

Review : *The Trouble with Translation is Translation*

Yvonne Singer

The Ironic Turn, 2003-04

Kunstshalle Erfurt, Germany

Yvonne Singer's video installation "The Trouble with Translation" (2003), especially designed for the exhibition "The Ironic Turn" consists of two video monitors facing each other at eye level in the middle of a darkened enclosure. The two video clips playing on the monitors are also projected onto opposite walls. The two clips are of different length, so that there is a constant shift in the images that oppose each other. Since the clips are repeated on a loop, the beginning of the piece is any point at which the viewer enters the space. When they become aware that the sequence is repeating, the viewers exit, again at any point, thus ending the piece. The artist comments that her pieces "present viewers with immersive situations where their physical and psychological experience is an integral component to activating and completing the piece."

The installation parallels the simultaneity of stream-of-consciousness images and sensations in Joycean texts which the artist cites as an influence on her work. Depending on their position in the space, some viewers will either shift their attention back and forth or turn to one monitor or wall. The viewer experiences the alienation of a traveler confronted with foreign languages and cultures. On one monitor there is an elderly lady reading texts in a language most viewers will not even recognize. With a subtle, ironic twist, the artist offers the viewer the aid of a superimposed image of the text itself, as if that might help in understanding, but of course for most people it only reinforces the sense that the material is unintelligible, particularly because the camera sweeps from the bottom to the top of the page, making it impossible to read the text. By listening carefully over the competing sound tracks one can hear the elderly lady explaining that she reading her father's Hungarian poetry about his granddaughter Yvonne's birth in 1944. The mention of the granddaughter's name, Yvonne, identifies the elderly lady the mother of the artist. We also hear another voice, presumably that of Yvonne, singing what sounds like a Hungarian children's song—a fragment of memory from her earliest years. Yvonne's mother comments in English that translation cannot do justice to original texts. Yvonne's mother also describes her relationship to her own father, using terms which do not translate into English. She appears on the screen framed by what looks like the white border of a photograph above a text, which explains the meaning of the Hungarian intimate form "tu." Until she was 16, Yvonne's mother was not allowed to use this intimate form of "tu" when she spoke to him. During the recitation of poetry, the opposite monitor and wall present us with a middle-aged man telling jokes and sayings in what some viewers will recognize as Yiddish and which speakers of German can partially understand. The Yiddish jokester explains the sayings in English. In another sequence we see phrases in large white letters on a black background which focus on the importance of the "mother tongue in our lives. This sequence of phrases is repeated and followed by a clip again featuring the Yiddish jokester. As he speaks, whipped cream is squirted on his face. The film then reverses the action and the whipped cream is removed

A subsequent sequence shows a woman's mouth painted with red lipstick saying phrases in various languages that one might hear in a language course, This is followed by the image of a young lady signing. At the same time, ironic texts pass across the bottom of the screen describing the benefits of language courses which help new immigrants fit in by teaching them Canadian pronunciation, and colloquial expressions that follow different codes from the formal language and polite expressions learned from a phrase book. A smaller image on the

side of the screen show the artist holding two oval mirrors, and silently mouthing the phrase “Hello, my name is.” Above her are illustrations of mouth positions from a phonetics text book including a diagram of the mouth. Yvonne Singer says that her intention here is “to indicate other forms of language, another set of codes that require decoding, and the

importance of body language, gestures. The idea of deafness, inability to hear is a metaphor for the difficulty of communication. Language is a negotiated territory shifting and unstable and dependent on context. The CNN Format of the sequence refers to the media, popular culture, the overload of visual and textual information.”

To gain a fuller understanding of the piece we have to consider the biography of the artist, who was born in Budapest in 1944 to Jewish parents. After leaving Hungary the family lived in several European countries and as a small child Yvonne spoke several languages. However, after moving to Canada in 1949 she forgot these early language impressions and lost her mother tongue, Hungarian. The primary impact of her childhood on her art was her experience of dislocation and the silence of her parents about the war. Like many holocaust survivors, they sought to forget their past and reinvent a new identity. Yvonne became an assimilated Canadian. She attended McGill University in Montréal from 1961-65, taught in Toronto at the Ontario College of Art, from 1975-79, and received her M.F.A. from York University in 1980, where she is currently graduate program director.

Yvonne Singer’s pieces are centered around the loss of her native language and her uncertain position caught between diverse and sometimes contradictory roots and social roles. She uses images and sounds to illustrate her search for a vocabulary with which to portray her experience and her search for an “authentic” identity. The “Trouble with Translation” bombards the viewer with bewildering fragments of language and memory. It raises questions about the difficulty of transitions and translation, from one language to another, especially when this goes beyond literal meanings and involves humor and poetry. The piece operates on multiple levels to disrupt, rupture, and twist conventional notions about national, family, and self-identities. As the artist puts it: “All my work is concerned with absences, silence, loss and how public histories construct/shape private lives and subjectivities.” The ambivalence and opposition of high and low culture which emerges from her installation juxtaposes the world of her mother’s proud Hungarian identity, whose authenticity is challenged and undermined, with the jarring, taunting sound of coarse Yiddish jokes, insults and curses drowning her out: “You should grow like an onion, --head in the ground and feet sticking out.” in other words, the speaker explains in English, “Go to Hell!” While the mother, who symbolizes the mother tongue, emotes over the highpoints of Hungarian lyric poetry written by a famous poet and by her father, her son-in-law, is being smeared with whipped cream as he tells jokes in Yiddish, and the sound accelerates to create a Mickey Mouse effect. The film is then reversed so that the sound runs backwards and the whipped cream is magically removed, perhaps to indicate that it was all in fun and no harm was done. Of course for some listeners the reversed sound is hardly distinguishable from the sound running forward. Part of the humor, even if this is not deliberately intended in the sequence, is the fact that Yiddish is written in “reverse” order from right to left. The confusion is amplified by a split screen where the husband/son-in-law is speaking in not quite authentic Yiddish or a parody of Yiddish with the track running forward while on the other side of the screen it is running backward.

The relegation of the mother to one side of the installation is broken down in a sequence where she appears on the same side which has featured her son-in-law with his Yiddish jokes. A split screen displays a still photo of her seated in any easy chair wearing the same clothes as

in the video sequences on the other monitor and wall. On the other part of the split screen we see the artist reading her mother's account of their arrival in Canada on July 12, 1951. The text moves across the bottom of the screen on a scroll bar, intended to evoke foreign film subtitles: The artist comments: "Foreign in one place is home in another." The voice reading

in this sequence is edited to create stuttering repetitions that lag behind the moving text. Thus the reading is broken and fragmented, faulty, as are the fragments of memory it describes. In fact, much of the sound in the sound track of the Hungarian reading has gaps, breaks and interruptions, which also point to the imperfection of language, translation, and memory and the uncertainty of identity. Thus the installation has many features of what Ihab Hassan calls the "Postmodern Turn. These include indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonization, loss of self, the unrepresentable, hybridization of genres, comic carnivalization, performance-participation, constructionism in which the mind generates its own realities, and immanence, which refers to capacity of the mind to generalize itself through symbols. (Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, Ohio U. Press: 1987, pp.168-173). Yvonne Singer's "post-modern piece" underscores the focus of the exhibit the "Ironic Turn" by playing with ironic citations and allusions to challenge conventional artistic traditions of "authentic identity and art".

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