

In the pause of a gesture there

Curatorial text developed in
transitive collaboration with
the Toronto Research Group

M :

might be an echo #3

by Marjoca de Greef
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A :

M: Usually, we write our texts in English. It is the language we both master second best. The English language made it possible for us to collaborate, because our native tongues: Macedonian and Dutch are too far from each other to be used by the two of us, as a tool of communication. We have been discussing the similarities between translation and collaboration many times; the act of translation is part of our artistic practice. Just now, we translated a poetic text written by you in English for *Remember by Heart* (2022) by Sarah van Lamsweerde. Sarah, you, and me, we were collectively engaged in the Dutch translation. It was a small text, but still, lots had to be discussed. Vertalen en samenwerken hebben een gelijksoortig karakter. Steve McCaffery and bpNichol, both explorers of the boundaries of poetry, visual art, sound, and prose, and the driving force/drijvende kracht of the Toronto Research Group, brought the act of translation to a whole new level. In the 1970s and '80s, they conducted radical experiments, such as creative translation, collaborative poems, intermedial texts, and performances. Collaboration was the hallmark of their artistic practice. In one of their conversations, Steve McCaffery stated: "Yes, both translation and collaboration suggest that creativity is not integral/expressive but dialogic/relational (Nichol, "The Annotated" 75).¹ Ja, zowel vertalen als samenwerken doen vermoeden dat creativiteit niet integraal/expressief, maar dialogisch/relatieel is (Nichol, "The Annotated" 75).

Vrij vertaald: creativiteit is niet een onaantastbare vorm van (persoonlijke) uitdrukingskracht, maar een gesprek of een relatie tussen twee of meer mensen, dieren, objecten of begrippen.

Loosely translated as: creativity is not an untouchable form of (self)expression, but a conversation or relationship between two or more people, animals, objects, or concepts.

A: In an online interview with Steve McCaffery, I found part of his answer very animating. Stating how a translation is always transitive, a 'translation of' something, McCaffery continues: "But my interest, as you know, has been in creative translation in the spirit of Zukofsky's Catullus and the different presupposition that there is not only a text to translate but also a latent text within a text awaiting exhumation".²

Many translators criticized the translation, which Louis Zukofsky made in collaboration with his wife Celia Zukofsky of Catullus's works, a Latin poet of the late Roman Republic. Being a homophonic translation, many translators viewed it as controversial. In this method, the translator often does not attempt to preserve the intended meaning but instead renders a text in one language into a near homophonic text in another language.

Although in our experiment with translation, we didn't go that far, I remember when translating small parts from Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993) in our native languages, there was a moment when his: "I present you with the universal Blue", in Macedonian, I translated as Ви го претставувам универзалното сино and the Korean translation of Aram Lee read 나는 당신에게 가장 보편적인 푸른빛을 선물한다.

I liked how, the Macedonian 'претставувам' and the Korean '선물한다' have two different understandings of the English 'present you with', one which presents the blue and another that gives the blue as a present/gift. Both translations are close to the original meaning. However, the slight difference changes how a reader enters the 'universal blue'.

In a way, there is a strong relation between 'translation of' and 'being-with'. The act of translation allows for a gradual discovery, a deeper understanding of someone's words. But it also weaves in the voice of the translator. In a translated text, the 'work of the author' coexists with the 'work of the translator'.

Similarly, collaborations, as McCaffery mentions, have the capacity to unearth dormant qualities in one's practice. To set forward things that have not been previously explored.

M: Zukofskys menen dat de betekenis van een gedicht onlosmakelijk verbonden is met de klankkleur van het gedicht en dat dit in een vertaling niet veronachtzaamd mag worden. Het is geen uitzonderlijke opvatting. Het is vooral interessant dat zij dit principe handhaven bij de vertaling van een gedicht geschreven in een 'dode taal' waarvan niemand precies weet hoe deze werd uitgesproken. In ieder geval is het onbekend hoe de maker van dit gedicht, Catullus, die meer dan tweeduizend jaar geleden leefde, zijn geschreven woorden uitsprak.

The Zukofskys suggest that the meaning of a poem is inseparable from its acoustic properties. They state in their preface that their translation "follows the sound, rhythm, and syntax of Latin".³ It is not an unusual practice in translation, however, it is particularly interesting that they maintain this principle for the translation of a poem written in a "dead language", of which no one knows exactly how it was pronounced.

Anyway, it is unknown how Catullus, who presumably lived from 84 to 54 CE, pronounced his written words.

Translating a text of a dead writer involves talking with the dead. With their translation, the Zukofskys introduced imaginary acoustic properties. It makes one wonder how they communicated with the writer of the poem. What kind of collaboration was it? How did they speak to each other? Maybe the translation was, to speak (again) with Steve McCaffery, "a more rewarding form of collaboration, in which the translator exhumes a latent other text within the source".⁴

Needless to say that the Zukofskys are right to accentuate the sensorial nature of a poem. You told me that when listening to *Vragen?* (2021), the Dutch spoken performance of Richtje Reinsma, you had a particular understanding of the spoken words.

A: Greater number of the audience perceived Zukofsky's translations as strenuous. Like a thick shadow of obscurity cast over Catullus's direct language. Disorganizing the order of the syntax, interrupting, intruding his lines.

Mostly, a lot of meaning is given to the meaning of words. Arguments arise whether one word is better suited or not. Words are also breaths, pauses, inhalations, and exhalations. The way one utters a text can tell so much more than the meaning of the words spoken or written. You take a deep breath before delivering a difficult line, straighten up the posture when trying to speak with confidence, and the weight of the words weighs down your shoulders when expressing grief. The breath, the posture, the gesticulations, they are part of the words we speak.

While following Richtje's performance, both times, once during the rehearsal and then with an audience, I had to think a lot about what happens when you perform in a language other than English. Most of the people in the audience were native Dutch speakers. I, on the other hand, have some understanding of it, but I am far from fluent. So instinctively, my ears and eyes started to trace and discover what was around the words as elements of speech. At times I had a hold onto what Richtje was saying, and other times I could only recognize the words as sounds: voice, questioning intonation, wind, paper following the body movement.

An oscillating boundary can be sensed when listening to a performance in a language that you do not understand. At times you might feel cut off, and at a different moment, you feel embraced. And this is totally up to you. Would you be willing to attune to a slightly different dynamic or not?

M: Yes, you mean it was not experienced as “a more rewarding form of collaboration” between the Zukofskys and Catullus, as Steve was suggesting, but merely as a brutal attempt to countermand the original text? Still, I like that the Zukofskys addressed the importance of the acoustic properties of a poem. Also, I like that they were doing it with imaginary acoustics. Perhaps their methods and theories are the more interesting occurrences or articulations of their work. I guess one could say that of the works of the Toronto Research Group as well. It doesn’t make both these practices any less meaningful to me.

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M: Exactly.

Your experience with the performance *Vragen?* is resonating with the kind of attention that is sometimes needed to appreciate complex works of art. I always cringe a bit when I hear people say –while glancing at a work of art– “This work of art doesn’t speak to me”. Don’t you think it is a huge demand to expect a work of art to speak to you if you don’t take the time to become acquainted? Sometimes it is needed to ruminate or to partner up with the work of art, even if you don’t understand its language, or ‘fancy’ the work of art, or even if it provokes hostility. Engaging with a work of art is, again, a form of collaboration. In a way, this is happening in Aram Lee’s *The Nervous Canines* (2022), which is present in this exhibition. Aram engaged herself with Albert Eckhout’s *Study of Two Brazilian Tortoises* (1640). ‘The study’ was painted during Albert’s stay in Brazil. The young Dutch painter arrived on 23 January 1637 in the city of Recife, seven years after the Dutch took control of the northeastern parts of Brazil, then known as Dutch Brazil, or New Holland. It was his first travel outside the borders of his country. For seven years he served as court painter to Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, who was the first governor-general of the colony and owner of the Mauritshuis.⁵ Albert, it seems, was unconditionally devoted to creating visions of plants, animals, and people, which justified and bolstered the crimes of colonization and slavery. A distinct example of his ‘visions’ is *Tapuya Woman* (1641), one of his series of paintings of life-size female-male pairs. She was a representative of the Tapuya with whom Europeans were often engaged in battle. He depicted her carrying a severed hand and foot, as references to cannibalism. *Study of Two Brazilian Tortoises* demonstrates a similarly constructed ferocity. Although the actual tortoises are toothless, Albert painted a row of spiky teeth in their open-mouthed beak-like jaws. Aram investigates how the quirky nature of these imagined records is roving inside institutional archives. With *The Nervous Canines*, she translates Albert’s painting, showing that archives are sites of moving and living histories. This way of working relates to a statement by the Toronto Research Group.

“The role of the translator, rather than to preserve and fix a poem’s semantic content, might involve augmenting and multiplying a text’s potential. The translator, rather than look to make her work invisible, should be understood as a participant in a work’s linguistic migration. Translation then becomes the work of community, one that acknowledges its transformation of sense and intercultural exchange”.⁶

It sounds like a description of a relational artistic practice, the kind of practices that are now on show in this exhibition.

A: I wonder how many people will start talking to you if you don't stop to give them the chance to do it.

For some reason, I have to think about the opening line of our conversation, in which you indicate how English is the language in which we collaborate.

Usually, we send our texts to a proofreader before they get published. However, we decided to use this text as it is. And although we are aware that some grammar inaccuracies are visible to native speakers, simultaneously, it makes space for traces of our native languages to come into the foreground. I can easily recognise which one of us wrote a paragraph in a text by the way we construct our sentences. It is veiled in our speech even if we are unaware of it. There are times when I have to read a proofread text out loud, and I notice how my reading is slower. As if I need to adapt to a voice that reads parallelly with me. The words are the same, but sometimes in a different structure. The pause is not at a familiar place, and I have to take a breath in too soon or a second too late.

Recently I came upon the artist statement of Hak Kyung Theresa Cha, a Pusan (부산) born artist who immigrated to the United States when she was around 11 years old. Her main body of work focuses on language, on “looking for the roots of the language before it is born at the tip of the tongue.” I think you are referring to this quote in our conversation *Art Practices and Cultural Heritage: The Critical Capacity of Nostalgia*.⁷ In her statement, Theresa says:

“Since having been forced to learn foreign languages more “consciously” at a later age, there existed a different perception and orientation towards language. Certain areas that continue to hold interest for me are: grammatical structures of a language, syntax. How words and meanings are constructed in the language system itself, by function or usage, and how transformation is brought about through manipulation, processes as changing the syntax, isolation, removing from context, repetition, and reduction to minimal units.”⁸

When translating into Dutch, part of the poetic text for Sarah's work, we had to discuss and even erase a few words. Precisely because some of these words didn't make any sense when translated into the context of a Dutch text.

Whether you are engaging with a work of art or collaborating with the practices of other artists, the process is similar. The work of art is not there alone, outside, without any relationship to anything else, to anyone else. It's developed gradually, referring to, responding, scrutinizing, sometimes abruptly, almost impulsively, in relation to occurrences, experiences... in proximity, at a distance.

M: The works of art in this show are pervaded by many identities, territories of multiple disciplines. They are living companions.

Even though 'artistic genius' has been revealed as a romantic glorification of individualism since the 1970s, it seems hard to think around the idea of the genius in arts.

Hoewel het 'artistiek genie' sinds de jaren 70 van de vorige eeuw is ontmaskerd als een romantische verheerlijking van het individualisme, lijkt het lastig om buiten het idee van de geniale kunstenaar te denken.

For several years now, we have been exploring, together with artists, how art practices can function as a social space where 'other potentialities can be conceived' and shaped. This form of artist/curatorial practice is radically different from the general idea of a curator ushering a 'theme', and artists who are impelled to function within this frame as autonomous creators. The latter sounds contradictory and an impossible way to create an exhibition; however, it is the widespread and accepted way.

We onderzoeken, al enkele jaren, samen met kunstenaars, hoe een kunstpraktijk kan functioneren als een sociale ruimte waar "het anders mogelijke gedacht kan worden"⁹ en gestalte kan krijgen. Deze vorm van kunstenaar/curatorschap is radicaal anders dan het stereotype idee van een curator die een 'thema' bedenkt en kunstenaars die daarbinnen moeten functioneren als autonome scheppers. Dit laatste klinkt tegenstrijdig, maar het is de gangbare en geaccepteerde manier om een tentoonstelling te ontwikkelen.

When I look at your practice, in which you combine being an artist, curator, designer... you are moving between these domains and open up to the practices of other artists, creating designs, poems and artefacts. In this exhibition you are exploring openness physically, offering space into *Façade_Override_Façade* (2022). You are working on this exhibition not just as a method to present your research but as a means to materialise your curatorial ideas inside your work of art.

A: It is important to allow the works to find one another. When you enter a room with several people, everything you do affects the way others move. The artistic practices are not just temporarily inhabiting the same space. With 'no theme' in which the common is made known, these practices have to adjust themselves to their surroundings, establish a connection, and initiate collaboration with everything and everyone present in the space. A binding tissue starts to grow slowly. They are 'becoming-in-common'.

Even if that means that at moments they edge each other.

A visitor might find it animating when, at times, Leroy's counting synchronises with Richtje's questions. Is Leroy measuring the distance between two questions?

1. Joyce, Stephen. *Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture*. University of Toronto Press, 2013.
2. Trans-Avant-Garde: an interview with Steve McCaffery by Ryan Cox <https://www.raintaxi.com/trans-avant-garde-an-interview-with-steve-mccaffery/>
3. Zukofsky Celia & Louis, *Catullus (Gai Valeri Catulli Veronensis Liber)*, translated by Celia and Louis Zukofsky, in *Complete Short Poetry*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991.
4. Trans-Avant-Garde: an interview with Steve McCaffery by Ryan Cox <https://www.raintaxi.com/trans-avant-garde-an-interview-with-steve-mccaffery/>
5. Rebecca P. Brienen (Rebecca Parker). *Visions of Savage Paradise : Albert Eckhout, Court Painter in Colonial Dutch Brazil*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
6. Stephen Joyce, *Poetic Community: Avant-Garde Activism and Cold War Culture*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013) 139 -146.
7. *Practices and Cultural Heritage: The Critical Capacity of Nostalgia*, A conversation between Marjoca de Greef and Anastasija Pandilovska, *Persistent Traces of Heritage to Come*, 2020, published by Suns and Stars
8. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Theresa, *Artist's Statement / Summary of Work*, 20th Century, UC Berkeley, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive. <https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf4j49n6h6/?order=2&brand=oac4>
9. Gielen, P. 'Netwerkhysterie.' *De Frontlinie: bestaansonzekerheid en gentrificatie in de Creatieve Stad*. Ed. R. Griffioen. De Frontlinie, 2017: 125.