

EXHIBITION REVIEW

CAOIMHE MORGAN-FEIR

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COMING TO TERMS

CURATED BY JOHN G. HAMPTON,
JACKMAN HUMANITIES INSTITUTE WITH
THE JUSTINA M. BARNICKE GALLERY OF
ART AT HART HOUSE, UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO, SEPTEMBER 16, 2013–JUNE 15,
2014

With white walls and cool marble tiles, the hallways and offices of the Jackman Humanities Institute's tenth floor easily double as a gallery. Devoted to interdisciplinary research, the Institute typically fosters interaction and collaboration between a variety of humanities scholars by hosting seminars, conferences, fellowships and the like. But every year, as a part of their dedicated art programming, the Institute presents an exhibition that engages their annual theme (which also binds wider research projects and collaborations). For 2013–2014, this theme was "Translation and the Multiplicity of Languages." In *Coming to Terms*, the corresponding exhibition, curator John G. Hampton builds from this general topic to investigate three sub-topics: "hegemonic anglophonization and its effects; deconstructionist translation; and intersemiotic translation."¹ Careful to resist applying the notion of "translation" so widely that it loses a clear meaning or weight, Hampton looks to artistic examples or explorations of the practice that are indicative of its ambiguities and nuances. This emphasis on the breadth of translation, its relevance beyond translation amongst languages, widens the exhibition's focus to look at relationships between disciplines and forms. While the tenth floor houses *Coming to Terms*, the exhibition relies,



Carl Trahan, *Dérangement* (2013), detail of installation, chalk, 12' 4" x 5'. Photo: courtesy of John G. Hampton.

quite heavily, on the forms and materials of academic settings (blackboards, television screens, illuminated signs) to intervene within the space, and elaborate on various versions of translation.

Carl Trahan's *Dérangement* (2013) features the most characteristic employment of educational materials: chalk writing across a blackboard. In meticulous, miniature lettering, *Dérangement* traces the synonyms of its titular word, their synonyms and so on. From one word hundreds more branch out and break off; a lineage of language grows in dendriform fashion. Within the Jackman



Nicoline van Harskamp, *The New Latin* (2010), frame grab from DVD video, 30: 23. Photo: courtesy of John G. Hampton.

building, *Dérangement* initially appears to be a relic from an earlier seminar or meeting—the leftovers of some research group. Only after a moment or two does the very intricacy of the translations, their delineation and continuation, become apparent. And when this intricacy emerges, the exercise's labour and futility become even more noticeable. Trahan simultaneously highlights the impossibility of exactitude within translation alongside its vast potential. It might be impossible to create a direct translation, but new paths emerge in the attempt.

This impossibility, the slippery slope of synonyms, also emerges in Simon Glass's site-specific installation, *On the Tower of Babel* (2013), which consists of vinyl lettering installed alongside letterpress chases. *On the Tower of Babel* features English passages translated from Hebrew by Glass. The nine passages are positioned on the walls through-

out the tenth floor, and quote Genesis 11:1-9, which tells story of the Tower of Babel. However, Glass does not present the story in linear fashion, but, instead, installs the nine separate verses out of order. Verse four appears next to verse six; down the hall a section notes that the earth was "of one language" alongside a passage that records Yahweh scattering people "over the face of all the earth." To follow the narrative in a linear fashion viewers must traverse the tenth floor in a sporadic, zigzagging approach. Simultaneously, to walk through the tenth floor in a logical, linear fashion viewers must content themselves with jumping between sections of the tale. There are two options: alter the narrative, or alter the floorplan. A disruptive, and slightly confrontational, effect underscores the installation.

Glass also includes notes about the English translations, which are often longer than the verses

themselves. There are comments on the effects of prefixes, possible connotations, etymologies of particular words and allusions. These caveats, while clarifying, further complicate any basic reading of the narrative—most fundamentally, they bloat a relatively small, easily digestible text up into something more than four times its original size. But beyond length, they also begin to introduce sneaking doubts about the veracity of any translation, let alone this one. These doubts are solidified in the final citation when Glass suggests “translation...is never enough.”

Nicoline van Harskamp’s *New Latin* (2010) mines and mimics gestures from the academic world, but uses them in an entirely performative manner. In an office tucked away from the rest of the exhibit, a desktop computer screen displays the video work, which recreates a panel at an academic conference. This panel seems to be a conventional discussion between an artist and a curator (Van Harskamp playing herself and actor Daniel Popa playing the curator/intellectual Alexandru Dima). They carry out a half-hour long discussion in Romanian about the dominance of English within the art world. But herein lies the twist: Van Harskamp does not speak Romanian. With an original script translated from English to Romanian, Harskamp memorized the inflections and pronunciations, and proceeded to perform the discussion. Both Van Harskamp and Popa play their parts remarkably well. All the non-verbal cues are there—pens are flipped, occasional glances brush over disruptive audience members, and thoughtful pauses are held before answers. While the translation of written language forms the basic foundation of *New Latin*, Van Harskamp ultimately focuses more on the critical role that non-verbal signifiers play in bolstering authority (particularly in realms such as academia or the arts, where unspoken codifiers abound). She creates a slightly parodic piece that gently prods at the conventions of self-presentation.

The connection between performance and translation also surfaces in Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay’s *Portrait of a Young Man* (2012–2013). A video with three distinct components, it uses footage of a floral arrangement, American Sign Language and an image of a galaxy to translate the impact and experience of listening to the Scottish singer Jimmy Somerville, best known for singing the 1984 *Smalltown Boy* (now a popular gay anthem). Something surreal hovers around the introduction of these translations into the conference room that houses them. While the work’s television screen initially melds into its office-like setting, its content, which emphasizes embodiment and performance, seems at odds with the more conservative environment. While Van Harskamp’s performance replicates the minute gestures and styles of the academic realm, Nemerofsky Ramsay’s video work performs alternative ways of knowing and expressing the world that have traditionally been marginalized. The work spills out and queers the space beyond its frame.

In their grey areas and faltering moments, the works assembled in *Coming to Terms* underscore that, within translation, loss figures as importantly as discovery. Installed within the Institute, the artworks function uniquely: they disrupt more through their failure, their insistence on the impossibility of straightforward translation, than anything else. These projects are not seamless or smooth. But in this admission, they offer a particularly keen insight for any interdisciplinary location: if translations cannot be neutral, they must be claimed and accounted for. And while objective, hermetic translations might be impossible, their more flawed counterparts are infinitely more generative.

NOTE

- 1 John G. Hampton, “Coming to Terms,” Jackman Humanities Institute, http://www.humanities.utoronto.ca/event_details/id=1064 (accessed July 2014).