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THE TRANSLATIONAL TURN IN VISUAL CULTURE

In recent years, translation has become a widely used concept in the visual arts. Proof of this can be found in the numerous international events organized on the subject – such as international exhibitions (“Found in Translation” at the Guggenheim in New York, 2011) and conferences (“Art in Translation: International Conference on Language and the Arts” in Reykjavík, 2012) – in studies carried out at many academic centres, and in publications. Although this global interest focuses mainly on the relationship that art establishes with translation, its conceptual value has developed from linguistic and literary ideas or from the transcultural condition of global art. This is significant because it reveals that translation applied to the world of art has not come from the field of art theory but from a comparative approach.

Comparative literature, critical iconology, visual studies, and translation studies have had to conform to the new cultural analyses developed by cultural studies and certain philosophical tendencies born in post-structuralism and deconstructionism. The concept of “culture”, understood as the dialectic between being in its relationship with society, has been the axis on which translation has been related to the scope of art theory and the production of visual artefacts. In the early 1990s, theoretical and artistic works arose in the English-speaking¹ context that developed the concept of translation as a practice that is indispensable to the understanding, interpretation, and dissemination of contemporary art. Since then, artistic practices have also suffered from a tendency to move towards cultural issues, creating common areas, affinities, and interests with linguistic and cultural translation theories.

In this context, the reasons for the growth of translation as an “artistic interest” depend on many complex contemporary phenomena: the globalization of the art market; the internationalization of art that has expanded the possibilities of the displacement of works (biennales, international shows, etc.)² and thereby increased the number of conferences and symposia on issues that directly or indirectly seek to analyse and reflect on linguistic, cultural, and artistic processes; and –

¹ Mirzoeff, Nicholas (1999). *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. London: Routledge; Jay, Martin (1993). *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Jencks, Charles, (ed.) (1995). *Visual Culture*. London and New York: Routledge; Bal, Mieke, and Bryson, Norman (1991). Semiotics and Art History. *The Art Bulletin*, 73, 2, 174-298; Bal, Mieke (1997). *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

² See the texts recollected in Belting, Hans; Buddensieg, Andrea; Weibel, Peter (eds.) (2013). *The Global Contemporary: The Rise of New Art World after 1989*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press for ZKM, Karlsruhe.

finally – the importance of visual communication, especially the role of digital platforms (film, video, television, the internet) and the emergence of multimedia products and new technologies applied to audiovisual media that have made possible the collapse of any linguistic and cultural border. From these international phenomena, new concepts have arisen, along with the need to use other instruments and other models of interpretation of artistic works. Some issues related to translation have been integrated with the visual arts: firstly as an indispensable tool for interpreting works of art produced in different geographical or cultural environments, and secondly as a “formal” element essential for the artefacts that represent artistic, social, anthropological, or political realities. Thanks to these new perspectives, translation is now used as a strategy to interrogate and understand –epistemologically, ontologically, and philosophically – the expressive possibilities opened up by works of art.³

The main aim of this volume is to weave a theoretical alliance between art and visual translation by linking more closely to the interdisciplinary debate that sees in translation the metaphor of a transfer (*translatio*) of meanings from the word (*logos*) to the image (*eikon*), and perceives in inter-artistic production the manifestation of a poetics of cultural and intercultural relationship.⁴ Current studies of

³In 2007, the British *Journal of Visual Culture* dedicated a monograph to the subject of translation in visual studies, compiling articles by Mieke Bal (2002), Joanna Morra (2000), Gary Shapiro (1997); Juliet Steyn (1996), Lawrence Venuti (1998), etc. (*Journal of Visual Culture*, 6, 5. 2007).

⁴Rampley, Matthew. “Visual Rhetoric”. In: Rampley, Matthew (ed.) (2005). *Exploring Visual Culture*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 133-148; Steiner, Wendy (1982). *The Color of Rhetoric*. Chicago: The University Chicago Press; Wagner, Peter. “Introduction: Ekphrasis, Iconotexts, and Intermediality – the State(s) of the Art(s)”. In: Wagner, Peter (ed.) (1996), *Icons, texts, iconotexts: essays on ekphrasis and Intermediality*. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1-40; Mitchell, William J. T. (1994).

vision have encouraged the use of the term “visual translation” not only to refer to a theoretical comparison between art and literature, but also – through new readings and methodologies – to interpret contemporary artistic phenomena, whose conceptual axes are identity, society, territory, and politics. The act of interpreting thus arises from the need to decode the work of art in relation to the historical and geographical context in which it was produced, and in relation to the context in which its reception takes place. In a global world, however, many works of art seem to remain within an intellectual oblivion created by the difficulty of understanding and deciphering them. The concept of visual translation is therefore related to both a hermeneutical notion that reflects on the complexities of the contemporary artistic artefact and an epistemological attempt at reflection on the cultural and linguistic exchanges that take place between subjects and international events. In the era of globalization⁵, art’s public is heterogeneous, mobile, unpredictable, diasporic, and hybrid. Visual translation falls within the broader scope of visual communication, the transmission of messages, the media used as vehicles of information and, consequently, within the way of receiving and decoding these elements culturally. Translation applied to the artistic field must be understood as a segment of human communication involved in every act of interpretation of art in its phases of emission and reception.⁶

Thus, the articles collected in this volume analyse theories and artistic praxes using the concept of translation not only in its linguistic and

Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation. Chicago: The University Press of Chicago.

⁵ See Guasch, Anna Maria (2017). *El Arte en la era de lo global, 1989-2015*. Madrid: Alianza.

⁶ Di Paola, Modesta (2019). *L’arte che traduce. La traduzione visuale nell’opera di Antoni Muntadas*, Milan: Mimesis.

cultural sense but also in its inter-artistic and inter-medial aspects. The main objective of this publication is to bring to light the “contact zones” between different disciplines (visual studies, translation studies, comparative literature, iconology, and political philosophy) studying the relationship between translation and art – an interest confirmed by the semantic osmosis between text and image that favours the transmigration of meanings on a terminological level. To use terminology familiar from translation studies, we could call these issues “contact zones” in which one can find the affinities and interferences between translation and visual production. The authors included in this volume portray these contact zones, moving among heterogeneous cultural expressions – often far apart in time and space – and, most of all, identifying and illustrating an epistemological route and a hermeneutical approach that problematizes and also gives meaning to visual translation. These categories are not sealed off from one another – quite the reverse, as terms that appear under one rubric could easily be transferred to another.

The first contact zone investigates aesthetic historiography, literature, and philosophy to find inter-artistic forms that use the apparatus of translation in a metaphorical way. Here, from modern theories of visual culture and visual rhetoric to linguistic interests within the field of philosophy, translation is described as a metaphorical element of the relationship between *icono* and *logos*. **Francisco Jarauta** analyses some important theoretical statements on the concept of translation provided by Walter Benjamin. We are indebted to Benjamin for giving the most revealing description of the translator’s activity within the ontological approaches. In his essay *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* [“The Task of the

Translator”], Benjamin founded the basis of a metaphysical translation. This conforms to his idea that what inspires the task of translator is the great opportunity to integrate different languages in one true, perfect, and universal language. Jarauta points to Benjamin’s universal language, which reveals the intimate relationship between languages as well as the possibility of translation in the form of an interlinear version that matches language and revelation. **Daniel Lesmes** also confronts Benjamin’s thinking. Under the light of visual translation, Lesmes analyses Benjamin’s concepts of similarity and resemblance, conceiving the reading of images from their “virtual similarities”. Beginning with Benjamin’s theory of translation, Lesmes rethinks the virtual as visual and exposes a visual translation within what Benjamin called dialectical images. From the field of comparison between image and word, **Javier Arnaldo** considers the artistic work of Henry Fuseli, which links visual translation with literary models. Through the concept of “mythical translation” coined by Novalis, Arnaldo considers the idea of translation as infinitely reflective, projecting its acts in way that is similar to what happens with sight when mirrors are facing each other. From the field of curatorial studies and art production, **Virgilio Berardocco**, via Harald Szeemann’s critical and exhibition work, analyses the unfinished project of modernism as the biblical tower of Babel, which provides an effective and innovative key of interpretation, and reveals modernism’s differences and polysemic richness. If Berardocco finds a confrontation with the utopia of Babel from curatorial statements, **Inés Molina** moves around the same myth from the perspective of the “architectural image” and its relation with communitarian urban experiences developed during the decades of the 1960s and 1970s.

In the second contact zone, authors analyse the concept of visual translation from colonialist, imperialist, and post-colonialist fields. Here, translation is an indispensable mediation between cultures, often denouncing the manipulations of canons and power. The importance of the “point of view” is especially underlined as a programmatic declaration in the field of visual arts, an ideological admission that perceives “the agent that sees” within its narrative cultural implications. This is a crucial move to overcome certain modernist hypotheses, for which even the radical option of silence served to ratify the separation and – at the same time – a hypothetical pureness of the various artistic fields. **Sol Izquierdo**, using the category of cultural translation for the analysis of modern interpretations of the Ajanta paintings, sheds light on a transmedial, translocal, and linked process of transcription and recodification of images in relationship with their artistic contexts, and he observes how a globalized panorama was connected by a common pictorial source. **Julia Skelly** analyses Teresa Margolles’s textile works as transcultural objects that, within the context of the global art world, are acknowledged *as* artworks. Through the lens of visual translation, she describes the political work that Margolles makes as that of a global contemporary artist who employs textiles to create death-related artworks and who enacts a feminist, material translation that has implications for global art histories while unveiling the global epidemic of femicide. **Vega Tescari** analyses the historical and political meditation that the video artist Chen Chieh-jen (1960) makes in his works, characterized by the insertion of archival footage in close dialogue with actual and contemporary images. Looking at China’s past in relation to its present, Chen’s work underlines social injuries,

unsatisfied expectations, misinterpretations, and illicit appropriations by the Western gaze.

In the third contact zone, visual translation comes to a definition inherent in the very condition of contemporary globalisation, and consequently the ontological necessity or impossibility of a dialogue between cultures in which the unfamiliarity of idioms has to find compensation through an understanding of the images accompanying trade at all levels of communication. Here, the theory of visual translation arises in relation to the phenomenon of crossing boundaries between disciplines, media, and cultures. Interdisciplinarity and intermediality are necessary and essential to the study of complex and multifaceted contemporary realities. **Birgit Mersman** analyses Xu Bing's artistic attempts to replace linguistic translation by icon transcoding in order to adapt to the digital "pictographic age" of global visual communication. She interprets Bing's *Book from the Ground* as a new artistic Babel project, providing a universal visual translation tool in times of digital transformation. **Alaa Badr**, within the wider context of the new generation of Arab photographers that emerged after the "Arab Spring" revolts in the early 2010s, considers the power of photography both as a medium for a visual discourse on identity and as a tool with which artists express themselves through a "revolutionary art." Photography acts as a "double actant": the photographer is a witness and, by documenting the unfolding events, also becomes an agent of the societies. Based on the concept of translation and Bruno Latour's community of humans and non-humans, and returning to some central aesthetic concepts of Graham Harman, **Federica Matelli** exposes a kind of post-human translation closely related to the global

situation of semi-capitalism and computational capitalism. **Cristina Moraru** investigates a new methodology of art interpretation that operates visual translation from an interdisciplinary approach in order to understand the work of art in its political, social, historical, and cultural contexts. This new methodology is informed by critical theory that now questions the traditional aesthetic categories. According to Moraru, the endeavour intended through visual translation entails not only the process of rethinking traditional aesthetics, but also the radicalization of thinking about the production of artistic work in the socio-political and cultural context and its public reception.

The difficult balance between philological reconstruction and accounts of the “genetic” transformation of artistic production culminates in this volume with the development of a translational turn of visual studies and the proposal of a new alliance between word and image through visual translation. With such theoretical premises, artistic production seems to be particularly suitable for setting the parameters for a translation turn in visual art. Indeed, these parameters are evident in some works of “displaced” artists who have lived in the in-betweenness of languages and culture. Often their artistic production is characterized by the loss of those elements that would be typical of their culture of origin and by the constitution of something new and unpredictable that treasures its own self and the other, without neglecting the hybridisation and adaptation of linguistic and cultural codes that allow the other to understand. From this perspective, a very important case study is the artistic production of Antoni Muntadas. His series of artistic works entitled *On Translation* addresses different topics on translation that enable us to develop a theoretical framework about visual

translation. Since 1995, Muntadas –networker, nomadic traveller, and “figure that transgresses the frontier”– has carried out a complex analysis of linguistic, cultural, and visual translation. With this long series, the artist has visually recorded the problems that occur in the “invisible” processes of migration and the decoding of cultures. A profound artistic interest has manifested itself in parallel with a growing attention to the role of the production of theory, as confirmed by the abundant literature on the relations that art weaves with other cultural forms, through linguistics, philosophy, media studies, and social sciences in general. It is evident that many artistic forms are the result of an interdisciplinary production and therefore to be understood they need a different reading key from that used in the past. The contemporary artist is no longer a contemplator of reality, but a nomadic subject who often makes a critical reading of the societies in which he or she comes into contact.

The theoretical and artistic praxes that deploy the concept of translation – both in its linguistic and cultural elements and in its inter-artistic and inter-medial aspects – that are traced in this volume offer new perspectives on the relationship between art and translation. They reveal metaphorical connections between *logos* and *icono*, but they also go beyond metaphor and justify visual translation as a discursive concept and an indispensable tool for the realization of contemporary transnational and interlinguistic artefacts. They bring to light the contact zones among different disciplines (visual studies, translation studies, comparative literature, iconology, and political philosophy), studying the relation between translation and art – an interest confirmed by the semantic osmosis between text and image

that favours the transmigration of meanings on a terminological level. Finally, they draw a conclusion according to which artistic criticism and praxes, using the concept of visual translation, validate the theorization of a *translational turn* within visual cultural over the last twenty years.

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