembly open to negotiation, an 'essay' that reflects on its epistemic positioning or 'situated knowledges.' As a visitor, I left more attuned to my own 'semiotic technologies' to borrow Haraway's terms (1988). In sum, Packer's project interrogates hegemonies by reconsidering subjectivities and epistemologies.

Within the curatorial translation zone, an unsettling yet exhilarating panorama of endless artistic and curatorial translations unfolds – an evolving network of textual 'afterlives,' spanning physical and digital realms. This temporary zone recenters subjectivities, epistemologies and hegemonies. Translation is necessary as it shifts perspectives, but impossible since it is never complete, as per Spivak. With advancements in code-switching, translation appears limitless, yet the crucial question remains: Who holds the power to write the code?

[3] https://www.cracalsace.com/en/635_study-session-amilcar-packer [accessed 21 August 2024]

Conclusion: the limits of translation are the possibilities of (mis)translation

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously stated: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (1922: 74). This assertion highlights the limits of interlinguistic commensurability, but more importantly, cultural and epistemic boundaries. Yet, as poststructuralism has taught us, a limit is also the opening to a possibility. Throughout this article, I have highlighted the paradoxes of translation, recognizing it as being both 'necessary' and yet 'impossible' as per Spivak. I explored the dilemmas of loss and gain in translation, untranslatability and universal languages, and the 'double bind' of translation which, according to Spivak, encourages 'infidelity' to the original (2022: 103, 142). Within the artworld, I have noted that there are many 'translators,' and whilst I am only focusing on artists and curators, I have noted that power differentiation persists, echoing the dynamics of globalization, as Haraway and Spivak remind us. Whilst English remains the lingua franca of Anglo-American hegemony, a critical shift is occurring: the rethinking of source, target, and bridge languages, center and periphery, and the broader discourse that structures the art world.

Glissant, Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant offer a path beyond binaries and hegemony, through changing 'by exchanging' and embracing 'diversality' (Glissant, Chamoiseau, and Plenel 2021: 38-39; Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant 1990: 903). Artists and curators are in a unique position to move 'beyond difference' by highlighting the impossibility of universals, the gaps between languages, the urgency to decolonize discourse, the right to opacity, and the generative possibilities of (mis) translation. The limitless creative possibilities of code to generate hybrid languages opens an endless panorama for artists and curators that resists reductionism and instead fosters *diversality.*

Faced with 'the necessary but impossible' nature of translation, I propose to conceptualise a curatorial translation zone – a space for transmission, transformation and critical reflection on the signs, power structures and epistemologies that shape us. In a globalized, post-colonial world where linguistic and cultural loss accelerates, the curatorial translation zone functions as a dynamic, impermanent negotiation space. It nurtures hybrid languages, novel artistic forms, and emergent knowledges, celebrating a 'kaleidoscopic totality' of cultures.

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