

Wai Kit Lam - review

A Knock on a Foreign Door: Dialogues between Two Cultures

AMAE Artgroup & Wai Kit Lam, 12/2003, Italy & Hong Kong
Dialogue by Wai Kit Lam, Paolo Mascolini & Riccardo Roversi

K = Kit / **P** = Paolo / **R** = Riccardo

K: From the experience of working on our project *Close to the Blind Track*, I got difficulties and great experiences in writing, translating and performing the lyrics. Firstly, it is a challenge for us to speak the other part's language in the performances, but this is only one of the difficulties I faced. During the preparation of the Chinese part, I have to consider if it is too difficult for you to speak my mother tongue, Cantonese. I write Chinese, but speak Cantonese. I know it is too difficult for the foreigner to speak Cantonese, so I decided to ask you to speak Mandarin instead. The problems then aroused: I don't know how to write Mandarin pinyin although I know how to speak it. I then asked my Mandarin speaking friend to write it for me. I found handicap with my own language! On the other hand, although I have learnt a while Italian, it is still an unfamiliar language for me; at least, I am not fluent with it. I had tried my best to practice the Italian lyrics before I filmed my part; it was very difficult for me to express the deepest feelings on the lyrics. These remind me again the differences between languages/cultures. And the most important thing, I learnt that through the use of language, we establish the identification of the self. Have you got similar experiences like mine? What do you think about the identification of the self through language?

R: First of all I think that the meaning of poetry is in the sound of the words than in the voice of the reader. In front of a translation, we have infinite numbers of readers before us. The first reader is the writer, the second reader is the translator, but the translator has his/her special poetry and his/her special dictionary. Usually the translations are based on another historical translation, as well as another dictionary and others points of view. The last meaning is in the rhythm of sound, because the translations are very distant from the first mark on the paper. When Ezra Pound (1885-1972) translated the poetries of Li Bai (701-762) after years and years of his own strong poetry instead of Li Bai's poetry, only the time when he took away that power, he would be able to know the other point of view. The meaning of poetry, is in the weight of the sound not in the meaning of the words.

K: Referring to the theory of "Mirror Stage" by the French psychoanalyst Jacques-Marie Emile Lacan (1901-1981), he suggested that we construct the concept of 'I' through the identification with the other. We suppose the others are complete, we assimilate ourselves into the other in order to get rid of loss and lack that are caused by uncertainty and insecurity. We assimilate ourselves into the other and at the same time, we want to be recognized by the others. From this point of view, I would like to apply language into the construction of identification. We feel safe, respect and esteem when we are recognized by the others. One of the ways to achieve recognition is come from the same use of language. On the other hand, the awareness of the differences between languages/cultures will bring us a deeper understanding of our own selves.

I strongly realized the above situation in my three years in London. This kind of experience also happened in my last year in The Chinese University of Hong Kong, this is my own country but I spoke Mandarin every day with my Mandarin speaking friends. In my flat, I was the only Hong Kong student among 8 others, everyday, I spoke Mandarin, watched Mandarin TV... When my flat mates spoke very fast or with native Mandarin accents, I couldn't catch them up. The incapacity of language/communication, the difficulties of expressing the deepest feeling

occur when the majority of your society speaks a different language than you; or even more, it happens at the time when you need to use an unfamiliar language to express yourself. This is a disorientation of identification. The establishment of identification will be collapsed if we are not recognized by the society; the feeling of loneliness will then be occurred. What is your experience during the process of learning and performing the Mandarin lyrics? Being a visual art artist, what do you think about the relationship between spoken language and visual language?

P: Well, it was a great experience! I'm fascinated with the possibility of knowing every language, every expression. Speaking many languages and mostly the understanding process of foreign languages can be a great way of knowing the others, their habits, and their histories. Often when I meet people from different countries who speak different language, I'd like to be able to speak their own languages, rather than they speak mine. It may sound strange for an Artist that in general who bounds himself/herself and well ingrains his/her concept of 'I'.

I mean that in general Artists, mostly in Italy, tend to construct their concepts of 'I' by knowing the others, but often using an opposite feeling. I think, in order to increase the knowledge of the others; we have to deny our identities. We have to become a sponge, ready to be soaked. In the experience of our project, I became just a chameleon that repeated the lyrics by earing. Now I can also remember and repeat the lyrics without reading it, even if it's just a sound without any feeling. However I swear you I'm learning Mandarin!!!

R: Bad control of a language is like a mask. It is difficult for our interlocutor to catch the shading of our personalities, is like to say black or white, on or off. In the light there's not only one kind of shade, in the darkness there are many light rumours. It is very difficult to speak about melancholy with a bad control of language. It is simple to smile in front of an interlocutor who speaks another language but is not simple to cry. If we cry the only way for compassion is in the silence. If we make joke, there's no problem but not even memory.

K: Can you explain more about your use of video art in our project? What is the relationship between video art and communication technologies nowadays?

P: I think video is a strange way to communicate nowadays, because if the language is more used in the world, and maybe for that, it often becomes a very dangerous way to communicate as well. We get use to moving images but otherwise, we still can't really control them. We often say that they are false; they don't represent the reality, but it is not so easy to distinguish actually. It might be an easy thing to say that a movie is a fantasy and absolutely far from reality. But other thing is to say that SARS doesn't exist; that is only an exaggeration that is modified by political and economic interests. Nevertheless we decide to believe in something not so different from a movie. We can edit a TV-news exactly as we do with a movie.

So, the use of the video in our art-works tends to make reflection on what it really happens and when it happens as well. We love to recreate situation where the certainty of the audience are mined. No one can be sure about what is really happening.

K: For me, video projection/screening is a one way dialogue, the performers cannot 'talk' to the audiences, and it is different than the time when they are face to face. The two-ways dialogue can only be happened when the dialogues are in real time. The dialogue in video is similar to the writing of letter, the sender may not know if the letter can be reached to the receiver or not. A Letter to my Dear Bird is a spoken letter, it is a one-way dialogue. The supposed receiver of this lyric is obviously a missing bird; on the other hand, the receiver of this video is the audience. Who is the missing bird and who is the audience? We are lost; we lose in this high technology era. Where are we now?!

A Letter to my Dear Bird is a metaphor of the problem of communication.

R: We are everywhere in any place, this is the meaning of contemporary art. The problems of communications embody the sublimations of the bodies. It is prohibited to touch a leg or an arm; only the naked images of legs and arms are legalized. When we want to speak with a friend with computer, the eyes are the only interested in that kind of relationship, not the hands nor the nose.

There's too much white in our relationships.

K: Even if we talk through msn or webcam, do you think we can break down the walls between cultures? What have we learnt? For me, the most interesting thing of cultural exchange is about the study of identification. We 'see' our own identities through the 'mirror' from the other cultures. No matter whether the reflected images are totally different or very similar to our own cultures, we can learn a lot through the exchange. We have to respect our own cultures first; if not, how can we ask the other cultures to respect us? It is obviously a worthy experience indeed.

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