Translation and Agency

Janet A. Kaplan

AICA "Triangular Mutterings" panel Sat., September 16, 2000

In an impassioned letter, circulated internationally via email, about the role o culture, written in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Turkey, Turkish critic and curator Vasif Kortun asked: "What are the possible roles that contemporary visual culture can play in a time like this?" And, he poignantly added, "If you hav tents you can send, please let me know. But at least as important, I look forward to your ideas about healing in whichever form it may come."

The role of cultural work is to envision, engage, interrogate, posit, intercept, intervene, enlarge, and expand to open up at all levels from the cerebral to the visual to the physical. But what, in fact, can cultural criticism offer in the face of disasters whether of "natural" origin like an earthquake or of human-made origin, like a Kosovo, an East Timor, or a Rwanda? How do we translate between the often rarified world of art criticism and the rest of the world in which that work is produced? And where do we locate identity as we negotiate our work? How can the cultural work of the critic/curator/editor, etc., find affiliation and make productive alliance to develo strategies of engagement at the same time that we celebrate difference? In essence what is culture's role in times of emergency?

Attention to the specific, to the moment, to the provisional and the contingent offers one direction for cultural engagement. The American artist Mary Kelly suggest a compelling model in her work *Mea Culpa*, a piece in which she seeks to locate the

intersection of political events, cultural institutions, theoretical discourses, and art practice within the dailiness of everyday experience in the form of compressed lint gathered from a clothes drier into which she has embedded atrocity testimoniesfrom Sarajevo, Johannesburg, PhnomPehn, and Beirut that have been translated into English texts. [Here, for example, is a detail of one panel (as seen in her 1999 installation a Postmasters Gallery in New York) bearing testimony text from Beirut about the effects of high-density explosions. Set into the curved lint, its shape determined by that of the drier's lint filter screen, the piece is organized into a continuous narrative, broken into visual and spatial intervals that sets a slowed rhythm for spectatorship.]

As Juli Carson has described this work in an interview with Kelly published in the Winter 1999 issue of *Art Journal*, "Anecdotal recollections which have been pressed into the nonsubstantive lint collected through a process of filtering, posit an enigmatic trace. The lint trap... paradoxically produces something in the very process of effacement...."

Acts of the individual and the everyday, embedded within larger systems, offer one answer to the question of culture's role in the world--the tactics and ethics of the individual act in the detritus of everyday life. It is a very challenging call in this time o such deep skepticism about the efficacy of social engagement and equally intens scrutiny of the concept of the individual. But, without negating realities of power and influence, we are all embedded in a societal fabric that is similarly made up of th detritus of use and wear--the abrasions of experience and their residue. Mary Kelly has manipulated her materials, an index of domestic quotidian activity, to control these

traces that are then enframed as her art. She offers a powerful metaphor for a build up of actions that can leave unpredictable but definable traces. It is a metaphor for engagement, and an affirmation of the role of the witness, the critic, and the translator as well as the artist, that might carry us, as Kortun put it, from the tents to the healing.

But the question of cultural translation needs to be raised. As Jorge Luis Borges asked in "The Library of Babel," "You who read me--are you certain you understand my language?"

At this cultural moment in which we are ricocheting between diasporic diffusions and intense national affiliations, the agency of the critic's role in cultural translatio takes on special urgency. In the on-going press of mass immigration, refugeeism, and displacement, the complexities of translation and its concomitant misunderstandings are a constant source of both energy and confusion. Within the larger geopolitical and social systems in which critical work is embedded, what is the agency of such cultural work? How should we grapple, in Sarat Maharaj's words, "with absolutist notions of identity, with hard-hat, fixed cultural essences on the one hand and identity as difference, as perpetual translation on the other?"

The act of translation is premised on a utopian notion of permeability and communication across difference. Yet, fictive languages, like those invented by Chinese artists Xu Bing and Wenda Gu frustrate such optimism by humorously reinforcing the absurdity of such an endeavor.

In Xu Bing's A *Book from the Sky* (1987-91), for example, (this photo documents an installation view of the piece at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa), the entire space is covered with a series of beautifully bound boxes arranged in a grid on the floor, giant scrolls arching from the ceiling and smaller scrolls hung from the wall. Printed on the books and the scrolls are approximately four thousand characters of an invented unreadable language of fake words. The typeface, which Xu laboriously carved by hand, is based on a style developed over a thousand years ago during the Song Dynasty by professional Chinese engravers that is still used today in China for books and newspapers. As Xu explained (in an interview conducted by myself and Chinese artist Simon Leung with Wenda Gu, and the British scholar of Chinese art Jonathan Hay, published in the fall 1999 issue of *Art Journal*,) in addition to its historic and contemporary resonances, Xu chose this style because rather than expressing the personality of the artist, it is a typeface that connotes the public. "If I use this public mode of communication, it already belongs to everybody, not just to me." but, as he was quick to point out, "The seriousness of the execution and the presentation sits in tension with the underlying absurdity that animates the project. When the visitor first enters the space, the words look readable. They think the words they see are words they can read. However, when they actually try to read the words, they can't. At its first installation at the National Gallery in Beijing in 1988, Chinese visitors first thought that some of the words were simply wrong. Then they realized that all the words were wrong. Their expected response was disrupted." While, in one sense, Chinese readers were thus distanced from their own language, Chinese is, in fact

a language, in both written and spoken form, that makes multiple translation demands As Xu further explained, "my generation of artists has a very strange relationship with words. During the cultural revolution we could only read Mao's books. And, at that time, Mao was promoting a new, very simplified set of characters, [so] we spent a lot of time memorizing the new words. Then they would change the words the next year. And then they would change them again. It was very confusing, not only with respect to language but culturally. While all Chinese speakers share the Chinese written language--a fundamental basis of Chinese identity--"standard" Chinese is spoken in a dialect foreign to and imposed on most native Chinese speakers a language at once their own and not their own. Thus, in contemporary Chinese art, the citation or use of words, whether written or spoken, is a performance of language both within and against tradition. A performance of culture, state, and self. Thus, for Xu, Chinese characters are written against the goal of translation. And since this piece was produced in China before Xu came to the U.S. its first audience was Chinese, although, from the beginning, he intended it for a larger than Chinese public. As he explained "Chinese audiences lost one part of the meaning and Western audiences lost another. Each side gets the parts that the other doesn't." Such layers of incomprehension are the subject of many of Xu's works.

In his *Introduction to New English Calligraphy* first shown in Finland in 1996, but seen here in an installation view at the ICA in London, he has created a classroom complete with desks, instructional videos, paper, ink, brushes, and even promotional t-shirts. Visitors are invited to engage in the classical act of copying the calligraph

that is set forth in the samples, traditionally a rigorous activity that is associated not only with writing but with spiritual discipline as well. When they first read the characters to be copied, visitors think that they are Chinese. But when they become involved in the actual act of copying, they realize that the words are really characters composed of reconfigured Roman letters that spell out words in English, as in this detail which, when read in a combination of Chinese and Roman systems, here left tc right, but top to bottom, says "The Third Asia Pacific-Triennial of Contemporary Art."

Thus, Xu places participants in a space between two languages, between two cultures, translating Roman letters and English syntax into Chinese script. As Charles Green described it in his review of The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial in the Winter 199 *Art Journal* "affectionately triple-coded, ironic, user-friendly [this work] shatters the binary opposition of Orientalist and post-Orientalist perspectives."

In *Temple of Heaven*, a site-specific installation, here shown in 1988 at P.S. 1 in New York, Wenda Gu, another Chinese artist now living in New York, uses a different typography, here ancient Chinese seal script, which is the oldest recorded form of the Chinese written language that was introduced by China's first emperor, Qing Shi Huang. Because it is a language most contemporary Chinese speakers cannot read, including Gu himself, it liberates the words from their meaning.

Here, using hair collected over the previous 5 years from 325 barber shops around the world, Gu has inscribed four curtain walls with invented, unreadable script based

on Chinese, English, Hindi and Arabic languages. On the ceiling are large letters whos forms synthesize Chinese characters and English letters. On the floor is a Ming-style furniture setting for the tea ceremony with chairs into the seats of which he has set TV monitors showing passing clouds. Visitors are invited to sit on the clouds and meditate in the space.

Interested in cultural fusion, Gu explains "If I used a conventional printing style, both English and Chinese readers would realize immediately whether it was fake o not. By using seal script, on the other hand, neither Chinese nor non-Chinese readers are able to make that determination. I am playinga double-game. Chinese readers ca interpret the concept of an unreadable language as the mythos of a lost history, while non-Chinese readers can interpret it as a misunderstanding of an `exotic' culture. The miswritten language symbolizes misunderstanding as the essence of our knowledge c the material world.

To add to the irony, in response to related earlier ink painting work that Gu did in China, the government suspected that the unreadable characters might have hidder meanings or that Gu was destroying the code of tradition, so they closed his exhibitions several times.

Establishing elaborate structures of pseudo-Chinese lettering,both Xu and Gu invite decoding only to deny it. The illusion of translation is that meaning ha somehow been transferred. Yet, the demands of translation are always out of reach. The transfer of meaning across difference is at best some vague approximation of

possibility. And, of course, the impossibility of translation is part of its allure. We want to know what we cannot know.

Wenda Gu's *United Nations Project: The Babel of theMillenium* (seen here in a 1999 installation at the San Fransicso Museum of Modern Art) prompts thoughts of the fragility of international politics negotiated through the work of simultaneous translators isolated in their individual booths who must instantaneously ferry meaning from one shore to another--a job so difficult that, like air traffic controllers, they require frequent breaks because a lapse of attention (or understanding) has the potential for devastating consequences. And yet how can translation be anything but a compendium of near misses and close calls? Inherent in the need for translation is that the recipients do not have access to the tools by which to evaluate the results for themselves. So who can know how close or far they have come?

At the heart of the debate about inaccuracies of translation is the recognition that a translator carries a culture, not merely a language, from one place to another--tha translation is an interpretation in which the interpreter holds power over the exchange. As St. Jerome is said to have said (already a layer of translation that prompts doubt), the text is a prisoner to be dealt with by a translator as if by a conqueror. Such exigencies of power are central to the complexities of cultural translation as wel

But, within the exercise of power, we should be prepared, as Maharaj explains, for "sparkling unpredictables," for serendipities, for things to go haywire. "Something invariably slips away, is left out, gets omitted, falls through the net of signification. But there is creative force and fission in such moments of apparent slip-

up or divergence from the pre-scripted." It is the creative possibilities of "going wobbly," as he puts it, of failure, mistranslation, mis-match, and melt-down that open a space of energy—the potential for getting it, not necessarily wrong, but at least not quite right.

It is just that possibility that Xu Bing offers in *Net and Leash*, of 1997, an installation seen in the exhibition "Animal, Anima, Animus," in Finland and PS 1 i New York. Here the artist fabricated a steel cage in the form of a text that the show's curator had written about the exhibition and a leash made of wire bent into the form o a verse from a poem by John Berger entitled "They Are the Last" which reads:

Now that they have gone
it is their endurance we miss.
Unlike the tree
the river or the cloud
the animals had eyes
and in their glanc
was performance.

This sheep in a pen made up of looping wire that spells out a poem and a curatorial text raises delicious complications of interspecies translation. The sheep is penned in by this cage of text. Can it make meaning from these words? And, most pointedly from the point of view of the conundrum of translation, how can we ever know?