Interpreting through an artist's eyes

From the street the art lover or simple passer-by can look through huge windows and see three enormous screens. On each of them an interpreter is situated in a "normal" environment (dark clothes, plain decor, a bottle of water to hand) uttering sentences the passer-by cannot hear.

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If his curiosity is whetted he can push open the door of the gallery. There are headsets hanging from the ceiling so he can follow the interpretation from each booth separately, while the exhibition area is filled with the sound of the original, a conversation between three people we do not see speaking a mix of English and German. At the side smaller screens show photos of an army camp in Germany where American military personnel are trained before being sent to Iraq or Afghanistan.

Can the passer-by really understand what is being said? The original recording is muddled and indistinct, with people often speaking at once. As for the interpretation, it does not allow the listener to recreate the whole conversation because the headsets only provide the contribution of each speaker separately.

A few months ago the artist contacted me and my colleagues to suggest this job. Although very unusual, the task had to be taken seriously, we had to believe in it and really get involved. There were considerable obstacles.

The subject to start with. We knew the gist of the conversation to be translated, but it was not happening in our presence as it was a recording. Moreover it did not include all the words spoken but only excerpts the artist had chosen according to her own criteria.

The content next. Although well versed in the main thrust of the matters discussed, we found it very hard to pinpoint the "message" of each speaker. Their English was rudimentary and marked by strong accents. They did not finish their sentences. They were very elliptical and made reference to shared experience or circumstances or events that were important to them (and of which we had just a vague notion). What is more the "conversation" hopped from subject to subject. Nobody was really bothering to listen carefully to what the others were saying. The absence of a "host" created confusion.

Communication too. There was no audience in the room. The artist was present as were the technicians, but we knew we were not working for them. We were also aware that we would without doubt have listeners, but they would listen off-line, with a time lag and piecemeal. This gave rise to particular anxiety, akin to working for television with its potentially huge and demanding audience, whose reactions you cannot see. So we could no longer consider interpretation as a way to facilitate real time communication...

The technical conditions last (and certainly not least). So as not to break the free flow of
conversation recording was done with a hidden machine - and sound was dire. The voices mixed into each other, it was sometimes hard to know who was talking (and who was about to talk - or interrupt). For several minutes of the recording the participants were speaking two at a time (and addressing the artist); as the microphone was not directed at anyone in particular it produced only a hubbub that had an almost musical quality, but was completely unsuitable for listening and understanding and, by that token, for interpreting.

These impediments and the unusual experience have, I admit, given me cause to reappraise my work as an interpreter. After 30 years am I not adept at facilitating communication? But what type of communication can we speak of here, between three people who are conversing, but also indirectly addressing an audience of art lovers or simply those who want to know what life is like on an American military camp?

Here the immediacy of interpreting, the direct contact with the speaker and the audience, is broken down in time and space. What has this got to do with the profession? And what better way to think about its limits, its challenges and its ultimate purpose?

Does the artist not confront us with a kind of laying bare of verbal exchange, by playing with the integrity of the message and even the intimacy of conversation? But does she not also toy with the relationship between the subject of the report and the actors she directs, as well as with the relationship between the producers and consumers of interpretation, by deliberately inducing a lengthening of spatial relationships, a distortion of speaking time, both of the original and the translation? By all but completely erasing the true value of communication, does she not make us even more aware of it?

Every time I go back to the exhibition and talk to the artist - this was the first time she'd worked with interpreters - I dig a little deeper into her artistic approach and also into my own relationship with my profession. And then I think that in 50 or 100 years time, that is to say when all traces of my presence on earth and my professional activity have long vanished, this work of art that marries sound and image will be more evocative and revealing about the interpreting profession than any abstract analysis that might have attempted to describe it. Is this not one of the ultimate purposes of art?


The interpreters: S. Hengl, B. Krémer, N. Loiseau (graduates of ETI, Geneva).

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