THE RETURN OF THE TRANSLATOR

From the edge of meaning to the edge of sense

Srajana Kaikini

Poet, linguist, translator A.K. Ramanujan's poem *Elements of Composition* begins with the following line: "Composed as I am, like others, of elements on certain well-known lists [...]."[1] The phrase reflects a linguist's comment on his own relational existence in the world, a translated self, attributing its composition to a list of innumerable things. In a critical portraiture of Ramanujan, a deft translator who emerged as one of the leading modern Indian theorists on translation, scholar Vinay Dharwadkar calls the poet a postcolonial cosmopolitan. He describes how theory, for Ramanujan, is not, by definition:

> autonomous or self-reflexive. It is and has to be a transitive or instrumental enterprise undertaken in relation to a past, present or conceivable future practice that simultaneously gives rise to it and is informed and transformed by it, but which it cannot entirely describe, predict, or contain.[2]

Any attempt to theorize the act of translation traverses this thin line of having to remain relevant to practice as well as having a transformative impact on knowledge. The exercise of translation thus is a complex combination of moves which must be reworked in tune with the questions thrown at us from our contemporary worlds. First, the most obvious questions must be asked, and then the not so obvious will eventually surface.

When does translation come into play? The most common situation in which we need the help of translation is with the remark 'I don't understand this' — a feeling of not being able to relate to a situation, an object, or speech. When we speak of translation, the question that follows automatically is, what is this a translation 'of'? The usual suspect in most cases is 'language' — translating the meaning of one word in a language into another language trying to preserve an equivalence of meaning. The linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson identifies three major typologies of translation — translation could be intra-lingual, inter-lingual, and inter-semiotic.[3] Defining the domain of poetics as part of linguistics, he asks a seminal question, "What makes a verbal message a work of art?"[4]

This question lends itself to many tangential applications in philosophy of science and aesthetics. Jakobson maintains that linguistics when understood as a "global science of verbal structure" encompasses poetics as an integral part of it.[5] Nuancing the distinction between linguistics at large and poetics in particular, makes it possible for us to free translation from the domain of words strictly and engage with it on philosophically speculative terms. When we consider 'metaphysics' as a tool to speculate on translation, then the first step is to understand the nature of translation as a transforming process and the second is to see how apparently different disciplines are capable of appropriating or mobilizing translation as their own method, be it science, mathematics, or art, thereby making translation a key *method* of any transdisciplinary practice.[6] This paper seeks to understand the role that translation plays beyond its linguistic enterprise. It reflects on the task of living with unintelligible, opaque, and subjective points of view, and speculates on the intention of translation with the aim of situating it as a foundational method in acts of transdisciplinary creation.

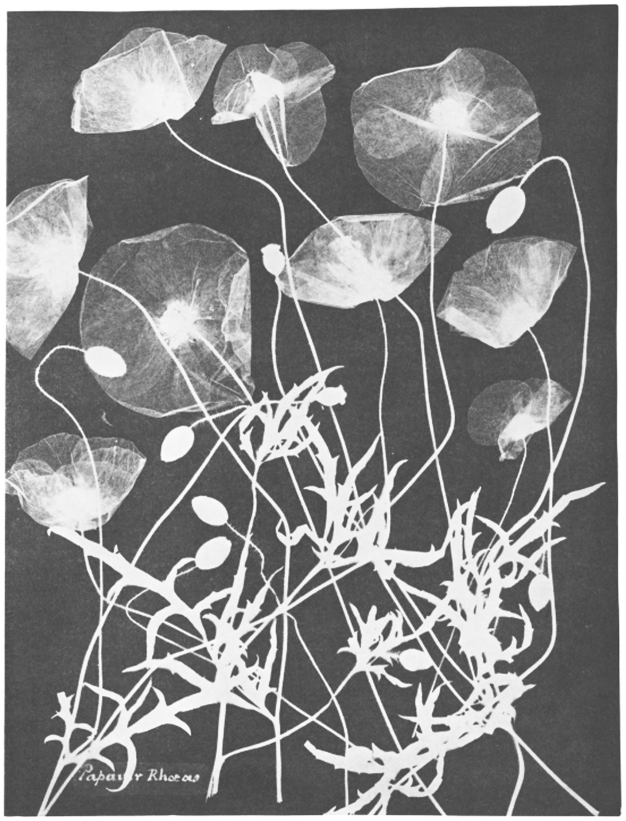

fig. 1 Anna Atkins, *Papaver rhoeas*, cyanotype, 1840s. Accessed through pagophila.files.wordpress.com, on 5 December 2016.

1 A.K. Ramanujan, 'Elements of Composition', accessed through: poemhunter.com/poem/elements-of-composition, on 19 October, 2016. See: A.K. Ramanujan, Vinay Dharwadkar (ed.), *The Collected Poems of A. K. Ramanujan*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997. Also see: A.K. Ramanujan, 'Three Hundred Rāmāyanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation', in: Vinay Dharwadkar and Stuart H. Blackburn (eds), *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

2 Vinay Dharwadkar, 'Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism: A Note on A.K. Ramanujan's Theory and Practice of Criticism and Translation', in: *Indian Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (160) (March-April, 1994), pp. 91-97.

3 Intra-lingual translation would refer to translations that take place within a language, where we are looking at synonyms or similar words equivalent to each other. Inter-lingual translations would refer to method of meaning transference between two languages, where often many transformations occur in meaning and expression. The third, inter-semiotic translations occur between verbal and non-verbal systems of communication where translations could occur between word, image, performance, sound, and other media. This third type of translation is most relevant when we consider contemporary art discourse. See: Roman Jakobson, 'On Linguistic Aspects of Translation', in: R. A. Brower (ed.), *On Translation*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959, pp. 232-239.

4 Roman Jakobson, 'Linguistics and poetics', in: David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader*, New York: Longman Inc., 1988, p. 32.

5 Ibid.

6 Basarab Nicolescu defines transdisciplinarity as follows: "Transdisciplinarity concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines. Its goal is the understanding of the present world, of which one of the imperatives is the unity of knowledge." See: Basarab Nicolescu, 'Methodology of Transdisciplinarity — Levels of reality, Logic of the included middle and Complexity' in: *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* Vol. 1, No. 1, (2010), pp. 19-38.

In the context of scientific discourses, philosopher Sundar Sarukkai who has written widely at the interstices of science, language, and translation observes that the foundations of science are intrinsically connected to methods of translation. Scientific discourse is an attempt at writing the "text of the 'original' world" and the very notion of 'translation' presupposes the concept of an 'original'.[7] This condition also presupposes a translatability of the 'original'. If science attempts to understand the phenomena of the world, this understanding is communicable only when the world re-emerges through the scientist's instruments — either through statistics, or formulae, or diagrams, or images (fig. 1). Thus, it can be argued that the world is presented after undergoing a *treatment* of translation.

When it comes to aesthetic experience, we are in the domain of semiotics, and consequently of inter-semiotic translations. Be it attuned to literature, music, art, or even science, an experience which can be aesthetically considered implies a negotiation not just of knowledge, but also of affect. Inter-semiotic translations operate in between sign systems — be it of the verbal or the non-verbal kind. At the core of the inter-semiotic domain vocabulary, familiarity and consistency become precarious in relation to the act of translation. Art as a distinct semiotic domain must be encountered via methods of access, approach, and negotiation that actively transform the art experience into a communicable expression. Even when we term certain experiences, be they aesthetic or mundane, as inexpressible or untranslatable, their nature is ultimately captured by a construct of language which refers to 'that' which is inexpressible. Yet again, we find ourselves in the arena of symbols and signs and their power to make or unmake meaning.[8]

Playing with Symbols

Sarukkai maintains that translation in fact gives us insight into the structure of the concepts of different languages — translation tests the 'meaning-bearing' capacity in between languages, thereby enabling our understanding of the 'boundaries of concepts' in different languages.[9] When one encounters an 'alien language' — the inherent translator within us moves us to 'make sense' of this alien language in terms that are commensurable. Thus, even if attributed to wrongly, once meaning attaches to the concept in one 'language', it allows a free transformation of the concept in the 'new language', thereby exhibiting its potential to accrue meaning and enable different experiences of it.

As mathematician and process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead observes in his thesis on metaphysics *Process and Reality*, 'symbolic reference' is a primary mode of human perception. He states, "symbolic reference belongs to one of the later originative phases of experience [...]. When human experience is in question, *perception* almost always means *perception in the mixed mode of symbolic reference*".[10] For such a mode of perception based on reference, a 'common ground' is required and this perception, he says, in turn is subject to possible errors. This 'common ground' shared between two nodes of transaction thus requires that there are certain points or loci available for connections (the authenticity or correctness of it is another debate).[11] These nodes of transaction in turn have crucial political import. Emphasis on one or another node reflects an urgency of the discourse to address the condition of its time. So we have had historical turns where the author, the artist, the spectator, and more recently, the mediator, emerge as the node that asks for special consideration.

Historically speaking, most of critical literary theory marked its discourse around the Addressor – Speech – Addressee model.[12] This model underwent substantial reconfiguration with the coming of the 'Age of Reading' and the turn towards reader-response criticism in the 1960s and 1970s coinciding with Derridean deconstruction in the West.[13] Deconstruction critiqued subordination by text and called for a reordering of the approach to a text by opening it up as a predominantly re-structureable system of signs. This means that the 'text' is no longer available for mere interpretation but for a complete questioning and analysis of its signifying structure. Such a reading always aims at a relationship which is not perceived by the writer, between what the text commands and the language he uses. This is synchronous with the concept of the 'death of the author' observed by Roland Barthes and more presently the call for the 'emancipated spectator' by Jacques Rancière.[14] In her book *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism*, literary critic Elizabeth Freund discerns the general tendency in conventional modern criticism (in this case Western tradition) to adopt unaffected, clinical and distant technical language in an attempt to follow 'scientific hermeneutics' to keep 'unruly language' within limits of legibility. 'Reader-response criticism' focuses on the experience of the audience, rather than on the author, or on a work's content, form, or historical context.[15] Thus, similar to how literary theory heralds the 'return of the reader' as a turn towards a new fold of critical tools to examine the subjective experience, so too, does the 'return of the translator' emerge from a demand of our times for theoretical tools to negotiate our experience

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Sundar Sarukkai, 'Translation and Science', in: *Meta*, XLVI, 4 (2001), p. 648.

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This linguistic position which asserts that any conceivable thought can be expressed in natural language is called the principle of effability. It was put forth by philosopher Jerrold Katz and also aligns itself to philosophical traditions that tend towards materialism and realism like, for instance, the Naiyayikas whose chief metaphysical doctrine is that which is knowable is nameable. For more on effability see: Jerrold Katz, 'Effability and Translation' in: Franz Guenthner and M. Guenthner-Reutter (eds), *Meaning and Translation: Philosophical and Linguistic Approaches*, London: Duckworth, 1978. For insight into the connections of semiotics and art see: Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', in: *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (1991), pp. 174-298.

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Sundar Sarukkai, 'Translation as Method: Implications for History of Science', in: *Indian Journal of History of Science*, 51.1 (2016), pp. 105-117.

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A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York: The Free Press, 1985, p. 168. Emphasis in original.

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This is comparable to Jakobson's call for a shift of focus towards metonymy in literature from the superfluous theorization on metaphors. Metonymy — the expression of something through an aspect of that thing, which has the potential to represent the full concept — can be argued as a way of mathematizing experience in order to enrich its creative expressive possibilities. See: Roman Jakobson, 'The metaphoric and metonymic poles', in: David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader*, New York: Longman Inc., 1988, p. 57. This extract is taken from: 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances', in: Jakobson and Morris Halle (eds), *Fundamentals of Language*, 's-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co, 1956.

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Ibid. (1988), p. 35. An act of verbal communication is considered to have a speech event which, as elaborated by Jakobson, is constituted by the Addressor — Speech — Addressee scheme. The addressor sends the message via speech to the addressee. To be functional this transaction needs a context of reference, a 'code' (any kind of language) for the message and a contact that enables the communication. It may help to note here the emphasis put on a systematic structure for language by Ferdinand de Saussure, in a situation where the connection between the signifier and the signified is rather arbitrary. See: Saussure, 'The object of study', 'Nature of the linguistic sign', in: Lodge (ibid.), pp. 1-10.

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M.H. Abrams, 'The Deconstructive Angel', in: *Critical Inquiry*, 3, Spring 1977, pp. 425-438. Cited in: Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader. Reader-Response Criticism*, London, New York: Methuen & Co., 1987, p. 11. Also see: Douglas G. Atkins, *Reading Deconstruction: Deconstructive Reading*, Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1983.

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Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in: *Aspen Magazine*, no. 5/6, 1967, accessed through: ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes, on 19 October, 2016; Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott, London: Verso, 2011 (2008).

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Freund, op. cit. (note 13), pp. 5-7.

of the 'contemporary' — a contemporary that is warped with information at speeds and intensities that threaten to erase the spaces of active reception, and replace them with passive consumption (fig. 2).

fig. 2 Still taken from *Karl Holmqvist, Reading from his book 'K'*, 2013. A part of *The look of words, the ideas they conjure and the memories they evoke* event on occasion of *Marking Language* at Drawing Room, London (2013), an exhibition exploring the relationship between linguistic communication and drawing in recent art.

Once we understand that translation thrives on speculation, the possibilities of speculation over an experience clearly present us with a problem — that of a completely subjective interpretation of the thing translated. What do we do with such an expanded sense of subjectivity, this anxiety about shareability of experiences? What do we do about our intuitive faith in an objectivity that is promised by science? How do we acquire the stamina to embrace this proliferation of viewpoints?

Here, a small detour into the question of 'objectivity' and its socio-cultural history would help. Objectivity — 'the view from nowhere'[16] — gained maximum currency in the age of 'modern science' with the emergence of Newtonian physics.[17] The geometric and the diagrammatic mode of understanding complex phenomena has been the ultimate goal of most philosophers from the Western tradition: those who adhere to scientific understandings of the world including Aristotle, Kant, Hume, Reichenbach, Hobbes et al.[18] It has also been seen as a move towards 'truth', the heart of the matter, the real representation of reality through formulae and numbers, such that all possibility of alterity, multiplicity, instability is stripped away from this mode of representing the world. The contingency of thought is therefore seemingly given certain parameters for determinance, made more regulated, lawful, and thereby more flattened. At first glance this implies that semantic plurality gets curbed through these processes

16 This phrase is used by American philosopher Thomas Nagel as a comment on ideas derived independently through a supposed detached objective perspective in contrast to the attached perspective through the subject. See: Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

17 Jonathan Y. Tsou, Alan Richardson, Flavia Padovani, 'Introduction: *Objectivity in Science*', in: Jonathan Y. Tsou, Alan Richardson, Flavia Padovani (eds), Objectivity in Science, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015, pp. 1-15.

18 Wesley C. Salmon, 'The Philosophy of Reichenbach', in: *Synthese*, Vol. 34, no. 1, 1977, pp. 5-88; Richard Pettigrew, 'Aristotle on the Subject Matter of Geometry', in: *Phronesis*, Vol. 54, no. 3, 2009, pp. 239-260; Graciela De Pierris, 'Hume on Space, Geometry and Diagrammatic Reasoning', in: *Synthese*, Vol. 186, no. 1, 2012, pp. 169- 189; Michael Friedman, 'Kant on geometry and spatial intuition', in: *Synthese*, Vol. 186, no. 1, 2012, pp. 231-255; William Sacksteder, 'Hobbes: Geometrical Objects' in: *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 48, no. 4, 1981, pp. 573-590.

of symbolization. Suppose you assign a fixed symbol to an otherwise contingent concept, say for instance, A = a bag of five apples and B = a bag of six oranges. The immediate understanding of this equation is sensing a fixation of meaning. A and B appear more fixed as compared to a bag of apples or oranges, which is vulnerable to forces from the world. However, resisting this reading of mathematics as a mode of universal semantic singularity, Sarukkai argues for the naturalizing of the mathematical vocabulary, demonstrating that mathematics in fact can be seen as primarily a playful *mode* of translating the world:[19]

> But mathematics is writing. The activity by which mathematics creates its alphabets highlights its first engagement with NL [natural language]: it reduces the graphic width of words into graphemes. This move is a writing of writing. It is rewriting the already written. It is the activity of translation which best describes this 'writing of writing'.[20]

By arguing against the conventional notion that mathematics constantly tries to negate its connections with natural language by arguing that mathematics itself is an act of translation of the world, Sarukkai moves the target of translation from meaning towards marking. Translation, he argues, is more akin to tracing than one-to-one mapping even in the mathematical domain and the discipline of mathematics must first acknowledge its own contingency on the world of natural language.

By this repositioning of mathematics as a mode of translation, Sarukkai implicitly also undermines the exclusive nature of the discipline of mathematics and moves it into an interstitially available domain. The power structure of the discipline is dismantled. By positing process before the object, mathematization as a process is brought closer to the subjective process of 'making sense' or 'translating'. By writing words as symbols, alphabets, numbers, 'opaque entities', play is made possible. A ludic loosening of grammar, where a possibility of a new structure emerges from an apparently fixed way of doing things, play is the mode within which realities, temporalities, and truths can be questioned. The so-called symbolic reductions become sites of 'differential plurality', i.e. velocities as words cannot be composited but velocities as vectors 'v' can be; mass as a word cannot be added but mass as 'm' can be.[21] This resonates with the way metonymy operates in the creation of idioms, where poetry is made possible in an otherwise prosaic expression through the use of condensed symbolization.

Just as science invents its own instruments to operate, every field of enquiry makes its own tools. Whitehead, with the claim that "the tool of philosophy is language"[22] talks about this inevitable dialectical dependence of experience on language as a limit condition — a contradictory condition wherein language breaks down in its attempt to express:

19 Sundar Sarukkai, 'Mathematics, Language and Translation', in: *Meta*, XLVI, no. 4, 2001.

20 Ibid., p. 669. Natural language here refers to spoken or written language which uses common syntax of words and sentences to communicate.

21 Ibid., p. 671.

22 Whitehead, op. cit. (note 10), p. 11.

> But the language of literature breaks down precisely at the task of expressing in explicit form the larger generalities — the very generalities which metaphysics seeks to express.[23]

He systematically rejects the possibility of self-sustained facts, floating non-entities and proposes merely a situation of breakdown — where natural language fails to grasp the thing that philosophy seeks to understand. However, the logical implication of this line — that mathematics can be the philosophers' language — is the very jump that Sarukkai in his understanding of mathematization as an embodied naturalised process seeks to reject. He proposes, instead, a kinship between the mathematical and the natural language; a kinship which according to Walter Benjamin, is not concerned with similarity but with supplementary *intentions* underlying each language as a whole.[24]

The symbol is a trope of translating the alien tongue — like the groping in the dark of a person deprived of seeing in a lightless cave.[25] She wants to see but cannot, hence she deploys her hands. She touches and sees through this touching. The symbol is the first touch that our cognition makes with the world. It is not a reductive constricting mechanism but an enabling, freeing trope. The cave translates itself into her experience through her touching. When asked to express this experience, she re-translates experience traced by her cognition into a new vision of her experience via words, materials, sound, lines, or movement. An artist is born through this process of translation. The creative act thus unfolds through this method of the tracer, the inscriber of the world into her system of knowing to be shared with her kin. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy expresses a similar 'exscribing' that takes place in the act of reading where the written word and the read word exist on the boundary of touch, the touch of hand translates to the touch of sight (fig. 3).[26]

Through Boundaries

Now, this proposition may seem sweeping — that every uttered expression is an act of artistic creation. Indeed, by present-day definition, it can be. We may say that the practice of questioning is indeed artistic; a thing born out of no-thing. But, to nuance the proposition that informs modes of being in the world, every act of expression that *translates an experience* or *enables one*

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Ibid.

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"[..] an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other." Walter Benjamin, cited in Sarukkai, op. cit. (note 19), p. 670. Benjamin's ideas on the 'task of the translator' reflect his pre-occupation with the act of translation as a transformative creative endeavour, where translation is a form in itself, with the aim to address first and foremost the relationship that languages have between each other. The task of translating, according to him, is to render transparent the interplay of syntax between pure languages, thereby allowing for the gaps between words to speak more that the wholeness of sentence structures which pose as an obstruction in Benjamin's view, for "if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade." See: Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', in: Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913-1926*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

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This persistent effort to see is comparable to the opening passages in *Thomas the Obscure*, one of the important post-structuralist novels by French philosopher and literary theorist Maurice Blanchot. His works influenced future post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida. The protagonist in the novel negotiates situations that challenge his immediate perceptive experiences collapsing the divide between event and narration — a process that often underlines the translator's act. One such excerpt is as follows: "Soon the night seemed gloomier and more terrible than any night, as if it had in fact issued from a wound of thought which had ceased to think, of thought taken ironically as object by something other than thought. It was night itself. Images which constituted its darkness inundated him. He saw nothing, and, far from being distressed, he made this absence of vision the culmination of his sight. Useless for seeing, his eye took on extra-ordinary proportions, developed beyond measure, and, stretching out on the horizon, let the night penetrate its center in order to receive the day from it. And so, thought hits void, it was sight and the object of sight which mingled together." Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, trans. Richard Lamberton, New York: Station Hill Press, 1988, p. 14.

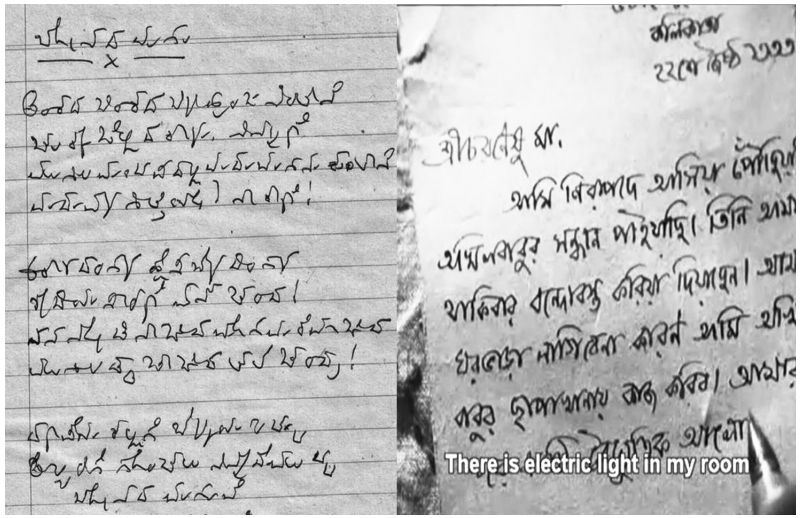

fig. 3 Srajana Kaikini, *The languages I don't understand — My grandfather's writing, Apu's letter to his mother,* still from *Aparajito*, dir. Satyajit Ray, 1956, image annotations in: *Suddenly this overview, Reading the Literal,* an exhibition of curatorial research at FICA, New Delhi, India. 2014. (Photos: Srajana Kaikini)

from a boundary condition where the communication must take place across the boundary into unfamiliar terrain, could be an act of artistic creation. To express the unknown, the unsayable, the impossible involves shifting meaning and experimenting with them — symbols being tropes of such experiments. This is the mode underlining translation. Thus, translation inhabits all loci in the environment of a metaphysical entity — the phenomenon or the thing experienced, the receiver of an experience as well as the giver of an experience. Is translation then synonymous to the act of artistic creation? This is a question that will receive a wide range of answers. Perhaps a gardener would say — the seeds translate themselves into saplings but the gardener only makes it possible for their 'translation' to occur. Perhaps the Kantian would say — every expression translates a universal idea and so it could be dispensable. Perhaps the Naiyayikas (the Atomists) or the Nominalists would say — yes the word and the world are symbiotic and indispensable and hence translation too. Perhaps the Buddhists or the Cognitivists might say — translation is a tool without which cognition may not even be possible and therefore any act of creation is contingent on it. Regardless of the all speculative positions of answering the question, what matters here is that this is the very *modality* through which translation as a method can work — as a fractal, as a rhizome, as a live multiplying cell.

Art as an experience is rendered translatable at the boundaries of itself — when it seeks to speak to an outside of it, be it mathematics, science, sociology, or technology. When a work of art presents itself to its spectator as an alien language (and therefore an alien phenomenon defining an experience for which the

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"[...] the page is a touching (of my hand while it writes and your hands while they hold the book). This touch is infinitely indirect, deferred [...] but it continues as a slight, resistant, fine texture, the infinitesimal dust of a contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued. In the end, here and now, your own gaze touches the same traces of characters as mine, and you read me, and I write you. [...] (If I write I create sense-effects [...] I displace myself from bodies. Exscription passes through writing [...] And so we have to write from a place, a body that we neither have nor are [...]" Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, Paris: Editions Métailié, 1992, trans. by Richard A. Rand as: *Corpus*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 51.

spectator has no vocabulary to respond with), the spectator as a historical subject stands at this boundary that distinguishes our experienced selves and the experience at hand and *translates* what we experience into an assemblage of the known, unknown, old, new, distant, near, intuitive, and reasoned. This act of translation as 'making sense' gives us a version of the work that we appropriate as our artistic experience. Whether this experience is as intended or new or random or considered false or irrelevant are secondary concerns; what is crucial here is that it is defined by the transference of meaning or affect. The relation is that of being 'ambiguously' reflexive. A relation therefore is manifested within a system where more than one entity demands a certain communication from the other entities to define its own nature. Translation, therefore, can be argued to be a foundational method in contemporary transdisciplinary creation where boundary conditions are constantly questioned and re-formulated.

When we consider the curatorial gesture as an inherently translational gesture, it is not to be reduced to one of being a connector of corresponding truths between the artist, the art work, and the audience.[27] Instead, the curatorial asks to be creatively understood as a gesture that charts a resonant frequency-overlap between the three fields in *ambiguous* ways, nebulous

[27] Much has been written in the discourse of curating on the parallels between the curator and the translator, taking from Walter Benjamin's 1923 text 'The Task of the Translator'. When we see the curatorial through ideas of method, montage, performance, the curator is most often heralded as the mediator, often the translator. On face, it appears to be a negotiation of networks. But what does it imply? See for example: Boris Buden, 'Toward the Heterosphere: Curator as Translator', in: Maria Lind (ed.), *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.

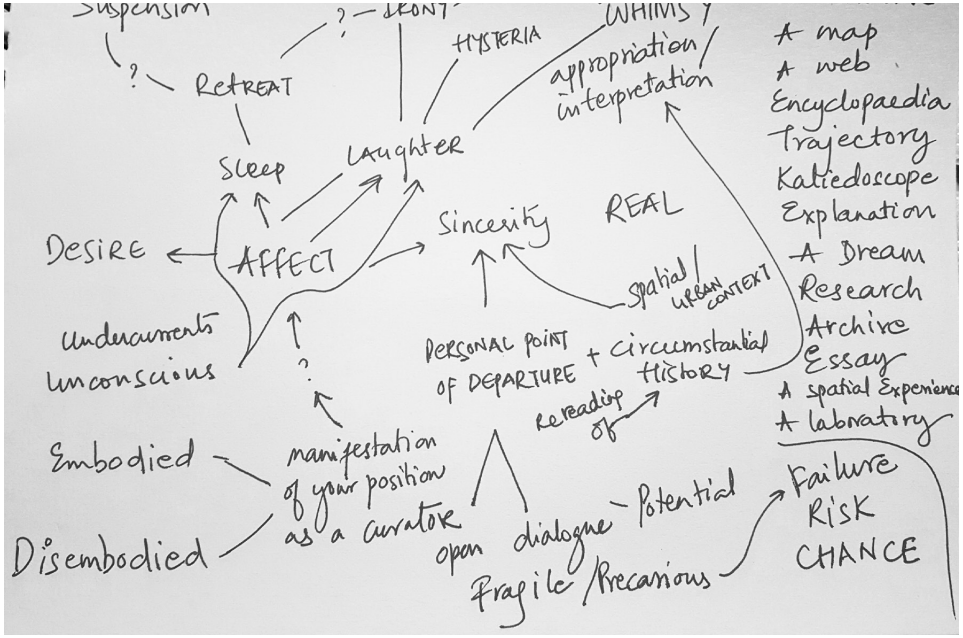

fig. 4 Srajana Kaikini, The 'ambiguous' process of curating. 2013. Brainstorming session of De Appel Curatorial Programme at de Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam. (Photo: Srajana Kaikini)

but having the momentum to make possible a motion of thought, ideas, works, and experiences (fig. 4). The curatorial gesture as a translational gesture is thus one of an 'ambiguous' tuning of senses, where "meanings of concepts are actually created through engaging with the alien in ambiguous ways".[28]

Knowing-Seeing: Meaning as Experience

This 'ambiguous' reflexivity in turn implies that translation is no longer in the stronghold of epistemology but exists interstitially. If translation's inter-semiotic trapeze is to enable artistic creation, then there must be a new frame of understanding what this interstice is. What do we make of 'I don't understand this'? Does this expression convey a lack of understanding at all? Or is it merely an expression that implies a lack of an *expected* understanding i.e. an understanding that does supposed justice to the original intended experience or meaning? Here, meaning and experience occur in the same register. They do not exist as epistemologically and ontologically distinct entities but are proposed as one cohesive mechanism — where cognition goes hand in hand with experience — a structural presupposition that can be seen in many South Asian philosophical schools.[29] Two concepts — one from Sanskrit literary criticism and another from the Buddhist tradition that speak of such a cognitive appropriation of our experience of the world will help demonstrate this entanglement between knowledge and experience.

The *Dhvani* theorists speak about poetic expression through the mode of suggestion, where in all meaning is implicit within symbolism or concealed euphemism or merely hinted by means of experienced objects of the world. In other words, they reject the possibility of any 'object-less' emotion.[30] "The [element of suggestion is] twofold: 'that which is based on the power of the word,' and 'that which is based on the power of the sense'."[31]

This two-fold mode of expression through word and sense illustrates the synergy of the physical and metaphysical realm, where making meaning through a word is not complete without making meaning through sense. Word implies meaning while sense implies an experience. Thus the theory upholds expression of implicit sense with the usage of explicit objects. Any aesthetic experience is best expressed in the *Dhvani* view through the concrete descriptions of clear entities. The theory of suggestion thus falls in line with the Suprematists, the Russian Symbolists and later the Concrete Poets (fig. 5&6) who push symbolism to its limits by claiming to strip the word of all meaning and manifest in their works, pure affect, feeling, emotion, play.[32] However, in their attempt to deconstruct the linguistic dominance on art, they in fact re-enforce an experience

[28] Sarukkai, op. cit. (note 9), p. 115.

[29] Bina Gupta, 'Introduction', in: *Reason and Experience in Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 2009, pp. 3-20.

[30] V.K. Chari, *Sanskrit Criticism*, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publishers, 1993. It is interesting to note here that in Sanskrit criticism, the notion of 'symbol' is quite different from the usage in modern poetics. It stood more like a condensed metaphor or a trigger to evoke certain experiential connotations more than a representational trope. For a comprehensive introduction to the theory, see: Chari, 'The Indian Theory of Suggestion (dhvani)' in: *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 27, no. 4, 1977, pp. 391-399.

[31] Anandavardhana, *Dhvanyaloka or Theory of Suggestion in Poetry*, trans. K. Krishnamoorthy, Poona: Oriental Book Agency, 1955, p. 37. For the annotated translation of the work by commentor Abhinavagupta, see: Anandavardhana and Abhinavagupta, *The Dhvanyaloka of Anandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta*, trans. by Daniel H.H. Ingalls, Jeffrey Mousssaieff Masson, M.V. Patwardhan, (ed.) Daniel H.H. Ingalls, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University press, 1990.

[32] Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry. A Worldview*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968. Accessed through: ubu.com, on 17 September 2016.

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fig. 5&6 Eugen Gomringer, Silence, 1953. Taken from: Eugen Gomringer and Jerome Rothenberg (eds), *The Book of Hours, and Constellations: Being poems of Eugen Gomringer,* New York: Something Else Press, 1968.

of the works. The work comes to us both as meaning and sensation.

From playing with words to structures of space, these poets break language down into affect while allowing for a symbiotic experience of these works. This enchantment with precise and sharp economy of words was famously put forth by poet Ezra Pound who, in his fascination with Chinese ideograms, appropriated their linguistic structures to create his own ideas for what he termed as Imagist poetry — where word, image, meaning, experience all emerge simultaneously entangled with each other.[33] Resonance — the mode with which the import of a poetic expression is received — thus again embodies a mode of translatory activity where in the resonant subjects in congruence with each other make meaning or construct an experience. This mode of resonance mimics the transaction that is promised by translation, a movement without which experience would fail. The word which is made radically opaque is appropriated by our cognition into an assemblage of sense and meaning. This way the reader has complete agency over the text she reads, and the viewer has complete agency over the art she perceives. The freedom to misread, unread, and non-read emerges and the phrase 'I don't understand this' loses ground as *understanding* is subsumed by *experience*. The loosening of foothold in meaning marks a return of the translator who instead of being a mere preserver of inter-semiotic meaning becomes an enabler of uncharted experiences of the given and the seen.

The second theory which demonstrates the cognitive appropriation of experience is the Buddhist principle of *Pratītyasamutpāda* or 'dependent origination' whose basic import could be understood as 'When this is, that comes to be'. This theory is a doctrine of causality where intuition functions as an 'operative concept' and the truth of a thing is apprehended through perception. But this perception is more than mere sight. Instead it is a mode of a 'knowing-seeing'.[34] This view does not pre-suppose empirical experience but makes possible speculative, propositional, and imaginative experiences that can dwell under statements that could begin with 'what if' or 'suppose' and operate both through the domains of the known and the felt. The reason for invoking these two theories is two-fold. Firstly, they illustrate an uneasy and hazy blurring of epistemology and ontology by invoking the cognitive and temporal nature of experiences thereby presenting to us the curious positioning of translation in this blurred zone. Secondly, they frame the politicized nature of translation. An event of translation is a contingent just like the expression 'I don't understand this', which ironically communicates a failure to relate. Its event is inevitably chosen and expressed in specific structure, ambition and for certain effect. Translation intends to constantly speak from the boundaries, pushing against comfortable categories and trying to invoke a new

[33] Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, London: Faber and Faber, 1991 (third edition).

[34] In Buddhist texts, the concept of dependent origination is expressed as follows: "When *this* is, *that* comes to be; on the arising of *this, that* arises. When *this* is not, *that* is not; on the cessation of *that*, *this* ceases." See: 'Majjhima Nikaya', trans. by Lord Charmers, in: *Further Dialogues of the Buddha Vol. 5 & 6*, London: Oxford University Press, 1927, cited in: Bina Gupta, *Reason and Experience in Buddhist Philosophy*, New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 2009, pp. 50–53. Of the schools of Indian philosophies, there is a *prima facie* understanding of the Buddhists as being the most 'anti-rational'. However, as Gupta elaborates in her book, this 'reason' that is thought to be absent in the Buddhist philosophies alludes to the faculty of thinking through concepts. Buddhist philosophies mostly critique the value given to conceptual thinking and re-enforce the importance of 'non-conceptual experience'. Therefore cognition plays an important role in the way the world is assimilated into knowledge and experience simultaneously. Ibid., p. 29.

structure of the world by deciding to inhabit an interstitial space. It is dissatisfaction with the status quo, a desire to make new of what has always been and an experimental state of mind.

The struggle of the human psyche with making sense of the world she inhabits is expressively reflected in the closing lines from a poem *Dukkhageete* (Song of Sadness) by Indian poet Gangadhar Chittal (who wrote in Kannada) to a person ravaged by anguish, raving with existential questions. The poet writes:

> *Eke idu, enu idu, entu idu enabedā,*
> Don't say, why so? What and how be this?
> *chīridarū brahmāṇḍa birivante*
> even if you scream such that the universe tears open
> *bānataḷa chippoḍedu siḍivante kūgidaru,*
> even if the heaven and earth crumble under the thunder of your wailing
> *horaḷidaru, dikku dikkugaḷa kadakada baḍedu naraḷidaru,*
> even if you roll on the floor, moan, beat frantically on the doors of all directions,
> *ahā niruttarā, niruttarā, niruttarā sṛśṭi.*
> Answer-less, Answer-less, Answer-less, oh nature.[35]

Nature is *niruttara* — answer-less, to the suffering poet's relentless questioning to his world. His anguish only to be responded through a three-fold echo, as if reflecting from the landscape — a double-edged response from mute nature. 'Niruttara, niruttara, niruttara'. This 'nature' that is outside of the boundaries of the self, perhaps will never answer. We provide our own answers, and in the garb of degrees of concreteness or fluidity, we become authors of various modes of translating our emotions, churnings — translating our worlds and becoming translations of our worlds.

The Intention of Translation

We return to the questions we began with. How can we affirm the act of translation as a vital force of proliferation rather than a mode of flattening and silencing the rough edges of our world? How do we negotiate our precarious subjectivities? How do we exercise translation at all without universalizing or relativizing absolutely? The first step in trying to reckon with these questions is to recognize how translation performs as a method which is actively contingent with our everyday interaction with the world. Language and the world are in strange relationship with each other; in mathematics and science, as well as in philosophy. The role that language plays in the discipline of philosophy embodies an inherent dichotomy — it tries to relate the observed specific world to a generic understanding of it. We can see how translation plays a role in this relation. Theories like *Dhvani* resonance or 'dependent origination' of Buddhist metaphysics or of embodied cognition in mathematical philosophy give us handles into trying to creatively co-opt translation as a political and structural tool in the domain of experience vis-à-vis meaning. With the sensorial turn gripping the field of the curatorial and artistic research, in a time where politics of hurt, care, feeling, and dissent are on the table, translation seeks an intentional re-definition in the transdisciplinary structure of our negotiations with the world.

Translation thus emerges as an active relation that one enters into when expressing linguistically, creatively, or emotively. Yes, an artist translates, a curator translates, a spectator translates, a mother translates, a geographer translates, a storyteller translates, the moment we attempt to voice an intention that must be conveyed, we enter the domain of translation. If translation enables possibilities of new unarticulated meanings it can only be inferred then that the intention to translate is not to preserve but to make free a thought. This making free is not a violation of the 'original' but a desire that comes from a feeling of care for that which is translated. This *cared thought* is translated to be freely appropriated and renewed by the world. Thus the proliferation of experience is perhaps the only justificatory mode which makes translation possible as a method for making as well as experiencing. What is supposedly then 'lost' in translation is 'gained' through speculation.

Thus, we could tackle the utterance 'I don't understand this' by first trying to understand why we want to understand, and what the 'this' that we are trying to grasp is, and then ask what makes us feel obliged to be part of this relational structure in the first place. The method of translation as 'making sense' and consequently 'making heard or seen' offers us a 'relationship' strategy to negotiate the contemporary conundrum by appropriating what we discern as our artistic experience. By recognizing and charting out the contingent forces that drive us to ask certain questions and drive us to want to express certain ideas, translation as a mode emerges as the trapeze that can make the artist swing from the edge of meaning to the edge of sense, creating as many gaps as the leaps she is willing to take.

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[35] Gangadhar Chittal, 'DukkhaGeete', in: Shantinath Desai (ed.), *Gangadhar Chittalara Kavya Srishti*, Bangalore: Prism Book House, 2002, p. 97. Translation by author.

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Antoinette Nausikaä, *I Touch Things So I Can Feel Them*, 2011, drawing. Courtesy the artist.