

Translation

Tangent

Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen. — Ludwig Wittgenstein

4'33". *I just might have made a mistake in addition.* — John Cage

The genre of translation — regardless of the tone of what is being translated — has long been understood to be elegy. Compared to the original, any translation, or so the assumption goes, is never as good; it doesn't live up; it merely substitutes — a regrettably necessary crutch — for the real thing, paling, predictably, in comparison. Doomed from the start, translations are thought to fail, by definition, to achieve the status of art. The "poetry," as Robert Frost famously defined it, is "what gets lost in translation." Untrustworthy (it always loses the poetry), translation's fidelity is suspect from the beginning (a good translation is said to be "faithful" — faint praise for an exception that throws the basic character of all the others into doubt). Though just how faithful even the best translation can be is called into question by conventional wisdom: *traduttore, traditore* as the apposite Italian adage goes ["a translator," to translate, "is a traitor"]. Translation, from these perspectives, is a event of inevitable loss and betrayal.

Even theoretically, the task of translation, traditionally understood, runs up against the limits of its paradoxical demands. On the one hand, the best translation is the one that most closely approaches the original; but that original is precisely what needs to be replaced by something different, something "other," since its own difference — its foreignness — is what called for translation to begin with. And so it cannot, on the other hand, be

approached too closely. (The problem of translation thus replicates the problem of mimesis: the most realistic artwork would not be recognizable as an art work). Some ineliminable difference must assert itself, even as that difference is what translation seeks to eliminate.

But what if the fundamental assumptions behind these received ideas were wrong, or could at least be imagined otherwise? What if the foreignness of another language (including the languages of media) — its inescapable material particularities and unavoidable formal peculiarities — instead permitted and encouraged translation? And what if those translations were recognized as equals to, or even improvements over, the original — precisely to the extent that they departed from it?

Take, for example, the triptych of 72 x 36 inch abutted canvases which formed part of Robert Rauschenberg's 1951 series *White Paintings*, each with an application of commercial white house paint laid in smoothly unexpressive and uninflected roller strokes. The material specifics of that de-skilled production is significant; in comparison with an artists' brush, the roller produces a more uniform surface, spreading the viscous liquid in even swaths and evoking the mechanized production of industrial or non-artistic practice, more hardware-store than atelier, more impersonal servo-mechanism than signature painterly craft (anyone, Rauschenberg insisted, could apply the paint, and the work's conservation instructions include directives for repainting as the lustre dulls).

From the perspective of a narrative history of painting, Rauschenberg's various *White Paintings* appear as variations on the concept of the monochrome, taking their place as manifestations or instantiations of an idea that a number of artists translated into material form throughout the century. In particular, Rauschenberg's paintings add a hue to Alexander Rodchenko's 1921 trio of *Pure Colors: Red, Yellow, Blue*. Rodchenko's

monochromes were themselves a despiritualized, desemanticized and distilled response to Kazimir Malevich's starkly reduced palette of geometric forms from the 'teens, most notably his signature *Black Quadrilateral*, the beautiful *Red Quadrilateral*, and the iconic *White on White*. Restaging Rodchenko's conceptual end-game gambit, Rauschenberg's paintings seem to offer a comparable rebuke to his own contemporaries, casting a quiet cold stare at the psychologised gestures and overwrought facture of abstract expressionism and offering an unheeded warning to the imminent egomaniacal spiritualism of Yves Klein's branded blue.

From a slightly different perspective, however, the *White Paintings* can be seen less in terms of the monochrome tradition of 20th century painting and more as an attempt to translate part of the essential logic of another medium into the realm of painting. John Cage had seen the *White Paintings* early on, incorporating them into his legendary *Theatre Piece No. 1* at Black Mountain College in 1952, and he astutely proclaimed them to be "airports for shadows and dust." Rauschenberg took Cage's cue, explaining in retrospect: "they had to do with shadows and the projection of things in a room onto the blank whiteness". As Branden Joseph has shown, these accounts echo Moholy-Nagy's description of Malevich's *White on White*:

the plain white surface, which constituted an ideal plane for kinetic light and shadow effects which, originating in the surroundings, would fall upon it. In this way, Malevich's picture represented a miniature cinema screen.

The site of "projection" and visual focus, Rauschenberg's paintings give a concrete form to Moholy-Nagy's argument, and they translate the concept of the cinematic screen to the medium of paint. However, rather than presenting an obstacle to translation — something foreign or inherently

removed from the concept of cinema — the material specificity at the heart of Rauschenberg's medium is in fact integral to the realization of that concept. The operation of the roller on the paint encourages the effects of both shadow and dust, pulling the pigment towards the surface and emphasizing the adhesive tack and brilliant reflectance of its oil-glossed sheen. Understood as translations of abstract ideas into formal particulars, Rauschenberg's white canvases can be seen as essentially cinematic paintings.

Translated from film to canvas to criticism to canvas, Cage himself then retranslated the concept of that blank canvas to music: a silent movie, to be sure, but also a radical version of *cinéma pour les oreilles*, and a pre-ambient, protean "music for airports." In 1952, after several years of contemplating similar compositions, Cage scored his landmark *4'33"*: empty staves partitioned into three movements adding up to the eponymous duration. What was tacit in that score became, in a later version, explicitly "*tacet*": the musical directive for an instrument to refrain from playing during an entire movement.* Acknowledging the *White Paintings* as an intertext, Cage actively

* The textual status of *4'33"* is complicated, and its instability is all to the point for understanding the relation of conceptual music to the material fact of writing. David Tudor, who premiered the work in 1952, recalls the first manuscript (now lost):

The original was on music paper, with staves, and it was laid out in measures like the *Music of Changes* except there were no notes. But the time was there, notated exactly like the *Music of Changes* except that the tempo never changed, and there were no occurrences — just blank measures, no rests — and the time was easy to compute. The tempo was 60 (qtd. Fetterman 72).

Tudor produced two subsequent reconstructions of the score (Fetterman 75), and a second manuscript score was written by Cage in 1953 (collection Irwin Kremen), but in a graphic notation of proportional duration that divides the half-dozen pages of the score into vertical bands of varying width; this drawing — which visually echoes Rauschenberg's canvases — served as the basis for at least two different printed editions (*Source: music of the avant-garde 2* [July 1967] and Peters Edition 6777a [1993]). A related piece — whether one should consider it a variation, edition, or an entirely different work is not entirely clear — reads: "I/ TACET/ II/ TACET/ III/ TACET," followed by a discursive note describing the premiere and stipulating that the work

encouraged the comparison; his headnote to an essay on Rauschenberg in *Silence* abruptly announces: "To Whom It May Concern:/ the white paintings came/ first; my silent piece/ came later". In part, Cage's insight regarding the *White Paintings* derived from his ability to see through the concept to its material form, heeding Ludwig Wittgenstein's repeated injunction: "don't think, but look!". Looking with a careful attention *at* the work, rather than *through* the work to its ostensible message, paradoxically permitted Cage to catch a better glimpse of the ideas at play in the *White Paintings*. If nothing else, Cage's patient watch revealed the surface of Rauschenberg's painted canvases to be far from purely or merely achromatic, but rather maculate, with minute tache: "The white paintings caught whatever fell on them; why did I not look at them with my magnifying glass?"

But the series of inspired translations doesn't stop there. With a dumb literalism and obstinate misreading, Pierre Huyghe took a second look at the idea of the blank surface with the very magnifying glass Cage had forgotten to use. Reduplicating the move Cage himself had made when he transferred Rauschenberg's idea from painting to music, Huyghe translated Cage's statement from the visual to the aural, from magnification to amplification. Using computer software to analyze a recording of one performance of Cage's ostensibly silent piece, Huyghe magnified the scale of the digital print, scrutinizing the enlarged surface of 4'33" and dilating the

"may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time." That version was itself published in two slightly but significantly different editions (Peters 6777 [1960] and Peters 6777 [1986]). The latter, in a typeface reproducing Cage's distinctive handwriting, states that the timing of the original movements was 30", 2'23", and 1'40". The former states those times as 33", 2'40", and 1'20". Once again, one must decide whether that discrepancy is merely error or the indication of two distinct compositions. Similarly, the program for the 1952 premiere lists "4 pieces" by John Cage: one entitled 4'33" and the three movements adding up to 4'33" — in sum, a good nine minutes of silence. Do the facts belie the concept? Does the concept trump the facts? In either case, the most elegantly simple composition in the history of music has one of the most convoluted and mysterious textual histories.

ambient noises. Those distended patterns were then rescored using traditional staff paper and made newly audible as the 1997 flute sonata *Partition du silence*. At once understated and exaggerated, the sonata distorts only in so far as it pursues an impeccable fidelity, remaining faithful to the point of outrageous distortion. Huyghe's minutely detailed score, moreover, once again locates the most abstract limits of a concept in the most idiosyncratic material details of an object.

Cage ends his description of Rauschenberg's work with the sentence: "Not ideas, but facts". "No ideas," as William Carlos Williams wrote, "but in things." The fact of things might seem impervious to abstractions, an irreducible residuum that by definition remains unmovably itself, but we only recognize those things when they are enmeshed in the coordinates of some theoretical map. Moreover, the dynamics of translation reveals the degree to which the conceptual relies on the material, the abstract on the minute particular, the proclaimed "dematerialization of the art object" on a new appreciation of the materiality of substrates. Although these terms would seem to be mutually exclusive, defined in part through their opposition to one another, it turns out — again and again — that one term reveals itself as the essential core of the other, requisite rather than banished. The closer one approaches the conceptual the more palpably the material presses forward, even as that material, in turn, is only appreciable within a conceptual framework. Furthermore, this dynamic opens a situation in which the corporeal materiality of facts — the mere fact of a fact — can (in fact) be the idea: "What interests me is a *contact*," Rauschenberg explained with regard to the *White Paintings*, "it is not to express a message". "Translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something," Walter Benjamin argued accordingly, explaining:

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point — establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law accordingly to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity — translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense.

Not expressive, but touching [*tactus*]; like a tangent [from Latin *tactus*, "touch"]; lightly — discrete and thoughtful (with tact): softly, quietly; "*contactet*," as a musical description would read [from Latin *tacere*, "to be silent"]. "The enormous danger inherent in all translations," worried Benjamin, is that "the gates of language [...] may slam shut and enclose the translator in silence".

Then again, Cage might have understood Rauschenberg's "contact" to be a kind of microphone. And Rauschenberg might always have re-translated Cage's composition back to canvas, with a 'pataphysical precision, as a six foot and nine inch extension: four feet and thirty-three inches, exactly.

Poetry may well be "what gets lost in translation," though that phrase should be understood not in the sense of elegiac ruination or privation, but of absorption and reverie — in the way one might be lost in thought. Which is precisely the way thought can be found in materials, ideas lodged in things.

Craig Dworkin

January 2008