

Poetic translations (16–17 Dec 20)

Online, Dec 16–17, 2020

Deadline: Oct 15, 2020

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‘Poetic translations’: Conversations across the plurality of Arts disciplines in Visual Arts Exhibitions

Solent University, Southampton (Zoom webinar)

Wednesday 16th – Thursday 17th of December 2020

Call for Papers deadline: 15th October 2020

Subject fields: Visual Art, Exhibitions, Art History, Contemporary Art, Literature,

We are currently inviting paper proposals for ‘Poetic translations’: Conversations across the plurality of Arts disciplines in Visual Art Exhibitions online conference.

Visit our Poetic Translations web page for more information

A clear distinction between art and other exhibitions characterised the growth of large exhibitions in the nineteenth century. While art exhibitions were staged within a narrowly defined context of European painting and sculpture, all else was displayed within two broader contexts: specific academic disciplines (natural history, history, anthropology, design and industry, book fairs), and/or trade exhibitions. Since at least the mid-twentieth century, this distinction between art and other exhibitions has become blurred. References to the natural sciences, history, theatre, music, dance or literature have been incorporated into art exhibitions, while historical museums have exhibited art works, commissioned art interventions and utilised contemporary curatorial practices. The British museum, for example, hosts ‘permanent’ exhibits of contemporary art works in its collection, as do many other museums.

The frequently asked question ‘what is art?’ invites the response: ‘art is...’. Since so far no definitive answer has proved to be possible, it is common to hear the question put in the context of a specific work asking: ‘but is this art?’. Philosophical discourse acknowledges the plurality of arts, at least since Plato. However, until the twentieth century the plurality of the arts was presented hierarchically with poetry at the top. Modernity saw a rethinking of this hierarchical order of the arts. For example, Adorno argues that ‘art’ is not a generic concept; if the arts were governed by a single concept they would be hierarchically placed under philosophy, establishing a hierarchical chain. The value of the plurality of the arts is precisely in its capacity to circumvent the above hierarchy. Jean-Luc Nancy further develops the thought and asks: ‘Why Are There Several Arts [not just one]?’ in his essay of the same title. At issue is how might we understand the relationships between the plurality of arts disciplines without imposing a hierarchy?

The art critic Clement Greenberg argued in his radio essay ‘Modernist Painting’ (1961), that Moder-

nism was 'the intensification, almost the exacerbation' of the self-critical tendency that he identified in the approach taken by the philosopher Immanuel Kant, in the discipline of philosophy. Greenberg contended that the essence of Modernism was in the capacity of each arts discipline to focus on what was specific to itself in order to escape the traditional hierarchy in which paintings were expected to 'illustrate' literary narratives in order to establish their value. Greenberg's argument focused on the formal qualities of each art form; for him, painting's essential characteristic was in its two-dimensionality. In modernity, he thus argued, artists insisted on the non-referentiality of art and focused on the medium itself. Hence, artists titled their works 'composition' or 'untitled' to emphasise that their art works should be interpreted on their own terms and not on their ability to illustrate 'higher' art forms.

Shortly after the publication of Greenberg's essay, his claim that each arts discipline sought to 'purify' itself through its formal means was challenged. However, his argument that in modernity art performs a self-critical role was taken up by many artists. This performative process does not take place through the 'purification' of each arts discipline but precisely through the 'poetic translations' across arts disciplines: some paintings in the 1960's were translated into performance acts, dance and music performances were translated into visual art works (Fluxus), film and video were translated into visual art installations, visual artists presented performance works, artists translated curatorial practices to present art installations and curators translated both visual and performance work (including music, dance, theatre), as well as literature, film and video into art exhibitions. The curator Harald Szeemann sought to revive Richard Wagner's approach to Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art) which made use of most arts disciplines including design, as can be seen in his post-1969 exhibitions.

Since literature (poetry) was historically the highest form of art, much of the twentieth century avant-garde art shunned references to literary narratives. However, recently some exhibitions have been using literary material to organise visual art exhibitions. For example, Tate St Ives' Virginia Woolf: An Exhibition Inspired by her Writing (2018), exhibited works by women artists who addressed issues arising from Woolf's writing. London's Gagosian Gallery exhibited Crash: Homage to J. G. Ballard, bringing together art works that resonated strongly with Ballard's harsh, dystopian literary visions. Most notably, Mieke Bal's Emma & Edward: Love in the time of Loneliness, Oslo (2016-17), established 'associative connections' across time and arts disciplines (Literature and visual arts) between characters in Flaubert and the works of Munch and others.

The rationale of the conference is to explore how the different arts translate across disciplines and to establish exchanges that will allow arts disciplines to engage with contemporary debates and concerns in a non-hierarchical way. In this context the term 'translation' is taken from Walter Benjamin through Jacques Derrida's interpretation, which can be read as yet another translation in a long line of poetic translations. Translation, as Derrida points out, implies a hierarchy: the translation is generally perceived as secondary to the translated material. The translator is thus always indebted to the text/material which is translated, and to its author. And yet, the translator also transforms the translated material and makes it relevant for a different context. The act of translation involves a level of betrayal analogous to the betrayal of the 'creative act' it translates (each creative work betrays a tradition through the creative moment). Hence this conference's use of the term 'poetic translation' with reference to the hierarchical tradition and the way it is being transformed through translations to create non-hierarchical structures of exchange. For the 'creative act', by definition, introduces an innovative moment. It is this 'poetic' innovation, Ben-

jamin insists, in which 'the unfathomable, the mysterious, the "poetic", can be reproduced; but only if the translator is also a poet [artist]'.

A wide range of contemporary debates and concerns can be addressed from the perspective of non-hierarchical relationships between a plurality of the arts and across cultures, for example: globalisation, migration, environmental concerns, issues of gender/ethnicity identity. Papers are invited to discuss and/or present exhibitions which are not limited to the European tradition and/or works made by marginalised communities often categorised as craft and those associated with 'design' rather than 'the Arts'. Examples of craft might include textile, pottery and folk art, while design might include fashion, everyday objects, popular culture, even web design.

Below are some suggestions of themes we would welcome, but other relevant approaches will be equally considered:

- Exploring philosophical and theoretical approaches to 'poetic translations' across arts disciplines, and their potentials and limitations in addressing contemporary debates and concerns.
- Papers by curators, artists and academics who have engaged in projects of translating specific works from different arts disciplines: how were the projects devised, how did they evolve, and what was the rationale for doing it?
- Papers reflecting on exhibitions where poetic translations from other arts disciplines took place: what was achieved through the translations? How did they address contemporary debates and concerns?
- Papers by artists, and/or academics reflecting on specific art works in which poetic translations across art disciplines (including cultures) took place
- Papers which address poetic translations across disciplines in the context of cultural translations.
- Actual art work, including curated exhibitions, which translate other arts disciplines.

The above list is suggestive, not comprehensive. Any other approaches to the above are also welcomed.

Format of the submissions

We are inviting abstracts of 300 words maximum by 15th October 2020. Abstracts should come as attachments in Word or PDF.

Please submit to: poetic.translation.solent2020@gmail.com

Papers should be of 15 minutes each allowing for a couple of questions. Blocks of sessions will be followed by break-up rooms where longer discussions on specific topics might take place.

We are hoping that the conference will lead toward the publication of an anthology on the topic, selected papers from the conference will be invited.

Sincerely,

The editors Dr Nicola Foster, Maja Hill, Denise Clarke

Reference:

CFP: Poetic translations (16-17 Dec 20). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 8, 2020 (accessed Jan 6, 2026),

<<https://arthist.net/archive/23674>>.