

Return to the Far Pavilions

Daniel Jewesbury

Something is always missing in a translation. However perspicacious the translator, some nuance will always be neglected, some particularity left un conveyed. The verb 'to traduce', originally meaning to transport, convey or translate (and related to the modern French verb traduire, to translate) now means to slander or calumniate — to misrepresent. The desire to render all knowledge into a commonly-accessible code leads, conversely, to a canon of decontextualised signs, which float or drift, reverberating dully in new contexts. The modernists' utopia, enabled and epitomised by perfect communication, never arrives, because they failed to account for the fragmentary character of language itself.

Does all this sound like a lesson in things we already know, that we hardly need to be reminded of? Then consider the rationale and ambitions of the 48th Venice Biennale (which has the catchy title "dAPERtutto / APERTO overALL / APERTO partTOUT / APERTO überALL"). This year's event, the biggest so far, attempts to represent everything in late twentieth-century art, before the Three Zeros finally arrive, and to fabricate from it (and for it) a uniform narrative of 'international art now'. It is one which, predictably, privileges the slight and the banal. New terminologies have been found to articulate and perpetuate the old yearning for a True Story of Art: the dual rhetoric of 'globalism', both as a nostalgic recollection of the ideal of Socialist Internationalism and as a metonym for the 'real' internationalism of global capital, is invoked repeatedly, often almost mystically, by the various organisers and national commissioners of the Biennale. Overall curator Harald Szeemann writes in his press release that in this year's Biennale the "national ghetto will be abolished"; yet the idiosyncratic logic of the Biennale depends on those ghettos, on the seemingly random cluster of pavilions gathered in the Giardini, empty for eighteen months until the circus once again rolls into town.

As the dismantling and re-organisation of Modern sciences of classification continues, institutions are attempting to align with the spirit of the supposed 'new democracy' under spurious banners like 'respecting difference' or 'celebrating diversity'. It's easy to 'celebrate diversity' when that simply means devising a few new sub-divisions of the existing categories: the 2001 census in the UK, for example, will attempt to include definitive categories for all people of mixed race. Similarly, the supposedly benign rhetoric of 'multiculturalism' is now widely denounced as a ruse, a barely-disguised reiteration of the status quo. Rather than seeking tangible shifts in power, such strategies attempt to assimilate 'difference' into the existing structure, even when that structure has no place for difference, or rather can only offer subordinate places, as fragmentary traductions of the monolithic centre.

The number of national pavilions establishing themselves outside the main Giardini site has certainly grown, but if you try to find any of them you'll have trouble; the Biennale organisers, some-

what churlishly, refuse to print full addresses for them on publicity material. Wander the labyrinthine alleyways of Venice looking for one of them and you'll quickly see through the rhetoric of openness and equality clinging to this year's event. The Irish pavilion has been in the Nuova Icona gallery for several years, down one of those inauspicious-looking alleyways on the island of Giudecca. This year's representative, Anne Tallentire, presents a body of work that resists traduction into the globalist miasma of Szeemann's überBiennale by insisting on its own specific contexts. The show, *Instances*, pulls together three curiously jarring elements (a series of short performance videos, a backlit transparency and a half-hour video projection) and with them addresses the concerns that have occupied Tallentire for several years: translation, communication and authorship. In the first room a small colour monitor rests on a flight case and shows a series of hand-held single-edit sequences that fade up from black. In them, the artist is engaged in various activities, pulling up a floorboard, arranging small pieces of wood, spreading broken glass on the floor until it fills the monitor screen. The way the camera frames the performances, concentrating solely on the act and cutting off even the performer's body, prevents any external contexts from becoming visible, except that it's clearly the same room in all the shots. Every so often, the normally-silent video breaks into sound, just for a second or two: the sound of glass scraped across wood, of a floorboard banged back into place. In the back room of the gallery a wall is taken up with a video projection. Walking into the space at the beginning of the loop one finds it almost completely black, save for one pinpoint of light. Gradually the space gets lighter, but it's not just your eyes that are getting used to the darkness; the half-hour video shows dawn breaking somewhere over the nondescript inner city. The process of elucidation (literally) that the video records is ultimately pointless: there is no landscape for us to survey, since all that can be discerned of this 'grand vista' is a steel fence that occupies the whole of the foreground, and an unremarkable tower block. Taking the shedding of light as a metaphor for the explanation of intrinsic meaning, both these video pieces are about narrative, about our desire to make stories of ostensibly unconnected events, and yet each refuses to be narrativised. The third element of the piece, which sits between the two video rooms, is a large colour transparency of a woman's ear pressed up against concrete, listening where there is no hearing to be done. Writing in his catalogue essay, Brian Hand suggests that a translation is not simply a corruption of an original text, but that the original is itself always infected with omission, that the communicative act is always partial, approximate. Tallentire's deftness lies in drawing this out, making out of it a body of work that is insistent, but which clings to its own partiality. Leaving the gallery and the contemplative space that has been constructed in it (in contrast to the rest of the



Biennale), I was put in mind of the right to silence and its gradual removal from British law. Silence itself, the absence of information, can now be an implication of guilt.

Tallentire's work draws out considerations of space as well, by figuring the construction of narrative in four dimensions. Several artists in the Biennale explored our contemporary relationship with urban space and built landscapes, most notably Doug Aitken. His video installation *Electric Earth* is divided into three consecutive 'rooms', with images and sounds overflowing from one chamber into the next. In the first room a young black man lies on a bed in a motel room or apartment, endlessly changing the channels on his TV, which we then see is showing only noise. His glazed expression contrasts with the voice-over: "A lot of times I dance so fast I will come... It's like food for me". In the second room two mirror-image projections are shown at right angles to one another; in the third another three screens form three sides of a square. In these two spaces the same young man dances in the deserted streets at night. The familiar signs of the city —barbed wire fences, abandoned shopping trolleys, empty parking lots —litter Aitken's beautifully filmed environment, while the soundtrack mixes shadowy hip-hop beats with the character's narration: "It's the only now I get". His peculiar autism, his alien-





ation from the city which surrounds him, recall Frantz Fanon's disturbed subject of European colonialism, fragmented and re-inscribed by intangible processes of power located far away.

In the Italian pavilion, three artists collaborate to explore the spatialisation of narrative, with an elaborately-constructed series of three interwoven films. In the first, *Jump-Cut*, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno present us with a clip from a French film of the early 1970s. A moustachioed character mutters urgently down the phone, agreeing to come over straight away. He leaves his apartment block, and emerges from the building 25 years older, the same actor in the Paris streets of today. He salutes the camera and begins to walk across town... The piece concentrates on a single break in continuity in the original film, in which the character was shown standing in a building in one part of town and emerging, miraculously, in a completely separate area as he leaves that building. In this 'remake', the same actor has been engaged to walk the distance between the two shots, re-uniting a space that had been fragmented, but at the expense of



the 'linearity' of time, of narrative. As he reaches his destination, the film reverts to the original, the break 'sutured'. Watching the video, one gradually becomes aware of another layer: the projection is itself a re-presentation of another projection, the film having been projected in the same room some time previously and re-filmed with a hand-held camera. The people walking in front of the projector are themselves part of the film. As the loop comes to an end, the camera leaves the room, walking out into the night-time desertion of the off-season Giardini; just as we think that we've returned to a simple projection, that the re-filming

has stopped, the camera pulls back once more to reveal the picture framed, re-filmed, on the wall that we are watching now...

More literal approaches to space are found in the large-scale black and white aerial photographs of Balthasar Burckhard and in Frank Thiel's colour photos of the enormous reconstructions underway in Berlin. Both concentrate on the 'given-ness' of the urban realm, on its seemingly random (but actually tightly controlled) development and growth.

The Biennale features a large number of Asian artists, particularly young Chinese artists. Speaking at a discussion organised by Audio Arts magazine in the British pavilion, Charles Esche suggested that it may be more than coincidence that at a time when China is the only Other super-power in the world, when its international relations are continuously headline news, European and American curators have decided to discover Chinese 'culture'. Many works concentrate on re-articulating the myths of Socialist Realism, most notably Cai Guo-Qiang's Venice Rent-Collecting Courtyard. The piece is a slightly-altered replica of a series of sculptures originally commissioned by Mao during the Cultural Revolution. However bad things are now, the sculptures tell us, look how bad they were before: peasants toil, their backs bent under their loads, while the landlords extort their rent and the bosses stand by ready to beat anyone found shirking. The lifesize sculptures were toured around China in the '70s and copies made for various eastern European cities. Harald Szeemann wanted to exhibit them in Documenta in 1976. Figures were added whenever politically expedient: heroic soldiers when the army were needed to maintain 'order', virtuous workers when there were shortages. The piece re-emerges now as Guo-Qiang's personal remembrance of recent history. A straw panama is added to one landlord, a wooden sword placed in the hand of another, in an attempt to re-locate (or dislocate) the figures. However, the piece sits uneasily between irony and poignancy in the surroundings of the Biennale. Nearly all the Chinese political art shown (there are several exponents here) suffers from its translocation, from a situation where contexts (history and politics) are immediately available, to the glib neo-Orientalism of the international art show.

Some of the work seems to comment wryly on precisely this condition, particularly Zhou Tiehai's painting *The relations in the art world are the same as the relations between states in the post Cold War era*. Or as Szeemann puts it, "The large number of Asian artists this year will facilitate an encounter with a history that is very different from that of Europe or North America".

To return finally to that claim of non-territoriality, let's end with an anecdote, one which, obviously, proves nothing. A friend from Dublin, another freelance writer, asks for a copy of the Gary Hume catalogue at the British pavilion, showing her press accreditation. She's told she needs a union card to get any press information. When she says that she's a freelance, that art writers in Dublin don't need press cards, the new internationalism is explained to her immediately: "You're not in Dublin now. You're in Great Britain." Roll on the abolition of national ghettos.