

Poetry in Gesturo-Haptic Translation

embroidery creates environments
fire flies insightful wonder
life behind curtains

[begin by reading haiku, then display haiku on screen]

Writing is a type of dance, a specific movement of the body toward expression. This idea, central to the calligraphic tradition, is often lost in the equation of writing with the trace it leaves behind. But can dance leave a similar trace? Not so much as a mark upon a page but as a pattern of movement, which can be both captured and recaptured. This proposal begins in that possibility: writing the gesture in a performance of gestural, dance-based writing, the two in combination as a translation of voice, signs, and movement, as an assembly of actions.

We describe our experiment as ‘poetry in gesturo-haptic translation.’ It begins in questions about form as addressed, for example, by the poet Lyn Hejinian. She writes:

One makes a form, sketches it out, looks to see it, and pursues the suggestions it has made. The initial step is a gesture—or the result of a gesture. (14)

In making a form, one sketches it out in the prefiguring and pre-formative gesture. In writing, a word or phrase. In music, sound or texture. And to adapt the formula: In dance, a first movement, an acting toward. Where the word is present an acting toward the word translated as body-sign. We pursue a gesturo-haptic form in this movement of translation.

[open “haiku drifter” flash file, open “Screen one” and click image to begins playing video]

The result is at once communication and activity, research and ethnography, poetics and poetry, and, finally, documentation and assembly. In some ways, the more modalities or motives we engage with, the more the project returns to itself in a large circle. *[pause, examples onscreen]*. These modes come into play as paths toward a similar communicative object—in this case, or initial haiku. Communication is the sharing of meaningful objects: the spoken, the written, the performative. These are distinct aspects or features of a single object, and they all mediate a shared goal: the possible translation of that object across spaces, times, languages, traditions.

We look to expand the modalities: part alphabetic text, part sound, part image, part movement, but all assembly. The gesturo-haptic performance attempts translation as an extemporaneous convergence of meanings or systems of meaning. As communication display, the performance can also be read as a joint activity elaborating voice, word, and gesture. Sociologist Charles Goodwin describes the ‘mutual elaboration’ of talk and gesture as a kind of “activity in progress,” and one which “provides a relevant language game” that can be used to specify which features of the performance should be attended to (613). In making a display of communication, therefore, we attend to those “initial objects,” but also stay ‘alert’ to what is lost and gained in the activity of translation “in progress.”

We recommend poetry in gesturo-haptic translation as a kind of ethnographic field research. On stage, in fact, we *are* fieldnotes in that our words, images, and gestures symbolize our professional/poetic identities in the movement of live translation. Jean Jackson makes this excellent point about fieldnotes as a form of translation:

It seems that fieldnotes may be a mediator as well. They are a ‘translation’ but are still en route from an internal and other-cultural state to a final destination. (14)

Fieldnote mediation suggests a way into talking about—and thus performing—translation as a kind of transformation across ‘states’ of being or doing. Fieldnotes write the experience of social activity as interactivity across and between languages, cultures popular and otherwise, circuit-worlds. That interactivity, we want to say, is a translation.

We like the language but still wonder what it all means.

We propose a theory of communicative activity, but we can also call it an instance of “relational poetics” as defined by Kristin Prevallet. Relational poetics is concerned with texts “in a constant state of motion, dispersion, and permeability...” (24). Gesturo-haptic translation is always looking at texts in this way and, in our case, with the translation also in constant motion and dispersion. Performance understood as a method for translation makes room, we think, for this kind of dispersion that nonetheless takes on a new readable form. We thus respect “what already exists” and “[translate] the content of the borrowed source into a form...” (24). In constant communication, though, J.R. and I each compose the other as both translator and “borrowed

source,” making the gesturo-haptic performance obvious for what it is: a collective exercise in “collecting evidence” (26) written and performed simultaneously “from several perspectives at once” (28).

In our model, we view the author and spectator as mutual interlopers in the processual performance of assembly. Like the Brechtian *Lehrstücke* [‘learning-play’] (79), gesturo-haptic performance requires the interaction of perceiver and performer, actor and audience, teacher and student. A pedagogy of relational learning as well as a poetics of relational assembly gesturo-haptic translation insists that everyone present both does and does not know the answers.

Performative translation thus adds technique to existing and emerging technologies of assembly. Everyone on hand for a given performance by default becomes a document technician. In his book *In the Vineyard of the Text*, Ivan Illich proposed that “the alphabet is an elegant technology for the visualization of sounds” (39). We end by proposing that gesturo-haptic poetry is an elegant technology for the actualization of translation. (and again, plug the evening performance)

Bill Marsh & J.R. Osborn

San Diego, March 20, 2005

Works Cited

- Brecht, Bertolt. (1992 [1964]). *Brecht on Theater*. Ed. and Tr. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. (1970 [1943]). *The Film Sense*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. (1995). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goodwin, Charles. (1994). "Professional Vision." *American Anthropologist* 96(3). 606-633.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. (2002). *Writing Machines*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Hejinian, Lyn. (2000). *The Language of Inquiry*. Berkeley: UC Press.
- Illich, Ivan. (1993). *In the Vineyard of the Text*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Jackson, Jean E. (1995). "'I Am a Fieldnote': Fieldnotes as a Symbol of Professional Identity." *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*. Ed. Roger Sanjek. Ithaca: Cornell UP. 3-33.
- Prevallet, Kristin. "Writing Is Never by Itself Alone: Six Mini-Essays on Relational Investigative Poetics." *Fence*, 6.1: 19-31.