

Notes on Translation

Té (Kynan Tan & Andrew Brooks)

A murmur, seizing me, I can't master its source, its increase is out of my control. The noise, the background noise, that incessant hubbub, our signals, our messages, our speech and our words are but a fleeting high surf, over its perpetual swell.

– Michel Serres ¹

We might think of translation as a shuttling back and forth between perception and understanding; a never-ending process of transduction between the sensorial and the semiotic; an attempt to reconcile the material and the immaterial through a crude coding of things experienced into a sign-based system of things grasped.² Translation is both necessary and impossible. It is always an approximation, and in approximating, produces something new.

We are attempting to make visible and sensory an invisible entity that exists undetected beyond our limits of perception. To make seen (if only for an instant), the malleable and shapeshifting nature of electrical energy. A swarm of hidden actors and connections, translated into a mass of pure sensorial experience. A momentary return to a pre-linguistic state where these invisible forces are inscribed upon the body through the synaesthetic experience. Electrical energy is vibration and vibration is simultaneously translated into sound and light.

John Cage said that there is no such thing as silence and drew our attention to the sound, the noise and the vibration all around us. Most famously demonstrated in his composition 4'33" Cage's thesis was that a musical reality was inescapable, and he legitimated this claim with his oft-recounted anechoic chamber epiphany.³ Cage both opened music up to the noise of the everyday and loosened sound from the shackles of Western art music. Treating sound as acoustic energy – as vibrations – and accepting that there is no such thing as silence, we can deduce, as Robert Barry did in the 1960s, that "There is not anything that is not energy."⁴

The noise. A sea encompassing the visible and the invisible, a multiple from which our signals, messages and meanings momentarily emerge as "a fleeting high surf, over its perpetual swell".⁵ Perhaps we can apply Serres' metaphysics of noise to thinking about energy. Energy is an omnipresent force, limitless and unending. We may tap into this invisible phenomena, harness it as a malleable material, and translate it into perceptible forms. And yet it has itself no background. Cage's assertion that there is no silence poetically reminds us of the energy around us. Sound and energy dissolve into one as we attempt to make sense of a continuous and complex environment of vibrating audibility. And so we return to translation, that of concepts and materials into compositional forms. In doing so, we ask how might energy be understood as a multiple? As a physical force and a metaphor? A concept and a material?

"Water, the sea. Perceptual bursts, inner and outer, how can they be told apart?"

— Michel Serres⁶

We are interested in a synaesthetic translation, one that involves a joining of the senses, a momentary return to a pre-linguistic state, a somatic understanding of experience. Patterns of invisible energy are translated into multiple forms, connecting sound, light and movement at a singular branching point. The electrical signal enables a symbiotic relationship between these forms, in which causality is replaced by multiplicity. Neither sound, light nor movement comes first in the chain of activity; rather they are simultaneously materialised from the invisible force of electrical energy. Perhaps, as the artist Robin Fox notes, synaesthetic experiences take us back to a state of "neural recklessness where everything is thrown in without deference to the emergent synaptic bureaucracy that parses our senses into organised and functional blocks."⁷

We can read the reception of these multisensory experiences as a form of synaesthesia, a cross-modal neural perception. The brain does not perceive these as of the same source. The tactile, sonic and visual each adhere to different physical properties and are observed by our senses through differentiation. Each individual sense generates different meanings, as sensorial experience is translated into thoughts and understanding. Yet the brain is adept at linking these together, in branching meaning across these separate entities. The process of differentiating, approximating, dividing and recombining this mass of experience into functional blocks for the brain to process necessarily creates something that did not exist, something unique to the viewer's perception.

There is a friction between these differences and in these relations. Frictions between how the energy around us becomes sensory by this process of approximation, and frictions between how the difference in senses creates different forms of meaning. The work evolves over time, while at each moment in time we ourselves have changed from the moment before, constantly parsing input, changing how we perceive, an unending feedback loop of re-adjusting ourselves. A continuous process of seeking stabilisation and never quite finding it.

Between our sensory experience and thought, is something lost? What happens when that which is drawn from the senses is translated – added to, subtracted from, rounded or adjusted to match the completely *other* space of thought and language? The way that we observe the world around us, our making sense of things, and our own internal dialogue are all necessarily different, and that friction is what we are constantly observing, making sense of and coming to terms with.

The process is repeated here in these pages, in trying to translate the idea of the work somehow into another format that can be sensorially and cognitively processed, from sound and light into a snapshot, an image. Concepts and thoughts into text, still pages for processing at other timescales using other modes of perception.

Here the mind returns to solipsism. Because of the unknowability of thoughts, that which cannot be transferred or proven to be true, knowledge that is unable to be defined, thinking only of oneself and the movements of one's thoughts and senses. How everything forms connections, *is* everything else, draws a web of one-dimensional lines, a point reaching to a point, but the connection itself has no area, no mass, no definable reality.

- 1 Michel Serres, *Genesis* (Ann Arbor: The University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
- 2 This definition of translation is informed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Translation as Culture'. For Spivak, translation is a political act of simultaneously understanding the 'other' and the self. It is the notion that meaning arises from the process of translation that has informed our thinking here.
- 3 In 1951, Cage visited an anechoic chamber (a room designed to completely absorb reflections of either sound or electromagnetic waves. i.e. designed to be silent) at Harvard. Expecting to hear silence, he heard two sounds: one high and one low, which the sound engineer informed him were the sounds of his nervous system and his blood circulating. It is a story that Cage told for the rest of his life and one that underpinned his aesthetic philosophy: that sounds are everywhere and that all sounds are musical.
- 4 Ursula Meyer, "Conversation with Robert Barry, 12 October 1969", in *Conceptual Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972).
- 5 Michel Serres, *Genesis* (Ann Arbor: The University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
- 6 Michel Serres, *Genesis* (Ann Arbor: The University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
- 7 Robin Fox, "The exploded infant" (2014) <http://monablog.net/2014/07/14/the-exploded-infant/>



