



trans-mute*

Daniela Sneppova

abstract

The following is a test of the limits of language. It is an attempt to translate a performance that took place at the 'Silence is (not) sexy' stream at the EGOS conference in Barcelona in the summer of 2002. This textual representation moves between the inspiration – the triggers that led to the creation of the performance – and a description of what the audience participated in. The blacked out, missing text performs a number of functions. It refers to the acts of censorship by many Eastern European countries before the fall of Communism: Censors frequently obscured words or phrases in personal correspondence sent between nations, families and friends. The missing text also seeks to reproduce the gaps and silences of translation. It is difficult to discern what is left out of a translation. We take for granted that what is missing from a translated text. However, I am interested in the cumulative effects of these 'minor' absences. Thus the invisibility of absence is something that is explored in the on-line project. The on-line project offers a different kind of text with which the user must actively engage; an environment of sound and images that responds to mouse movements and clicks. The blacked out text is meant to remind readers of the on-line dimension of this project. Readers will always make connections when reading any text; in this article that process is exaggerated, encouraging readers to 'fill in the blanks.' Each text, the written and the on-line project, requires a different kind of interaction, a different active reader.

The Voice, the Gaze and the Possibilities of Interpretation

Working between two cultures entails negotiations between many of the issues involved with translation. This living process led me to an exploration of the mediums of communication and some of their conventions. [REDACTED] necessitates a medium. A mediation. If we consider that 'communication' in the 19th C. mostly meant 'a form of transportation' – the question might be: how do we 'transport' an experience from one consciousness to another?

Can [REDACTED]? 'Silence' has been used metaphorically in the discourse mapping the 'immigrant experience' to suggest that the process of dislocation involves

* The 'Silence is (not) sexy' stream at the 2002 EGOS conference was unlike any other conference or conference stream I have witnessed. I would like to thank the organizers for working to create an unusual, exciting and dynamic stream by opening the boundaries of intellectual exploration to include other possibilities of representation, expression and interaction. I would also like to thank Keir Keightley for his ongoing encouragement and support throughout this process.

the loss of a voice, the erasure of a speaking body, and therefore [REDACTED] or loss of experience and cultural presence. The performance attempted to explore other possible meanings and experiences of the silenced word/world of exile, by mobilizing “displacement as a strategy of assimilation and resistance.”¹ Within (the experience of) exile is a disturbance, a gap, [REDACTED], a transposition which may offer another possible interpretation/translation of ‘silence’. Through the dislocation of exile there is the potential to create a third space involving a negotiation between the home that is no longer and the home that has not yet become real: an interaction between the you that departed and the you that has not yet arrived.

The details of identity are sifted through media of [REDACTED], whether they take visual or auditory forms or come fully into existence through more experimental, experiential attempts at self-realization and communication. How culturally [REDACTED] in language are our relationships? Some would argue that we are completely configured by our inauguration into the systems of language. But how does this shift for the polyglot, the transnational nomad?

Octavio Paz reminds us that each translation is the creation of a new text. Could we transpose this idea onto the acquisition of a new language, and through it, the construction of a new [REDACTED], a new identity, a new subjectivity?

How can you represent yourself in another tongue, one that already has names for you that you don’t recognize: she, girl, woman, ona holka, zenska, elle, mademoiselle, madame, sie, fraulein, frau...and those are just the more ambivalent ones (unlike whore, bitch, kunda, putain...). Will the new culture ever feel [REDACTED], like an old warm coat that has melded with your body through years of wear? And so what if it doesn’t quite fit? Does it make you more aware of the processes involved in your (own) elaborate construction as you struggle between [REDACTED] systems?

“Identity is only perceptible through a relation to an other – which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other.”²

But what if this diverging and merging is multiple? How many [REDACTED] can you contain or cross and how are they affected by each other?

Prague, Summer, 1997

Walking down four flights of stairs to her mailbox was always pleasurable. The trip was filled with an anticipation that perhaps someone was [REDACTED] for her under lock and key. The iron railing she followed down to the front lobby was guarded by the head of a woman embedded in the archway at the bottom of the stairs. Painted white she blended

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- 1 Hirsch, M. (1994) ‘Pictures of a Displaced Girlhood’, in A. Bammer (ed.) *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*. Indiana University Press, 88.
 - 2 Phelan, P. (1993) *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge, 7.

into the architecture. She was invisible but not [REDACTED]. If you knew where to look, she greeted you with an air of mystery. Who was she? What was she waiting for?

Within a three day period, she received letters from her three lovers, all living in different places, writing in three different languages. Reading their words, what struck her was not only how she imagined each individual through his combination of words, working in conjunction with her memories of each person; but even more forcefully, she realized how differently each one was constructing her. Strewn through time, these differences might not have been as apparent as they now were, all laying together on her kitchen table. So, where was she? Where could she be found, in and between these versions of her, the interpellated subject, the desired object?

She recognized herself in each letter, yet each letter was different. There was [REDACTED] as well as difference in their words: a repetition of [REDACTED], a repetition of response, elements of the [REDACTED] melded with the unexpected. This [REDACTED] across cultures was mediated through one agent.

How did the various languages figure in these transmutations of her? Was she a different person when she spoke a different language? Did each language have something the others did not? A different set of personal possibilities, [REDACTED], identities? How was her knowledge and relationship to her 'mother tongue' different from languages she learned later in life, languages learned as a teenager, as an adult? Does the age of language acquisition permanently affect our [REDACTED] and understanding and experience of that language? Is it possible that there is a trace of the specific age of acquisition that lingers as you speak a particular tongue, and therefore a trace of a time and place in language and speech?

A Screen, a Body and Eight Radios

The cast of characters for the performance included a video tape featuring three pre-recorded settings/actors (presented in the form of a large video projection), a live performer (the body) wrapped from head to foot in newspapers, handwritten letters and rope, and 8 small radios, suspended from the ceiling and tuned to various stations.

The image of a torso framed from neck to stomach appears onscreen. A woman's hands, continuously unbutton shirt after shirt on her own [REDACTED]. In an endless scene of 'de-consumption', the woman attempts to rid herself of her garments, compulsively removing one after the other, only to reveal [REDACTED] underneath. The erotic potential of disrobing is postponed and thwarted through this scene of endless repetition which never culminates in skin, but instead devolves into an obsessive ritual. The repetitive action creates a pattern of motion with a hand dropping each shirt to an off-screen space at the bottom of the screen. Positioned under the screen is an actual pile of clothing that bridges the 'real' and 'mediated' spaces by suggesting that the refuse from the scene on the screen has begun to spread to the 'real' space of the [REDACTED]. This is further underlined at the conclusion of the performance when the 'live' performer will put on a shirt from the pile that matches the first shirt shown on screen and then exit the performance space.

But long before that happens, the bound figure on screen is displaced at various points by traveling shots of suburban scenes in North America or by 'electronic snow' in the form of video static. This technical break (the snow) is co-ordinated with audio [REDACTED] in the video soundtrack. These narrative elements in the video are further [REDACTED] by a sequence of a figure, bound in newspapers from head to toe, sitting on a stool in an empty room. The projected image reproduces the 'live' figure who exists in the room together with the audience.

The 'live' body on display in the performance space, a figure bound from head to foot, is an uncomfortable presence, creating a sense of unease among the audience members.³ The figure's gender is temporarily suspended, its identity is [REDACTED], wrapped in newspapers, hand-written letters and tied with rope. Eventually it begins to scratch at its various restraints. Words begin to itch, burn, define, explain, ooze, categorize, ignite, describe and irritate. They are not her words, but they [REDACTED] her, mold her, producing an outline that is at once her and not her.

Prague, Fall, 1997

She walked down Jindriska Ulice (St.). It was turning into a cool fall. I need a coat she thought in English and imagined one in Czech. She had noticed a pawn shop on her way home from work. There was a long, black, men's leather coat in the window. She went in and asked how much it was, in Czech. She kept forgetting to be formal when [REDACTED] to strangers. Only friends, family and lovers should address each other with such familiarity. The large man behind the small counter gave her a strange look. Was she his long lost sister? Was he the brother she had never met? She was still in transposition mode, [REDACTED] between two cultures, the transition not yet complete: speaking one language but dreaming in another. The alignment would come within another week, she estimated. It couldn't take another month.

Is intimacy [REDACTED] at different distances in particular languages?

How are love, fear, danger, revenge, longing, joy, loneliness, lust translated from tongue to tongue, body to body, without losing the nuances of a particular cultural experience? It can be difficult enough between two people [REDACTED] the same language living in the same location/locale. What happens when we add a translation between two or more cultures? The limits of language become more apparent in acts of translation.

The pawn shop was one small room piled to the ceiling with other people's garbage: old radios, watches, clothing, a [REDACTED], a bike, broken lamps, some gold jewelry and dishes. There were many shops like this in Prague, stocked with what the Czechs in Germany had picked out of the Germans' garbage and brought back [REDACTED].

3 This character was inspired by images from earlier works of art that have had a long resonance with me: the photographic collages by Dada artist John Heartfield who fought against fascism in Germany with words and images and characters from Czech director Vera Chytilova's 1968 film *Daisies*. In the film two rebellious woman characters end up in an apocalyptic vision, dressed in only newspapers, tidying a room they destroyed.

Capitalism had arrived at the same time the borders had opened and she was finally allowed to return home, 21 years after her expulsion. She tried the coat on; it was large but that was desirable so a big sweater could fit underneath it. '400 crowns' her would-be brother said. Well, it would have to wait until payday, then.

A week later, when she returned for the coat, it was no longer in the window. It had been replaced by a glass coffee table, a yellow ski jacket and a red pull-down lamp. Was she too late? She entered the store to find out what had happened to it. There was an old man ahead of her trying to sell the owner a watch and some jewelry. She looked around the store as they squabbled to reach a financial agreement. There was only enough room for about four customers at a time amongst the piles of [REDACTED]. As the old man squeezed past her to exit, he put his earnings into a small change purse. He looked neither happy nor sad. It was hard to tell whether he had left behind his own [REDACTED] or those scavenged from someone else. The same large man as before sat behind the small counter. 'I knew you would be back', said her [REDACTED] brother as he pulled her coat from a pile of clothing behind his chair. The radios on the shelves above him were all blaring the same radio station, each advertising the same radio station.

It was cold enough for her to wear her new coat immediately. Walking home she admired her [REDACTED] in a window. Warm, stylish and affordable. Whose coat was this before? She noticed it had a [REDACTED] smell. What was it? When she got home she greeted the plaster 'woman in waiting' and went upstairs to her two small rooms to examine her new treasure further. She hadn't noticed before, but there were [REDACTED] printed on the lining, words in what [REDACTED] to be German. She could not read all of them. They created a pattern and she wondered whether they were just decoration or had some other significance. They seemed to be names of places. She had been to some of them. The scent of the leather had traces of tobacco and something else she recognized, but it still remained a [REDACTED].

A Screen, a Body and Eight Radios Collide

At certain moments, during the performance, the actions of the 'live' figure before the audience align themselves with those of the figure on screen. It is the same figure repeating the same action with an uncanny [REDACTED], the same, but different.

A loop occurs when a pattern is established, something repeats and over time becomes familiar, expected. The '[REDACTED]' and the mediated performance exist in the space together, playing with our everyday experiences of liveness and instantaneous video surveillance. We are now used to live video projection from a space in which we exist e.g., watching ourselves on the TVs of a shop window with a video camera aiming out at the sidewalk. Walking through a bank lobby we witness our actions mirrored on a monitor mounted on the ceiling. In the performance space there occurs a [REDACTED] of vision for a binocular audience: one vision, obviously, a representation, a projection on the screen, the other an action transpiring in 'real' space shared with the audience, in real time.

The projected image seems 'live,' like a direct broadcast (a 'live feed') from within the performance space, perhaps a camera fixed on the performer. But the room represented

on screen is clearly different from the performance space. This could mean either that the live performance is a copy of the projected one, shot earlier in another place, or that there is another, [REDACTED] performance going on at the same moment somewhere else. If both figures are performing is there a 'real', authentic, [REDACTED] performance? Is the live a copy of the prerecorded? And if so, is either unreal?⁴

Prague, Late Fall, 1968

At the age of four she was awakened in the middle of the night, dressed and put into a car by her mother. She was then driven three hours to the West German [REDACTED] where her father was waiting for them. He had left days earlier and they just managed to get out before the borders closed for the next 21 years.

'Where are we going?', she asked

'We are going on a vacation', they responded, not knowing how to tell her the [REDACTED].

A year later, after 3 months in a refugee camp and yet another new country on the other side of an ocean, she felt something was very wrong. When was this holiday going to end?

'There's no [REDACTED] like home', but after a month or a year or a decade 'home' is a nostalgic entity, an idea, a photograph, something to quote. 'Home' becomes a temporal category, distant in time as much as in space. Was there ever a place like [REDACTED]?

Voice/Noise/Silence

In the performance space, 8 radios are suspended from the ceiling at ear level. They float effortlessly (via almost invisible fishing line) with their antennas extended, [REDACTED] and disseminating information throughout the audience. The sound emanating from them varies, since each is tuned to a different station. Some are transmitting a pre-recorded voice speaking Spanish, another speaking French, speaking English, speaking Czech, and still others are wavering between static and barely discernable commercial messages or pop music from local stations. The broadcasts are coming from different places, some transmitted from the room of the performance (with pre-recorded material broadcast from portable transmitters) while others are [REDACTED] 'live' from the airwaves of Barcelona. Unless you are in close proximity to a radio, however, it is difficult to hear any one voice distinctly, as the 8 radios seem to create a chaotic conversation amongst themselves. The soundtrack is a multi-track collage allowing different points of access dependant on what languages each audience member can discern and where she or he is standing. This radio multi-track mixes with the soundtrack emanating from and

4 The idea of the self as a performed character, the product of a specific location was explored by Erving Goffman (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, and later by other theorists such as Judith Butler (1990) *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.

accompanying the video: a digitally manipulated recording of paper being ripped. Through processing, these ripping sounds have left behind their status as indices or ████████ of the real world. They have entered the realm of machine sound, their original source no longer easily recognizable. This is mixed with sounds from the suburbs (birds and cars) and moments without any sound. At various points in the performance all sound sources are cut leaving room for the possibility of ████████. The radios with their signals cut transmit static. The room generates its own sounds and the audience breathes, shifts, and whispers. Stopping a sound source does not equal silence. ████████ is not what we may think it is. The OED has 4 definitions for the word silence, and it exists as both a verb and a noun: something to be described and an action to be taken, an experience and a command.

The video soundtrack goes quiet as the performer finally manages to rip her way out of her bondage, only to reveal herself not naked but clothed, covered in a fabric that has more words printed on it. She walks to the screen, puts on the coat from the pile of clothes that seems to have spilled into the room from the video. She walks through the audience turning off the radios one by one and then exits. The audience applauds.

The process does not end, the conversation continues.

the author

Daniela Sneppova is a performance and installation artist whose works in film, photography, video and sound have been exhibited internationally. Her father, Ludek Snepp, was a noted Czech novelist who was forced to flee with his family as a result of the 1968 Soviet invasion. She currently teaches visual art and media studies at the University of Western Ontario in Canada.
E-mail: dsneppov@uwo.ca