

To be translated

By *Isidoro Valcárcel Medina*

Time in motion twists and translates, and does so more thoroughly than even the most experienced professional translator.

We have recourse to translation to make ourselves understood in other ways and other forms of speech... It would seem a logical step to use a different, more current language to convey something that happened; but time, unfortunately, will warp the things we want to preserve, turning them into something else. As Azorín said, "To be translated is for foreigners to savour an insipid delicacy." I have used part of this quote, which fits the case so well, in the title of my presentation, because the freedom of action in not speaking a strange language - as English is to me - is something not to be disdained. Or, to put it differently: ignorance in this case will lead to improvisation, disregard to close attention.

In Spanish now, "being translated" has been substituted by the awful "being versioned." Art today aspires to "version" performance (which, according to the wisdom of the Spanish Royal Academy of Language, is a word of ambiguous gender). So, I wonder, should the translator translate "action" as "performance?" I guess I use "action" because I am not translating. But what about the modes of "actioning" - what happens to them? Are they "performatted?" Does being translated mean being digested? Is action translation or is it the original act? And what if all we were doing in the end was translating the past? I would venture to say that such an approach would be doomed to failure.

It seems like the perfect moment to stop and consider the term "action" itself as a word that simultaneously manifests and defines. Action is, perhaps, the conscious gesture that can best express the clarity of the creative act; in its development it contains the preamble of any work of art, and closes off the circle of expression honestly. The word "action" merges with the word "reality"; and this might be, on the other hand, part of the reason why the term is being pushed aside: it is unsophisticated, and possibly too clear, too explicit for the sophisticated world of art.

But let us not fool ourselves: all works of art are the outcome of an action... and the action in question is the fundamental part of all of them, which is why the word has such a complete, conclusive feel to it. As time has gone by, the word has been influenced by foreign terms, and has also become the product of a certain cultural and even economic speculation.

Yet still, in essence, at a particular moment in time, something takes place... and at a different (also particular) moment, this something is recounted, remembered, possibly even longed for. But the unfortunate thing, perhaps, is that the new version can no longer reproduce (how could it!) what happened.

To be translated, however, with the liberty and autonomy that those involved in this publication have translated, means, happily, "to be reinvented;" and this is where creation fulfils its role.

What cultivated human beings never quite grasp is that to "tell" something is to "make it anew". What the cultured person insists on ignoring is that what has happened - if the aim is to adapt it - is forever being translated into something else. To not allow this something else to come about is to sever a creative possibility. There is no reason for the pleasures of the maker to be any different in essence to the pleasures of the translator - and it goes without saying that I am not referring here to an occupational skill.

Today, most actions "translate" without realising that they have the option of creating. Translating the translator thus seems to be the most appealing option, and this can be done by anyone, from their own home. Ulrichs put a text of his through successive translations into different languages and finally back into his own, and the end result was something other and creative.

Time, all-embracing, passing before and through everything, will translate in spite of us. To ignore this because of a mistakenly conceived artistic intention is to dismiss reality, and to misguidedly imagine that art can only be what surprises us.

I read and my translator translates - perhaps only seconds later - something other. Performers of yesteryear (most of them being people who do not act as creators) translate into the same language at a different time in history; that is, they cannot be understood.

Time slips past, yes, but so do languages, and hopefully ideas, although this axiom is never absolute.

I might perhaps express this more clearly by quoting Illich, who claimed that modern English no longer possesses the necessary characteristics to be able to translate 12th century Latin. Similarly, the analysis of the peculiarities and conditions underlying actions from the sixties and seventies have not been interpreted by the makers of actions now. Instead they continue to repeat the same clichés; by which I mean to say: the experiences of those years cannot be translated by the lexis of today.

Most performers working or emerging today have done, read, or heard yesterday's actions, and today attempt, with the best of intentions and the most respectable lexis, to "translate"... and present their translations to a public who were mostly not there, who did not see, and did not hear the original actions. But what neither the makers of the actions nor their receivers do is to apprehend that they can (or should I say, must) do actions of today for today, while it still makes sense to do them. It is better, certainly, to translate than to repeat, but it is also true to say that there are better things than "to translate" (as I mean it here); and one of those things is to create.

Though if I want to be wholly demanding, the worst thing is not to translate, but to transfer. To translate is not to transfer; translating requires effort and culture.

Half a century of translation, and some have been lucky enough to have to be translated... Half a century of action, and the material of some has been cancelled out, leaving them with nothing to worry about... All of this opens up a route that really need not lead anywhere; it is its own justification. This is the route we might call meaning, and it is the only one acceptable when we speak of art.

Things go wrong when translators think they must translate literally, or artists think that therein lies the seed of success. That is, things go wrong when people think that the seeding of ideas depends on translation (and please understand this word I repeat so often in its broadest sense).

The translator is always unfaithful, and that is his or her salvation; the artist's obligation is not to follow paths already opened. This is the song of happy infidelities; rigorous infidelities, if you will allow the excess, but filled with responsibility and satisfaction. This is why, while the option of reiteration in any form may lead to accuracy, it comes at the cost of sadness or apathy from those who had dreamt of carrying on having fun at the cost of art, if you will forgive my nerve.

An old performer who is no longer having fun repeating the same old stuff (probably because nothing else has arisen inside him), can only translate his dissatisfaction precisely like that, by repeating it, to show that he has, at least, understood, and that the word which translates that fatigued expression is, regrettably, the same.

Having reached this point, now that what society asks of him is that he carry on translating (he, who in such cases enjoys not being understood), he must now openly and shamelessly become a reformer (a discouraging word, which could always be followed by counter-reformer).

The reformer's salvation is in playing a double game: in using the same cards but inventing new relationships between them. He will use the new set of cards, whose very normality makes it somehow enigmatic, to mock at the learned and invite the affection of the unlearned - all of whom will be similarly uncomprehending.

Action, not the product of it, is what is important in art. Not the interpretation of an idea, but the commitment in it.

This is the substance of the game of art in progress and progressing here. But I cannot neglect to say that this progression, this action, is not, or at least not only, a passive staging. A performer is not a performer because he or she knows what role to play, but because he or she truly experiences the role for the first time. Not because he or she is a good interpreter; but because he or she exceeds his or her role. In a thick Spanish dictionary I looked at I read: performing art = art of interpretation. And in a much more discreet one I found: performer = (usage unnecessary, can be substituted by interpreter).

There are considerable differences in the dates on these 18 images, in spite of the fact that they are extremely contemporaneous (more than 25 years in just 4 days). The images are extemporaneous, then.

But performances as they are orchestrated by today's organisers, with an utter lack of concern for their appropriateness, are also extemporaneous. The 18 images, too, share a strong territorial proximity in addition to their closeness in time.

Geographical locations are given for each photograph in addition to their dates. Often, the locations are very far away from each other. Yet all of them were taken in Madrid, in close-lying districts; in some cases, three or four were even taken in the same street. So Buenos Aires, New York, Milan, are nowhere; instead we have Plaza

Benavente or Platerías. Above all, to heighten this contrived parody, some of the actions (which, by now, do not actually deserve all the attention they are getting) lasted for hours; but today they last no longer than the opening of the camera shutter.

Also, when the actions took place they needed no testimony, no guarantee of their existence, no documenting; but in our reality they seem to exist as almost nothing more than certified proof. A sad memory, I think, of something that was once alive. A memory not drawn out of need, or following the artist's own imperatives, but of a shift within the art world, which apparently now needs us to feel, touch, palpate, palpitate in comfort. (Another reason for sadness, this eagerness to combine feeling and touch with comfort.)

To further clarify the reasons behind this series of images of the past made today, I would like to mention that over the years, I have frequently enjoyed messing around with genres, inventing one or two; and so I thought of the word refrito, when – without, of course, relinquishing their creativity – people would use the leftovers from a previous meal, adding a new or original ingredient as the only way to revitalize yesterday's food. Performance in Resistance is, for me, a refrito, a rehash I have, it is true, put all my energies into – but the fundamental reason for making it is to show that it is that, a refrito, the only way to make something meaningful out of this return to the past. I admit, however, that (going back to the quote I introduced this talk with) improvising a poor solution would result in an 'insipid delicacy.'

Translating one thing into another may not be terribly fun, in spite of the fact that as translators, our obligation is to enjoy ourselves and act respectfully – as I ask my translator to do with the word refrito, which is fundamental.

Continuing to resist against disappearance, or at the very least, against an awareness of the process and progress we would wish for, can lead to such desolate scenarios as these 18 odd situations, in which nothing is as it was, but nothing has changed as it should have.

I feel I must point out that we translate just as much when carrying something across from one language into another as when carrying it into a different time, a different place, or a different genre.

The translation I make is not a faithful one. It is wilfully unfaithful. In actual fact, the translation acts faithfully, but becomes unfaithful over time. I do not deliberately make it unfaithful; time turns it into unfaithfulness.

The paradox of 18/18 is that it would be dull of me and for me to simply serve up the ideas of the actions without any new ingredient; that is, were I simply to make a literal translation. Doing so would mean ignoring the reality of the circumstances.

But in whatever I have come up with is the evidence of my physical appearance. The years take their toll, as they say – and photography as yet has not learnt how to reproduce the past.

These gestures (a closer description than actions), were contrived to be photographed, and clearly display their bogus nature right from the start. You are looking at a sham, a forgery, even if this is frowned upon in the art world. But this blatant sham by the action artist who positions himself within the frame for a brief moment, a gesture then to be perpetuated as something remarkable, can only be justified if the first thing it articulates is its outmoded pretension – its resistance, as the title of the work explains, to disappearing... and, what is worse, to progressing.

The parody I intended was to uselessly serve up a pig's ear as a silk purse, to switch outdated for current, repeated for invented. And perhaps I can still claim to have some decorum left in me when I say, "Let me at least make it quick." In the end, the only authentic or respectable thing about the images is the information in the frame: title, place, date: this is where the communication lies. The viewer may use it to deduce whether this mismatch between image and text is plausible. And yes, it would be, if what I was intending was to make performance resist, not against its own disappearance, but against its own evolution – its reinvention, if I may insist.

And now I'd like to take a look at what was really worthwhile in this drawn-out path of expression and emission of ideas. As it is easy to see, all the work here was made possible by a group of people who put their efforts into it and actually came up with the idea for it. The so-called maker of it, here before you, can definitely say that without the efforts of these people the project would never have come to fruition. So, from the organisers to the writers, to those who worked on the design and the technical aspects, all have left their imprint on this delightful experience.

Many of them jumped on the bandwagon, so to speak, of something already made, and stayed graciously there; some of them contrary to my

advice not to take it too seriously. Miren Jaio, in particular, whom I spoke to frequently, would not listen to my advice to just give up on the whole enterprise.

The lukewarm response I felt towards the initial theme of the project was partly the reason for my slightly deceptive stance; but I have later had to reiterate my thanks for their dedication, because I have ended up considering the whole experience as a peculiar creative adventure. As always, I guess, I am supposed to have contributed something when all I actually did was jump on the bandwagon... while, not wanting to be completely cynical, I did take care to be faithful to my desire for unfaithfulness.

What I wanted, then (by way of a joke), was for the documentation I so strongly criticise to become the main element in the composition. The entrancement of putting together the images with the photographer, however, amounted to less in the end than the images themselves: that is, just the contrary to what I usually maintain.

And then there is this book – a multiple, of multiple origins, and the supposed originator of it has witnessed how his own intervention has been surpassed by over 30 people (I think) who have added details and perspectives onto the unseen original occurrence, whose memory I have treated so falsely. The narrators, for instance, have managed to dignify my possibly disrespectful remembrance of the past.

To present a series of occurrences from years ago as something entirely relevant to the present is to make a definite statement in favour of reiteration, or of misencounters. The different expressive derivations of this, however, are certainly extremely relevant to the present, and that is the case with the external contributions to this project.

Circumstances were fundamental in determining the work I proposed. You can't just act like nothing has happened, because many things have happened. But beyond that, what took place afterwards was the obligatory progression of ideas and artistic modes, if we are still talking of art here.

If the intrinsic need in creative expression to innovate in any setting were not enough, there is always the sometimes radical change in customs and surroundings that makes it unreal to carry on behaving as you did before. In art, saying something once, but stubbornly, is enough to lay it down; there is no need to repeat it exactly the same way; you have to add something to it, even if all you want is to say the same thing again.

In this case, making a book which includes the extrapersonal and extraterritorial derivations of a series of photographs, which were a corollary to other distant previous acts, has led from a simple original idea to some surprising, original consequences. I don't think I could ask for anything more.

Let us now, then, take a look at the complex, varied range of written and even performative interventions that have enriched this simple (I insist) sample of memories, resulting in an often rich and unexpected fabric.

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18 Pictures and 18 Stories

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