

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Born in Würzburg, Germany, Nadja Marcín studied at the Art Academy Münster, earning her diploma in 2007. Since 2005 an active exhibition schedule, various study programs, as well as numerous awards and grants were conducive to an internationally oriented career. In 2008, she enrolled at Columbia University in New York for further studies, which she completed in 2010. Marcín currently lives and works in New York.

The exhibition title "Lost in Translation" aims straight at the central thematic issue in Marcín's artistic approach, which is influenced by her biographical background and revolves around language. On the one hand, to be lost in translation refers to the act of transferring content from one language-specific form into another, an exchange of two words or phrases. On the other hand, it refers to the representation of content in a form, the transformation of an intellectual idea into a concrete image or verbal articulation, its material realization. Marcín here draws from her own experience of relocation to a foreign country and the consequent mental adjustment to a new linguistic surrounding. Beyond the acquisition of linguistic matter, an extensive learning process is necessary to become familiar with contextual and cultural values underlying conventional language competence. This process of adaptation can be perceived as a kind of cultural "translation".

"Translation" therefore not just comprises the simple transition from one form into another but foremost, an intellectual reevaluation. Thus Marcín wrote the script for her latest video piece "Hotel" in her native language German, translating it into English in cooperation with the American writer James McGirk. Many variations and deviations emerged throughout the process, revealing the singularities of the involved languages and their particular meaning structures. These differences in usage are further emphasized in the German subtitles, in which the English wording is re-translated again into German. In this context, "Lost in Translation" deals with the artist's "speechlessness" not so much with regard to a lack of adequate linguistic means of expression, but rather concerning a missing cultural competence and consequent loss of identity.

Every translation thus requires rethinking, examining one's thoughts in relation to basic language structures concerning the pairing of meaning and form. Every translation involves a fundamental disorientation and uncertainty concerning the possible discrepancy between meaning and form, whereas a perfect pairing is impossible due to individual, social as well as cultural divergences. There is ample space for ambiguities and misunderstandings, at the same time revealing a space of possibilities, whose creative potential Nadja Marcín seizes. Such difficulties and shortcomings prove that "translation" is a state of transition between languages and cultural contexts in communication, in which the relationship between form and meaning must be renegotiated. Marcín openly deals with the risks of representation, which are to be found in the transmission of ideas and identity as well as artistic intention. Her focus lies on the efforts undertaken in finding forms of expression, a prime concern of all social and artistic activity, resulting in a variety of linguistic articulations, expressions of the Self, and artistic manifestations.

Central to Marcín's work are the imponderabilities of all forms of expression. The discrepancies between form and meaning and identity misconceptions are often displayed through forms of self-expression and self-presentation in social interaction. According to Shakespeare "All the world's a

stage, And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts“ (As You Like It) The performance of roles within a greater social order or a particular subculture mirrors the theatricality of our existence. We are but empty surfaces, onto which socio-cultural values and codes are inscribed, so that we merely play a fictional part, alienated from our own true identity. This becomes evident in Marcins video “Hotel”, as personality is defined in terms of the actors’ performance within a confining subcultural margin. The power structures within the hierarchical microcosm of the hotel determine the figures’ behavior forms. The individual is dependent on structures defining its identity, also demonstrated by Marcin in her video “As in Science Fiction”. It narrates a kind of self-discovery trip, in which the search for identity is acted out in surreal sequences, recalling initiation phases. The main character seems torn between her assimilated and her authentic, autonomous Self.

Nadja Marcin appears prominently as the protagonist in her performances, videos and photographs. Through her embodiment of all parts, her repeated physical appearance and the obviousness of her amateurish acting skills, the enacted scenes appear like spontaneous and simply equipped children’s fantasies. Due to the effect of recognition, Marcins own personality seems to shine through all embodied personae, suggesting an authenticity, which seems to be further emphasized in several biographical traces. Marcin not only expresses herself through various figures, but also exposes herself, eschewing neither nakedness nor embarrassment in her frank treatment of herself and others. It is this discrepancy between authenticity and artificiality, which Marcin unfolds in her works. If we assume, along with the theorists of radical constructivism, that reality is a direct product of our (subjective) perception, then reality is nothing but its representation through the filter of our experience. The result of our interpretation, its complexity is reduced, becoming an artificial construct. Reality becomes thus a world of illusion, its representation expressing a "limited view of things". It is precisely this simplified world of categories and classifications that Nadja Marcin turns her attention to. Marcin thwarts and exaggerates stereotypes with an uninhibited sense of comedy and a seriousness of intent at the same time. She seizes such stereotypes that are conventionalized in the habitual use of language and reinterprets them. In her video “Singing in the Rain”, she appropriates the famous song by Gene Kelly while simultaneously adapting to the corresponding role, which is inseparably bound to the name of the entertainer and conveys a modern type of male dancer. Clad in a costume consisting of flesh colored tights, panties and a rather unelegantly stuffed bra, Marcin suggests nakedness and thus brings her own female sex into play. She alludes to the construction of gender as proposed in the field of Gender Studies. Gender is defined not so much as a material-biological fact, but rather as a product of formative social factors and the concomitant expectations. In this starkly improvised, female performance, the construction of gender is being put on display, as well as the “making” of a Hollywood star/stereotype. Marcins repetition of the famous performance actually happens as a negative version, painfully exempt of the essential elements: lacking an elegant dress, lacking rain and lacking a male protagonist. The imitating show star is endowed with features different from the original, so that the figure of Gene Kelly, now replaced by a female, turns “fake”. What remains of “the real thing” beyond its (stereo-)typical attributes? The ridiculous performance of the song is now a mere persiflage, mocking the classic, whose distinct features, its trademark signs are missing. Instead, the rather nonsensical performance questions its meaning as a cultural classic.

Marcin questions notions of the stereo(typical) and reevaluates conventional, standardized representations in culture and language.

In defamiliarizing the familiar image, unsettling the typical representation in its radical replacement with her own performance, Marcin deliberately fails in her intended identification with the original and instead reinvents the standardized figure in a performance freed from all conforming depiction. She thus translates it into her own language, avoiding the simplicity of stereotypical singularity and instead evoking a multiplicity of meanings. The photograph "Eve" provides a stark contrast between the suggestiveness of the name and the picture. One can barely relate the culturally transmitted ideal of Eve to the image of a young woman with starry eyes, lying stretched out in the grass, naked. Marcin here reinterprets a culturally coded, Christian symbol, so that the correspondence between form and meaning in a conventional sense becomes impossible. Marcin injects doubt into mechanisms of meaning-making to the extent that in reversing them, she often proposes nonsense as a state of ultimate creative freedom. While absurdity is often disconcerting, it discloses an alternative view on things. Surprised, and a bit alarmed, we lose ourselves in Nadja Marcins translations, which compel us to rethink habitual representations, so that we remain in a state of beneficial speechlessness until we've recovered a, perhaps "renewed", language.

Bettina Haiss, art historian, Cologne, Jan 2011