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Performing Interpretation

Performing Interpretation is a work in progress developed and presented in preparation of the 2020 SAR Crisis Collective Conference on the topic Language of Artistic Research in a lecture setting and interpreted into the Norwegian at bit-teatergarasjen's Prøverommet in Bergen in January 2020.

Find an excerpt of the recording on soundcloud:
<https://soundcloud.com/user-888747253/interpreting-performance-performing-interpretation>

Hello, welcome everyone.

Thank you all for coming. I am very happy to be here tonight. And nervous, as I see you all zipped up in the corner. But. I recently got invited to participate in a conference on the topic of artistic research. Now soccer part for single shot. It will happen in March. More specifically I am working on the LANGUAGE of artistic research. Single jingle roof top.

I am developing a lecture performance and conversation with an interpreter for the stage. I will use anecdotal, academic and anarchistic ways of speaking. AAA, anecdotal, academic, anarchistic will be my proposition for what the language of artistic research could be. What you will see here tonight is a first step in the preparation for this conference. Sweet handle, open divider. It will take approximately 30 minutes.

A big thank you to Kristina and Prøverommet for inviting me.

It's a great opportunity to rehearse something in front of a real audience.
Or is it.
It is also an invitation to fail.

Failing is supposed to be a good thing, an important part of learning, improving, failing better. It certainly doesn't feel like a good thing while it happens. Especially not if you're doing it in public, a missed chance, sneak preview, sneak down grayscale flower plans. I screen shot beach desire. Write me, at least watch me,

match me on stage is Ragnhild Waage. Thank you for doing this. We can fail better together.

Man in the audience, correcting the pronunciation: It's Ragnhild.

Johanna: Ragnhild.

Man: Ragnhild.

Johanna: Ragnhild.

I teeth authentic.

Ragnhild is a government authorised translator. She is a founding member of Allegro, a translation agency located in Bergen and has many years of experience in the field - as well as the voice of Marianne Faithfull. I'd have her raw.

I called Ragnhild's number without knowing her or who she was. She picked up the phone. And that was it for me. Love at first hear. I tape her, cream her, own her. I dust magazine, I use window blue, I re-use present, voice.

The voice itself establishes a relationship, apart from content. A bodily experience.

Ragnhild's voice travels into my ear. It goes from her body into my body. Goes from her body into your bodies. So even though you are all zipped up in the corner, we are very much connected.

I almost empty water glass. For you. For you. You, you half empty. Still young, you say, a sip, authentic.

Ragnhild, you are interpreting tonight.

For you. And also for me. We haven't rehearsed this. I summer dog, I memorize, I purple you. You jump through window. I'm impressed. You starstrike me with unisex. Which is a bit like I am going to my own performance as I do not know what is going to happen. Translate, sleep, erase.

I just briefly want to make it clear what it actually is: interpretation.

Translation refers to the written form of transferring text from one language into another. Interpretation is oral. The interpretation of spoken words of one language into spoken words of another. It is used in conferences and meetings but also for example for live transmission on television. You go dull, grab phone.

Or even in the cinema. At least when I was a kid in 1990 in Austria.

My dad took me to an original language movie.

The movie was Czech and it was interpreted live by a woman who stood, microphone in hand, in the darkness of the theatre.

All I wanted to see was the latest Walt Disney.

But there I was, staring at this shadow of a person, not properly hearing the Czech, and not properly hearing the German either. I hold modern double image. Got you. You fooled.

She did a simultaneous interpretation. As the name suggests, the interpreter speaks simultaneously to the original. You time chat train, you almost miss last minute pain. In consecutive interpretation the speech is interrupted in irregular intervals. Then the interpreter can give her interpretation of what has just been said.

I want to show you an example of an interpretation that moves between consecutive and simultaneous. It's from the TV show The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel. It is placed in the 1950s. In one episode Mrs. Maisel, an american comedienne, travels to Paris, spontaneously conquers the stage of a club and finds an interpreter.

play Maisel Clip, 3 min (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yss_cgpmwaA)

Interpreting is an extremely demanding activity.

The Austrian interpreter Christa Wendl told me she enters another state of mind, highly alert and focused on the task. A flow, if it goes well. She might not notice other things around her and she actually might not remember much of what she interprets.

She told me about a recent discussion concerning world politics, the ethics of interpretation and this other state of mind.

Putin and Trump met for a tête-à-tête with only an interpreter present. Later on the question was if that interpreter could be called as a witness. There is an ethical dilemma here as an interpreter is bound to professional discretion. But the problem was also that the interpreter probably could not remember much of what she had heard because she was so focused on interpreting what she heard. I go on speaker: Audio scissors for alphabet.

Christa also tells me it is impossible for her to read the notes she takes during a session after the session.

So Ragnhild is the interpreter tonight.

I am the artist.

And you are the audience.

Such clarity, no?

I talk. Ragnhild talks. You listen.

We perform. You watch.

You are allowed to talk, but only on the inside.

We, on the other hand, should not talk on the inside, not during this performance.

We need to focus. We need to perform.

You are allowed to go, if you must.

We must stay. We are on.

You probably have expectations. But us too.

We want you to be silent. You can talk later.

We can talk later, but not too much.

I want you to be attentive, critical, but not too critical.

You can criticize Ragnhild. But not me. Or is it the other way round?

You may understand English. You may understand Norwegian. Maybe both.

I am speaking to you in English. I move outside my first language.

Ragnhild on the other hand, moves into her first language.

She renders my non-native speech native. She destroys what I say. The sound of the English original is being erased, spoken over, sentence by sentence. It's quite an act.

At the same time the interpreter has to forget herself, has to forget even what is being said, so she can keep on moving.

She has to come close to me, creep into me, become me.

I lose it, short loose, loosely spaced. We weren't loosely spaced. But tight. Bright.

She can only fail.

I push away. She, hot surface battery.

Interpretation cannot be completely exact or absolute.

It can only try something, fail, fail better.

You filter world out from your corner. Time covers, window parts. Compartment strip wick buckle up. The water glass untouched.

In a lecture the scholar and literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak shows a translation of a text by the German philosopher Hegel. She shows a page, that she worked on, all the mistakes she found. She says: „Look at all of the German put in there. Do you think I'm writing to someone saying this is a bad translation? No. This is a translation. It's a wonderful page.“

She says it would be a mistake to think a good translation is a correct translation. To her a good translation is a transactional space, something that should be read in an active way. You go: brumm brumm. Laptop work work. A translation should not just be convenient, practical. It should not hide the fact that it is a translation and that it was written by a human being. Back ache, itch face, rub burn. Oral turn. Recovery on eastern light. What kind of world would we live in if it was fully translated, fully translatable.

The poet Anne Carson writes: „As a classicist I was trained to strive for exactness and to believe that rigorous knowledge of the world without any residue is possible for us.“ But then exactly this residue, the rest, the leftovers, started to excite her. I open air out, T-shirt off, rows of rabbits. „To think of its motion, to think of its shadow, (...) to think of these things gives me a sensation of getting free.“

Getting free.

Release the pigeon. You stumble to the chair. Dry sun, warehouse window. Working myself towards the topic of language in artistic research I pluck facial hair. If that language could actually do that, could actually give the sensation of getting free. I am working on a proposition. To think about the language of artistic research not in terms of academic or journalistic or autobiographical writing. Those forms can be used when they serve a purpose of course. To think about the language of artistic research as something that is „getting free“. I match the empty turn. A movement, an action, a transformation rather than a language that names things without residue.

„Research“, writes Linda Tuhiwai Smith in Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples. „Research is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary.“

Research has a colonial history, it names things and people without hesitation. It puts things in order, cliché, category. It steps in Adams footsteps. Adam named the animals. I boss you all.

„The guilt, the crimes begin once you line letters up to make words out of them“, writes Roland Barthes. The alphabet itself is innocent. On the other hand there is Eve. She bites into the apple, sets a free mark, and bites Adams answer to the chaos of creation in half. Kill kill, cover. I want you H cup.

I borrow this from Anne Carson. She writes:

„Most of us, given a choice between chaos and naming, between catastrophe and cliché, would choose naming. But translation is a practice, a strategy, or a gymnastics of the mind, that does seem to give us a third place to be. In the presence of a word that stops itself, in that silence, one has the feeling that something has passed us and kept going, that some possibility has got free.“
Release the pigeon. I silly walk, you laugh, you shake, half worn shoes, escape.

During a conversation at a party on Saturday Magnhild mentioned a facebook post.

Ragnhild: It's Magnhild.

Johanna: Magnhild.

Ragnhild: Magnhild.

Johanna: Magnhild.

The facebook post asked for a Norwegian translation for the word „embodiment“. It got one hundred comments. To me that sounds like some possibilities have gotten free.

It also sounds obsessive.

Obsession is not unheard of when it comes to matters of translation.

The German poet Friedrich Hölderlin is known for compulsively revisioning his translations of Sophocles. And I quote again from Anne Carson, „forcing the texts from strange to more strange. His family committed him to a psychiatric clinic, from which after a year he was released as incurable. He spent the remaining 37 years of his life in a tower in varying states of indifference or ecstasy.“

From my shadow, under expedition hat I used to think interpretation and translation required a very specific mind, highly focused and knowledgeable, precise, perfectionist. But I now understand that the endeavor also calls for a certain amount of madness. A willingness to go all in, to knowingly work on the impossible. To be able to accept that not your most accomplished results are really adding something to the real. But that it is in the mistakes and the silences of the untranslatable where the third space opens up and new thoughts can emerge.

Let's go water undercover, let's go to the bar, let's drink, let's hang, let's dazzle dazzle. This is it for today. Thank you Ragnhild and thank you all for your time and attention. You are allowed to talk now. But at the bar.