

# TRANSLATING, THE ACTIVE MARGINS

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“Did you write this poem?” “No, I wrote a German Poem.”  
(Bertold Brecht, interrogated by the FBI in the 1940s)

For almost 20 years now, together with a team of co-editors, I have been involved in a publication project called *ARTMargins*, a journal devoted to post-war art that began its life in the early 2000s as a website devoted to post-war art in the former Eastern Europe. The word “margins” in the title of the publication is often thought to refer to postcolonial theory, a critical method sometimes (not quite appropriately) brought to bear on former Eastern Europe. However, when we thought of the title “*ART-Margins*”, we were not thinking of postcolonialism, but rather of the white margins in a printed text, the area where we as readers may place notes as we proceed, add images or words of our own, or leave other physical traces of our activity. It appeared to us at the time that this could be a good way of thinking about a magazine that was less interested in serving up art for the market—there were already plenty of publications doing that—than in creating an active reader. After all, it is in the margins of a text—including the space between the lines—that reading manifests itself as a form of labour, and the reader as a (co-) producer of a text that constitutes itself as much through the letters printed on the page as through the emptiness around them. And it was precisely there, at a point where reading and writing emerge as related if not mutually dependent activities, that we wanted to locate *ARTMargins*: the journal’s pages as so many material peripheries into which readers scribble their notes

(factually or mentally), co-producing the text they read rather than passively consuming it.

The idea of an “active margins” that underwrites these ideas is not uncommon: the periphery has often been thought as a spatially concrete threshold, a liminal in-between where heterogeneous elements mix, and where passive contemplation turns into active co-production. One of the principal fields of engagement for such co-production is translation, one of the areas in which both *ARTMargins* and *Notebook* are active. In the way in which it confronts a text with its possible equivalent in another idiom, translation broadly understood is less a goal-oriented mechanism than an arduous process of *Übertragung*, of “carrying over” the words and concepts that exist in one language into another, to see if they can exist there. Of course, in our neo-liberal age of rapid monetization, translation is rarely thought to be complex. Indeed, never has it been as rapid and abundantly available as today (Google Translate), to a point where we increasingly seem to take such “carrying over” fully for granted: if on the one hand we live in a world in which the multiplicity of languages and the importance of cultivating them has become a primary diversity goal, this multiplicity curiously dissolves on the level of “the Global” itself, which we associate primarily with a series of corporate visual emblems that are not in need of translation because they have become universal, from the Google logo to maps of airline networks in which foreign countries appear as so many graphs emanating from a single “hub” to Global English as the developed world’s dominant idiom. These (and other) emblems of the neo-liberal age operate as universal signifiers of a world in which exchange appears as the only imaginable form of existence, obviating the need for translation understood as the tedious labour of carrying words from one language into another.

To illustrate how contemporary artists have sought to counter the hegemony of translation-as-exchange that is so characteristic of the neo-liberal era I’d like to use the example of an art project that attempts quite literally to shift translation back into the margins, Natascha Sadr Haghghian’s and Ashkan Sepahvand’s

project *Seeing Studies* (2011). The volume of the same title Sadr Haghghian and Sepahvand produced for *Documenta 13* in conjunction with the Office for Art, Design and Theory and the Institute for Incongruous Translation is the English translation of a schoolbook used to teach art in the first year of Iranian public middle school.<sup>1</sup> The artists begin their translation with a series of graphic tables reminiscent of constructivist kiosks—combining the flatness of Islamic art with the spatial illusionism of modern Western painting—on which columns of Persian words that share a common Arabic root are listed together with their English equivalents. For example, the word منظره [*manzareh*], derived from the Arabic root نظر [*N-Z-R*], has the following equivalents in English: “view, projection, landscape, scenery, sight”, while the (Arabic) plural of the same word, مناظر [*manāzer*], also means “optics.” Sadr Haghghian not only reminds us that many of the key Persian terms in the original textbook were themselves adopted from another language (Arabic), but also that the semantic spectrum of even the most basic Persian art historical terminology rarely coincides with that of its English counterpart, resulting in the need to list several English words for one Persian term.

The subsequent translation of the book places the English translation in the margin, next to its Persian original. Crucially, while the artists translate most of the Persian into English without further ado, the Persian terms that appear in the lists mentioned above—all of them related to seeing or image creation—are left untranslated in the English text in the margin: “The *naqsh o negār* on ceramic vessels and other handmade things were also a kind of *tasviri* expression which is today called *tarrāhi*.” The only way to understand the untranslated terms is to go back to the tables at the beginning and find a translation. However, since many of them have not one but several equivalents in English, and since additionally they relate to other words and expressions with which they share the same Arabic root, the

<sup>1</sup> Natascha SADR HAGHIGHIAN – Ashkan SEPAHVAND (eds.), *Seeing Studies*, Berlin: Hatje-Cantz 2011.

effect is not unlike a Freudian rebus: as is the case in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, certain elements in the original (Persian) have several, sometimes contradictory, equivalents, precluding a direct exchange of one concept for another. Instead of appealing to an immaterial "third term", translation becomes difficult and hard to consume. By proceeding in this way, Sadr Haghghian and her collaborator prepare us for an Islamic tradition in which the "image" understood in the Western sense—as a mimetic copy of life whereby a sign is used in exchange for the living thing—is deeply problematic. Correspondingly, *Seeing Studies* demonstrates that "seeing" in the East and in the West does not necessarily mean the same thing, and that the translation of Persian ("Eastern") modes of visual perception into a corresponding Western vocabulary can be very misleading indeed. *Seeing Studies* shows that for a translator—and all of us are translators to varying degrees and in varying senses—it is not enough to think about equivalence and exchange; one must also be aware of what resists translation in the sense that it cannot easily be absorbed into the orbit of our own cultural literacy.

Today, a whole spectrum of publications are being devoted to art practices in (formerly) "marginal" regions of the world. Many of them, however, seem to prefer exchange over translation, in order to prepare what is marginal for an art market with a voracious appetite for anything considered foreign. The German philosopher Rudolf Pannwitz once wrote with regard to contemporary efforts of translation from one European language into another that "our translations [German ones], even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. They are much more intimidated by the idiosyncrasies of their own language than by those of the foreign tongues." For Pannwitz, a good translator "must broaden and deepen his own language with the foreign one."<sup>2</sup> The punchline of

<sup>2</sup>Rudolf PANNWITZ, „Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur“ (1917), in: Josefine KITZBICHLER – Katja LUBITZ – Nina MINDT, *Theorie der Übersetzung antiker Literatur in Deutschland seit 1800*, Berlin: de Gruyter 2009, p. 294.

Pannwitz' statement is that as translators we are too comfortable with our own language; only if we use the foreign tongue, or anything foreign, as an occasion for complicating our own idiom will we be able to adequately approach the foreign one.

Publications such as *Notebook* and *ARTMargins* set for themselves a similar goal: to not only translate what is foreign in order to prepare it for the global art market, but to accept, even nurture, what Walter Benjamin called the untranslatable part, the poetic core of the translated original that remains out of reach for a view of translation that merely sees it as facilitating exchange.