4.s00 / 4.s12 Bad Translation: Expanded Typography and Publication

Instructor: Bo-Won Keum (she/her)
Time: Mondays 7pm–10pm
Location: 5-216
Door code: 3-0-8-5-#
Class website: translation.bo-won.com
Class Zoom: mit.zoom.us/my/fundamentals

> "So let us consider translation not as a failed attempt to resurrect a semblance of a divine original but rather as a performance, not as the apocryphal misreading of scripture, but as something that entails more freedom by necessity, like the interpretation of a script or a score. To think of translation as a mode of performance recognizes that translation is relational, always a directed dialogue or even a choral conversation, never a monologue. The coherence that gives a translation the force to make the original sing in a new textual body comes from that spirit of performance, the translator's confident self-possession arising in the guise of another's voice."
> — Katrina Dodson

Course Description

In his essay, "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin writes: "it is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language that is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work." The same can be said of the typographic designer who must give an idea visual form: form beholden to the syntactic constraints of whatever shape it must materialize in, whether as a series of marks etched into stone, a block of text living in the codex, or a pixel activated on a screen. How does the grammar behind tool and substrate set the rules for translation? When do these translations fail, and why—and what do those failures generate instead? How can translations, good and bad, productively challenge an idea's core?

We'll be looking at good translations, bad translations, and everything in-between. Part visual language study, part workshop, this class will iterate around translation as method and practice for typographic experimentation. Using language as an organizing framework and structure, students will engage with calligraphic form, modular alphabets, and notational conventions and experiment with 1:1 translations, direct transpositions, and transliterations. By the end of the term, students will have researched and developed a project that translates a known and observed system into a visual language of their own creation. This will be supplemented by theoretical writing from artists, writers, and technologists that may include Ferdinand de Saussure, Walter Benjamin, Albrecht Dürer, Donald Knuth, Charles Gaines, Tan Lin, Louis Lüthi, Édouard Glissant, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. Students can expect to learn basic typographic rules and typesetting techniques.

Supplies/Materials

1 journal for sketches and notes
1 laptop with access to Adobe Creative Cloud

Evaluation

You will be evaluated on the expansiveness of your thinking, desire to take risks, and rigor of process. Note that evaluating reading responses will mostly be in observing how you engage in class discussions. Attendance and communication around attendance will be factored holistically across the categories.

- 40% Final Project
- 30% Reading responses
- 30% Exercises

Attendance, Academic Integrity, and Commitment to a Diverse Learning Environment

The quality and value of the work produced in this classroom is only as strong as the diversity of perspectives they hold and represent. Productive critique, discussion, and engagement with each other's ideas is only possible through the elevation and respect of each other's unique understanding of the world characterized by lived experience and respective cultures.

In this vein, attendance and punctuality is essential. You are learning not only *with,* but also *from* and *for* each other; absences rob your fellow participants from your contributions to the discussion. If you absolutely must miss class, please email me in advance. Greater than two absences without any prior communication will result in a failing grade.

MIT's expectations and policies regarding academic integrity are outlined in this document: http://integrity.mit.edu/. Success in this class and beyond hinges particularly on the tenet, *to trust the value of your own intellect.* Please let this motivate you. Academic integrity should be interpreted as integrity to one's own motivations, creative process, and instincts; originality of thought is prioritized above all else.

Field Trip(s)

At some point in the next few weeks **(2/20–3/11)**, depending on our class size and scheduling availability, we will take a trip to Beaver Press, MIT's letterpress studio which is located at the Barker Library. This will involve some scheduling outside of class, as the library is only open 10am–6pm. Please stay tuned.

Schedule

Week 1: 2/5 — Introduction, *The Task of the Translator*
Where we discuss key-terms and pair figure-draw.

> **Homework**
> Read: Walter Benjamin, The Task of the Translator (1923)
> Read: Claudia Durastanti, WHISPERING IN CAPS LOCK (2018)
>
> Watch *(if you have time):* ▶ The Task of the Translator by Lynne Sachs

Week 2: 2/12 — Tools and Substrates
Where we discuss the readings and set the terms for our continued conversations around work.

> **In-class**
> Find 25 different A's. Each A should take up a full 8.5 x 11 letter sheet.
>
> **Homework**
> Watch: ▶ ROSKI TALKS: Shannon Ebner, September 26th 2017 [18:00 onwards]
> Read *(as a follow-up, if you have time)*: Eileen Myles, "Passing "A"" (note: p. 3 is a repeat!)
>
> Do: Pick one A and find and/or make the rest of the alphabet it belongs to.

Week 3: 2/20 *(Tuesday)* — Language as Material
Where we look at the A's and discuss other A's (as well as other letters.)

> **Homework**
> Read: Louis Luthi's *On The Self-Reflexive Page*. (Be sure to research the examples mentioned in his text.)
> Watch: ▶ *The Phantom Tollbooth*
>
> Do: Pick a typeface that you'd like to write your name in. Come prepared to discuss why.

Week 4: 2/26 — Context as Constraint
Where we discuss the relationship between historical styles and technological shifts.

>**Homework**
>Do: Find a context informed by a system of set/limited visual parameters with repeating patterns that can be traced and mapped. It could be in the traffic lines in roads; in the movement of a conductor's baton; in the lines drawn between points of interest marked on Google Maps. Come up with a few examples of a grid that you might form letters from.

Week 5: 3/4 — Visit from a Toolmaker
Where we learn about the work of New York-based typographer and designer, [Marie Otsuka](#).

>**In class**
>Present your research to everyone; Marie will chime in.

>**Homework**
>Read: Donald Knuth, "[The Concept of a MetaFont](#)" (1982).

>Do: Draw out the full alphabet using that grid. Prepare to show them in Google Slide form.

Week 6: 3/11 — Your First Notation
Where we discuss your alphabets.

Week 7: 3/18 — Formulas, Systems, and Mistranslations
Where we discuss systems of notation and program, and then those who celebrate the mistranslations.

>**Homework**
>Read: Édouard Glissant, *[For Opacity](#)*
>Look at: Theresa Hakyung Cha, *Dictee*

>Do: Think about the materials we've looked at in class and come up w/ a proposal for something you want to translate into a graphic notational system of your own creation. The source should be finite and self-contained—a text, a conversation, an event, an archive, etc. Prepare to present this to your classmates informally through a 10 minute slide presentation.

3/25 — No class (Spring break)

Week 8: 4/1 (remote) — The Untranslatable
Where we discuss the readings and present our project proposals to each other.

>**Homework**
>Read: Beatrice Warde, [The Crystal Goblet](#) (1955)

Week 9: 4/8 (remote) — The Elements
Where we watch Jerome Hiller's [Cinema Before 1300](#) (2023), among other things.

4/15 — No class

Week 10: 4/22 — Progress 1
Updates on the project (group crit)

Week 11: 4/29 — Progress 2
Updates on the project (group crit)

Week 12: 5/6 — Progress 3
Updates on the project (group crit)

Week 13: 5/13 — Final project presentation / review
1:1 Meetings, testing, refinements

Week of 5/22(???) — Final project presentation / review
Guest critic: TBD