

THE TRANSLATOR'S VOICE



JANUARY 30 – MAY 03, 2015

› OPENING: Thursday January 29, 2015 – 7pm



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ACCESS

Free admission
Tuesday to Friday: 2-7pm
& Saturday & Sunday: 11am-7pm

The exhibition stays open Bank
Holidays

49 Nord 6 Est - FRAC Lorraine enjoys financial
backing from the Lorraine Regional Council and
the Dac Lorraine at the Ministry of Culture and
Communication

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Is everyone a potential translator?

This is the hypothesis proposed by the exhibition envisioned by young Swiss curator Martin Waldmeier. Works by thirteen artists representing different generations and backgrounds create a pathway allowing the visitor to examine and rethink the place of translation in the age of globalization.

Hegemonic, official, minority, or on the verge of extinction, the status of each language is at the heart of cultural, identity, political, and economic issues. The site of encounter and friction between languages, translation is a vehicle of those power relations.

Translation is used here in the broadest sense of the word. It encompasses attempts at communication in a language other than one's own, regardless of whether it is spoken fluently or just enough to get by, or if it's heavily accented. Will the language of the future emerge from this hybridization?

Artists:

Sylvie Boisseau & Frank Westermeyer, Erik Bünger, Luis Camnitzer, Rainier Ganahl, Dora García, Joseph Grigely, Susan Hiller, Christoph Keller, Fabrice Samyn, Zineb Sedira, Mladen Stilinović, Noline van Harskamp, Ingrid Wildi Merino

Curator: Martin Waldmeier

Laureate of the Award 2014 for Young Curators MARCO/Frac Lorraine/SFKM

A coproduction by 49 Nord 6 Est - FRAC Lorraine, MARCO, Museo de Arte Contemporánea de Vigo, and SFKM, Sogn og Fjordane Kunstmuseum.

THE TRANSLATOR'S VOICE



A word from the curator

“In the beginning there was ... translation,” the Finnish poet and translator, Leevi Lehto, wrote. Translation is the true basis of culture, he argued, and “traffic” between cultures and languages is what lets them grow and change over time. Translation lets the foreign enter our world; it lets the foreign speak to us in a language that we can understand, and, in the process, it expands and changes our point of view.

With “The Translator’s Voice,” we invite you to join us and a group of artists from around the world to reflect on the question of translation in the global present. Today, translations are everywhere: facilitating international trade of goods, enabling diplomatic negotiations between political leaders, interpreting our daily news broadcast, permitting online communication between countries and continents, and introducing us to foreign films and literature. Much of what we know about the world has reached us through translation: as the pace and intensity of global communication and circulation are accelerating, the need for translations is growing.

It’s not only since the popular film “Lost in Translation” that the process of translation has also been associated with loss. Languages and cultures are not different ways of saying the same thing, but different ways of saying different things. Translation is therefore always an approximation, an infinitely difficult task of mediating between different expressions of human experience. How can we, then, think of encounters between languages not only as a challenge and a difficulty, but as a source of creativity and learning? How can we understand the world differently in different languages? Can translation be a place for critical or even subversive activity?

Translation is of course not a new phenomenon, despite globalization. Every encounter between cultures has always required translation, and throughout much of modern history, these encounters have been neither equal nor peaceful. While English is increasingly perceived as a hegemonic language, criticized as displacing minor and vernacular languages, its power is preceded by centuries of colonialism(s) and imperialism(s) that have imposed similarly hegemonic languages upon colonized peoples, systematically using their languages to suppress native cultures.

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If one is to claim that “in the beginning there was translation,” then one must also acknowledge that, from the very beginning, translation has always been defined by the historic relations of power between the colonizers and the colonized, between centers and peripheries, between minor cultures and empires, and some of those relations continue to persist today, albeit in new forms.

The title of this project, “The Translator’s Voice,” points in two thematic directions. On the one hand, it encapsulates the idea of making visible the activity – and the voice – of translation, and the gesture of letting it take the center stage as a unique source of knowledge about the nature of cultural differences and about different ways of expressing identity through language.

On the other hand, the figure of translator becomes a critical metaphor for the linguistic conditions of globalization and the postcolonial era: the growing need for – and the joy, and the pain of – learning foreign languages; the intentional and unintentional multilingualism of migrants, and the phenomenon of hybrid cultures and “accented” ways of speaking and experiencing the world.

Here, translation no longer designates just a profession, or an activity. It represents human condition, and more and more often, we find ourselves assuming the role of a translator...

Martin Waldmeier
Londres, 14/11/2014

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AWARD 2014 FOR YOUNG CURATORS MARCO/FRAC LORRAINE/SFKM

At the young age of 30, curator Martin Waldmeier is the recipient of the MARCO/FRAC Lorraine/SFKM Prize 2014.

The Translator’s Voice

29 May – 30 August 2015

MARCO, Museo de Arte Contemporánea Vigo – Espagne
www.marco.vigo.com

31 October 2015 – 31 January 2016

SFKM, SOGN OG FJORDANE KUNSTMUSEUM Førde – Norvège
www.sfk.museum.no

Martin Waldmeier is a curator and researcher. He studied History of contemporary art and of media, and obtained a Fulbright Award to pursue critical visual studies in the United States at the Arts Institute in Chicago. He is currently pursuing doctoral studies in visual cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London; his dissertation is entitled “The Artist Translator.” Martin has worked as assistant curator and residency coordinator at PROGR Center for Cultural Production and as curator and interim director at Stadtgalerie (both in Bern, Switzerland). He has also recently been the winner of Apexart’s Unsolicited Proposal Program in New York with the exhibition “Death of a Cameraman”.
Born in 1984 in Basel (CH), he lives and works in London and Warsaw.

THE TRANSLATOR'S VOICE

Pictures available on request



BoisseauWestermeyer-1.tif



BoisseauWestermeyer-2.tif



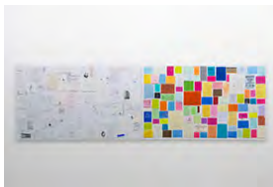
Bunger.tif



Camnitzer.jpg



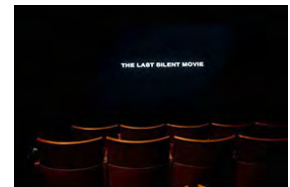
Garcia.jpg



Grigely.jpg



Hiller-1.jpg



Hiller-2.jpg



Keller-1.tif



Keller-2.tif



Samyn.jpeg



Stilinicovic.jpg



Van_Harskamp.jpg



WildiMerino.jpg



Z-LogoExpo.jpg



Z-MartinWaldmeier.jpg

Contact /communication@fraclorraine.org

THE TRANSLATOR'S VOICE



LUIS CAMNITZER

Born in 1937 in Lübeck (DE). Lives in Great Neck, New York (US).

Insults, 2009

Wall text in English, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, French and German
Installation, dimensions variable.

Courtesy of the artist & Alexander Gray Associates, New York.

This piece by Luis Camnitzer consists of one simple sentence, appearing side-by-side in 7 languages.

In an interview, Camnitzer suggested that he “found it interesting to make insults that only satisfy the offender as they are not understandable by the insulted person.” While the statement initially seems to feed nationalist sentiment, its simultaneous presence in multiple languages makes it absurdly self-defeating. However, in Europe, where language is frequently invoked as a means to legitimize policies of exclusion (or even military aggression, as the current conflict over Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine demonstrates), Camnitzer’s statement is as politically charged as it can be.

This interweaving of wordplay, humour, and political and social critique is typical for Camnitzer’s conceptual and immaterial method of working. In the 1960s, Camnitzer was one of the first artists to use printed language as an art medium. Since then, he has developed a large body of work, often characterized by political overtones. His perhaps most well-known piece, “From the Uruguayan Torture Series” (1983-84), is a photo- and text-based response to the violent military dictatorship of Uruguay, where he emigrated to from Germany in 1939, and where he subsequently grew up and received his first training as an artist before ultimately relocating to the United States.

MLADEN STILINOVIC

Born in 1947 in Belgrade (ex-YU). Lives and works in Zagreb (HR).

Artist who Cannot Speak English is No Artist, 1992,

Acrylic paint on artificial silk, 140 x 250 cm. Ed. 7 + 1 A.P.

Courtesy of the artist, Zagreb.

Made as early as 1992, Mladen Stilinović's provocative claim that an artist who doesn't speak English is no artist points to a conflict that is currently hotly debated both in the field of culture and beyond. If speaking a language is akin to addressing a specific linguistic and cultural community, which language should the artist speak? And who is the artist speaking to, after all?

Over the last three decades, and particularly with the fall of the socialist block, art has become globalized, and is now associated with a hypermobility of people as much as with a perpetual flow of information, images and objects across borders. In this system, so Stilinović claims, artists increasingly have no other choice but to speak English in order to be noticed and recognized; in order to "exist." But Stilinović's claim can also be read as a symbol for the paradigmatic changes that took place in Eastern Europe with the fall of socialism, where the English language - and with it, the need to learn it - appeared suddenly as a phenomenon of the new hegemony of Western capitalism.



© the artist, photo: Boris Cvjetanovic

THE TRANSLATOR'S VOICE

**DORA GARCÍA**

Born in 1965 in Valladolid (ES). Lives and works in Barcelona (ES).

Letters to Other Planets, 2005

Translation of the exhibition's press release in 12 languages
12 x 21 x 29.7 cm.

Courtesy of the artist, FRAC Bourgogne collection
& galerie Michel Rein, Paris.

Dora García's *Letters to Other Planets* is an ongoing work in which the artist instructs the inviting institution to work with professional translators to translate the press release of their exhibition - in this case, "The Translator's Voice" - into twelve additional languages that are not immediately recognizable for the average Western European exhibition goer.

For art institutions, press releases serve an important promotional purpose: their role is to help the media inform their readers about current exhibitions and accompanying cultural activities. But, as Dora García suggests, this communication is never quite neutral - rather, public relations work targets certain groups while ignoring others. In this process, the use of language serves as the most important tool. Today, art institutions usually communicate in the major local language as well as, increasingly, in English as the *lingua franca* of "global" culture. But it is precisely the English language that also stands for the "navel-gazing, international snobbery" - to use the artist's words - of the art world.

Dora García's intervention takes precisely the opposite direction. The languages she has chosen are spoken by an enormous amount of people world-wide, yet are virtually non-existent within conversations on art and culture. She therefore understands *Letters to Other Planets* as a utopian gesture of the museum addressing itself to potential communities of addressees far from the art world - hence the allusion to "other planets." She speaks of it as a "poetic statement about worlds that will never meet", as considers it a reminder about the "incredibly rich universes that will never be present in the form of language in a contemporary art gallery."

THE TRANSLATOR'S VOICE



INGRID WILDI MERINO

Born in 1963 in Santiago du Chili (CL). Lives and works in Biel & Geneva (CH).

Otra Mirada a lo Insignificante, 1982-2014

25 photographic prints and texts, dimensions variable

49 Nord 6 Est - Frac Lorraine Collection.

This is an autobiographical work that follows Ingrid Wildi Merino's professional and educational path as a Chilean immigrant in Switzerland. Taken over a period of 32 years and in different places in Switzerland, the series contrasts architecture photography and autobiographical narrative. Wildi Merino is interested in how language skills have been instrumental in finding professional and intellectual opportunity, subsequently transforming the architectural scene of her everyday life.

Initially, Wildi Merino worked, as many immigrants, in low-paid industrial jobs that didn't require speaking. Some years later, she was able to use her scarce income to fund her studies in visual art, paving the way to her current occupation as an artist, curator and academic. By employing the supposedly "neutral" aesthetic of architecture photography, she is not primarily interested in the architecture's visible aesthetic features, but rather in how architecture is embedded within the invisible class fabric of Swiss society. While the industrial landscapes of the agglomeration are places where the working classes and foreigners provide cheap labour, the historic or post-industrial urban architectures of cultural and research institutions are where the Swiss middle classes and global elites work.

Wildi Merino's autobiographical narrative can also be viewed in the particular sociolinguistic context of German-speaking Switzerland, where the dominance of Swiss German creates huge obstacles for immigrants. As an oral language, Swiss German is almost impossible to learn for non-native speakers, yet the Swiss speak it with pride, expressing their strong sense of regional identity. Simultaneously, the language acts to exclude migrant identities and non-native speakers by perpetually marking them as "other" despite the widespread political demand for foreigners to "adjust" and "integrate."

ZINEB SEDIRA

Born in Paris in 1963 (FR). Lives and works in London (GB), Paris (FR) & Algiers (DZ).

Mother Tongue, 2002

3-screen installation with headphones, 4'33'' each

Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration, Palais de la porte Dorée.

Mother Tongue belongs to an early period of Zineb Sedira's work in which she documented the cultural and linguistic ruptures that resulted from her family's successive displacement. Sedira grew up in France (adopting French as her "mother tongue"), while her Algerian parents - which were both involved in Algeria's liberation struggle - continued to speak Arabic. She later settled in England, where she obtained her artistic education, and raised her daughter in an English-speaking environment. In her video installation, Sedira opens up her family's private space and depicts three different constellations of encounter between herself, her daughter and her mother. While each speak different languages, Sedira acts as the translator between generations that no longer possess one shared language.

Informed by an artistic education in the United Kingdom that championed critical feminist and postcolonial ideas, Zineb Sedira's early work in particular gives voice to migrant women of color. But *Mother Tongue* also speaks more in general of how the postcolonial condition can be viewed as a condition of translation: "As a housewife, my mother never had the chance to learn French properly because she had little exposure to French society," Sedira says, and wonders whether there might have been a subconscious rejection of the French language due to her parents' experiences during the colonial era. Sedira also points out how her parents have often experienced racism and discrimination in France, where they lived mostly for economic reasons. But above all, she says, "my parents were worried about the fact that they had to bring up their children in that culture, removed from Algerian traditions, the muslim faith and the Arabic language." In the postcolonial context, the problem of language is both personal and political, and each generation makes its choice differently.



© Collection Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration, Palais de la Porte Dorée

THE TRANSLATOR'S VOICE



SUSAN HILLER

Born in 1940 in Tallahassee, Florida (US). Lives and works in London (GB).

The Last Silent Movie, 2007

Video (200 min., sound and subtitles only),

24 etchings (37 x 42.5 cm, framed).

FRAC Bourgogne Collection.



For *The Last Silent Movie*, the London-based artist Susan Hiller collected voices of the last living speakers of languages that are by now either extinct or severely endangered. By means of archival research, she uncovered twenty-five voice recordings and arranged them into a composition. The aural encounter with them is framed by a series of etchings based on oscilloscope graphs, offering both a “trace” as much as a symbolic “portrait” of each language’s ghostly presence. By now, most of those whose voices speak to us from the depths of the archive have died.

Researchers estimate that in the present, approximately 25 languages disappear each year, continually eradicating an enormous wealth of knowledge about culture, nature, history and language itself. Many endangered languages contain rich oral traditions with stories, songs, and verbal testimony passed on from one generation to the next. These “living archives” of cultural memory are lost when the language ceases to be spoken and understood. Often, languages disappear due to the presence of more powerful, hegemonic languages, which marginalize local and vernacular forms of expression. While half of the world’s languages have already “died” throughout the last 500 years, this process continues unhindered today with the spread of globalization.

Throughout her artistic career, Susan Hiller has been concerned with absence, loss and cultural memory, and in *The Last Silent Movie*, she invites us to reflect on the value of these endangered or silenced languages as much as on the conditions that led to their disappearance. Through the act of listening, these languages temporarily come back to life - and as we listen, “some of their speakers sing; some tell stories, some recite vocabulary lists - and some, directly or indirectly, accuse us - the listeners - of injustice.” (Susan Hiller)

THE TRANSLATOR'S VOICE

**ERIK BÜNGER**

Born in 1976 in Växjö (SE). Lives and works in Berlin (DE).

The Allens, 2004

Video, 28'18'', computer-generated voice sample soundtrack.
Courtesy of the artist.

It is a common practice throughout Europe for foreign-language movies to be dubbed by voice actors in local languages. Across Western Europe, the vast majority of films are released in this manner, and with the exception of large cities, subtitled screenings are considered a product for niche markets and "arthouse" audiences. Voice dubbing is, however, also widely used in Asia and Latin America, highlighting how the increasingly global reach of pop culture faces an equally growing need for localization and adaptation.

Having moved from Sweden to Germany, Erik Bünker took interest in this pop-cultural practice – "being confronted with all these strange, misplaced voices on television and in movie theatres." Since most well-known actors are usually dubbed by the same voice actors, the artist compares the experience to a form of "possession" in which the original film character becomes another one altogether. In the process of dubbing, the foreign films are "domesticated", a term used among translators to designate a translation in which the source text is translated in close conformity to the target language, creating a pleasant reading or listening experience yet frequently incurring a loss of information, cultural specificity and linguistic subtlety.

In Erik Bünker's video, Woody Allen addresses viewers with a constantly shifting, unstable voice; an effect for which the artist used a computer program to change between different language tracks. While individual words can still be understood, it becomes impossible to grasp the overall meaning. Meanwhile, differences between the multiple voices become all the more prominent, as does nonverbal language, playfully raising questions about the relation between language, gesture, voice and cultural identity.

THE TRANSLATOR'S VOICE



JOSEPH GRIGELY

Born in 1956 in East Longmeadow, Massachusetts (US). Lives and works in Chicago (US)

People are Overhearing Us, 2012

pigment print on dibond, acrylic glass; 1.2 x 3.75m

Courtesy of the artist & Air de Paris, Paris.

Joseph Grigely has made the use of writing as a medium of communication between the deaf and the hearing into a preferred point of departure for his work. Having lost the ability to hear during childhood, his artistic practice now frequently explores the creative potentials of the encounter between oral and written forms of communication. His work is not primarily about the deaf, but rather “about those who can hear, and whom the need to communicate on paper turns fortuitously into writers.” (Guillaume Désanges)

Grigely’s *Conversation pieces*, perhaps the most well-known articulations of his artistic practice, are compositions of notes drawn from a large archive of papers, bits and snippets used by Grigely during conversations with the hearing. On them, single words, short sentences, sketches and drawings appear as isolated communicative gestures, removed from the context in which their meaning originally unfolded.

Here, translation appears less as a shift from one language to another. Instead, it is the transfer from oral speech to writing and back that interests Grigely, and that could be regarded as a process of translation. Grigely himself uses the term “transmodality” – in the sense of a transfer of meaning between different forms (modalities) of speech. His notes are communicative hybrids characterized by elements of both spoken and written language. On the one hand, they include questions, hints, misunderstandings and digressions typical of an oral conversation; on the other hand, they possess the permanence of writing. Together, they form an intimate archive of communicative encounters.

While the full meaning of these fragments remains known only to those involved in the conversations, Grigely’s notes speak as voices from an in-between in which meanings can be found, lost, superimposed, imagined and reimagined.

FABRICE SAMYN*Born in 1981 in Brussels (BE). Lives and works in Brussels (BE).****Lettre d'amour à personne inconnue, 2014***

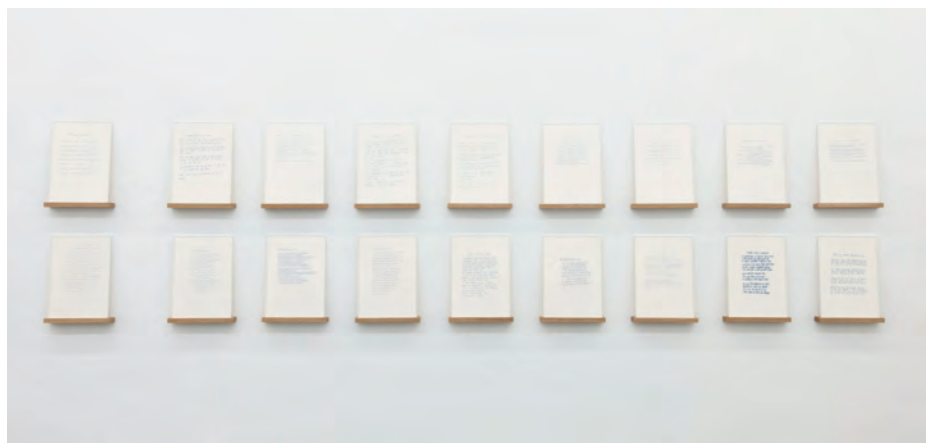
14 handwritten letters, x 23.5 x 5 cm each.

Private Collection.

Known in France as “Telephone Arabe” and in the English-speaking world as “Chinese Whispers” or simply “Telephone”, the works of Xu Bing and Fabrice Samyn employ the simple and humorous principle of a game in which a message is transmitted so often that its meaning changes.

Fabrice Samyn on the other hand asked seventeen translators from different countries to translate, one after the other, a love letter to an unknown person, originally written in French. Samyn's letter circulated around the world along the line of latitude on which Belgium is located (50° North), with the text eventually being translated back into French.

By using this method, the artist contradicts the common belief that a word in one language has an exact counterpart in another. Different languages encapsulate not only different ways of speaking, but different experiences of the world, making the task of translation not just one of transmission, but of re-writing. The work also raises the question of the translations' status as an “original” in its own right (which is a frequent issue of debate among translators). Are translators authors in their own right? Should translations enjoy similar critical recognition as original texts and works of art?



© The artist, photo: Philippe De Gobert

RAINER GANAHL

Born in 1961 in Bludenz (AT). Lives and works in New York (US).

Basic Chinese, 1993-present

Study sheets (selection, 95 ex., 22.9 x 30.5 cm chaque).

Video, colour, sound (selected material, 200' approx.)

I Hate Karl Marx, 2010

Video, colour, sound, 5'49".

Basic Conflicts: Language, 1999

Video, colour, sound, 1'30".

All works: courtesy of the artist.

Rainer Ganahl is an artist with an extraordinary sensibility for language. He has devoted nearly three decades of his artistic career to the hard labour of studying languages, de facto declaring the act of learning an art practice. The enormous amount of work he has produced while doing so broadly reflects on the politics of learning, sheds light on the psychology of immersing oneself in the foreign, and explores the creative and critical possibilities of this infinite task.

Again and again, Ganahl links the activity of studying languages to desire – the desire not only to understand the other, but to *become* other altogether. He notes that the interest of being fluent in a foreign language is almost always linked with geopolitical vectors of power and influence. This may explain why Ganahl has deliberately chosen to learn languages that, from an Euro-centric point of view, are often thought of as “difficult” or even “impossible” to learn, such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean or Russian. In recent years, he focused particularly on Chinese, producing numerous videos, happenings, publications and installations to comment both critically and with irony on the current growth in geopolitical, economic and cultural interest in China.

Ganahl uses video to systematically chronicle his learning efforts, collecting thousands of hours of footage as well as building a huge archive of study materials and notes. A small selection of these, pertaining to the *Basic Chinese* series, are shown in the exhibition. And taking the notion of “becoming other” through immersing oneself in a foreign language yet a step further, the short and funny video *I Hate Karl Marx* imagines a *what if-moment*: What if, in a not-too-distant future, the Anglo-American cultural hegemony of today has been surpassed by the Chinese?

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**SYLVIE BOISSEAU & FRANK WESTERMEYER**

Born in 1970 in Thiès (FR). Born in 1971 in Essen (DE).

Live and work in Geneva (CH) & Berlin (DE).

Chinese is a plus, 2008

Two-channel video (40'), 2 photographs 30.3 x 37.4 cm each.

Courtesy of the artists.



In “Chinese is a plus”, the French-German artist duo Sylvie Boisseau and Frank Westermeyer explore the different motivations for studying the Chinese language in present-day Europe. Acting as participant-observers, they offer viewers a gaze into two different classroom environments at a Chinese language school in Germany.

In one set of encounters, they observe native German adults practicing basic Chinese among each other, while in a parallel scene, they attend a class of second-generation migrant teenagers of Chinese origin. As much as both groups’ attitude toward the Chinese language is different, so is their skill and their respective desire to learn it. Shifting between awkward insecurity and surprising self-determination, the German adults mostly limit their conversation to small talk, revealing the nature of their desire to learn Chinese as both cultural and economic.

The installation’s title, *Chinese is a plus*, in fact points precisely to this rising demand of fluency in Chinese, based on a widespread consensus that China is a growing economic, political and potentially cultural superpower. Here, like with the English language, the desire to learn follows the logic of capital, where fluency in the (future) language of power promises opportunity, progress, and prosperity. For the ethnically Chinese students on the other hand, fluency in Chinese poses itself as a question of cultural identity. What does it mean to be Chinese yet live outside of China? Is it possible to be both Chinese and German at the same time? Where do cultural loyalties lie?



CHRISTOPH KELLER

Lives and works in Berlin (DE).

Interpreters, 2008

Video installation (interpreters' cabin, video projector, headphones, DVD/Video, 26 min, sound)

Courtesy of the artist & Esther Schipper, Berlin.

For *Interpreters*, Christoph Keller invited five professional interpreters to reflect on their experience as translators and speak about how their personal backgrounds and their multilingual upbringing has informed their way of exercising their profession. While we listen to "the translator's voice", as the title of the exhibition suggests, we ourselves take their place, gazing out from inside a translation booth.

Translators often work in the shadow of those that they translate - be it authors of literature, politicians, or other prominent figures. In recent decades, translators increasingly fought for more visibility, recognition, and protection for their profession. Translators are "invisible", both physically and figuratively, the well-known American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti criticized: "Translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when there are little imperfections."

In Christoph Keller's video, these imperfections become noticeable in the form of brief, almost unnoticeable pauses in the translators' speech. They hint at the setup that Keller has chosen to record these interviews: as the translators speak, they interpret the audiovisual "script" on which the work is based from German back into English (what they translate is therefore not necessarily their own story.) They speak of growing up in multi-lingual households; about the excitement and the adrenaline rush of translating live, and even about their ability to "pass" as people of different origins in different countries. Being a translator then no longer just appears as a profession, but as a way of being with multiple places of belonging, bridging multiple experiences of the world.

Interpreter: Tanja Barbian
© The artist & Esther Schipper, Berlin

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**NICOLINE VAN HASKAMP**

Born in 1975 in Hazerswoude (NL). Lives and works in Amsterdam (NL).

English Forecast, 2013

Unique live performance and video work (38')

As part of BMW Tate Live Performance Room, Tate Modern.

English Forecast by Nicoline Van Harskamp investigates how the English language is (and will continue to be) transformed through its growing use as a lingua franca – that is, as a language used for cross-border communication – among non-native English speakers world-wide. Van Harskamp is interested in the idea that English is increasingly “inhabited” by different cultural, social and ethnic groups, each using English in a different manner to suit their own needs and express their particular experience of the world.

The video presented in the exhibition was initially conceived as a live performance for online audiences, and features a team of four voice actors with different mother tongues. During the artist’s research process she interviewed numerous non-native English speakers of different origins, including scientists and language experts. Subsequently, she developed a script in the form of a collage of audio samples. In the performance, the voice actors listen to these samples and repeat what they hear. For us as viewers, their statements come together to create a dissonant and, at times, contradictory narrative, delivered in a multitude of changing phonemes and attitudes. A phonetic transcription hints at the totality of possible sounds in human communication.

Throughout the half-hour performance (which is interrupted by breaks for us to practice new sounds in different “Englishes”), the four protagonists discuss possible futures of the English language. What will it sound like? Will monolingualism be the exception? Will it be easier to switch between languages, and will it even be possible to switch between different “Englishes”? How could non-native speakers overcome the hegemony of standard English and the political and economic system that promotes it? Will English ever be under threat? Can a language be “universal”, or will the English of the future rather be characterized by a “universality of differences”?